



# ESPA Colleges



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE

Better  
education  
and care

## Inspection report

Audience  
Post sixteen

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## Basic information about the college

Name of college:	ESPA Colleges
Type of college:	Independent, day/residential, specialist
Principal:	Stephen Levy
Address of college:	6-7 The Cloisters, Ashbrooke, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear SR2 7BD
Telephone number:	0191 510 2600
Fax number:	0191 563 7711
Chair of governors:	Paul Shattock OBE
Unique reference number:	50001
Name of the lead inspector:	Margaret Hobson
Dates of inspection:	11 – 14 October 2005

## Background of the organisation

1. European Services for People with Autism (ESPA) is a limited company with charitable status registered since 1995. They aim to provide long-term residential services for individuals across the autism spectrum. It is located in the north east of England and has city centre sites in Newcastle upon Tyne, Sunderland and County Durham. Since 1995, the trust has extended its provision to offer both day and residential programmes for young people between 16 to 25 years with autism spectrum disorders, including Asperger Syndrome, associated moderate and severe learning difficulties and/or mental health issues.
2. There are now three colleges and two halls of residence, as well as eleven residential houses and one non-LSC day provision. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funds 105 students in the three colleges: North Rye in Newcastle upon Tyne with attached residential at Ashleigh, South Hill in Sunderland, and Tasker in Sunderland with attached residential provision at Westfield. Of the 105 students, 72 are day students and 84 are male. Forty six learners are 16 to 18 years and 59 are over 19 years. There are no students from minority ethnic groups. Residential students come from all areas of England.
3. Teaching accommodation is located across the three college sites. Students at the more able end of the autism spectrum, including those with Asperger Syndrome, attend North Rye and Tasker. Students with moderate or severe learning difficulties attend South Hill. Since 1996, two vocational skills units have been established, one at the South Hill site and one in the grounds of Ashleigh hall of residence. Both provide work-based activities for learning at all levels of ability.
4. Learners follow an autism-specific core curriculum which includes social and communication skills, emotional literacy, health education, creative and expressive arts, literacy and numeracy, information and communication technology (ICT), and vocational subjects. Learners also attend local general FE colleges for specific courses with support. Independence skills are reinforced through the extended curriculum within the residential provision.
5. A multi-disciplinary team of specialists support the work of the colleges. The team includes a psychologist, a psychiatrist, two speech and language therapists and two educational consultants.
6. The college is committed to maintaining and evolving a network of the highest quality of educational provision to meet the needs of a varied and complex group of learners.

## Scope of the inspection

7. In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the college's previous inspection report ([www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)); the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits; 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
  - specialist provision in social and life skills and vocational skills.

## Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Satisfactory: grade 3
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory: grade 3
Achievements and standards	Good: grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: grade 2
Leadership and management	Inadequate: grade 4

*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.*

## Curriculum areas

Social and life skills	Good: grade 2
Vocational skills	Satisfactory: grade 3

## Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Satisfactory: grade 3

8. This is a satisfactory college. Learners' achievements are good overall. Success rates in a range of national and in-house awards are good. All learners make significant gains in communication, confidence, social and independence skills, as well as outstanding achievement of behaviour self-management skills. There are no differences between the achievements of different groups of learners. Some opportunities for assessing and recording individual learner progress are missed.
9. Teaching and learning are good. Teachers make good use of practical activities to motivate and involve learners. Good teaching effectively meets the needs of individual learners. In a minority of lessons, there is poor planning and insufficiently differentiated activities to meet learner needs. Literacy and numeracy are insufficiently integrated across the curriculum.
10. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is good. The college responds effectively to meeting the needs and interests of learners and is outstanding in supporting students with autism spectrum disorders. Learners are helped to steadily increase their awareness and control of their behaviours and anxieties. The college has made a satisfactory response to the implementation of the SENDA. However, it is not fully compliant with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 in terms of action planning and monitoring. Preparation for the transition of learners is satisfactory.
11. Support and guidance for learners are outstanding. There is good access to counselling and outstanding management of behavioural incidents. Initial assessment is comprehensive and outcomes are used to develop effective individual learner support plans. Good use is made of advocacy services to gain impartial advice, support and guidance. The emotional literacy programme provides a framework that enables students to learn how to successfully manage their own anxieties and behaviour.
12. Leadership and management are inadequate overall. The strategic plan for the education provision of ESPA lacks detail in relation to action planning, monitoring and evaluation. The operational management of the autism-specific curriculum is good particularly in relation to the assessment of learners' autism-specific needs and support for behaviour management. However, the roles and responsibilities of senior and middle management teams lack clarity and lead to inconsistent practice between the college sites. Quality assurance processes, although improved, lack coherence across all curriculum areas and college sites. The self-assessment process lacks rigour; the report is characterised by description and lacks analysis. Health and safety



