



West Cheshire College



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Inspection report

Audience Post-sixteen	Published 9 December 2005	Provider reference 130618
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Basic information about the college

Name of college:	West Cheshire College
Type of college:	Further Education College
Principal:	Sara Mogel
Address of college:	Eaton Road, Handbridge Chester CH4 7ER
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Chair of governors:	Martin Seed
Unique reference number:	130618
Name of reporting inspector:	Bev Barlow HMI
Dates of inspection:	10 – 14 October 2005

Background of the organisation

1. West Cheshire College is a large further education college. It specialises in vocational education and training and is the largest provider in the area. The college has three main campuses; Ellesmere Port, Chester and the Capenhurst centre which is the base for specialist engineering technology provision. The college works very closely with local partners to meet the needs of their communities. An extensive range of full and part-time vocational courses is offered from entry to degree level. Part time courses are offered in over 70 other venues including community centres and the work place; around 40% of learners study at these sites. A large programme of flexible training, including e-learning, has been developed to meet the needs of individual employers. The college's mission is to provide "access to opportunity" and its aim is to close the skills gap in the local area.
2. West Cheshire has two distinct areas; Ellesmere Port and Neston and the District of Chester. Ellesmere Port has a strong manufacturing base centred on the automotive industries with expanding retail and leisure sectors. Chester has a growing economy particularly in financial services, hospitality, retail and health and social care sectors. Unemployment rates are lower than the national average. Across the area there are concentrations of low levels of numeracy and literacy skills. Many employers have identified gaps in employees' vocational and additional skills such as customer service and ICT.
3. The college has significantly increased in size since the last inspection in 2001. The majority of learners are from the local area of Cheshire and the Wirral. Most learners are adults aged over 19 years and studying part time. The small proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups is representative of the local area. The college has three Centres of Vocational Excellence (COVEs) in health and social care, logistics and automotive manufacturing. It provides apprenticeship programmes in nine vocational areas. The college works in partnership with 16 local schools to provide vocational courses for learners aged 14 to 16.
4. At the time of inspection there were 1,688 learners aged 16 to 18 years and 4,954 adult learners on courses leading to externally accredited qualifications. Additionally, 2,200 adult learners were enrolled on courses not leading to externally accredited qualifications. Around 380 learners aged 14 to 16, from local secondary schools, were following a vocational course at the college. The college also manages the apprenticeship programmes for 324 work-based learners. The majority of learners are enrolled on Entry level, level 1 and level 2 courses with around 15% of learners studying on a course at level 3 or higher.

Scope of the inspection

5. In determining the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the college's previous inspection report; the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC); and data on enrolments and learners' achievements over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:
- overall effectiveness of the college and its capacity to improve further
 - achievements and standards
 - quality of provision
 - leadership and management.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: grade 2
Capacity to improve	Outstanding: grade 1
Achievements and standards	Good: grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: grade 2

Note: Where contributory grades have been awarded, they are shown in the relevant sections of the report. Contributory grades represent the judgement of the team that the quality of the aspect of provision indicated by the grade differs from the grade overall.

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: grade 2

6. College data for 2005 confirms that learners' achievements are good overall. Success rates at all levels have improved faster than the national rate since 2003. For adult learners success and retention rates are now above national averages; they remain around the national average for learners aged 16 to 18. Pass rates on NVQs are high at all levels. The college recognises that pass rates on some courses are low. The achievement of the full framework by apprentices is good overall; it is very good in childcare and engineering but low in construction. Learners make good progress in developing practical and occupational skills.
7. The college judged its teaching and learning to be good and inspectors agreed. In the sample of lessons observed inspectors were able to confirm that the teaching in the college reflects vocational standards and key skills are now becoming firmly established into the delivery of most courses. Teachers make effective use of ILT in lessons and e-portfolios on NVQ qualifications. Assessment is well planned.
8. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is outstanding with very successful implementation of strategies to widen participation. Exceptionally strong links have been formed with employers, the local community and schools. The college is outstanding in meeting the needs and interests of its local community. Radical changes have been made to the curriculum and how it is delivered. Learners' development and employability are well supported by the wide range of relevant courses and enrichment activities. Enrolments have increased in recent years, including, for example, a 30% increase in apprentices in the last two years.
9. Learners receive outstanding guidance and support. Revised induction processes enable learners to settle quickly into college and their courses. The tutorial system is well planned and highly effective. Initial assessment is effective in identifying learners needing additional support; the support they receive is very good and linked to their vocational programme. Learners' progress and achievement are well monitored.
10. Leadership is outstanding and management is good. The principal, governors and senior managers set a clear direction for the college. Self-assessment and quality assurance are thorough and accurately identify the college's strengths and areas for development. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self assessment report. The college's financial management is good. The college provides good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: grade 1

