



Sussex Downs College



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Better
education
and care

Inspection report

Audience
Post-sixteen

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Basic information about the college

Name of college: Sussex Downs College

Type of college: General Further Education College

Principal: John Blake

Address of college: Cross Levels Way, Eastbourne BN21 2UF

Telephone number: 01323 637637

Fax number: 01323 637472

Chair of governors: Richard Holste

Unique reference number: 133435

Name of lead inspector: Gloria Dolan, HMI

Dates of inspection: 5 - 9 March 2007

Background of the organisation

1. Sussex Downs College is a large general further education college on the south coast of England. It was formed from two mergers completed in 2003 which involved Eastbourne College of Arts and Technology, Lewes Tertiary College and Park College. It has three campuses at Eastbourne, Lewes and Newhaven. There is a local learning centre at Hailsham and a skills centre in Uckfield.
2. The college serves the communities of Eastbourne, Lewes and Wealden in the main, which include rural as well as urban areas. It works with four community colleges in the Wealden area to provide construction and motor vehicle courses for learners on the Increased Flexibility Programme and the Young Apprenticeship Programme.
3. In 2005/06, there were 4,504 full-time equivalent students aged 16-18, 9,000 (2,170 full-time equivalent) students aged 19 plus and 650 students aged 14-16. The college has around 500 work-based learners and 3,000 students on adult and community learning (ACL) courses. Just under 4% of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds which reflects the local community. Most areas are reasonably affluent but there are some areas of deprivation.
4. The college provides courses in all 15 sector and subject areas. It has a designated Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) for performing arts, is the lead partner in a CoVE for sport and recreation and a partner in a retail CoVE. The college was awarded Action for Business College status in July 2005.
5. The college organises its operations into six distinct areas called learning brands: Eastbourne Vocational College; Lewes Sixth Form College; Park College; The Adult College; The International College and Training Solutions.
6. The college's vision statement is "We will make a major contribution to the transformation of our local community by helping learners to achieve an unbeatable combination of skills and qualifications, thus increasing confidence, prosperity and enhancing personal wellbeing".

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

Good: grade 2

8. Achievements and standards are good. Most of the college's work is with 16-18 year old students. Success rates are high and improving. Success rates are also high for 14-16 year old students. Success rates for adults at levels 2 and 3 are above the national average but they are low at level 1. The standard of most students' work is good or better.
9. Teaching and learning are good. Most teachers use a good range of activities to fully involve students in lessons and meet individual needs. There is insufficient use of information and learning technology (ILT) in some lessons. Learning resources and assessment practices are good. Initial assessment of literacy and numeracy skills is thorough and additional learning support is good.
10. The extent to which the college meets the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. The curriculum offer is extensive and covers all 15 sector and subject areas. Courses are provided from pre-entry level to level 4. Many students progress from a lower to a higher level. Participation rates in the college's enrichment provision are high. The college's approach to social and educational inclusion is outstanding.
11. Support and guidance for students are good. Initial advice and guidance are impartial and readily available to prospective students. Information about careers advice and higher education is also good. Welfare support is good. Tutorials are used effectively for reviewing students' progress and setting targets. The tutorial curriculum is good overall but not implemented in a way which ensures all students have an equally good coverage of key themes.
12. Leadership and management are outstanding. The principal and governors provide a clear strategic direction and strong, energetic leadership. Significant change in the last five years, including two mergers, has been achieved whilst maintaining and improving success rates for the majority of students. Quality assurance is good. Financial management is good.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: grade 1

13. The capacity of the college to improve is outstanding. The self-assessment process is well established and accurate but evidence is insufficient in ACL. Quality assurance is good. Improvement plans are clear, detailed and effective at raising standards. Progress against achieving planned objectives is monitored regularly. Significant management restructuring has been accompanied by effective training for managers and improved student performance. The college's quality assurance processes include regular observations of teaching

and learning. Strengths and areas for development are accurately identified by college observers. The monitoring of equal opportunities is rigorous and students from all backgrounds achieve equally well. The college has well qualified staff and other resources are generally good.