management is insufficient at this time particularly in relation to work experience placements.

Capacity to improve

Satisfactory: grade 3

13. The college demonstrates satisfactory capacity to improve the environment for learners. The curriculum for addressing the needs of learners with autism spectrum disorders remains exemplary, the staff have significant expertise in working with these learners and the multi-disciplinary team is effective. However, quality assurance procedures are still developing and the college does not have performance indicators that enable provision to be evaluated year on year. The self-assessment arrangements are improved but remain underdeveloped in relation to the level of contribution across all college sites. In the self-assessment report for 2004-2005, some of the organisational strengths and weaknesses were identified, but some significant weaknesses were not. Development plans are insufficiently monitored and evaluated.

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

14. The college has made satisfactory progress in addressing areas for improvement since the previous inspection in 2002 and the key strengths remain. The focus on the specific learning goals of students has improved as have the aspirations and expectations for some of the more able students. ICT and literacy and numeracy provision remain in need of significant improvement. The quality of developmental and operational planning and quality assurance measures also remain as areas for improvement.

Key strengths of the college

#### *Strengths*

- good development of self-confidence, social and independence skills
- good assessment of learners' autism-specific needs
- good range of courses
- outstanding behaviour self-management
- outstanding support and guidance

Areas for improvement

#### *The college should address:*

- the complexity and coherence of assessment and monitoring of progress
- the consistent sharing of good practice across college sites
- the quality assurance procedures including self-assessment
- the establishment of rigorous health and safety procedures
- action planning for the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000

- the co-ordination of the Skills for Life provision across college sites.

## Main findings

### Achievements and standards

Good: grade 2

15. Learners' achievements are good overall. The college accurately identified this as a strength in their self-assessment report. The provision meets individuals' needs well as outstanding progress is made in the development of their behaviour self-management skills. Learners enjoy their time at college and work with enthusiasm and confidence. They demonstrate significant improvement in self-confidence, social, communication and independence skills. There is a high level of participation in the wide and varied extended and leisure curriculum.
16. There are no differences between the achievements of different groups of learners. Most achieve their primary learning goals with the majority making significant progress in relation to their autism. Autism-specific baseline assessment is comprehensive with realistic autism-specific targets clearly set. These are closely monitored for achievement through the tutorial process. Learners are well supported to take responsibility for their progress towards these goals.
17. Where appropriate, learners have their achievements recognised through a wide range of nationally accredited awards from entry level to level three, as well as through ESPA awards. Pass rates on accredited programmes are good. In 2003/04, most learners achieved several accredited and non-accredited awards.
18. Learners increase their skills through work and community experience and the extended curriculum. They contribute well to the local community through their involvement in local and environmental projects, and fundraising events. Where appropriate, these skills are further developed through participation in an externally accredited programme, preparation for work.
19. Rates of retention, attendance and punctuality are good and are monitored effectively. There is good communication with parents or carers through six-monthly reviews.

