

Inspection of Activate Learning

Inspection dates: 22 to 25 November 2022

Overall effectiveness	Good
<hr/>	
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	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Activate Learning is a very large general further education group located across the counties of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Surrey. It is made up of seven colleges: Banbury and Bicester College, Bracknell and Wokingham College, City of Oxford College, Farnham College, Guildford College, Merrist Wood College and Reading College. There is also a technical centre at Blackbird Leys in Oxford. Most college campuses offer courses across a very broad range of subject areas. Merrist Wood College offers specialist land-based courses for young people, adults and apprentices. Farnham College offers A levels and a small vocational provision.

The college has learners of all ages studying on courses from entry level up to level 5. The largest subject area in the college is preparation for life and work. Other very large subject areas include health, public services and care; arts, media, and publishing; business, administration and law; and science and mathematics.

At the time of the inspection, there were 7,678 learners on study programmes, 4,196 learners on adult learning programmes and 1,832 apprentices. There were 830 learners in receipt of high needs funding. Activate Learning works with five subcontractors.

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

Learners appreciate the calm, welcoming and inclusive learning environment. They enjoy their learning and are respectful of their peers and teachers. Most learners attend well and are punctual.

Learners develop a wide range of skills that help them to be successful. For example, they become effective communicators as they participate in discussions and listen and respond to the views of others. They develop empathy and explore more sensitive topics with thoughtfulness and maturity. For example, health and social care learners learn about the range of clients they may work with and their physical and emotional needs to consider.

Learners develop appropriate study skills to succeed on their course. They learn to be more analytical and evaluative in their thinking and their work. They value the plentiful support to help them achieve their potential. For example, access to higher education learners develop strong academic writing skills. This develops their essay writing skills so that their work improves over time. Learners speak proudly about how they can now write essays and reference their work effectively.

Learners are ambitious and keen to do well on their courses. They work hard, and standards of work for most learners are high. Learners complete their work with pride, and most know what they need to do to achieve the grades they would like. For example, carpentry apprentices are highly motivated, aspire to achieve distinction grades, and their current work demonstrates that they can achieve highly.

Learners benefit from a strong and consistent focus on preparation and readiness for their next steps. They know how to access support through the college's careers service and appreciate the help and guidance that they receive from their tutors. Learners develop their knowledge and understanding of their options through a range of relevant activities. These include frequent visiting speakers from a range of employer bodies, as well as helpful advice on preparing for interviews or writing a good personal statement for university applications.

Learners and apprentices rightly feel safe at college and in the workplace. They understand the importance of health and safety and consistently adopt safe working practices as a result of their effective learning on these topics. For example, motor vehicle learners and electrical engineering apprentices work in a safe and professional manner in the practical workshops. They wear appropriate protective clothing, are acutely aware of their surroundings and follow all guidance for safe working.

Learners value the supportive and positive relationships that they have with their peers and staff. Learners feel safe across all college sites and know who to talk to about any concerns. They are confident that any concerns they did have would be dealt with promptly. However, too many learners are not aware of wider risks outside of college. For example, they do not have a good enough understanding of the risks of radicalisation and extremism and how to keep themselves safe.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a strong contribution to meeting skills needs.

Senior leaders and governors engage very effectively with a wide range of stakeholders. This includes large and small employers, community organisations, other educational establishments, and regional civic partners.

Senior leaders and managers have a very keen understanding of their region's existing and newer skills needs. They participate in local, regional and national forums and networks frequently to make sure they can identify emerging skills needs and react swiftly. They review existing provision and develop new curriculum accordingly. For example, they responded rapidly to the recent need to develop courses in English for speakers of other languages in their region. This was to enable such learners to move into employment in sectors with skills shortages.

Curriculum managers and teachers work very closely with stakeholders to plan and design their courses. Stakeholders attend industry-specific advisory panels where they can advise staff about industry developments, resource requirements and skills needs. Employers from many specialisms frequently visit college centres. They attend events, give subject specialist talks to learners, deliver master classes and some provide training to staff so that they keep abreast of new developments and emerging technology within sectors. For example, employers from esport businesses provided expert advice on the specialist facilities learners would need access to as well as co-designing and sponsoring learners' uniforms. Hospitality learners benefit significantly from learning directly from a very celebrated and nationally recognised chef and colleagues from his restaurant company.

Curriculum managers and teachers work with employers and community groups to help understand and develop the skills that their learners need. They develop very good links with employers so that many learners benefit from work experience placements or work-related learning and live briefs.

