

Inspection of West Suffolk College

Inspection dates: 1 to 4 March 2022

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Education programmes for young people	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

West Suffolk College (WSC) is a general further education college based in Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. The college teaches a range of vocational courses, apprenticeships and adult learning programmes across 15 sector-subject areas. The college forms part of the Eastern Colleges Group, which includes two sixth-form colleges that teach A-level programmes that complement the courses taught at WSC.

At the time of the inspection, there were 3,204 students on education programmes for young people, with most young people studying level 2 and level 3 courses. A smaller proportion study level 1 programmes. The largest subject areas include health and social care, art and design, and building and construction. Of the 1,477 adult students, the majority study English, mathematics and English for speakers of other languages. There were 661 intermediate apprentices, 1,049 advanced apprentices and 198 higher apprentices. There were 126 apprentices on framework-based apprenticeships and 1,782 apprentices on apprenticeship standards.

There were 185 students with high needs. Approximately half of these students are taught discretely on supported learning programmes and half are taught in vocational curriculum areas.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Students and apprentices enjoy studying at WSC. They appreciate the support that they receive from the teachers, and they feel confident to ask questions or for extra support when they need it. Apprentices value the work they do at college that helps them to perform better in their workplace. Apprentices learn new knowledge and skills so that they can contribute positively to the employers for whom they work. Students and apprentices say that they feel more self-assured and confident through their time at college.

Staff provide valuable support for students and apprentices. Students with high needs benefit from learning support assistants who know them well and can encourage them to become more independent, while still supporting them to make good progress. Staff support students very well with their mental health and well-being needs. Students and apprentices feel safe, and they treat each other with respect at college and in their work placements. Students feel proud to be at the college and say that it is a privilege to study there. They value the calm and productive learning environment in which they work.

Students understand that the college provides them with challenging work, but acknowledge that this helps them to make good progress. They become more resilient during their studies. Adult students appreciate the flexibility that they have in college so that they can manage childcare issues effectively while still completing their work. Students benefit from a range of additional activities, such as skills competitions, to extend their knowledge and understanding of the employment sectors in which they plan to work.

Most students appreciate being able to learn online, and found their lessons interesting and helpful. A minority of students, however, found learning online challenging. They miss being able to speak directly to their teachers and the social interaction with other students.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders and managers at WSC have established a broad and varied curriculum that reflects accurately the needs of the community the college serves. They work closely with strategic partners and employers to plan a curriculum that is inclusive and meets the skills requirements of the local and regional area. Leaders have established good links, for example, with hospital trusts, so that employees can gain qualifications in English and mathematics and progress in their careers or move on to higher qualifications. Where college staff do not have the expertise to teach specific components of apprenticeship programmes, leaders use subcontractors with the relevant expertise to provide high-quality specialist teaching. They monitor the quality of subcontracted provision effectively.

Governors are highly committed to the college and the value it brings to the local community. Governors have the relevant experience to carry out their roles on the board. They have a very good understanding of their statutory duties for safeguarding and equality and diversity. Governors work closely with the senior leadership team. Governors support senior leaders well and provide them with highly effective challenge to secure improvements in the provision. Governors receive frequent, detailed reports from senior leaders, and as a result, they have a good understanding of the main strengths and areas for development at the college.

Most teachers plan the curriculum carefully so that they teach students and apprentices new skills and knowledge that are relevant to the businesses in which they work, or plan to do so. Teachers liaise frequently with employers to plan the curriculum so that students' work meets industry requirements. On hair and beauty courses, teachers use employers to set assessment tasks for nail technicians. This ensures that students complete work to an appropriate level and within industry timescales. On the level 5 departmental and operations apprenticeship, managers provide training that is planned with employers, and that complements the in-house training offered by the employer. As students progress through their course, teachers ensure that they learn more complex skills and become well prepared for future employment. On level 1 carpentry, teachers teach students to use hand tools competently and they then progress to using routers to cut lap joints and subsequently more refined work, such as mortice and tenon joints. Teachers on discrete courses for students with high needs do not scaffold learning effectively. They do not break down targets on students' education, health and care plans thoroughly so that they can use them to plan learning. As a result, too few students on these programmes retain the skills they learn in their long-term memory and are not able to transfer them to new situations. Students with high needs who are taught in vocational lessons make good progress and achieve their qualifications.

Teachers on all programmes are highly qualified in the subjects that they teach and most have relevant teaching qualifications. Teachers and assessors use their expertise and their knowledge of industry practice effectively to support students and apprentices to understand the industries in which they intend to work. Where teachers are less experienced, they benefit from a college mentor to help them to improve their practice.

Most teachers teach their lessons skilfully and use assessment effectively. They prepare their lessons carefully and present topics confidently and clearly so that students can understand them. In level 3 business studies, teachers use a variety of assessment methods to check students' progress in the skills they are learning. They use online methods, as well as in-person sessions, to assess students' presentation skills so that students are well prepared for job interviews. Students also benefit from sitting in on mock business boards and interview panels. In level 3 applied science, teachers do not use assessment strategies effectively to check students' learning or to inform their teaching. As a result, students do not remember what they have been taught or understand how to apply their knowledge to new tasks.

