



West Suffolk College



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Better
education
and care

Inspection report

Audience
Post-sixteen

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130818

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Basic information about the college

Name of college:	West Suffolk College
Type of college:	General Further Education
Principal:	Dr Ann Williams
Address of college:	Out Risbygate, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 3RL
Telephone number:	01284 701301
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Chair of governors:	Betty Milburn
Unique reference number:	130818
Name of lead inspector:	Davinder Dosanjh, HMI
Dates of inspection:	22 – 26 May 2006

Background of the organisation

1. West Suffolk College is a medium sized general further education college in Bury St Edmunds based mainly on the Out Risbygate site, with some construction and building services a mile away at Anglian Lane. The college serves a predominately rural community and the needs of the people in St Edmunds, Haverhill and throughout the rest of West Suffolk. Unemployment overall is relatively low. The majority of the local population is white (approximately 98%). In 2004/05, 90% of learners identified themselves as white.
2. The college offers vocational and general education programmes from foundation to higher education in all 15 subject sector areas. Most learners aged 16-18 are enrolled on full-time courses. The majority of adult learners are enrolled on part-time courses. Some 59% of learners are female. In 2004/05, there was an average of 748 apprentices participating in work-based learning and 51 Entry to Employment (E2E) learners.
3. The college is involved in three Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in Suffolk. It achieved a CoVE in management and professional development, the Suffolk School of Management. The college leads in the health and social care CoVE with two partner colleges and is a partner in the construction CoVE.
4. There are 12 upper schools with sixth forms delivering A levels in West Suffolk. There are also three special schools. The college plays a full part in planning and developing 14-19 age group vocational partnerships in West Suffolk. It is a member of five locality groups planning to expand provision. There are growing numbers of learners aged 14-16. In 2004/05, there were approximately 346 young people taking part in the college's Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) and programme of academic and vocational education.
5. Provision is also offered at a number of local learning centres in Haverhill, Mildenhall, Newmarket, Stowmarket, Sudbury and Thurston. The college runs a main LearnDirect Centre in Bury St Edmunds with several link centres. The college delivers higher education courses in association with Anglia Ruskin University and Suffolk College.
6. The college's mission is to 'provide excellent education and training which develops skills that contribute to the success of the individual and the economy'.

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); 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.

Summary of grades awarded

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

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

Outstanding: grade 1

8. Achievements and standards have improved significantly since the last inspection and are outstanding. Overall success rates on most courses are significantly higher than the national averages and have been maintained. Retention rates continue to improve. For work-based learners, achievements of frameworks have shown substantial progress. Learners are well motivated, enjoy their courses and attendance is very good.
9. Teaching and learning is good. The college has a highly effective system for observing teaching and learning which enables it to identify good practice and areas for improvement. There have been significant improvements in teaching and learning. Additional learning support and provision for key skills are very effective. The tracking and monitoring of learner progress is very good.
10. The college's response to educational and social inclusion is outstanding. The extensive range of programmes meets the needs of individual learners, employers and the local community, very well. Provision for learners aged 14-16 is very good. There is a very broad range of enrichment activities.
11. Guidance and support provided for learners are outstanding. They receive outstanding personal, vocational and academic support. An excellent induction programme enables learners to settle quickly into their courses. The very effective support provided for literacy and numeracy enables learners to make very good progress.
12. Leadership and management are outstanding. The principal provides inspirational leadership, ably supported by the senior team. Quality assurance systems are rigorous and highly effective in securing improvements in success rates. There are excellent arrangements for the professional development of staff. Governance is excellent. The financial management of the college is outstanding.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: grade 1

13. The college demonstrates outstanding capacity to improve. Staff at all levels, and governors, are very clearly focussed on continuous improvement. Quality assurance arrangements are very effective in bringing about improvements. Success rates have risen and weaknesses in retention have been addressed. Significant improvements have been made in the management of work-based learning. A well managed and effective lesson observation system, linked to outstanding staff development arrangements, has improved the quality of teaching and learning. Management information is now accurate and readily available. The self-assessment process covers every aspect of the college's

work. It is rigorous and the report is accurate. Highly effective actions by management have led to improvement in areas causing concern. The college is in a strong financial position. Plans to further improve the accommodation are well in hand.