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

Leaders and senior managers, supported by governors, have successfully established their 'Empowering Learning Strategy'. A key part of this strategy is their 'Learning Philosophy' promoted across all courses and all college campuses; it is well understood by staff. Leaders have made significant investments in both their staff team and the physical resources to 'empower learning'. Most staff recognise their role within the strategy and can explain how they are empowered and supported to do their job well.

Staff benefit from plentiful high-quality professional development, which helps them to be effective in their roles. For example, mentors support new teachers to understand their 'Learning Philosophy' and hone their skills following effective

feedback. More experienced staff members can apply to join a range of management development programmes relevant to their level of experience. This includes a specialist programme to encourage potential managers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds to develop their careers.

Teachers are well-qualified subject specialists, who use their knowledge skilfully to explain concepts clearly and successfully stimulate learners' interest so that they are enquiring learners. For example, access to mental health nursing learners benefit from experienced and enthusiastic teachers who inspire them to question all that they learn. As a result, learners participate enthusiastically in their learning, asking probing questions of the teacher to develop their knowledge further. For instance, learners were curious to know how the Human Rights Act linked to the Equality Act.

Leaders and managers have a very clear rationale for the courses they offer across all of their college campuses. They have planned their course offer to cater for a wide variety of academic, technical and vocational subjects, including niche and highly specialist provision, to meet the needs of their region. Managers and teachers ensure that almost all provision is ambitious and meets the needs of their learners, including disadvantaged learners, well. The provision for learners with high needs is especially ambitious and meets the needs of the high number of these learners studying across the college campuses exceptionally well.

Leaders work closely with most employers to plan effective apprenticeship provision. Apprentices benefit from training that helps them develop the skills employers need. Employers value the strong contribution that apprentices make to their businesses, many in very well-known organisations. Most apprentices benefit from well-planned on- and off-the-job training. Trainers ensure apprentices complete purposeful practical activities that enable them to apply theory to practice. As a result, apprentices rapidly develop high levels of practical skills. For example, furniture restoration apprentices film themselves servicing tools and completing skills projects. They review these with their trainer and their employer to assess their progress and agree targets for further development.

Teachers know their learners well. They make good use of learners' initial assessments and starting points to plan learning so that learners make good progress. Teachers carefully consider the order that they teach topics so that learners build their knowledge and skills coherently. For example, A-level psychology learners applied their previous learning on the central nervous system to analyse psychological and biological reactions to stimuli. Adult learners studying English as a second language quickly develop substantial new knowledge and skills. They use grammar accurately and rapidly improve their pronunciation of words. Learners enthusiastically extend their learning by listening to podcasts, reading books of an appropriate level and having conversations with a range of people.

Most teachers use a range of techniques to help learners transfer key knowledge into their long-term memory. For example, they use repetition, revisit topics, and draw out connections and links to help learners deepen their understanding. For example, A-level computer science teachers help learners solve practical problems

through recalling previous learning to spot mistakes in coding and problem solve by debugging and recoding.

Most teachers check learners' understanding carefully and frequently. In A-level English literature, teachers use questioning skilfully to help learners analyse and develop ideas of characterisation in 'Wuthering Heights'. Public services learners deepen their learning about Maslow's hierarchy of needs through challenging questions, where teachers encourage them to apply their knowledge to a range of contemporary scenarios in policing and the armed services.

Learners with high needs make outstanding progress as a result of the highly personalised curriculum and specialist support that enables them to realise their ambitions, get jobs or live more independently. Specialist teachers use assessment expertly and consistently in the classroom. They provide appropriate, supportive and encouraging feedback individualised to each learner and give them small steps to work on to improve. For example, writing from the left of the page, expanding their writing and correcting handwriting or spelling mistakes that are relevant to the topics. As a result, most learners have improved their reading, writing and independence in the classroom.

Most teachers use assessment and feedback effectively to help their learners understand what they need to do to improve. For example, in performing arts, teachers give learners very clear and precise feedback about small details of their practical dance work, which helps learners quickly improve their technique. Construction teachers use assessment effectively to check learners' understanding and further inform their teaching. Teachers prepare learners well for examinations and assessments.

Most learners use technical or subject-specific vocabulary fluently. For example, learners studying on travel and tourism, animal management and early years courses are increasingly able and confident to use specialist language in all of their work. This helps them to become more confident as they prepare for external work experience placements and helps to improve their written work.

Most learners are successful on their courses. They achieve the qualifications they study, many with high grades, and they move on to their choice of next steps. For example, performing arts learners achieve very well, and they move on to prestigious dance and drama schools or university. Adult learners studying English or mathematics are able to move into employment, gain more secure work or even promotion.

