

Inspection of Harlow College

Inspection dates: 21 to 24 May 2024

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

Harlow college is a large general further education college with three sites across Essex.

Leaders provide education programmes for young people, apprenticeships, adult learning programmes and courses for students with high needs at the main site in Harlow. The college has a specialist campus in Stansted, the Stansted Airport College. This provides a focused curriculum of technical and professional courses in aviation, engineering, and events management. There is also a dedicated adult learning centre, Bright Futures, based in Harlow.

Currently there are, 2,371 students on education programmes for young people. They study a range of vocational, technical, and academic courses, including T levels, at levels 1 to 3. Around 1,000 students continue to study English and mathematics qualifications as part of their studies.

At the time of inspection there were 136 students with high needs, 55 of whom were studying non-accredited qualifications, within the colleges' supported studies provision.

Around 1,764 adult learners study courses from entry level to level 3. Adults focus on one of four core strands: employment, access to higher education, literacy and numeracy, and personal and professional development. A large majority of adults study short courses in employment, and personal and professional development. A small number of adult learners study part time evening courses.

There are 409 apprentices, all of whom study standards-based apprenticeships. A majority of apprentices study level 3 engineering technician or installation, and level 3 maintenance electrician, standards-based apprenticeships.

The college does not work with any subcontractors.

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

Almost all students and apprentices enjoy their lessons and benefit from a productive learning environment. They develop new skills, knowledge, and behaviours as a result of their studies, and are well prepared to progress on to their next steps.

Students aged 16 to 18 have a positive attitude towards their studies. They apply themselves diligently to classroom activities. Most attend lessons well and on time. They behave well, and are respectful towards staff, peers and visitors.

Apprentices have a positive and professional attitude to learning. They recognise the importance of completing their apprenticeships, and work hard to achieve the outcomes needed.

Adults demonstrate maturity and an enthusiasm for learning. They benefit from carefully structured training and receive the support they need to gain and maintain employment. As a result, many adults secure full-time employment.

Students with high needs are an integral part of the college community. They benefit from coordinated specialist support, and have appropriate access to assistive technology to support their learning. Students with high needs enjoy their time at college and value the opportunity to develop their independence.

A large majority of students and apprentices receive useful careers advice and guidance. This includes individual tutorials with tutors who provide subject-specific advice, open access to the careers service, drop-in careers appointments, and bespoke guidance to meet students' and apprentices' needs. As a result, they are well informed about the careers opportunities available in their chosen industries.

Students aged 16 to 18, including those with high needs, benefit from an extensive range of enrichment activities. They develop confidence, character and citizenship while attending various sporting activities, driving lessons, craft and cooking clubs, and participating in groups such as the LGBTQ+ society. They rightly value the opportunity to socialise with others and develop new hobbies, and interests.

Younger students are well informed about key topics linked to their personal development, such as healthy relationships, consent, and sexual harassment. They are confident to discuss these topics and recognise signs of inappropriate behaviour.

Students and apprentices feel safe at college and in work. They value leaders 'zero-tolerance' approach to poor behaviour. Leaders and managers prioritise safety on campus.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a strong contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders work very effectively with local and regional stakeholders to understand the area's skills needs. They participate in, and often lead, a range of stakeholder groups, such as the Essex Chamber of Commerce Employer Representative Body, and Local Skills Improvement Plan, and play a key role in local, cross sector, partnership working. Leaders have very effective partnerships with local councils and Job Centre Plus. This helps them to understand and respond to the needs of unemployed adults. As a result, they respond quickly and effectively to local and regional requirements.

Employers and stakeholders contribute well to curriculum design. This leads to courses that incorporate key knowledge and skills for the local economy. For example, carpentry managers have recently added an increased focus on property maintenance and mathematical skills, because employers identified this as a key need. Stakeholders support the curriculum in a variety of ways, including through careers talks, guest lectures and live briefs. One employer works with college staff to develop a virtual reality program to bring to life information about careers in the aviation industry. As a result of this work, apprentices and students, including those with high needs, develop the knowledge and skills that they need to secure and sustain employment, or lead more positive and fulfilling lives.

Managers and staff throughout the college understand the part they play in meeting skills needs. Managers fully understand the local, regional, and national priorities and how the college fits within the skills ecosystem. They develop excellent relationships with employers and use both formal and informal opportunities to gather information about skills needs. Leaders and managers successfully work on bids and projects with other providers in the area to ensure that, between them, skills priorities are met. College governors understand very well how the college contributes to meeting skills needs and help leaders to prioritise developments in this important area of their work.