Most teachers use feedback skilfully in lessons to check students' and apprentices' learning. They ask probing questions so that students extend and deepen their knowledge. In carpentry level 1, tutors observe students' work and use this to discuss how to mark out work and ensure accuracy. However, on occasions, teachers and assessors do not provide students with sufficiently helpful or detailed feedback on written work. As a result, students, including a minority of students with high needs, do not understand what they do well and what they need to do to improve their work. Teachers on adult learning programmes provide students with good feedback on their work.

Students and apprentices gain valuable knowledge and skills on their courses. Leaders have invested in high-quality equipment and resources so that students are able to work towards industry standards. Teachers use these resources effectively to ensure that students and apprentices are well prepared for employment. Apprentices apply the knowledge they gain off the job confidently in the workplace. As a result, they become valued employees. In hairdressing, students learn advanced techniques such as colouring hair and can apply previous skills such as shampooing, so that they can provide clients with a range of treatments as required by the employer.

Most teachers assess students' and apprentices' starting points well and set appropriate targets so that students make good progress. In a minority of areas, such as applied science and business, teachers do not set targets that help students to improve their knowledge and skills. Teachers of students with high needs on supported learning programmes do not routinely share literacy and numeracy starting points for students at entry level 1 and below. As a result, teachers do not plan lessons that are well matched to students' needs.

Teachers prepare students and apprentices for employment effectively. They ensure that adult students learn how to write CVs, prepare for interviews and complete application forms. However, on access to higher education courses, teachers do not regularly check that students' work is authentic or that students use accepted forms of referencing. As a result, students are not well prepared for higher levels of study. Managers have provided a broad range of careers resources that are available to students and apprentices. Teachers do not, however, routinely plan impartial careers advice and guidance so that students and apprentices have a good understanding of the choices available to them on completion of their course or apprenticeship.

Teachers ensure that students and apprentices gain relevant industry-related behaviours so that they understand what is expected of them in the workplace. Students on hair and beauty courses understand how to create a calm environment for clients and they learn the valuable customer service skills required in a salon. Students with high needs on discrete courses benefit from valuable work experience in college enterprises such as the restaurant. As a result, they learn how to work with customers, serve food and deal with payments.

In education programmes for young people, teachers help students to improve their English and mathematical skills in vocational lessons. On level 1, catering students calculate food costs, apply percentage discounts and compare prices from different

retail outlets so that they can reduce costs in planning menus. On level 3 business, students learn how to give presentations and write reports to prepare them for future employment. On most courses, teachers ensure that students learn relevant technical terms and concepts. On the level 5 departmental and operations apprenticeship, students use their knowledge of the Betari box in the workplace to improve their decision-making at work. Students on the level 3 electrical apprenticeship use accurate terms to explain precisely where there are faults in complex electrical circuits involving microprocessor control systems. In a minority of apprenticeship programmes, teachers do not routinely correct apprentices' spelling and grammar in their written work. As a result, these apprentices make the same errors in subsequent assignments.

Teachers have high expectations of students' behaviour in classrooms, workshops and around the campus. As a result, students' behaviour is very good, and the learning environment is calm and well organised. Most students and apprentices attend their lessons, are punctual, and come to lessons prepared to learn. Students' and apprentices' attendance at English and mathematics lessons is too low, and as a result they do not gain the skills and knowledge that they require. Too few students pass their English and mathematics qualifications on the first attempt.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and governors have established a strong culture of safeguarding across the college. They have ensured that relevant policies and procedures are in place, and they use these effectively to keep students and apprentices safe. Managers responsible for safeguarding are appropriately trained for their roles and they make sure that staff receive frequent updates on safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. Managers have a good understanding of the main safeguarding risks in the local area and ensure that students and apprentices know how to keep themselves safe from those risks. Managers and staff have put effective strategies in place to support students and apprentices with mental health and well-being issues. As a result, students and apprentices feel safe and know how to report any concerns.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders and managers should ensure that students and apprentices attend English and mathematics lessons regularly so that they learn the skills and knowledge that they need to achieve on their courses.
- Leaders and managers must ensure that education, health and care plan targets are broken down thoroughly so that teachers can use them to plan learning activities that develop students' skills and knowledge, so that students achieve their planned goals.
- Leaders and managers must ensure that students and apprentices receive helpful feedback on their work so that they understand what they need to do to improve, how to make improvements and to prepare themselves for future study.

- Leaders and managers should ensure that all students and apprentices have a good understanding of the careers opportunities available to them when they complete their courses so that they are able to make informed decisions about, and plan for, their future careers.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130818
Address	Out Risbygate Bury St Edmunds Suffolk IP33 3RL
Contact number	01284 701301
Website	www.wsc.ac.uk
CEO	Nikos Savvas
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	10 May 2016
Main subcontractors	The British Racing School Eastern Region Roofing West Suffolk Hospital Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust University of Suffolk Marshall The Pacific Institute Learning Curve The Skills Network

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the principal of sixth-form provision, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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