11. Inspectors agreed with the college that overall its capacity to improve is outstanding. The college's quality assurance arrangements are comprehensive and have been highly effective in securing improvements. The college has improved retention rates for all learners and pass rates in many areas. The college accurately identifies that achievements of learners aged 16 to 18 need to improve and that pass rates on some courses are low. Strategies have been developed to monitor learners' progress more closely. The college's internal lesson observations accurately identify good practice and areas for development. There is evidence that some of the college's observations in adult and community learning have been graded too generously.
12. The college's self-assessment report produced prior to the inspection was mostly accurate in its identification of strengths and areas for improvement. Action plans include clear targets for improvement and effective procedures are in place to monitor progress closely. Some of the weaknesses identified in the self assessment report, for example, in student support, have been addressed successfully. It is too early to judge the impact of some actions taken by the college.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

13. The college has made outstanding progress in addressing areas for improvement noted during the last inspection in 2001. Some aspects for improvement, most notably the facilities at Ellesmere Port, the monitoring of equal opportunities and work experience opportunities for learners are now strengths of the college. The college has made radical changes to its curriculum and how it is delivered. Since 2003 success rates have improved on all levels of provision. The college recognises that the delivery of key skills has not yet been consistently embedded in all vocational areas. Low pass rates on the European computer driving licence (ECDL) courses have led the college to revise its policy to enrol most full-time learners on an ECDL course; learners are now enrolled on to a more appropriate ICT course. Assessment of work based learning is well planned but there is sometimes repetition of assessment activities. For example, in care, learners cover some competencies in the work place and are asked to repeat the tasks in college for their assessment.

Key strengths of the college

Strengths

- strong leadership and direction as a vocational college
- high success rates for adult learners
- good development of learners' occupational and practical skills
- good and improving quality of teaching and learning
- outstanding guidance and support for learners
- excellent facilities at Ellesmere Port
- wide range of courses to meet the skill needs of West Cheshire and widen participation
- effective quality assurance systems which raise standards and improve the quality of provision

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- low pass rates on some courses
- success rates for learners aged 16 to 18
- consistency in the delivery and achievement of key skills
- management in a few curriculum areas
- accommodation at the Chester campus

Main findings

Achievements and standards

Good: grade 2

Contributory grades:

Learners aged 16 to 18

Satisfactory: grade 3

14. Course reviews and development plans set challenging targets for learners' achievements and development of their vocational skills. The college is mostly successful in achieving high standards for adult learners. It is less successful in achieving high success rates for learners aged 16 to 18.
15. Success rates have improved at all levels since 2002/03. The rate of improvement between 2002/03 and 2004/05 is good. College data for 2004/05 shows that success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 are satisfactory and around the national average at levels 1 and 2. Level 3 success rates are above average when compared to those for vocational courses. Adult learners' success rates on level 3 and higher level courses improved significantly in 2004/05 and are good. Their success rates on level 1 and level 2 courses are above the national averages. In 2004 success rates on short courses were high. Learners on adult and community learning programmes achieve well. The college recognises that success rates on some full-time vocational courses are low. For example, success rates in some motor vehicle engineering and media courses are well below the national average.
16. Pass rates have improved, and in 2005 are well above the average on level 3 and higher level courses for adult learners. Learners of all ages make good progress in developing practical and occupational skills. Pass rates on NVQ courses at all levels are high. The progress made by learners on national diploma courses is above that predicted from their prior attainment. Pass rates at grade C or above in GCSE mathematics and English are low. Achievements in work based learning improved significantly in 2004/05 and are now good. In 2004/05 the completion of frameworks by learners in engineering, care and childcare was significantly above national averages. The college recognises that achievements are low in some vocational areas. For example, in construction, only three of the 19 learners successfully completed their course, although many are still in learning and nearing completion. Learners who do not complete their course in the expected timescale are now closely monitored. Retention of adult learners on all levels of course is good. In 2004/05 retention of learners aged 16 to 18 improved from below to around the national average.