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

14. The college has made outstanding progress in addressing areas identified for improvement during the last inspection. All of the key weaknesses identified have been successfully addressed and the strengths have been maintained or built upon. Achievement and standards are now outstanding. Retention rates have improved. The retention of current learners is high. Key skills provision is now well organised. Good practice is shared to good effect. Work-based learning was unsatisfactory in two areas at the last inspection. It is now consistently good or better. The judgements on leadership and management, educational and social inclusion and support for learners have improved, so that they are now judged to be outstanding.

Key strengths of the college

Strengths

- significant improvements in success rates
- very good implementation of key skills
- highly effective tutorial practice
- very good attendance
- very effective additional learning support
- extensive collaboration and partnerships with the local community and schools
- excellent employer engagement
- outstanding guidance and support
- strong leadership and strategic direction
- outstanding financial management
- excellent staff development arrangements
- excellent governance.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- the development of value added measures
- the proportion of high grades on national diploma courses for a few subject areas.

Main findings

Achievements and standards

Outstanding: grade 1

Contributory grades:

Work-based learning

Good: grade 2

15. Overall achievement and standards are outstanding. There has been a marked trend of improvement in success rates at all levels for the last three years which have been supported by the college's highly effective arrangements for self-assessment.
16. Success rates for learners aged 16-18 are outstanding and well above national averages. Overall success rates in 2004/05 on long courses at levels 1 and 2 were significantly above national averages. The success rate on all short courses for learners aged 16-18 has been sustained at levels significantly above national averages. Success rates at level 3 are well above national averages for vocational courses but low for the small number of residual GCE AS and A level learners. These courses have been discontinued. Retention rates have improved. The proportion of learners who achieve high grades on national diploma courses improved in 2004/05; however, the college recognises the number remains low on a few courses.
17. Success rates for adult learners have continued to improve. In 2004/05, they were significantly above national averages for level 2 and short courses over five weeks. High pass rates have been maintained and are mostly all significantly above national averages. Retention rates continue to improve. Current retention figures for 2005/06 indicate a 12% improvement for long courses and reflect the range of very effective strategies the college has put in place.
18. For work-based learners, achievement of frameworks has shown substantial progress. Success rates for framework completion by apprentices and advanced apprentices are well above the national averages which are low. For 2005/06, the number of learners already completing their qualifications is high.
19. School pupils aged 14-16 make good progress on the provision offered by the college and progression onto full-time courses at the college is good. Success rates for adult learners with learning difficulties and disabilities are high but lower for learners aged 16-18.
20. Most learners on vocational courses produce practical work of a high standard. They develop excellent levels of work related skills, are well motivated and enjoy their courses. Achievements in key skills improved considerably in 2004/05 and are now well above national averages.

21. Learners' attendance is very good and in 2004/05 was 88%, above average for similar colleges. Inspectors observed good attention to safe working practices. Progression to higher education, employment and further education is good.

Quality of provision

Outstanding: grade 1

22. Teaching and learning are good. The college's own data indicate that the proportion of good or better lessons is high and has improved since the last inspection. The proportion of unsatisfactory sessions is low. The college has made many improvements to the way it monitors teaching and learning. It has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in these areas and the self-assessment report provides an accurate evaluation. The lesson observation system is effective in identifying good practice, as well as practice which can be improved.
23. Throughout the college, learners demonstrate a mature attitude to their work. Lessons are usually well planned with clear outcomes and objectives. Teachers use a variety of techniques to stimulate learning and have good subject knowledge. There is good use of well structured group work. Teachers take account of individual learning support needs both in planning and teaching. Where information and learning technology (ILT) is used, it is used competently and appropriately. Teachers have a good rapport with learners, and learners appreciate the respect they are shown by their teachers and peers. Learning support assistants effectively support the learning process.
24. In the minority of less successful lessons, significant numbers of learners do not participate and learn effectively. Questioning is not sufficiently targeted and does not check on learning effectively. Outcomes and objective are not well defined, and the integration of opportunities to accredit key skills is unclear. In these lessons, teaching does not always take account of the needs of all learners.
25. The provision of key skills has improved markedly. The college has made them vocationally relevant and they are well integrated within courses. This provision is effectively coordinated across the college. Key skills support sessions are effective.
26. Learners' needs for additional learning support are accurately evaluated and promptly provided early in their courses. Learners who are supported achieve well, and they appreciate the support provided. The extent to which the college evaluates the effectiveness of additional learning support is underdeveloped and, therefore, such analysis is not routinely used as a means of further improvement.
27. Assessment is well planned. Comments on marked work are generally comprehensive and helpful, although in a few examples they lack useful detail. The tracking and monitoring of learner progress is very good. In construction, very effective online systems enable easy access to all staff and learners. Use of

