

# Inspection of Varndean College

Inspection dates: 5 to 8 March 2024

**Overall effectiveness** **Good**

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

## Information about this provider

Varndean College is a sixth-form college in Brighton. At the time of inspection, there were approximately 1800 students studying education programmes for young people, around 420 adult students, and 19 students in receipt of high-needs funding.

The college offers a wide range of courses, from entry-level to level 4. Most students study A level or vocational programmes at level 3 in, for example, psychology, criminology and sociology. The small number of adult students study part-time programmes in counselling, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and community learning, such as Pilates, art and Qi Gong.

The college does not work with any subcontractors.

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

Students flourish in the vibrant and highly inclusive culture staff create. They are respectful towards others, value equality, and embrace diversity. For example, they celebrate International Women's Day, enjoy sharing food and stories with others during Culture Day and welcome new friends to Pride. Students care deeply for one another and demonstrate the values they need to thrive at Varndean College and in modern Britain.

Students enjoy learning and are motivated to succeed. Most attend well, are studious and fulfil the high expectations set by staff. The small proportion of students not meeting these expectations value the comprehensive support and care staff provide to help them to get back on track. Students develop the characteristics they need for learning now and in the future.

Students are enthusiastic about and enjoy greatly the wide range of additional activities available to them. They take part in academic and sporting activities, such as hidden histories, women's football and gym-based fitness. Students aiming to study at prestigious universities develop their public speaking and critical thinking skills through the Aspire programme. Consequently, students forge new friendships and develop their talents and interests.

Many students make a valuable contribution to their communities. They learn to be advocates for sustainability and the environment. They take part in Citizens UK events, volunteer in schools and hospitals and involve themselves in activities to support those who are homeless or underprivileged. Students are caring and demonstrate thoughtfulness, consideration and altruism.

Students value deeply the extensive support and care staff provide for their mental health and well-being. They appreciate the help the well-being team provide, including access to counsellors, and the opportunity to discuss how they are feeling in courses, such as counselling. As a result, students develop in confidence and resilience.

Students appreciate greatly the advice staff provide, which helps them to make informed choices and stay safe in their relationships. Adult students learn how to manage professional boundaries. Younger students, including those with high needs, value highly tutorial discussions about relationships, sexuality and gender identity. These sessions help them to understand the views of others and the challenges they face.

Students feel safe at college and have a good awareness of how to stay safe in the community and online. With their peers and staff, they ensure bullying and harassment are never tolerated. Students understand the risks of radicalisation and extremism that they might face. Students are confident that staff will deal quickly and effectively with any concerns they have about their safety and well-being.

## **Contribution to meeting skills needs**

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders and managers work effectively with a broad range of stakeholders to identify and respond positively to local and regional skills needs. They collaborate with Brighton and Sussex Chambers of Commerce, FE Sussex and Brighton and Hove Council to secure funding and invest in resources and initiatives that meet the priorities set out in the local skills improvement plan. For example, leaders have introduced a carbon literacy qualification for all students, so they become more environmentally responsible. Staff work with employers to improve the digital competencies of those seeking employment in the creative and digital media sectors.

Leaders and managers have given careful thought to the design of programmes so that they provide students with the knowledge and skills they need for employment. For example, with a key employer, leaders have designed and established an internship programme so that students develop skills in teamwork, resilience and problem-solving. As a result, students are developing the range of skills employers in the region demand.

Though staff work enthusiastically to establish partnerships with employers and stakeholders that benefit the design and implementation of programmes of learning, leaders rightly recognise this is not yet consistently strong across all areas of provision. In many cases, partnerships are new and have yet to mature.

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

Leaders have a clear and ambitious vision to provide high-quality and inclusive education for all students, including those who are disadvantaged. With staff, they share a very strong commitment to social mobility and justice and place students firmly at the centre of their work. Managers provide programmes of learning for students to develop the knowledge, behaviours, confidence and resilience they need to be successful. As a result, most students are well prepared for their futures. A high proportion move on to higher education, further learning and employment.

Leaders and staff use their partnerships with partners and stakeholders effectively to plan the education and support that students receive. For example, staff work closely with Sussex Police to help keep students safe and build relationships between the police and minority groups. Managers and staff have introduced an employability programme for ESOL students so that they have a better understanding of how to secure meaningful employment. Students benefit from these partnerships, which help them to prepare for their futures, and help them to develop positive relationships and stay safe.