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

14. The college has made good progress in addressing most of the issues raised at the last inspection. Strengths have been maintained and, in many cases, built upon further. In addition, new strengths have been created. Success rates for 16-18 year old students have improved over the last three years. The achievement rate for apprenticeships has improved and now exceeds the national average. The quality of lessons at level 1 has improved. The retention rate at level 2 has improved to above the national average and the assessment and marking of student work has improved. The only area for development not addressed by the college since the last inspection is the low success rates in key skills. Data reports are timely, accurate and used effectively to plan provision, monitor the achievement of objectives and track the progress of students.

Key strengths of the college

Strengths

- outstanding strategic leadership and management
- highly effective management of change
- excellent partnership working
- good financial management.
- high success rates for students aged 14-16 and 16-18
- high standard of student work
- high attendance rate
- good teaching and learning
- flexible and wide ranging curriculum
- outstanding social and educational inclusion
- good support and guidance.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- low success rates in skills for life provision
- low success rates in key skills
- insufficient quality assurance in adult and community learning (ACL).

Main findings

Achievements and standards

Good: grade 2

15. Achievements and standards are good. Most college provision is for students aged 16-18. Success rates for these students are consistently high and improving. They enjoy their learning and achieve well. Most students take courses at level 3 and the success rate at that level was 12% above the national average in 2005/06. Students' performance at levels 1 and 2 is good and above the national average. Success rates on A level courses are high. Students make satisfactory progress based on their previous attainment at GCSE. The proportion of examination passes graded A or B is consistently high.
16. Success rates for adult students were below the national average at levels 1 to 3 in 2003/04 and 2004/05. They improved well in 2005/06 at levels 2 and 3 to 3% above the national average. Success rates at level 1, particularly in skills for life provision, remained well below the national average in 2005/06. This makes up a small proportion of the total work of the college. Overall success rates were better, at 4% above the national average, for adults on vocational programmes at level 1. Well considered actions have been set in place to bring about improvements. Retention rates are high on the wide range of ACL programmes. Success rates on short courses are around the national average.
17. Most work-based learners follow apprenticeship programmes. Success rates are satisfactory and they improved markedly in 2005/06 to 4% above the national average. The completion rate of apprenticeship frameworks during the current year is high. Success rates for advanced apprenticeships have been low but have improved well in the current year.
18. Key skills success rates are low at all levels, especially at level 3.
19. Success rates are high for 14-16 year old school students who study at college, a high proportion of whom progress onto full-time courses. The progression rate to further learning at college for 16-18 year old students is also high. Many students progress to higher education or employment. The average attendance rate for students is high at 89%.
20. The self-assessment report (SAR) included detailed and accurate analysis of the performance of students. Overall, students receiving additional learning support have higher success rates than the college average at each level. There are no significant differences in the success rates of students from different ethnic backgrounds. There is little difference between the success rates of male and female students.
21. The standard of students' work is generally good or better. Students on advanced courses demonstrate good understanding of complex topics. Many students are confident, articulate and work well in groups or independently.

Practical and workplace skills are well developed and most students show good awareness of health and safety considerations. The progress made by students on literacy and numeracy courses is sometimes slow.