17. The standard of learners' work is good. The college provides learners with good opportunities to prepare them for employment. All full-time learners are enrolled onto a range of courses, "the vocational passport" to develop their skills for employment. Almost all full-time learners complete the ECDL as one aspect of their vocational passport. The pass rates on ECDL are low but many learners successfully complete individual modules of the course and are developing good ICT skills. Achievements in key skills are satisfactory. Learners develop good skills in the workplace. For example, in nursing, cadets are highly valued by their managers and are given significant responsibility in the welfare of patients.
18. The college analyses performance by gender and ethnicity; overall there are no significant differences in their achievements. Learners aged 14 to 16 and those on Entry level and level 1 courses develop in confidence and make good progress in their skills in working with others and learning independently. Learning goals set for adults on courses not leading to externally validated qualifications are appropriate and inspectors observed good standards of work. Learners identified with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress and their achievements are high. Learners' attendance has improved since the last inspection. Inspectors observed good health and safety practice across the college. Progression to higher and professional education is good. Many learners are successful in gaining employment in occupations linked to their college course.

Quality of provision

Good: grade 2

19. The inspection in 2001 found the quality of teaching to be good. The college has successfully placed improvement in the quality of teaching at the heart of its strategy to develop as a specialist vocational college. It has set clear and high standards for teaching and learning.
20. A broad range of practical steps has been taken to work towards the college's goal that all teaching should be at least good. These include a strong focus on teaching that reflects vocational standards, the integration of key skills and skills for life into vocational teaching, and the work of a team of advanced teachers. In addition to a limited number of lesson observations inspectors considered a broad range of evidence including; the outcomes from the college's own lesson observations, meetings with staff, learners, and partners, examination of learners' work, and of teaching and assessment records.
21. Inspectors agree with the college that the quality of teaching and learning is good and has continued to improve since the last inspection. Most curriculum areas have established a core of vocational standards in their teaching to help learners adopt suitable attitudes and behaviour for employment. The teaching of skills for life and key skills is becoming firmly established in teaching. Vocational teachers and key skills specialists now work closely together. Work is under way to ensure that learning materials in the vocational areas reflect

the literacy and numeracy skills of learners. It is not yet consistently embedded throughout the college. The college has made good progress in the effective use of ILT in lessons and the use of e-portfolios by learners on NVQ qualifications. Assessment is well planned including opportunities in the work place. The suitability of assignments and tests is carefully monitored and standards of marking are standardised.

22. An extensive programme of graded lesson observations is carried out by a trained team of observers. Priority is given to observation in vocational areas where, for example, learners' success is not matching college expectations. Most observations are thorough and lead to clear areas for improvement. However, there is evidence that some observations in adult and community learning have been graded too generously. The formal observations combine with other activities to ensure that the qualities of teaching and learning across the college are kept under close review. Curriculum managers routinely monitor teaching in their area. A team of advanced skills teachers provide supportive observations and lead a comprehensive programme of staff development to share good practice. The self assessment report contains a detailed and accurate evaluation of teaching and learning for most curriculum areas.
23. The college provides an outstanding range of courses with excellent progression opportunities. The college has undertaken a comprehensive review of its learning programmes. Radical changes have been made to the curriculum and how it is delivered. Its approach to social and educational inclusiveness is outstanding. Learning programmes are now highly flexible and strongly reflect the needs of learners, employers and local communities. Their design is based upon very close partnership working with a broad range of organisations.
24. Full time vocational provision at Entry level and level 1 has been greatly extended and access to this provision with suitable support is offered to all learners who can benefit from it. There are now clear progression routes in all curriculum areas from Entry level to level 3. Courses for 14-16 year olds have become firmly established in a number of areas and have encouraged many participants to continue in post-16 learning. Work based learning places have expanded by 30% over the last two years. The provision of GCE A-level courses has largely ceased. New departments for construction and deaf studies have been established, and provision in health & social care, retail and music technology has been expanded to meet skill shortages. There are three COVEs: in health & social care, logistics and automotive manufacturing. A core package of vocational qualifications and employment related skills is now agreed individually with full time learners. This "vocational passport" is designed to ensure that learners are fully equipped to enter employment. A well established and successful specialist team develops innovative bespoke training packages with employers. A widening participation team has been successful in working with partners and encouraging adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy back into learning.