personal computers to gain remote evidence for work-based learners is well developed. Parents are well informed about learner progress. Standardised tutorial systems are effective in monitoring progress and setting targets for learners.

28. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is outstanding. The extensive range of programmes meets the needs of individual learners, employers and the local community very well. Learning programmes are flexible and responsive. The college plays a significant role in the local community by acting as a catalyst to facilitate the provision for the disadvantaged groups and promote lifelong learning. The continuing education programmes provide a very good mix of accredited and non-accredited courses to learners from a wide geographical area from over 100 learning venues. The provision for learners with learning disabilities and difficulties is excellent. The work-based learning programme is comprehensive.
29. Provision for 14-16 year olds is very good. The programme is comprehensive, vibrant and very effective. The college is working collaboratively with 17 schools, including two from the neighbouring authority, under the increased flexibility programme (IFP).
30. The college's responsiveness to the needs of employers is outstanding. The college provides a very broad range of bespoke and off-the-shelf training programmes for workforce development. These programmes make a substantial contribution to the local economy through considerable skills development. Employers play an active role in the college by sponsorship and acting as visiting speakers.
31. The college provides a very broad range of effective enrichment activities which involve substantial numbers of learners. The college has created a safe and healthy learning environment in which diversity is respected.
32. Advice, guidance and support for learners are outstanding. A well qualified and experienced team provides comprehensive and impartial advice and guidance which is readily available and accessible. Learners make well informed choices about their courses and future vocations. The induction programme is excellent and has a broad range of practical activities. It ensures that the learners are on the right course and quickly settle into their studies. The college has well established and strategically located welfare services providing a comprehensive range of services. When appropriate, the college refers learners to an extensive range of external organisations and specialist agencies with which it has very good links.
33. All full-time and substantive part-time learners take part in a highly effective tutorial programme. Teaching and learning assistants and support assistants work very effectively with tutors. The college sets very high standards for attendance, punctuality and achievements and monitors these rigorously. Learners feel well supported and respected. The support is highly responsive

and sensitive to the individual's needs. Literacy and numeracy support is very good. The college carefully conducts initial assessment of all full-time and most substantive part-time learners' needs by using a range of assessment tools. A substantial number of full- and part-time learners use this flexible support which is provided in a variety of modes. It is particularly effective in helping learners to achieve their qualifications.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: grade 1

34. Leadership and management are outstanding. The principal provides inspirational leadership and is ably supported by the senior team. Governors and senior managers set a clear strategic direction. A strong desire to bring about improvements is evident throughout the college, and it is having an impact. Curriculum management is good.
35. Quality improvement processes are highly effective. The self-assessment process is rigorous and comprehensive. Inspectors found the report to be an accurate statement of the college's strengths and weaknesses. There have been effective actions to improve success rates. The use of measures to determine the value added by attending college, on the basis of learners' previous educational attainments, is not well developed.
36. Communications are very good. There is a weekly newsletter and an electronic suggestions box. Managers are visible and accessible throughout the college. Morale amongst staff is high. The college has improved the accuracy and accessibility of its management information. An electronic register system has been phased in and this has assisted the drive to improve retention.
37. Resources are good in most areas of the college and outstanding in some. Significant improvements in construction and building services since the last inspection have enabled the college to respond well to the demand for places by pupils aged 14-16, as well as adults. The hairdressing and beauty therapy salons are outstanding, as are the video production resources. Interactive whiteboards are available in many areas and are being well used. The 'virtual campus' provides a valuable learning resource. Plans are well in hand to phase in a major building programme. The college complies well with the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act.
38. There are excellent arrangements for the professional development of staff. All staff are appraised annually. An extensive programme of staff development activity is available. This is clearly linked to college priorities. Most staff have a teaching qualification and the remainder are in training to acquire one. The commitment by staff to share good practice now permeates the college.
39. Governance is excellent. Governors have a good blend of experience and use their knowledge of finance, law and human relations management to good effect. The college is aware of the desirability of recruiting a governor with a

higher education background. Governors take a very active interest in the work of the college, for example, by sitting on self-assessment validation panels.

