



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

Inspection Report

ESPA Colleges

Dates of inspection: 22–25 April 2002

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Contents

Section	Page
Basic information about the college	2
Part A: Summary	3
Information about the college	3
How effective is the college?	4
Quality of provision in curriculum and occupational areas	5
How well is the college led and managed?	6
To what extent is the college educationally and socially inclusive?	6
How well are students and trainees guided and supported?	6
Students' views of the college	7
Other information	7
Part B: The college as a whole	8
Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors	8
Achievement and standards	8
Quality of education and training	9
Leadership and management	12
Part C: Curriculum and occupational areas	15
Literacy and numeracy	15
Vocational programmes: horticulture, college sector links and media studies	17
Communication, creative and expressive arts	20
Information and communication technology	23

Basic information about the college

Name of college:	ESPA Colleges
Type of college:	Independent specialist
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Address of college	6–7 The Cloisters Ashbrooke Sunderland Tyne and Wear SR2 7BD
Telephone number:	0191 510 2600
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Chair of trustees:	Paul Shattock OBE
Charity reference number:	1037868
Name of reporting inspector:	Christine Steadman HMI
Dates of inspection:	22–25 April 2002

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

European Services for People with Autism (ESPA) is a limited company with charitable status registered since 1995, which provides long-term residential services for individuals across the autistic spectrum. It is located in the north east of England and has city centre sites in Newcastle upon Tyne, Sunderland and at Seaham in County Durham. In 1995, the trust extended its provision to provide day and residential provision with a greater focus on education. There are now 3 colleges and 11 residential houses to meet the needs of adults (16–50) with autistic spectrum disorders, including Aspergers Syndrome, associated moderate and severe learning difficulties and/or mental health issues. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funds placements for 73 students in Ashleigh College in Newcastle upon Tyne, with attached educational provision at the Design Works Studio in Gateshead; South Hill College in Sunderland, with attached residential provision at Garden Lodge Seaham and Montpelier in Sunderland; and Tasker College in Sunderland, with residential provision in Westfield in Sunderland. Of the 73 students, 47 are day students, and 61 are male and 12 are female. There are no students from minority ethnic groups. Residential students come from all areas of England to access the specialist provision.

Students at the more able end of the autistic spectrum, including those with Aspergers Syndrome, attend Ashleigh and Tasker colleges. Students with moderate or severe learning difficulties attend South Hill College. Placements are for 42 or 43 weeks a year. In 1996, a vocational skills unit was established at South Hill College, to provide a range of work-based activities for learning at all levels of ability. All students attending the college have experienced troubled educational careers prior to taking up their placement. The majority who have accessed mainstream provision have suffered bullying and have very low self-esteem. In most cases, behavioural disturbance is acute.

Students follow a core curriculum, which is autism specific. It contains elements on the development of social and communication skills, personal, social and health education, literacy and numeracy, information and communication technology (ICT), and vocational subjects. Students are also able to attend the City of Sunderland and Newcastle further education colleges for specific academic and vocational courses, with support provided by a separate and dedicated sector college liaison team.

The residential aspect of the provision is designed to implement the elements of the extended curriculum and to reinforce the day provision, whilst promoting the development of independence through activities in the local and extended community. Residences are located in large established homes in residential areas that have been thoughtfully adapted and refurbished to a very high standard providing welcoming and harmonious environments that are autism appropriate.

A multi-disciplinary team of specialists supports the work of the colleges. A psychologist, a psychiatrist, a speech and language therapist and an educational consultant provide specialist contributions. These assist with individual assessment and intervention, and staff training.

How effective is the college?

Educational provision for students on the autistic spectrum is good overall. There is a very good autism-specific curriculum. Students make significant progress in the development of social and communication skills. Teaching is good overall with an excellent response to autism-specific goals. Subject-specific teaching is less well developed. The provision for the core communication, creative and expressive arts, and vocational subjects is very good. Literacy and numeracy, and ICT are unsatisfactory.

Accommodation for students in residence is very good, and good in teaching areas. Teaching, residential and specialist staff are very well qualified in autism-related issues.

Key strengths

- strong, well-communicated autism-specific ethos
- outstanding support and guidance for students on the autistic spectrum
- good progression in development of social and communication skills
- good range of courses to interest and stimulate students.

What should be improved?