### Quality of provision

Good: grade 2

20. The quality of provision is good overall. Teaching and learning are good with a minority of unsatisfactory teaching. In the self-assessment report, the college over-estimated the quality of its teaching and learning. The curriculum for addressing the needs of learners with autism spectrum disorders remains exemplary and was accurately identified as a key strength of the college in the self-assessment report. A range of health education sessions are offered to learners including sexuality, diet and nutrition, mental health, stress and anger management. Learners' demonstrate a good awareness of the need for

healthy eating and regular exercise. Staff have high expectations of all learners particularly in relation to behaviour and social skills. Most teaching staff have achieved or are working towards qualified teacher status. Staff receive good autism-specific training and have the skills and knowledge to work effectively with young people with autism spectrum disorders. There are very good working relationships between learners and staff.

21. In the better lessons, teachers plan good use of practical activities to motivate learners. Activities are planned to meet the needs of individual learners and prompts are used to develop independent learning. In less effective lessons, there is poor planning, targets which lack specification and insufficiently differentiated activities to meet individual learner needs.
22. Pre-entry assessment and the autism-specific baseline assessment are comprehensive and outcomes are used to develop effective individual learner support plans. Individual learning plans are satisfactory overall but some goals are insufficiently challenging or specific. The assessment and monitoring of progress is complex and insufficiently coherent across the college. Several initiatives have been developed to monitor and record progress but these are not sufficiently co-ordinated or implemented consistently across all college sites. For example, a recently improved system involves learners identifying personal short-term goals which are monitored weekly with achievements recorded. This has been introduced in two out of the three college sites. Six-monthly and annual reviews of progress are satisfactory overall and include detailed and useful learner pen portraits of relevant personal issues. There is inconsistency, however, with some reviews being descriptive rather than evaluative of the level of progress achieved against previous goals.
23. The college response to meeting the needs and interests of learners is good. Learners access a wide range of programmes and activities that effectively meet their individual needs and interests through participation in work experience and a good range of enrichment activities. Enrichment includes recreation, sport and leisure activities. The health and safety monitoring of work experience placements is not sufficiently developed. This weakness was partially identified in the college's self-assessment report. Learners make a positive contribution to the community through their involvement in community and environmental projects, and fundraising events.
24. The college's approach to social and educational inclusion is good. Staff student relationships are characterised by mutual respect and trust. The college has had outstanding success in supporting learners with behavioural self-management needs. Learners are helped to gain increasing insight into their own needs through the autism-related core curriculum including a range of emotional literacy and stress management workshops. They are also helped to make decisions about their daily lives and to better understand their rights and responsibilities. However, the college is not fully compliant with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 in terms of action planning and monitoring. Although currently there are no students of minority ethnic origin at the

college, equality and diversity issues are addressed throughout the curriculum, in particular through the emotional literacy programme.

25. Support and guidance in all aspects of the learning process are outstanding. Learner groups are small with high levels of support. Support from personal tutors, key workers and the multidisciplinary team is good. However, speech and language therapy support is not offered consistently across all college sites. Good use is made of external advocacy services to gain impartial advice, support and guidance but some students have to wait until the last minute to receive confirmation of future placements. There is an effective induction programme at each college site and daily tutorials provide intensive individualised support. The college makes good use of a consultant nutritionist. Learners are supported to make healthy eating choices, to have a good awareness of nutritional guidelines and the need to keep fit.
26. Recently introduced disciplinary measures have improved learner behaviour as well as raising awareness of safety. There is outstanding management of behavioural incidents as well good access to counselling. The emotional literacy programme provides a framework that enables students to learn how to successfully manage their own anxieties and behaviour, and so develop emotional well-being. The college actively promotes the security and well-being of students through positive promotion of anti-discriminatory and bullying behaviours and there are strong relationships of trust between students and staff. Learners are satisfactorily prepared for transition through liaison with the local Connexions service. Communication with parents or carers is good.