40. The financial management of the college is outstanding. There is a very extensive and thorough system of reporting financial matters to governors. Budgetary controls are robust. The college is in good financial health and uses any surplus to reinvest in educational resources. Value for money is outstanding.
41. The college has made good progress in the promotion of equality of opportunity. There is a clear strategy to promote respect for individuals. The race equality action plan sets targets to increase the enrolment and performance of particular groups. There is a thorough analysis of the provision by ethnicity, gender, disability and learning difficulty. The college fulfils its statutory requirements relating to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act and it has made a good response to the requirements of the Child Protection Act.

Learners' achievements

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003 to 2005, 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	02/03	797	73	56	16	2,535	51	55	-4
	03/04	621	75	60	15	2,662	62	59	3
	04/05	439	79			2,621	62		
GNVQs and precursors	02/03	72	49	60	-11	2	50	47	3
	03/04	2	0	65	0	0	0	52	
	04/05	0	0			0	0		
NVQs	02/03	136	72	56	16	32	69	57	12
	03/04	114	85	61	24	14	79	62	16
	04/05	104	84			29	86		
Other	02/03	589	76	56	19	2,501	51	55	-4
	03/04	505	73	60	13	2,648	62	59	3
	04/05	335	79			2,592	61		

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003 to 2005, 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	02/03	885	61	52	9	1,404	49	49	0
	03/04	835	63	56	7	1,277	55	53	2
	04/05	583	79			1,014	65		
GCSEs	02/03	223	62	57	5	258	44	55	-11
	03/04	204	48	61	-13	421	39	59	-20
	04/05	74	70			136	64		
GNVQs and precursors	02/03	104	63	59	5	5	40	53	-13
	03/04	50	78	63	15	2	100	57	43
	04/05	10	60			0	0		
NVQs	02/03	219	55	42	12	401	47	49	-2
	03/04	156	74	52	22	292	53	53	0
	04/05	144	85			337	58		
Other	02/03	339	64	50	13	740	51	48	3
	03/04	425	65	54	11	562	67	52	14
	04/05	398	79			541	72		

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003 to 2005, 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	02/03	935	68	62	6	1,225	45	51	-6
	03/04	807	66	64	2	1,020	58	53	5
	04/05	665	76			1,160	61		
A/A2 Levels	02/03	84	61	82	-21	70	27	63	-36
	03/04	27	56	84	-28	55	58	66	-7
	04/05	11	82			18	78		
AS Levels	02/03	182	68	61	7	134	25	48	-23
	03/04	110	44	63	-19	139	23	50	-27
	04/05	26	62			48	48		
GNVQs and precursors	02/03	406	59	50	9	51	61	45	16
	03/04	72	65	52	13	30	77	43	34
	04/05	29	62			6	50		
NVQs	02/03	41	68	51	18	226	34	45	-11
	03/04	43	56	54	2	279	44	47	-3
	04/05	34	82			236	58		
Other	02/03	222	88	55	32	744	53	54	-1
	03/04	555	71	56	15	517	74	56	18
	04/05	565	78			852	64		

Table 4

Success rates on work-based learning programmes managed by the college 2003/04 to 2004/05

a) Overall success rate

End Year	Apprenticeship Programme	Number of Learners *	College Framework rate **	National rate **	College NVQ rate **	National rate **
2003/04	Apprenticeship	117	50	32	59	47
	Advanced	168	40	31	51	48
2004/05	Apprenticeship	341	61	38	66	50
	Advanced	102	53	34	57	48

* 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	106	19	16	20	24
	Advanced	149	21	19	26	30
2004/05	Apprenticeship	356	38	21	42	29
	Advanced	97	36	21	38	31

* 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'