- the focus on specific learning goals for students
- the quality of strategic, developmental and operational planning
- quality assurance procedures across the extended curriculum
- the low aspirations and expectations of some of the more able students.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in sections on individual subjects and courses in the full report.

Quality of provision in curriculum and occupational areas

The table below shows overall judgements about provision in subjects and courses that were inspected. Judgements are based primarily on the quality of teaching, training and learning and how well students achieve. Not all subjects and courses were inspected. Inspectors make overall judgements on curriculum areas and on the effectiveness of leadership and management in the range: outstanding (grade 1), good (grade 2), satisfactory (grade 3), unsatisfactory (grade 4), very weak (grade 5).

Area	Overall judgements about provision and comment
Literacy and numeracy	Unsatisfactory. Students are generally well motivated and concentrate on tasks set by teachers. In some sessions, activities do not challenge students sufficiently. Initial assessment and target setting are ineffective, and students' individual learning needs are not adequately met. Literacy and numeracy skills are not well integrated into the curriculum.
Vocational programmes: horticulture, college sector links and media studies	Good. Students make good progress towards achieving their individual goals. Some teaching is not well planned and occasionally fails to challenge students. The facilities for horticulture at the vocational skills unit are of a very good standard and are well managed. There are extensive opportunities for study at local further education colleges.
Communication, creative and expressive arts	Good. Provision for personal, social and emotional development is effective. Students make significant gains in their self-awareness and personal and social skills. Their capacity to learn and live independently is increased. Assessment, teaching and learning strategies in subject areas, and in some aspects of the core curriculum, do not focus sufficiently on the learning needs of individual students. The development of literacy skills is unsatisfactory.
Information and communication technology	Unsatisfactory. Achievement of autism-specific goals and achievement at further education colleges is good. There was unsatisfactory teaching in half of the sessions observed and some unsatisfactory student achievement, often resulting from insufficiently challenging targets. There is a well-resourced ICT suite at Tasker College. However, there are insufficient specialist ICT resources overall. Assessment, target setting and recording of progress are unsatisfactory. The co-ordination of ICT across the college is ineffective.

How well is the college led and managed?

Leadership and management is satisfactory overall with good operational management of the autism-specific curriculum. The aims and values of the college are effectively shared with all staff and students providing an excellent environment for students on the autistic spectrum. There is an inadequate focus on performance management in planning processes. The college does not have comprehensive policies and procedures to co-ordinate and monitor the quality of provision across the extended curriculum. Staff are well trained in aspects of autism, but lack specialist knowledge and skills in curriculum development. Educational review by the trustees is currently underdeveloped. Financial management is satisfactory with appropriate review by trustees. The college gives satisfactory value for money.

To what extent is the provision of the college educationally and socially inclusive?

The college's response to inclusion is satisfactory overall. There is very successful interaction with adults on the autistic spectrum and with additional learning difficulties and/or disabilities within the college and in the local community. The college is especially effective in the management of students with additional mental health issues and students are able to live and learn in the college and in the area. The staff team actively promotes the security and wellbeing of students through positive promotion of anti-discriminatory behaviours. Issues relating to equal opportunities are satisfactorily addressed, although the college's response to gender is not fully developed. Opportunities for students to develop employability skills are currently underdeveloped, as are planned activities for students to experience a breadth of cultural events to develop their understanding of people of other religions and backgrounds.

How well are students and trainees guided and supported?

Guidance and support for students in both the college and the residences is outstanding. The colleges successfully promote the development of social and communication skills through coherent and well-communicated aims and objectives related to autism-specific programmes across the extended curriculum. There are good arrangements to induct students into the college through one-to-one support and communication documents using signage and symbols to ensure understanding. Very good productive and multi-disciplinary links have been established with specialists who work together to support students. Whilst individual needs are identified, planning is not always built on prior experience. Forward planning for transition is underdeveloped and is compromised by the limited range of supported placements available.

Students' view of the college

Students' views about the college were taken into account and a summary of their main comments is presented below:

What students like about the college

- many said 'everything'
- the staff and the support they are given
- making friends
- trips out into the local community
- the chance to go to sector colleges
- the quality of the residential provision
- involvement in designing the environment
- being given responsibilities
- being given choices.

What they feel could be improved

- most said 'nothing'
- knowing what they will do when they leave ESPA
- who to go to for support (day students)
- having to do certain things – especially in the evenings.