25. Learners receive outstanding guidance and support. A highly qualified team of specialist advisers work effectively with curriculum staff to provide a broad range of impartial advice and guidance for learners. Advisers take great care to focus on the needs and ambitions of their clients, referring them to provision outside the college when appropriate. Recent improvements to induction provide learners with an enjoyable and useful introduction to the college. Learners are aware of the extensive range of support services available. Additional learning support, particularly for learners with sensory impairment, Irlam syndrome and dyslexia, is excellent. Vocationally focused initial assessment and support planning are comprehensive. Ongoing support is highly effective in building learners' confidence and helping them achieve their qualifications and succeed in work placements. Learners' progress, achievement and preparation for employment are well monitored. Specialist support staff provide training to help teachers understand learners' needs.
26. The tutorial programme for full time learners has a strong vocational focus. It provides very good support and a wide range of relevant enrichment activities. Learners value the one to one reviews with their personal tutor where they discuss their progress and agree challenging targets. These are effective in keeping learners on programme. Good support is provided for learners who are falling behind. The college provides good opportunities for learners to practise healthy living including sports facilities, healthy meal options and stress management courses. A high priority is given to promoting health and safety in college and the workplace. An appropriate support programme has been extended to learners on part-time programmes. Regular reviews of all aspects of learner support lead to well targeted action plans and the continuous improvement of support services.

Leadership and management

Good: grade 2

27. Leadership is outstanding and management is good. Outstanding strategic leadership is provided by the principal, governors and senior managers. The strategic direction as a vocational college is clear and understood by all staff. The college is very responsive in meeting the needs of learners, employers and the local community with an extensive and productive range of business and community partnerships. A culture aimed at raising standards and obtaining the best employment opportunities for learners is evident in all areas of the college. Communication throughout the college is good.
28. Since the last inspection the college has continued to improve the quality of its provision. Success rates are good for adults and work-based learners and are satisfactory for 16-18 year olds. Quality improvement procedures are comprehensive and rigorous. A high level of accountability exists throughout the college. The self-assessment process is well established, thorough and accurate. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self assessment report.

29. The first phase of a management restructure to bring support services and curriculum areas closer together has just been completed. Managers in these areas are in new roles and many have expanded remits. Further realignment of the curriculum to these new areas is planned for later in the autumn term. Curriculum management is good in most areas and the management of childcare is outstanding. In four of the six areas graded as satisfactory aspects of course management and organisation are clearly identified as requiring improvement. Action plans are in place to improve management of these areas; it is too soon to judge whether these actions will be effective in rectifying all the issues.
30. Resources are good. Facilities at the new Ellesmere Port campus are excellent with very good real working environments. The college recognises the facilities at the Chester and Capenhurst sites require updating to meet its vision as a vocational college. Proposals for a new campus at Chester, to include the provision currently offered at Capenhurst, are in the final stages of development and build on existing good practice. Staff are well qualified, a very high proportion have a teaching qualification and those without one undertake teacher training. Staff development opportunities are extensive, accessible and well planned. Hourly paid staff are paid to attend meetings and the excellent staff conference.
31. Commitment to equality of opportunity is very strong. The monitoring of equality of opportunity is outstanding. Work to widen participation is successfully undertaken. The college has produced a suitable race equality policy and action plan. Learners' achievements are analysed by ethnicity and a review of curriculum resources has been completed to promote equality of opportunity. Access to courses is outstanding and the college has made very good progress in its response to the implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act. A cross college diversity week effectively promotes equality and diversity issues. The college has an appropriate child protection policy. Staff have received training and are aware of their responsibilities in relation to the protection of children and vulnerable adults.
32. Governance is good. Governors are aware of their duties and maintain a strong oversight of the college's educational performance and finances. Access to and the quality of management information received by governors is good. The college's financial management is good. The college provides good value for money.