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

Leaders and governors understand very well the needs of employers, their students and communities they serve. They consider these needs carefully when they plan the curriculum. For example, they work effectively with a wide range of employers and stakeholders to ensure electrical and aircraft maintenance engineering apprenticeship courses meet specific skill priorities. This ensures courses align closely with industry requirements.

Managers and teachers organise topics well, to help students and apprentices progressively build the knowledge and skills they need. For example, in level 2 carpentry, teachers focus on hand skills, before progressing onto the use of power tools, and the correct use of personal protective equipment. In level 2 gaming, students incrementally develop their knowledge of design, coding and research. As a result, students and apprentices develop detailed knowledge and skills throughout their studies.

The support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is well planned. Teachers, support workers, and managers know their students very well. They use this knowledge to ensure activities meet student's specific needs. Students with high needs develop physical and social skills in line with their curriculum plans. They make good progress, which prepares them well for their next steps.

The majority of teachers have suitable industrial and professional expertise and use this knowledge well in their teaching. For example, T-level health teachers are experienced theatre nurses and midwives, and teachers on adult security courses have extensive experience in the security sector. They set work that is suitably demanding to ensure students and apprentices develop detailed knowledge and skills beyond the basic requirements of their course.

Teachers on apprenticeship courses have extensive, specialist technical expertise. They use these skills to provide well planned and insightful practical lessons. However, not all teachers have the necessary teaching and assessment skills to provide consistently effective theoretical training for apprentices. As a result, a minority of aircraft maintenance engineering and electrical apprentices are slow to develop a secure understanding of theoretical concepts.

Specialist teachers for students with high needs are well qualified and effective. They use a range of effective strategies to help students develop their knowledge and skills. Students benefit from plentiful opportunities to repeat topics and recap what they learn. As result, students with high needs perform at, or above, the expected standard. However, in a small minority of cases teachers do not correct misconceptions sufficiently.

A minority of teachers do not consistently check students' and apprentices' understanding well enough. Teachers' checking of understanding across apprenticeship courses varies considerably. Teachers of adult learners move on to new topics quickly, without checking that learners have securely grasped new concepts.

The large majority of students and apprentices progress to their next steps successfully. For example, increasing numbers of plumbing students take up apprenticeships, and those that complete T levels or full-time aircraft maintenance engineering courses progress into related work opportunities. The large majority of students with high needs progress to apprenticeships, education or employment.

Leaders and managers use a range of useful approaches to monitor and improve the quality of students' and apprentices' studies. This includes curriculum annual deep dives, termly health checks and other quality processes. In the main, leaders use the outcomes of these activities well to identify areas of weakness and take appropriate actions to secure improvement. However, the information that leaders and managers access to review apprentices' progress is not always as precise as it could be. Consequently, leaders do not have strong enough oversight of this area to ensure precise and swift improvements are made.

Leaders rightly identified that substantial improvements were needed in the apprenticeship provision. After a comprehensive review, they made several suitable changes to improve their apprenticeship courses. These actions have had a positive impact on mechatronics and electrical apprenticeships.

In a few areas, such as engineering and aircraft maintenance engineering, leaders experience challenges in recruitment. They have been creative in ways to address these issues, such as offering incentives as part of the 'taking teaching further' initiative, and gaining a sponsor license to employ staff from overseas. Despite these actions, staff turnover in these areas does remain high, and in aircraft maintenance engineering this continues to impact the quality of teaching in a few theoretical lessons.

Governors have the relevant backgrounds and experience they need to fulfil their roles. They provide valuable input and steer on the strategic priorities for the college. Governors receive a good standard of information that allows them to understand performance. They use this information well to challenge and question leaders on any areas for improvement that have been identified. Governors triangulate what leaders tell them through a series of useful activities, such as attending training with staff or visits to their link departments.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Ensure that all apprenticeship teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge to teach high-quality theory lessons.
- Ensure teachers use effective strategies to consistently check and consolidate students' and apprentices' knowledge before moving onto more complex topics.
- Ensure leaders have access to detailed information on the progress apprentices make, enabling them to set precise and targeted actions for improvement.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130676
Address	Velizy Avenue Harlow Essex CM20 3LH
Contact number	01279 868000
Website	www.harlow-college.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Karen Spencer
Provider type	General Further Education College
Date of previous inspection	22 to 25 January 2019
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the vice 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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