Other information

The college has two months to prepare an action plan in response to the report. It must show the action the college will take to bring about improvements in response to issues raised in the report. The governors must agree the plan and send copies of it to the LSC and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

Part B: The college as a whole

Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors

Aspect & learner type	Graded good or better (grades 1 to 3) %	Graded satisfactory (grade 4) %	Graded less than satisfactory (grades 5 to 7) %
Teaching 16–19	53	27	20
Learning 16–19	48	38	14

Key: The range of grades includes: Excellent (Grade 1), Very Good (Grade 2), Good (Grade 3), Satisfactory (Grade 4), Unsatisfactory (Grade 5), Poor (Grade 6) and Very Poor (Grade 7).

Achievement and standards

1. All students have access to a wide range of experiences across the extended curriculum with the majority making significant progress in relation to their autism. These experiences are planned to ensure access to learning environments despite the challenges this presents for students with such profound and complex social and communication difficulties.

2. Achievement data provided by the college were overly complex. Inspectors were not able to measure the college-wide achievements as data had only been collated for overall achievements in curriculum areas shortly before the inspection. Individual progress is monitored through collation of individual students' progress evaluation documents. Student achievement is accredited through Open College Network (OCN) and Lifelong Educational Achievement Foundation (LEAF) awards. These forms of accreditation allow students to progress through a range of entry level courses and progress to courses at levels 1, 2 and 3.

3. Individual students are also offered a range of qualifications at pre-vocational and vocational level in horticulture, small animal care, catering and media studies. Half of the students attend further education colleges in Sunderland and Newcastle, and gain qualifications at entry level and above. Several students make good progress and achieve General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), with a small number gaining qualifications at General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced (A) level, degree and higher degree level.

4. Achievement levels are appropriate for most learners. However, some students with Aspergers Syndrome are not always sufficiently challenged in their learning, which restricts their academic achievement. Some students make excellent progress whilst for others the expectation of learning is unsatisfactorily low. Lifelong learning is insufficiently promoted. Learning targets are too generic with an over-emphasis on autism-specific goals. Key skills are not well promoted for students on higher level courses and no students gain qualifications in key skills.

5. The effective integration of autism-specific targets across the extended curriculum enables accreditation of independent life skills acquired through daily routines and specifically tailored leisure activities. The promotion of personal and social development is a strength of the college with students gaining qualifications in OCN courses in

communication, self-awareness, preparation for adulthood and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award up to gold level. Through participating in activities in the local community leisure centres, local hotels and restaurants, students develop independence and social and communication skills. Many students with significant additional medical and mental health issues make exceptional gains in the development of both independent living and coping skills whilst at the college.

6. Student retention rates are satisfactory and match those for other independent specialist colleges. There is a high level of demand for places at the three colleges. Many students stay at the college for three or more years with only a small percentage leaving for more extensive psychiatric care. There is close monitoring of students' punctuality and attendance.

7. Students' destinations are evaluated carefully in order to support transition from the colleges. Destination data show that about one quarter of leavers move into independent living and a quarter return to the parental home. Another 18% move into ESPA day provision, with funding by local health and social services as longer-term care placements. Some 8% return home and work placement and 27% move into alternative residential provision. A further 3% move on to alternative further education provision or higher education, and a minority move into secure accommodation.

Quality of education and training

8. Teachers and support staff show knowledge, competence and expertise in autistic spectrum disorders, and understand the impact that disability has upon learning. Lessons are well planned. Differentiated activities relate to specific targets described in individual learning plans and enables students to fully participate in lessons. Staff have high expectations for learning and manage distracting behaviours with skill. However, in some lessons, teachers are less knowledgeable and effective in defining and implementing the wider curriculum objectives. In less effective lessons, planning is primarily related to course criteria and autism-specific targets.

9. In the unsatisfactory lessons, aims and objectives are not generally well communicated to students at the beginning of the session. The majority of lessons take the form of group activities. Where lessons are individualised and differentiated activities are planned, the students are often better motivated and learning is more secure.

10. Initial assessment is used to develop individual learning plans. However, there is insufficient review of lesson plans to check success in meeting individual targets, to inform future planning or to evaluate the impact of teachers' interventions. Assignments and extra curricular tasks are set for some courses, however, there is very little marking or written commentary to inform learners about their progress. Verbal feedback is effective and supports learning.