Quality of provision

Good: grade 2

22. Teaching and learning are good. Most lessons are well planned and in the best lessons, teachers use a good range of activities to motivate and involve all students. Students learn in a mutually respectful environment and they enjoy their lessons. The range and quality of learning resources are generally good. In the less effective lessons, students' individual needs are not fully met and questioning is general and not appropriately directed. Teaching and learning have improved and the proportion of unsatisfactory lessons has declined since the last inspection. There is insufficient use of ILT in skills for life lessons.
23. Support for new teachers and those with development needs is good. College lesson observation records show that the proportion of good or better lessons varies between the six learning brands with the strongest lessons in provision for 16-18 year old students at level 3. The proportion of good or better lessons, whilst at a satisfactory level, is lowest in the adult college. Too few lesson observations have taken place in ACL. The SAR and quality improvement plans were generally accurate. The SAR did not have sufficient evidence from internal observations about teaching and learning in ACL provision.
24. Accommodation and equipment for learning are generally good. Most teachers are appropriately qualified and demonstrate good subject knowledge. The use of ILT in lessons and the availability of computers to students, whilst satisfactory, are better at some college sites and in some curriculum areas than in others.
25. Assessment practices are good and much improved since the last inspection. Guidance on assessment, standardisation, internal verification and moderation is clear. Assessment planning and grading criteria are clear and action planning to improve future assessment practice is well managed. Target setting is generally thorough but the recording and recognition of progress and achievement for students on non-accredited courses is not widely implemented. Feedback to students is mainly good at helping them to improve their performance but sometimes it is too brief or bland.
26. All full-time students receive an initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills. Support needs are identified and dealt with early. Support and teaching staff work well together in most lessons. Most supported students make good progress compared to other students studying at the same level.
27. The college offers an excellent and flexible curriculum from pre-entry level to level 4. Courses are offered in all sector subject areas and progression through the levels is clear and followed by many students. A level students choose from 48 subjects. Students study at many community venues as well as at the main

campuses. Enrichment activities are strong with high take-up by students. The aspirational college culture encourages wide participation and student success in many national competitions. Students make a positive contribution to the community through focus groups, student councils and charitable works. Most students develop skills well which are essential to their future economic wellbeing.

28. The college collaborates very effectively with many partners to meet local needs. Links with employers are productive. The college's relationships with schools are excellent.
29. The college's approach to social and educational inclusion is outstanding. Learning opportunities are provided for people from all sections of the community. The college accommodates 650 school pupils aged 14-16. Students from deprived areas and those who are traditionally hard to reach are successfully targeted. Courses are provided for many groups such as people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, asylum seekers, ex-offenders, speakers of other languages and mental health service users. Students from all backgrounds are successfully integrated into the life of the college.
30. Support and guidance for students are good. Individual targets for 16-18 year old students are set effectively and regularly reviewed during tutorials. Students studying at A level are set challenging targets based on their GCSE grades and overall they make slightly better than expected progress. Attendance, punctuality, behaviour and progress are regularly considered and action-plans are produced to address concerns. The college has identified that arrangements for delivering tutorials are inconsistent. Tutorial topics such as being healthy, staying safe and achieving economic wellbeing are covered in varying detail at different campuses, although generally the coverage is good.
31. Initial advice and guidance are impartial and good. There are regular visits from school pupils, open evenings and taster sessions. Marketing and publicity materials are informative and contain diverse images which reflect the local community.
32. Arrangements for supporting students' welfare are comprehensive. Good advice and information is provided about financial assistance, careers and higher education. Counselling is available on request. Arrangements for identifying and supporting students with personal difficulties are robust. Procedures for protecting vulnerable students are good.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: grade 1

33. Leadership and management are outstanding. Sussex Downs College is a large and complex organisation. Strong, energetic leadership and clear strategic direction are provided by the principal and governing body. The college has undergone significant change in the last five years including two mergers. Change has been managed highly effectively. Extensive management training

has taken place and the college has been restructured. The college is organised into six areas or learning brands, each with its own learning board to oversee and monitor the college's progress.