#### Leadership and management

Inadequate: grade 4

27. Leadership and management are inadequate. The strategic plan for the education provision of ESPA as an organisation is thorough, however, it lacks clear detail in relation to planning, monitoring and evaluation. Roles and responsibilities of senior and middle management teams lack clarity. Day-to-day management of the separate college sites is satisfactory but there are inconsistencies between sites and good practice is not shared. There are two part-time speech and language therapists (SALTs) who largely work supporting staff to develop strategies and resources for learners. At the time of the inspection they did not work with staff on all college sites. Middle managers have received little training for their roles. Operational management of the autism-specific curriculum is good and the vision and mission of the college is understood and shared by all staff. Appraisal processes are inconsistently applied across the college and not clearly understood by all staff.
28. The college has comprehensive policies and procedures. Quality assurance processes have improved in relation to the operational management of the separate sites and the establishment of a committee structure. However, there is lack of consistent application across all curriculum areas and college

sites. The self-assessment process, whilst improved, remains underdeveloped. The report identifies some of the weaknesses found by inspectors, but remains descriptive and lacks analysis. The self-assessment report failed to identify significant areas for development such as health and safety checking of placements, literacy and numeracy co-ordination and the inconsistency of practice across college sites.

29. The college has a comprehensive plan to improve the teaching accommodation and the residences are very well maintained and provide well resourced, attractive and homely accommodation. There is a strong training culture and staff are well-trained in aspects of autism but there are insufficient numbers of qualified literacy and numeracy teachers. There is insufficient co-ordination of literacy and numeracy provision across the college sites. Health and safety management is currently under review but is insufficient at this time particularly in relation to work experience placements and the consistency of risk assessments.
30. Policies related to equality and diversity are in place but action planning and monitoring remain underdeveloped. The college has an appropriate race equality policy, as required by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, but there is no action plan for its implementation or monitoring. There are no students from minority ethnic groups. The college has made a satisfactory response to the implementation of the SENDA. A thorough access audit has been undertaken. Arrangements for safeguarding are good and include a detailed policy with clear procedures. However, although the principal and assistant principal have been in post for some time enhanced criminal record bureau checks have not been requested either for themselves or for three other members of staff. A comprehensive bullying policy and procedures are in place which is well implemented. Educational review by the trustees is underdeveloped. Financial management is satisfactory. The college gives good value for money particularly in relation to its accommodation strategy.

## Curriculum area inspections

Social and life skills

Good: grade 2

### Context

31. The focus of the inspection has been on the autism-specific core curriculum, as well as literacy and numeracy. The core curriculum includes social and communication skills, personal, social and health education, emotional literacy, behaviour self-management and independent living skills. These elements are also integrated into the extended curriculum, as are opportunities for sporting and other social activities. Learners have opportunities to improve their literacy and numeracy skills through discrete lessons and practical activities. All learners participate in appropriate elements of the social and life skills provision, according to individual need.

### *STRENGTHS*

- good development of learners' confidence and independence
- outstanding development of behaviour self-management
- good teaching to meet individual needs
- good range of and participation in extended curriculum activities
- good personal support and guidance

### *AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT*

- insufficient co-ordination of the social and life skills curriculum across the college sites
- insufficient integration of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum

### Achievements and standards

32. Achievements and standards are good. Learners make good development in self-confidence and independence skills. The development of behaviour self-management is outstanding. Learners work with enthusiasm and confidence, and their behaviour is outstanding both in lessons and in extended curriculum activities. Learners take a combination of qualifications and awards, according to individual needs, including a range of nationally recognised qualifications. Participation rates for the extended curriculum are high.

### Quality of provision

33. Teaching and learning are good overall. Teaching materials are of a high quality, with good practical resources for teaching numeracy and independent living skills. In the better lessons, learners develop a range of relevant skills, such as confidence, social skills and independent learning skills. These lessons are well-planned to help learners make progress towards achieving their

individual goals. In less effective lessons, individual goals are not sufficiently broken down so that individual progress can be measured. There are missed opportunities for assessing and recording progress in literacy and numeracy.