11. There are excellent working relationships with staff and students in both the colleges and in the residences. Staff are very effective in managing inappropriate behaviour in class and in social settings so that the opportunities for learning are maximised and students are able to gain in confidence and maintain high levels of concentration.

12. Staff are well qualified to meet the autistic-specific disorders of the students at ESPA. There is a very good ratio of staff to students. Everyone within the colleges has specific training and development in the requirements of students on the autistic spectrum. However, there is insufficient understanding of teaching and learning and how this correlates with the social and behavioural core curriculum of ESPA. The majority of teaching staff at Tasker College are highly qualified to degree level and have a teaching qualification. At present, there are four staff working towards a post-graduate certificate of education. The staff at Design Works are well qualified in professional disciplines, but half of the staff do not possess a teaching qualification. Overall, the staff who teach vocational skills have appropriate assessor qualifications and experience. Staff at South Hill, although knowledgeable about autism, have no additional external qualifications to teach students with severe learning difficulties. There is insufficient staff who are qualified to teach literacy and numeracy.

13. There are suitable arrangements for staff appraisal and professional development activities to meet the autistic-specific core curriculum. However, there are insufficient arrangements to evaluate its effectiveness. All staff attend staff meetings and are fully involved in staff appraisal and development opportunities.

14. The environment is excellent for students on the autistic spectrum and provides safe and healthy surroundings. All the accommodation is very well situated within local communities that are used as a resource for educational, vocational and leisure activities. Both colleges and residential provision are decorated and furnished to meet the specific needs of the students. The décor is calm and relaxing with appropriate colour schemes and furnishings. Sensory rooms and areas for relaxation are used extensively. All the buildings are of a high standard and well maintained.

15. A good range of facilities and resources supports the autistic core curriculum, although some rooms are too small. Both staff and students have access to computers and the Internet. Access to ICT is limited in the residential provision. There is a lack of suitable specialist ICT adaptive resources for students with severe learning difficulties. Some learning resources are in short supply and others are not age appropriate. There are no readers for students who need support with literacy.

16. Pre-entry assessment includes information from questionnaires completed by parents, school reports, home visits and a visit to the colleges are carefully analysed. However, insufficient use is made of this information to determine which course students should follow. The subsequent reports sometimes have the same recommendations for students with different needs and levels of ability. This is unacceptable. An assessment to determine the student's position and needs within the autistic spectrum is carried out once the student attends the colleges. The individual learning plan, which forms the basis for the student's autistic specific and curricular programme, does not include academic goals or make reference to prior academic achievement. Extensive risk assessments are properly carried out, which include all students' activities, both on- and off-site and across the extended curriculum.

17. There are good methods to assess students' progress in the autistic core curriculum. Additional support needs are swiftly identified. Three quarters of students require additional counselling and therapy during their time at ESPA. There is not a common marking or assessment policy. In many cases, there is insufficient feedback on work. Students are not

given clear messages about their individual strengths and weaknesses to enable them to improve. Recording for accredited courses is satisfactory and meets the requirements of the relevant awarding body.

18. Progress made towards independence, social and behavioural targets are carefully measured across the extended curriculum. Daily communication between care and educational staff ensures cohesive support. Care assessments and planning arrangements for individual students are well co-ordinated and reviewed.

19. There is a wide range of courses available across the extended curriculum to meet the needs and interests of students. Where the college cannot meet identified needs and interests, staff find appropriate courses with other providers. Support is then organised to enable the successful induction and integration of students when they access other placements. There are good links with further education colleges, which over half the students attend, and a good network of support systems for the students.

20. The college has successfully designed a core curriculum that is autism specific, which meets the needs of the full range of abilities across the autistic spectrum. All students follow a course to develop their social and communication skills. However, the expectation that most students cannot access sector college provision in their first year, whilst based on sound autism specific principles, is too rigid for some students who would benefit from a more flexible approach in the design of their individual programmes. In some cases, there is limited reference to prior attainment in planning activities. The lack of an overall strategy to support curriculum planning adversely affects the balance of autism-specific developments and learning.

21. The environment within the colleges very effectively promotes the development of social and communication skills within an adult environment. Independence is encouraged wherever appropriate. In South Hill College, this is particularly evident through the total communication environment with the support of excellent signage and use of the in-house symbol system.

22. Overall, the support and guidance for students across the extended curriculum in colleges and in the residences is outstanding. The autism-specific provision enables students to develop social and communication skills over time, and to function effectively within the college community. Most students are well supported in their individual interests and aspirations and many gain an impressive range of accreditation of their achievements. For example, several students achieve bronze and silver level Duke of Edinburgh's Awards every year, and one has achieved a gold level award this year.