34. Since the last inspection, the college has considerably improved the success rates for 16-18 year old students, which make up most of the college's provision. Success rates for the large numbers of 14-16 year old students are high. The achievement rate for apprenticeships has improved and now exceeds the national average. Success rates for adults on levels 2 and 3 courses are now above the national average but the success rate at level 1 remains low, mainly on skills for life provision. Success rates for key skills are low.
35. Communication with staff and students is very effective. Managers promote a positive ethos that focuses on putting students first. Staff and students are enthusiastic and proud of their college.
36. Curriculum management is generally at least good and appropriate actions have been taken to address underperformance in a small part of college provision. The sharing of good practice across the college is well developed and very effective.
37. Governance is strong and effective. Governors play an active, challenging and significant part in developing the mission, direction and the educational character of the college. They monitor progress frequently and thoroughly. A member of the governing body chairs the board of each learning brand to oversee and monitor progress.
38. The college's focus on quality assurance is good. The self-assessment process is good, thorough and comprehensive. The college's management information system is informative and widely used at all levels for monitoring and planning purposes. The college has accurately identified strengths and areas for development in lessons. The self-assessment report for ACL provision did not identify some key areas for development. Staff are well qualified. Specialist equipment, learning resources and accommodation are good.
39. The college works collaboratively with a wide range of partners in innovative and effective ways and it is highly regarded by its partners. College partnerships plan strategically and focus on developing the educational, social and skills infrastructure for the region, including regeneration schemes, over the coming years.
40. The college's response to the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 is good. Child protection procedures are robust. The governing body has yet to receive training in child protection matters. Equal opportunities are monitored closely and implemented well.

41. Financial management is good. Staffing and other costs are controlled well. Resources are deployed well. 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, 2004 to 2006, 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	03/04	729	61	60	1	2,532	49	59	-10
	04/05	950	65	64	1	2,725	50	62	-12
	05/06	1,201	68			2,171	50		
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	51	73	65	8	4	100	52	*
	04/05	23	78	68	10	6	83	58	25
	05/06	21	76			2	50		*
NVQs	03/04	64	41	61	-20	15	47	62	-15
	04/05	63	40	67	-27	13	39	67	-28
	05/06	32	56			4	25		*
Other	03/04	614	63	60	3	2,514	49	59	-10
	04/05	883	65	64	1	2,698	50	61	-11
	05/06	1,147	69			2,122	51		

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2004 to 2006, 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	03/04	2,885	59	56	3	1916	52	53	-1
	04/05	3,219	65	61	4	2,027	57	60	-3
	05/06	1939	67			1,514	63		
GCSEs	03/04	928	57	61	-4	352	62	59	3
	04/05	821	69	64	5	338	62	62	0
	05/06	687	70			275	64		
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	119	71	63	8	21	76	57	19
	04/05	100	76	67	9	11	73	70	3
	05/06	44	68			6	100		
NVQs	03/04	433	47	52	-5	453	41	53	-12
	04/05	374	55	57	-2	508	43	60	-17
	05/06	359	69			365	55		
Other	03/04	1,523	58	54	4	1,287	45	52	-7
	04/05	1,924	65	60	5	1,186	61	59	2
	05/06	849	63			844	67		

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2004 to 2006, 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	03/04	7,911	73	64	9	2,083	50	53	-3
	04/05	7,941	78	67	11	1,967	50	57	-7
	05/06	7,492	79			1,557	60		
A/A2 Levels	03/04	1,885	87	84	3	284	73	66	7
	04/05	2,307	93	86	7	173	76	69	7
	05/06	2,194	93			168	71		
AS Levels	03/04	4,461	72	63	9	382	55	50	5
	04/05	4,275	74	66	8	324	49	52	-3
	05/06	3,868	73			230	56		
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	881	47	52	-5	78	26	44	-18
	04/05	645	63	60	3	65	15	53	-38
	05/06	431	69			18	56		
NVQs	03/04	53	66	54	12	593	40	47	-7
	04/05	72	75	62	13	543	33	54	-21
	05/06	77	87			451	48		
Other	03/04	917	50	56	-6	926	43	56	-13
	04/05	643	67	60	7	901	56	58	-2
	05/06	923	74			686	66		

* Fewer than five learners