

Inspection of The Northern School of Art

Inspection dates: 14 to 17 January 2025

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

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

Information about this provider

The Northern School of Art is a further and higher education art and design college. The further education provision is delivered at a purpose-built facility in the centre of Middlesbrough. At the time of the inspection, there were 639 learners studying creative arts programmes, which include vocational qualifications, A levels and access to higher education courses in art and design. Courses include acting for stage and screen and costume design, with the largest course being a level 3 diploma in illustration and animation. There were 589 learners on education programmes for young people, with the vast majority studying at level 3. There were 22 learners on adult learning programmes, most of whom were on access to higher education programmes, and there were 19 learners in receipt of high-needs funding.

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

Learners' behaviour and attitudes toward their learning are exceptional. Learners work extremely hard and participate fully in lessons, developing their artistic and creative talents. They know that they are expected to behave maturely and are able to explain why this behaviour is important both for their current studies and future employment prospects. Learners regard the school as a big family where they collaborate well with staff and peers and feel comfortable expressing their views.

Staff recruit learners onto courses that enable them to develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours from their starting points. Learners rapidly develop practical and technical skills from the start of their programmes. In costume design, which for many learners is a completely new area of study, learners' sewing skills develop rapidly. In GCSE mathematics, learners' starting points are assessed effectively, and staff make every effort to adjust the curriculum to focus on the areas that learners need to improve. When learners need to retake their GCSE mathematic qualifications, they achieve well.

Learners on the level 3 diploma in 3-D graphic design course quickly develop their artistic abilities, producing written and practical work of an exceptionally high standard. They take pride in the work they produce and are motivated to achieve their best. The vast majority of learners complete their course and achieve at a very high level.

Staff create a highly effective, calm, purposeful and welcoming learning environment where learners feel part of a supportive and creative community. Learners feel valued, respected and comfortable expressing and presenting themselves without judgement.

Learners gain valuable work-related experience. On the level 3 diploma course in photography, learners work on relevant assignments and projects set by employers and external stakeholders that are exceptionally well planned and integrated into their programmes. The commercial photography briefs enable learners to develop a deeper understanding of how their studies apply in the world of work while developing their skills and confidence in preparation for their next steps.

Learners work very productively with each other. They show a sincere willingness to learn and demonstrate a high level of maturity in their communication with each other. Learners on the level 3 diploma in acting for stage and screen course learn how to critique each other's work constructively, objectively and supportively.

Learners feel safe and know how to keep themselves and others safe. They are clear about what they would do if they had an issue either in or outside the school. If they require the support of staff, they are confident they will be heard, and staff will provide the help they need.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The school makes a strong contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders, managers and staff engage very well with stakeholders and employers to understand the evolving skills needs of creative industries and use their understanding to plan and teach a highly relevant curriculum. Leaders, managers and staff work extensively in professional networks and industry groups and use these contacts to inform the curriculum they plan and teach to learners.

Leaders and managers work effectively with local and regional creative industry employers to understand and respond to their skills needs. In so doing, they provide learners with many opportunities to participate in projects and work experience. Leaders and managers of the Tees Valley Mayoral Combined Authority recognise and value highly the way in which the school ensures that its curriculum aligns closely with the region's specific arts and creative industries priorities.

Stakeholders value the way staff at the school establish and maintain strong industry links and involve employers in the curriculum from across the creative industries sector. Stakeholders recognise the school as being innovative in its curriculum and course choices. They welcome the way in which managers and lecturers are prepared to adapt the content they teach and establish new courses to maintain currency with developments in the creative industries sector.

In all creative industries subjects, managers and staff engage very effectively with and involve stakeholders in curriculum design and implementation. They ensure that learners learn about and are able to practise up-to-date skills and techniques for the creative industry areas they have chosen. They use employers, partners and stakeholders well to support the delivery of the curriculum, ensuring learners learn about and develop the skills they need to be successful in their chosen subject area. Staff ensure that, on all courses, learners are set briefs by industry experts or local businesses who then participate willingly in assessing and critiquing learners' completed work from a commercial and creative perspective.

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

Leaders and managers provide an exceptionally current and relevant curriculum that enables learners to develop specialist knowledge and skills in creative arts. They provide learners with access to highly specialised equipment and resources that enhance their studies. The small adult learning provision offered, which is predominantly an access to higher education (art and design) course, enables learners to focus on developing the skills and knowledge required for higher education and equips them with the skills to work professionally in their chosen field. All learners are well prepared for their next steps into further education, higher education or careers in the creative arts industries. Leaders and managers ensure that learners achieve well. Leaders and managers have continued to improve the achievement rate of learners since the last inspection.