23. Links with the local and some regional and national careers service providers are well established. However, links with specialist agencies, social services, health authorities and the new Connexions Service are less effective, despite the repeated efforts of the college to establish appropriate transition arrangements for students. Many students have to wait until the last minute to receive confirmation of future placements. This is unsatisfactory and does not build on the long-term efforts of the college to reduce anxiety and create security for students.

24. Whilst work experience and preparation for work are provided within the college for some students, there is no entitlement for all students to experience real work placement with or without support. Those that are in place are very successful and provide an effective model for a gradual and empathetic preparation for future employability. Overall expectations for employability are unnecessarily low and opportunities are missed for the application of skills acquired within ESPA to be transferred into the community.

25. Students are very well supported whilst they adjust to life in the college with one-to-one support and help from a range of specialists. There is very good access to specialist support from a specialist speech and language therapist, a consultant psychologist and a consultant psychiatrist, as well as extensive and productive links within the local health service. Effective procedures are in place to monitor and recognise attendance and punctuality. Where trends are identified, appropriate steps are taken to address the specific causes of the behaviours and the effect it has on the wellbeing of the student.

26. Individual needs are identified, although planning does not always build on prior experience. The autistic-specific curriculum aims are sensitively promoted through the development of social and communication skills and the commitment and dedication of all staff. This contribution is recognised and valued by students, parents and advocates. The recent introduction of procedures to moderate the quality of the provision in the residences is satisfactory and successfully places the health and wellbeing of students at the heart of all student living plans.

27. The college promotes and encourages equality of opportunity for all students and employees. However, issues relating to gender are not well promoted and do not adequately prepare students for adult life. There are excellent links with a range of specialist services relating to the autistic-spectrum disorder at local, national and international level ensuring that staff, students, parents and advocates are well informed and actively involved in research and development.

Leadership and management

28. The leadership and management at ESPA overall is only satisfactory, but leadership of the autistic provision is good. The senior management team together with all staff have a clear vision of their mission which is to provide high-quality specialist further education designed to meet the needs of individuals with autistic-spectrum disorders and related conditions. To this end, ESPA has responded constructively to most of the issues raised in 2000 by inspectors of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The quality of teaching and learning has improved. A core curriculum designed to meet the needs of students on the autistic spectrum has been implemented. Students' progress and achievement within this curriculum are recorded and accredited. All staff are deeply committed to meeting the additional requirements of individual students. This is a key strength in the success of the organisation.

29. Although the aims of the organisation reflect the need of individuals on the autistic spectrum, there is a lack of strategic planning for education. The roles and responsibilities of the senior management teams lack coherence. The current strategic plan does not set out clearly identified priorities for education nor does it provide an effective framework to guide decision making at management level. There is no process for planning and review at strategic and operational levels. Operational planning is responsive to the individual needs of

the students. For example, one student, due to a specific fixation, was unable to go through a particular doorway. A new doorway was constructed which overcame this difficulty, enabling the student to access the outside world. ESPA acknowledges that as a result of the focus on the individual student systems are not in place to identify how well the organisation is progressing or to plan the way forward.

30. Operational management is good. There are clear policies and procedures for specific areas, such as risk assessment and behavioural management. Comprehensive procedures to eliminate oppressive behaviour, including all forms of harassment, have been developed. The organisation responds swiftly to eliminate any form of bullying or harassment. Effective procedures for appeals and complaints, which are well understood by students, are in place. In addition, the college also takes note of students' concerns and action is taken as appropriate.

31. Good and extensive daily communication on student-related issues ensure swift dissemination of information. The changing needs of students are addressed at weekly meetings at each college and monthly meetings of the senior management team. Significant developments are not reflected in the colleges' strategic planning.

32. Quality assurance policies and procedures, which cover all aspects of the colleges' work to effect continuous improvement, are not in place. However, some progress has been made since the last inspection. Arrangements to monitor the quality of teaching have been implemented. All staff are included in the teaching observation programme. As a result, constructive feedback is given to the specific member of staff and themes for improvement are included in staff meetings. A system to moderate the grades is not in place. Observation grades given by inspectors are lower than the grades awarded by ESPA. Procedures for disseminating good practice in teaching are generally underdeveloped. Views of parents and some students about the provision have been sought on an irregular basis. There is no overall procedure to analyse responses and to make any necessary changes. The self-assessment report was descriptive and did not include evaluation by a wide range of staff.

