

Inspection of Writtle University College

Inspection dates:

3 to 6 October 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

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

Information about this provider

Writtle University College is a higher education institution offering further education programmes in land-based subjects and sports. The college is in the village of Writtle, just outside the city of Chelmsford, in Essex. The campus is based on a large estate, with extensive landscaped grounds. There are a wide range of facilities which include a working farm, an equine centre, science laboratories, a floristry centre, a specialist animal unit, dog grooming parlours and sports provision.

At the time of the inspection, there were 984 students and apprentices in education and training. There were 18 students with high needs. Most students and apprentices studied at level 2 or level 3. There were 609 students aged 16 to 18 and 183 adult students. There were 192 apprentices, most of whom are on standards-based apprenticeships in veterinary nurse, arborist, land-based service technician, equine groom, horticulture and landscape construction operative.

At the time of the inspection, the leaders did not work with any subcontractors.

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

Students and apprentices enjoy studying at Writtle University College. They value the calm and inclusive culture, where they can feel part of the college community. Students benefit from teachers who are highly experienced subject specialists. Students and apprentices gain new knowledge and skills which prepare them appropriately for further study or work.

Students benefit from good-quality practical learning environments and resources that reinforce their learning in theory and practical sessions. Young students in agriculture courses carry out tasks on the college farm to learn about keeping cattle, sheep and pigs. Adult students of dog grooming learn in busy grooming parlours. Young students are supported to gain GCSE English and mathematics qualifications. However, while more students are achieving their qualifications, too few achieve grades 4 or above.

Apprentices gain confidence to carry out their job roles. Veterinary nurse apprentices develop the skills to use radiography equipment effectively to support veterinary surgeons in the diagnosis of conditions. Arborist apprentices learn to identify different tree species and how to maintain chainsaws safely before they carry out their work.

Students with high needs receive appropriate support from dedicated learning support assistants. However, teachers and staff do not use the information contained in students' education, health and care plans to ensure that they plan students' learning effectively.

Students and apprentices value their learning at the college. They arrive on time for lessons and come prepared to work. Students and apprentices treat each other and their teachers with respect. They allow others to speak and answer questions when required. They are keen to participate and respond effectively to teachers' instructions.

Students and apprentices feel safe at college and in their workplace. They know who to report their concerns to if they need to. They are confident that any concerns they have will be acted on swiftly. Staff in the well-being team use their expertise to support students and apprentices with the challenges they have in their lives that impact their learning. Students quickly develop safe working practices. They use tools safely and follow the guidance from teachers and farm managers.

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

Since the previous inspection, the quality of education for adults and apprentices has declined. Leaders and governors have not taken swift action to stem the decline in quality. As a result, there is too much inconsistency in the quality of teaching across different programmes. Although most young students receive good-quality teaching and achieve their qualifications, this is not the case for adult students and

apprentices. Too few apprentices at level 2 complete their programmes and too few adult students make good progress.

Leaders work effectively with employers and develop courses to meet the needs of the sectors they work in. Agriculture courses provide students with knowledge of different farm types and the systems used for modern UK production. Land-based service technician apprenticeships meet the significant skills shortages in the agritech industry. Adult students studying horticulture develop the skills needed to maintain gardens and estates.

Leaders have not ensured that the quality of teaching and learning is consistently good across all provision types. In adult learning and apprenticeship lessons, teachers do not check understanding before moving on to new subjects. Too frequently teachers' questioning does not give adults and apprentices the opportunity to make the connections to their prior learning. Teachers of young students use a variety of teaching strategies effectively. They recap knowledge at the start of sessions, using questioning appropriately to check students' understanding. Teachers ensure that students apply what they have learned in the classroom to practical activities. Animal management teachers create online quizzes to reinforce students' learning of key concepts such as animal nutrition.

Too few teachers use the information they gather on adult students' and apprentices' starting points or their learning needs to plan their teaching effectively. Teachers of adult students on dog grooming courses and land-based service technician apprentices do not consider the higher-level skills and knowledge a significant minority of adult students and apprentices have. As a result, these students and apprentices make slow progress. Teachers have been slow to assess adult students' English and mathematical needs. Teachers do not know what support these students require to develop these essential skills.