Learners' achievements

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age.

2001/02 to 2003/04, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
1 Long	01/02	1,266	52	53	-1	3,927	49	50	-1
	02/03	1,174	50	56	-6	3,077	55	55	0
	03/04	1,348	53	60	-7	3,655	59	59	0
GNVQs and precursors	01/02	26	15	54	-38	39	74	41	33
	02/03	17	12	60	-48	31	65	47	17
	03/04	0		65		0		52	
NVQs	01/02	113	53	52	1	155	65	49	15
	02/03	186	42	56	-13	68	40	57	-17
	03/04	76	45	61	-16	90	60	62	-2
Other	01/02	1,127	52	53	0	3,733	48	50	-2
	02/03	971	52	56	-4	2,978	55	55	0
	03/04	1,272	54	60	-7	3,565	59	59	0

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream Level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age.

2001/02 to 2003/04, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
2 Long	01/02	1,654	47	50	-3	3,704	51	48	3
	02/03	1,519	48	52	-4	3,287	44	49	-5
	03/04	1,499	50	56	-6	3,024	49	53	-5
GCSEs	01/02	223	48	54	-6	259	61	53	8
	02/03	278	43	57	-14	279	54	55	-1
	03/04	197	44	61	-18	183	62	59	3
GNVQs and precursors	01/02	176	45	56	-11	57	49	50	0
	02/03	213	50	59	-8	70	59	53	6
	03/04	79	72	63	9	29	55	57	-2
NVQs	01/02	467	41	43	-2	681	41	45	-4
	02/03	243	30	42	-12	887	32	49	-17
	03/04	192	53	52	1	627	54	53	0
Other	01/02	788	51	49	2	2,707	52	48	4
	02/03	785	54	50	4	2,051	47	48	-1
	03/04	1,031	49	54	-5	2,185	46	52	-6

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age.

2001/02 to 2003/04, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
3 Long	01/02	1,091	45	60	-14	2,446	55	50	4
	02/03	922	43	62	-18	2,152	53	51	1
	03/04	753	50	64	-13	1,683	55	53	2
A/A2 levels	01/02	137	63	80	-17	68	54	57	-3
	02/03	55	55	82	-27	65	63	63	0
	03/04	42	50	84	-34	60	58	66	-7
AS levels	01/02	187	45	60	-14	105	46	47	-1
	02/03	130	32	61	-30	98	39	48	-9
	03/04	75	33	63	-29	58	43	50	-6
GNVQs and precursors	01/02	438	36	47	-11	138	38	43	-5
	02/03	393	41	50	-9	126	45	45	0
	03/04	163	34	52	-18	67	39	43	-4
NVQs	01/02	45	22	49	-26	485	42	41	2
	02-03	30	30	51	-21	391	37	45	-7
	03/04	17	47	54	-7	412	45	47	-1
Other	01/02	284	55	54	2	1,650	60	54	6
	02/03	314	51	55	-5	1,472	58	54	5
	03/04	456	59	56	3	1,086	61	56	5

Table 4

Success rates on work-based learning programmes managed by the college 2003 to 2005.

a) Overall success rate

End Year	Apprenticeship Programme	Number of Learners *	College Framework rate **	National rate **	College NVQ rate **	National rate **
2003/04	Apprenticeship	43	40	33	70	50
	Advanced	13	31	32	54	50
2004/05	Apprenticeship	N/A				
	Advanced					

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned

** College and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'

b) Timely success rate

End Year	Apprenticeship Programme	Number of Learners *	College Framework rate **	National rate **	College NVQ rate **	National rate **
2003/04	Apprenticeship	36	8	16	22	27
	Advanced	20	5	19	15	33
2004/05	Apprenticeship	N/A				
	Advanced					

* The number of learners who planned to complete their learning programme in the given year

** College and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'