33. ESPA has a strong training culture. There is effective staff appraisal, performance review and staff development for autistic-spectrum disorders. All staff have a comprehensive induction to ensure their understanding of the students' particular needs and the management of any resulting behaviours. The annual staff appraisal system is well established and identifies areas for further training. Staff development activities include all staff, for example, caretakers and cleaners. However, the focus on improving teaching and learning is underdeveloped. There is insufficient evaluation of professional development for teaching staff. Staff are very committed to professional development, for example, a large number of staff attended a conference in their own time, at very short notice, to hear the most up-to-date research on autism from an expert with an international reputation. Staff do not identify how a planned activity will improve their performance or evaluate its impact. ESPA has been awarded Investors in People.

34. The colleges have a comprehensive range of staff policies covering employees and students. For staff, these include policies on confidentiality, the prevention and treatment of abuse and exploitation and a policy for volunteers. For students, these include a statement of rights of the individual supported by ESPA, a risk taking policy and a challenging behaviour policy. There is also a comprehensive health and safety policy. Incident forms are

appropriately completed by staff and sent to a senior member of staff where further action is taken, when necessary.

35. An equal opportunities policy is in place, but it is not well structured. It does not include references to current legislation, is not dated and does not have an associated action plan. Although there are 13 LSC-funded placements for female students, the colleges have not been active in their response to specific gender issues. However, there is a men's group which meets weekly. The organisation does not actively recruit from minority ethnic communities and their publicity material does not contain representation of minority ethnic groups.

36. Financial procedures are satisfactory. The students at the college are well supported and the staff ratios and additional support reflect their needs. The colleges are a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. The two trustees make a strong contribution to the finance and business aspects of the college and are actively involved in ESPA's development. The trustees have identified the need to include a trustee with expertise in education on the board.

Part C: Curriculum and occupational areas

Literacy and numeracy

Overall provision in this area is **unsatisfactory (Grade 4)**

Strengths

- teaching that motivates students
- good classroom management by teachers
- wide range of literacy and numeracy qualifications for students.

Weaknesses

- ineffective target setting for learning
- insufficient planning of teaching
- inappropriate activities for some learners
- ineffective initial assessment
- lack of specialist qualifications of staff in literacy and numeracy
- poor co-ordination of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum.

Scope of provision

37. The colleges offer a range of provision in literacy and numeracy from entry level to level 1. Students are also able to take GCSE English and maths at two local colleges of further education, where they are offered additional one-to-one literacy and numeracy support. All provision takes place in small discrete sessions, with a maximum group size of five. Some students work with a learning support assistant. The teaching of literacy and numeracy takes place on three sites. Students can study for internally and externally accredited awards. For example, some students' progress is accredited through in-house certificates in practical maths, English or literacy. Other students work towards external accreditation awarded by the OCN.

Achievement and standards

38. Initial assessment of students' literacy and numeracy skills is ineffective. There is no systematic assessment to evaluate the student's literacy and numeracy levels at the start of their programme. Some teachers use inappropriate assessment tools, for example spelling tests designed for children. Assessment does not inform the design of the students' individual learning plans or specific goals related to the development of literacy and numeracy. In general, students are aware of the targets set for their personal and social development. Most students work diligently at set tasks and are well motivated. Recording of achievement for literacy and numeracy in learning plans and at reviews is unsatisfactory. New or additional targets are not negotiated and set for students during the review process. Individual progress is not recorded effectively.

Quality of education and training

39. Two thirds of the teaching is satisfactory or better. In the most effective lessons, teachers use a range of teaching methods and resources to stimulate and motivate learners. The best teaching in literacy and numeracy enables students to pursue individual aims in a structured way. Students work at their own pace and develop independent study skills alongside literacy skills. For example, students use a CD-ROM to obtain information for research. Lesson planning is unsatisfactory and is not linked to the student's individual learning plan. Few learning activities are linked to students' interests or vocational goals. Schemes of work are not in place. Lesson plans consist of lists of tasks for students to complete. Learning outcomes are focused on personal and social development and do not include the development of literacy and numeracy. Much of the teaching and learning is in a vacuum, without context and is not integrated or linked into other aspects of the core curriculum. For example, students would have benefited from practising money handling in the numeracy lesson prior to a practical session focused on developing skills to work in the college café.