Leaders recruit highly experienced lecturers who have subject expertise and industry experience. For example, on the level 3 acting for stage and screen course, lecturers work as practising professionals in the industry as playwrights, musicians and actors. They use their subject knowledge to plan and deliver current and relevant content and help learners develop acting skills mastery.

Lecturers use a range of very successful teaching strategies to help learners acquire the basic skills they need for progression to more complex topics. In the first year of the level 3 acting for stage and screen course, lecturers demonstrate principles of acting, and learners cover voice, physicality and characterisation. In the second year, learners move on to studying classical theatre and also focus on audition preparation and digital portfolios. Lecturers use videos in research sessions to highlight performance features such as the use of movement and gesture and discuss these with learners. Lecturers use recap activities frequently to help learners recall what they learn, such as referring back to previous study or assignments. On the level 3 costume design course, learners improve their technical production skills using industrial sewing machines. Staff support learners through a step-by-step demonstration of, for example, the production of rouleau loops and fastening.

Lecturers help learners identify what they do well and how they can improve. For example, on the level 3 graphic and digital design course, learners are very capable of identifying emerging industry trends when reviewing artwork such as brand logos. Lecturers then revisit the design process with learners to help learners identify what they could improve before final assignment deadlines. As part of their course, learners produce a comprehensive portfolio, which they use successfully to gain employment or to secure a place for further learning.

Following assessment, lecturers provide learners with very useful feedback which guides them well in relation to future work. In animation and illustration, first-year learners receive feedback on each completed project. This summative feedback identifies key areas for development linked to the requirements of the second year of the course. As a result, learners are clear about how they can improve and value the expert advice that they receive.

Lecturers successfully support learners in developing their English and mathematics skills. During practical sessions, learners on the level 3 acting course work on core English skills such as sight reading and annotating scripts, as these are necessary skills for auditions. In level 3 costume design, learners apply basic mathematical principles prior to their pattern cutting. They are able to measure accurately, use rulers and set squares to determine angles, understand scale and produce patterns in half and full scale.

Leaders have a thorough understanding of the many strengths and few areas for further improvement for the courses they offer. Since the last inspection, they have continued to improve, develop and expand the provision.

Leaders and managers conduct quality assurance activities such as lesson visits and learning walks to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching. They offer training and

support where weaknesses are identified. They use data to evaluate why a few learners leave or do not achieve and know the personal circumstances affecting these learners and the impact on retention and achievement. They ensure that the programmes they offer remain high quality.

Leaders and managers have recently appointed new, suitably experienced staff to work with learners with special education needs and/or disabilities. These staff have introduced useful individual learning plans for learners. The plans contain key information from learners' education, health and care plans and helpful strategies for lecturers and support staff to follow to help learners achieve their aspirations. Because the plans are new, it is too soon to see exactly how they are used to set targets and monitor progress.

Learners are very well prepared for their next steps. They receive helpful support from lecturers who are knowledgeable about the specialist industries in which they work and from specialist careers advisers for support with UCAS and progression to higher education. Lecturers provide learners with valuable information about possible career pathways and roles in the arts sector. Learners interested in a career in acting are aware of the diverse opportunities available, such as roles as a scare actor, verbatim theatre actor and actor/producer. A high proportion of learners progress to prestigious stage schools in London.

Lecturers skilfully ensure that learners understand the risks associated with extremism and radicalisation and how to maintain their own and others' safety. Learners actively participate in presentations about what constitutes left-wing and right-wing extremism and how risks escalate when community tensions are high. They know to report suspicious behaviour and be aware of items that could relate to acts of terrorism in the stage and screen industry, such as unattended belongings in theatre spaces.

Lecturers on the level 3 graphic design and digital course introduce learners to, and continue to maintain their awareness of, ethical considerations. Through assignment briefs, lecturers align many projects to social issues where learners report on, or have to present possible solutions to, problems in modern Britain and global issues. For example, learners produce work that identifies social issues relating to war.

Leaders work with a highly knowledgeable and committed board of governors that has a very strong understanding of the challenges that come from managing a further education learning environment. Governors receive comprehensive board papers and also hear first-hand from staff and learners about challenges facing the school. This enables them to challenge and hold senior leaders to account effectively.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130571
Address	Newport Road Middlesbrough TS1 1LA
Contact number	01642 288000
Website	northernart.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Martin Raby
Provider type	Specialist further education college
Date of previous inspection	8 to 11 February 2022
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the vice-principal 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 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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