34. Residential learners have good access to a wide range of extended curriculum activities. Activities include sport, information technology, drama, social outings, personal care and domestic activities. Learners are actively involved in planning and choosing these activities. Effective use is made of the local community as a teaching and learning resource.
35. Personal support and guidance are good. There is a good ratio of staff to learners. Staff support for behaviour self-management is particularly effective and the management of behaviour incidents is outstanding. Learners feel comfortable and develop the skills and confidence to ask questions and express opinions.

### Leadership and management

36. Leadership and management of the individual college sites are satisfactory overall. Staff are well trained in the autism-specific curriculum. Residential accommodation is good as are many of the teaching rooms. However, co-ordination of the social and life skills curriculum across college sites is insufficiently developed.
37. Literacy and numeracy are insufficiently integrated across the curriculum. There are insufficient numbers of qualified literacy and numeracy teachers. Plans for the development of literacy and numeracy are in place but are not yet fully implemented.
38. The self-assessment report recognised some but not all of the strengths identified by the inspectors, but did not fully recognise all of the areas requiring development. For example, there are insufficient opportunities for staff to share good practice. While monitoring of the implementation and quality of developments is insufficient, equality of opportunity is promoted well in lessons and activities. Students are treated with respect by staff and treat each other with respect. Health and safety are promoted well in teaching sessions with some detailed and thorough risk assessments for learner groups and individuals within groups.



## Vocational Skills

Satisfactory: grade 3

### Context

39. Vocational skills include a wide range of vocational training courses either within the college's two vocational skills units or at general FE colleges. The majority of the 105 learners are involved in some form of vocational experience, with just under half on a supported work placement. Learners undertake national awards from entry level one to level 3 in a wide range of courses.

### *STRENGTHS*

- good achievement
- wide range of courses to meet individual needs
- outstanding support for the development of learners' social skills
- good autism specific staff training

### *AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT*

- the co-ordination of the curriculum
- the health and safety checking of work placements
- opportunities for sharing of good practice across sites

### Achievement and standards

40. Learner achievement is good including success rates in accredited qualifications. Learners undertake a range of courses which provide them with suitable challenge and they enjoy their lessons. They make significant progress in the development of personal skills such as the ability to interact successfully with others, increased self-esteem and behaviour self-management. Learners are able to undertake tasks which previously they have found too stressful. This includes, for example attending a mainstream course in a general FE college or using public transport.

### Quality of provision

41. The majority of teaching is satisfactory or better. In the better lessons there is good use of practical activities to motivate learners, such as helping to erect fencing at a vocational skills unit. Learners take pleasure in contributing to the well-maintained college environment in horticulture. In the less effective lessons, planning does not sufficiently meet the individual needs of learners and targets are too generalised. The resources used in the vocational skills units are generally of a high quality however some of the ICT equipment needs updating. Assessment, induction and reviews of progress are satisfactory.

42. The needs and interests of learners are successfully met. Learners attend a very wide variety of courses, at general FE colleges, ranging from employability skills to GCE Advanced level History. Within ESPA college, learners can choose from a variety of courses such as horticulture, small animal care, retail and woodwork. In 2004-05 there was good accredited achievement in 34 different courses.
43. Support for learners is outstanding. There is a very high ratio of staff to learners with an ethos of respect and equality. Learners feel safe and able to express their opinions. Many learners have a history of behavioural problems and are now able to use behaviour-management strategies effectively. The twice daily tutorials offer structured and effective support. Transition planning is satisfactory.

#### Leadership and management

44. The management of each college site is satisfactory but the co-ordination of the vocational curriculum across all three college sites is weak. There is little sharing of good practice. The staff development programme relating to the specific needs of learners with autism spectrum disorders is good. The majority of staff are suitably qualified to teach their vocational specialism.
45. The quality assurance of work placements is unsatisfactory. Procedures for systematically vetting and monitoring work placements for health and safety are not in place. Work placement risk assessments are inconsistent in quality. The need for further development of risk assessments is acknowledged in the college's self-assessment report. Unsupported work placements for the more able learners are insufficient. The self-assessment report recognised many of the strengths identified by the inspectors but few of these areas for development were acknowledged. Learners have a satisfactory understanding of equality of opportunity.