40. In general, tasks and activities following group work are not differentiated to ensure that individual needs are being met. In the majority of sessions, teachers set a whole group task, which did not sufficiently challenge some students, or extend their skills. The majority of students' files contain incomplete assignments and much work is unmarked. Teachers give insufficient attention to correcting punctuation and spelling. The development of handwriting skills is often overlooked.

41. The student-staff ratio is 4:1. Staff are able to provide much individual attention to students skilfully and sensitively developing personal and social skills. Classroom management is good and teachers ensure that the majority of students behave well. Rooms are spacious and well equipped and students' work is displayed. In general, teaching resources are satisfactory, although teachers sometimes use inappropriate materials, for example fairy stories designed for younger pupils and a spelling pack developed for Key Stage 3 of the National Curriculum.

Leadership and management

42. The management of literacy and numeracy across the three college sites is poor. The organisation recognises this weakness and has recently begun work with the regional office of the Basic Skills Agency to address this. However, at the time of inspection, there was no detailed action plan to co-ordinate this area of work, nor an effective policy for the integration of literacy and numeracy across the extended curriculum. Staff lack specialist qualifications in literacy and numeracy, and have little knowledge of the literacy and numeracy core curricula and standards introduced last year. There are no arrangements for staff to meet to share good practice and develop the work.

Vocational programmes: horticulture, college sector links and media studies

Overall provision in this area is **good (Grade 2)**

Strengths

- good standards of students' work
- well-structured practical teaching
- very good facilities for horticulture
- extensive range of further education college programmes
- effective management.

Weaknesses

- lack of challenge and variety in some lessons
- little use of students' individual learning plans in further education college programmes.

Scope of provision

43. Students are able to access the full range of courses at two local further education colleges with appropriate levels of support. Over half of the students at ESPA attend the colleges, with most following individual programmes at levels 2 and 3. At one of the colleges, students are currently undertaking GCSE courses in English, mathematics, history and business studies; GCE A-level mathematics and English; Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE) programmes in science and media and communications; level 2 courses in ICT, electronic servicing and leisure and tourism; NVQ level 2 in catering, sign language, Italian and French. The second college offers more discrete programmes specifically for ESPA students. These include a pre-vocational access course and an independent living skills course for students with severe learning difficulties.

44. The college has established its own vocational skills unit with a specialism in horticulture and is developing a programme in small animal care. Students can follow a NVQ level 1 programme in commercial horticulture, an entry level skills for working life programme, as well as a pre-entry vocational foundation certificate. In addition, students at ESPA undertake a range of OCN pre-foundation programmes in work-related skills and media studies.

Achievement and standards

45. Students progress well towards achieving both their educational goals and their autistic spectrum disorder goals. Students demonstrate very good levels of concentration and application, are diligent and keen to learn. Many students are willing to participate in group discussions. They listen attentively to the contribution of others and then offer their own opinions. In a pre-vocational access course lesson on moral dilemmas, students were able to make comparisons with political rhetoric. They articulated the distinction between opinionated discussion and personal arguments and reflected on how to manage appropriate behaviour in response to conflicting views and actions. Students' answers demonstrated good use of appropriate terminology. They displayed good knowledge and understanding.

46. The students' portfolio work is of a good standard. Working files are comprehensive, up-to-date and well maintained. Many students take pride in the quality of work they produce. Assessment in the vocational skills unit is methodical, well recorded and rigorous. The development of personal and interpersonal skills is enhanced for those students who attend further education colleges. Students following individual programmes across the further education provision have opportunities to work and socialise in a different and often vibrant community. Some students, especially on discrete programmes in colleges of further education, find integration more of a challenge, but receive good support to assist the process.

47. There are limited opportunities for students to participate in structured work-related activities. Few students participate in external work experience. The vocational skills unit provides a realistic horticultural environment, but this does not include regular opportunities for student involvement in enterprise activities.

Quality of education and training

48. The standard of teaching and learning in the classes observed was at least satisfactory, with over half being good or better. Many of the practical lessons were well structured. For example, in a NVQ level 1 horticulture session, students worked in a purpose-built potting shed at individual bays. The materials and tools for seed planting were prepared in advance of the arrival of the students. The teacher checked the students' recollection of the previous session's activities through appropriate questioning to each student and gave a clear practical demonstration of the process of seed planting. The activities were supported with good visual aids, including key words, technical language and well-labelled diagrams. Effective reinforcement of the learning points was established through reference to completed exemplars. The students worked independently with good individual support from the tutor. Formal assessment of the students' work was thorough.