Teachers plan learning logically and most use a range of effective teaching strategies to help students understand key concepts. In adult level 2 counselling, students

learn about confidentiality and self-awareness, so that they know how to set professional boundaries with clients. In level 3 digital games production, students discuss and critique one another's work before moving on to further tasks. Most students keep pace with learning and embed what they have learned in their long-term memory.

Expert teachers use their specialist knowledge to deepen students' understanding. In A-level graphics, students investigate algorithms that may lead to infringement of copyright laws. In A-level sociology, students consider Marxist theory in the context of the profits of large fast-food chains. As a result, students can apply fluently the theories they have learned to different situations.

Most teachers use assessment effectively to check students' learning. Staff teaching the International Baccalaureate probe expertly students' knowledge of the rise of communism in twentieth-century Russia. Students studying level 3 health and social care explain to teachers how Piaget's theory and cognitive development can affect children's communication. As a result, most students are secure in their knowledge and produce work that is of a high standard. However, teachers in GCSE mathematics do not always check that students understand the concepts they are learning.

Teachers provide students with feedback to help them improve their work. Students studying level 3 health and social care understand that they must develop written responses to questions to secure higher grades. Adult students studying counselling become more evaluative when recording their reflections. Most students act on the feedback teachers provide and make good progress, often achieving high grades.

Leaders provide students with a programme of high-quality careers information and advice to help them make informed choices about their futures. Professionals from sectors such as medicine, travel, engineering and culture provide students with valuable insights into industry roles. Students benefit from sessions with alumni, where they explain pathways into careers, such as those in the civil service. Students develop valuable employability skills in work experience and through the courses they undertake. As a result, students are prepared well for their next steps and progress successfully to further learning, training and employment.

Staff work closely with partners and stakeholders to ensure that most adult students develop the knowledge and skills they need for life and employment. Adult students setting out on new career paths, such as counselling, learn the fundamental knowledge they need for their specialism. Those new to the country develop the language skills they need to play a part in their communities and benefit from the services available to them. However, ESOL students do not always develop the skills they need for employment. Managers have plans in place to improve students' employability skills, however, it is too early to see the impact of these plans.

Leaders ensure that high-needs funded students benefit from very effective support. Staff work closely with local schools to help students with high needs transition successfully from school to college. Specialist staff know students and their needs

very well. Staff plan learning and set targets so that these students make rapid progress and achieve very well, often outperforming their peers. Students with high needs are confident, independent and learn to advocate for themselves effectively.

Leaders and managers monitor the quality of education effectively to understand the strengths and weaknesses of provision. They use the information they gather to make improvements to programmes of learning and inform professional development. Teachers, including those new to the college, benefit from useful professional development which they value highly. Teaching and learning mentors provide expert help so teachers improve their practice. As a result, most students benefit from high-quality teaching and support and so make good progress.

Leaders rightly recognise that a significant proportion of students do not complete all of the courses they set out to do. Leaders and managers modify students' learning programmes so they can move on to the destinations they have planned. However, more than half of those who do not complete all of their courses choose to leave their study altogether. While there are indications that this is improving, leaders and managers have been slow to make positive progress in this area. Leaders place high importance on staff well-being. Leaders are considerate of workload. Staff consider workload to be manageable and sustainable, they feel supported well by managers and valued highly by leaders.

Governors use their up-to-date knowledge of education and the needs of the region to help leaders build a clear strategy for the future, that is inclusive and provides students with the skills they need. With a good understanding of the college, governors provide leaders with effective support and challenge to improve the quality of learning. They ensure leaders and staff fulfil their statutory responsibilities, including those for safeguarding, equality and the 'Prevent' duty.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

### **What does the provider need to do to improve?**

- Continue to significantly improve the number of learners who complete their courses as they had originally planned.
- Ensure that all adult learners develop the employability skills they need for their next steps.

## Provider details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	130668
<b>Address</b>	Surrenden Road Brighton East Sussex BN1 6WQ
<b>Contact number</b>	01273508011
<b>Website</b>	<a href="https://varndean.ac.uk/">https://varndean.ac.uk/</a>
<b>Principal, CEO or equivalent</b>	Donna-Marie Janson
<b>Provider type</b>	Further Education – Sixth Form College
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	30 October to 1 November 2018
<b>Main subcontractors</b>	None

## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the Deputy Principal, 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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Sara Woodward	His Majesty's Inspector
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