Most learners benefit from opportunities to broaden their learning and become increasingly confident and skilled. For example, arboriculture teachers have successfully developed ways to add additional skills into the curriculum. At the start of the second year, all learners undertake the tractor driving competency assessment to enable them to drive the tractors and subsequently move the large industry kit around the site. Many learners also participate in a very wide range of enrichment activities, such as sports, debating groups and board games. However, a

minority of learners do not benefit from opportunities to extend their learning beyond their core studies.

Managers and curriculum leaders utilise well-understood quality assurance and improvement processes to focus on the quality of the learners' experience. Through effective use of learning walks, learner voice activity, employer feedback and careful review of relevant data, they have a secure understanding of their strengths and areas for further improvement. This includes the very small number of courses where the quality of education is not consistently good. They apply the same rigour to the small amount of subcontracted provision so that learners benefit from the same high-quality learning experiences.

Leaders and managers take prompt action to remedy weaker areas of their provision. For example, they undertook a thorough review of the apprenticeship provision and significantly reduced the number of standards offered. This has led to improvements in the quality of the apprentices' learning experiences. Too few apprentices had achieved their qualifications previously, but leaders and managers have taken decisive action to improve the progress that current apprentices are making. However, they have not ensured that employers are directly involved in reviewing apprentices' progress in a minority of cases.

Highly experienced and specialist governors understand their role very well. They support leaders closely and challenge them robustly. Governors have a very secure understanding of the quality of education and training for all cohorts of learners. They use this knowledge successfully to support the continuous improvement of quality within the college. Governors ensure that the college leaders fulfil their statutory duties and obligations.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and managers place a high priority on the safety and well-being of their learners. The designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) and their teams work closely and effectively with relevant external groups so that they can support their learners well.

The DSLs, their safeguarding teams and all staff are appropriately trained. They benefit from frequent refresher training so that they are aware of emerging risks. For example, staff have deepened their awareness of signs of neglect and being alert to the risks of being groomed by the incel movement. Staff are confident to report any concerns they have.

Leaders and managers use effective systems to identify, record and monitor safeguarding concerns. They respond quickly to any concerns reported by staff. Where appropriate, they collaborate with external safeguarding agencies

successfully. For learners with significant vulnerabilities, they use detailed action plans well to help reduce risk, keep learners safe and to remain in education.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders and managers should take prompt actions to ensure that the very small number of courses that do not yet provide a consistently good quality of education to learners improve rapidly.
- Leaders and managers should continue to improve the apprenticeship provision so that all apprentices benefit from their employer being fully involved in monitoring their progress and achievement rates continue to improve.
- Leaders and managers should ensure that all learners benefit from a personal development programme of learning that helps them to develop wider skills beyond their core studies, as well as better understand the risks relevant to the regions they live and work in.

Provider details

Unique reference number	134153
Address	Oxpens Road Oxford Oxfordshire OX1 1SA
Contact number	08006126008
Website	www.activatelearning.ac.uk
Chief Executive Officer	Gary Headland
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	12 to 15 December 2017
Main subcontractors	Oxfordshire County Council Optalis Reading Football Club SOFEA Ways into Work

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy chief executive, 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

Ann Monaghan, lead inspector	His Majesty’s Inspector
Peter Cox	Senior His Majesty’s Inspector
Sarah Houghton	Ofsted Inspector
Emma Barrett-Peel	Ofsted Inspector
Emma Leavey	His Majesty’s Inspector
Andrew Kaye	Ofsted Inspector
Nicki Adams	Ofsted Inspector
Judith Munro	Ofsted Inspector
Darren James	Ofsted Inspector
Peter Giles	Ofsted Inspector
Mark Hillman	Ofsted Inspector
Pam Richardson	Ofsted Inspector
Jo Folwell	Ofsted Inspector
Kate Lou	Ofsted Inspector
Andy Fitt	His Majesty’s Inspector
Montserrat Perez-Parent	His Majesty’s Inspector
Richard Pemble	His Majesty’s Inspector
Daniel Beale	His Majesty’s Inspector
Jo-Ann Henderson	His Majesty’s Inspector
Roland White	His Majesty’s Inspector
Richard Kirkham	His Majesty’s Inspector
Kate Hill	His Majesty’s Inspector

Emily Johnson

Ofsted Inspector

Carolyn Brownsea

His Majesty's Inspector

Viki Faulkner

His Majesty's Inspector

David Towsey

His Majesty's Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2022