Young students develop good English skills. Teachers routinely correct the mistakes students make. English teachers provide additional workshops for level 3 students to develop their academic writing skills, such as using references when referring to different sources of information. Consequently, the quality of students' work improves over time.

Teachers ensure that young students and apprentices receive detailed developmental feedback on their work. Young students and apprentices are clear on what they have done well and what they need to do to improve their written work. Students on equine management courses use this feedback to secure their understanding and learn from their mistakes. A high proportion of them achieve distinction grades. However, teachers of adult students and those teaching students with high needs are less skilful in providing consistently useful feedback. Teachers do not routinely identify where adult students have made errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Students with high needs receive generalised comments, which makes it difficult for them to identify simply where they have made mistakes or how they may improve. As a result, students repeat the same mistakes.

Teachers of apprenticeship programmes do not prepare apprentices sufficiently for their end-of-programme assessment. Apprentices are unaware that they could achieve distinctions. As a result, too few apprentices who reach their final assessments achieve distinction grades.

Most students and apprentices gain new knowledge and skills incrementally over time. Land and wildlife teachers ensure that students understand the composition of the soil before they are required to apply their knowledge to decomposition and cultivation. Veterinary nurse apprentices are taught how to communicate effectively and advise owners on how to maintain good health and welfare for their pets. In equine management, students complete additional learning beyond their qualification. Agriculture students achieve competency qualifications in the safe operation of tractors. They learn how to safely use pesticides and boom sprayers. As a result, students and apprentices are prepared for their next steps in education and employment.

Leaders, teachers and support staff do not have the appropriate professional training to support students with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Although leaders have taken early steps to implement improvements, it is too soon to positively impact students.

Leaders do not ensure that teachers prioritise the development of their teaching skills and professional teaching practice. Managers use the outcomes from lesson observations and develop suitable training. However, too few teachers access and benefit from this training. Consequently, the quality of education is not yet good or better. Most teachers update their industrial and subject-specific knowledge effectively. Many teachers continue to work in the industries they provide training in.

Most students are prepared appropriately for their lives outside of education. They know the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. They recognise the signs of coercive control and understand the importance of sexual consent as part of having an appropriate relationship with another person. Students understand the risks of radicalisation and extremist behaviour in the local area. However, too few apprentices understand what the risks are in the areas in which they live and work.

Students become respectful citizens. They participate in community projects such as designing and creating a garden for people with dementia and therapeutic areas for adults with mental health difficulties. Students learn the importance of contributing to society and develop a wider value of their work.

Leaders and managers ensure that students receive comprehensive careers information and guidance. Leaders host employer events that have high attendance. Students benefit from talking with employers about the skills needed for different job roles. Students receive detailed information on opportunities in higher education. As a result, most students continue into further or higher education or into employment. However, managers have not ensured that apprentices receive similar high-quality careers advice.

Governance arrangements are not effective. Leaders do not ensure that governors receive the information and detail they need to hold leaders to account for maintaining and improving the quality of education and training at the college.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Increase the proportion of adult students and apprentices that achieve their qualifications and achieve distinction grades.
- Ensure that teachers make good use of adult students' and apprentices' starting points, while taking account of their needs, to plan learning that develops their English and mathematical skills.
- Increase the proportion of teachers who participate in the professional development of their teaching skills.
- Increase the training for staff to support the educational needs of students with SEND.
- Ensure that the ongoing careers information, advice and guidance available for apprentices is of high quality.
- Ensure that the information provided to governors enables them to hold leaders to account for improving the quality of education and training to at least good.

Provider details

Unique reference number	133804
Address	Lordship Road Chelmsford Essex CM1 3RR
Contact number	01245424200
Website	https://writtle.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Tim Middleton
Provider type	Higher education institution
Date of previous inspection	14 January 2014
Main subcontractors	Not applicable

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of further education, 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 students' and apprentices' work, seeking the views of students and apprentices, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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