49. Some theory lessons were lacklustre. In these classes, there was often little variety in the students' learning and limited intervention by teachers to assess progress or illuminate the learning. Some of the more able students were not sufficiently challenged. Staff provide good verbal feedback and encouragement to students. However, little comment is made on students' written work with suggestions of how to improve. There are no structured processes in place to extend, integrate or reinforce students' learning between education programmes in ESPA and the further education colleges or between education programmes for day students and their residential settings. Teachers from the further education colleges are not provided with the individual learning plans of students and so are unable to contribute effectively to the achievement of these plans or apply differentiated teaching and learning strategies in lessons.

50. Students have access to some very good facilities and resources. The vocational skills unit has been developed over recent years by staff and students to provide a high-quality and stimulating learning environment for horticulture and small animal care. Students accessing the further education college provision use well-equipped and comfortable rooms and good quality specialist resources. Staff are experienced and have appropriate vocational qualifications. ESPA teaching staff and support workers skilfully manage students' behaviour. Staff are well briefed on individual students' behaviour. They calmly and sensitively intervene when students demonstrate early signs of agitation.

Leadership and management

51. The co-ordination of a diverse and complex further education college programme for students is effectively managed. Course management, verification and assessment procedures are well documented in vocational programmes. However, there is no formal protocol with the two further education colleges upon which to agree the purpose, outcomes or consistency of the student experience. Quality assurance processes, including the effective use of review and evaluation, are underdeveloped.

Communication, creative and expressive arts

Overall provision in this area is **good (Grade 2)**

Strengths

- good development and understanding of personal, social and emotional skills
- marked increase in students' capacity to learn and to live independently
- very positive student attitudes to learning
- good teaching
- strong and effective provision for personal, social and emotional development
- effective contribution of the extended curriculum.

Weaknesses

- lack of challenge in some teaching
- insufficient match between individual learning needs and lesson planning.

Scope of provision

52. The provision for communication, creative and expressive arts covers most of the elements of the ESPA core curriculum. Courses are provided in communication, self-awareness, peer support, aspects of adulthood, independence, home skills, creative skills (arts and crafts), performing arts, music and fitness. The extended curriculum available in the residential settings offers structured opportunities for students to develop their social, leisure and independent living skills. Achievement in the curriculum areas is recognised through OCN LEAF awards, mostly at entry level, stages 2 and 3 and pre-entry level ESPA college certificates.

Achievement and standards

53. Students' achievements are recognised through a good range of entry and pre-entry qualifications. Their capacity to learn and to live independently is greatly enhanced through the skills and experience gained in lessons and through the extended curriculum. In all lessons, students' attitudes to learning were very good.

54. A key area of achievement is the students' development of self-awareness and understanding of their emotions. In a performing arts lesson, they interpreted anger and surprise effectively in acting out scenes from television soap operas. Students overcame their anxiety about performing a role-play in front of others in a communication lesson and demonstrated a good understanding of how body language conveys emotions.

55. Students' communication skills and their understanding of the nature of behaviour and social interaction are also increased through the range of courses. In a discussion on relationships in the aspects of adulthood course, students confidently put forward their views about the issues in society presented by different lifestyles. In the extended curriculum, a student conducted a successful transaction at the local shop to make purchases. The students' ability to exercise choice and to be creative in their work was observed in art lessons where they worked independently and successfully used a range of media to explore a particular theme.

56. In contrast to the marked development of their personal and social skills, students' literacy skills are underdeveloped and are unsatisfactory. In most courses, written work was largely copying text or producing short sentences commenting on their achievements in their portfolios of evidence for accreditation. This work contained basic errors in punctuation and grammar, and handwriting was often unclear.

Quality of education and training

57. The quality of teaching and learning is good overall. In one lesson, teaching was outstanding. Teachers demonstrated an excellent knowledge and understanding of students' on the autistic spectrum needs and provided an atmosphere that was conducive to learning. In all lessons, through skilful management of behaviour, teachers and support staff increased students' capacity to learn. In courses on communication, teachers were sensitive but purposeful in providing the appropriate level of challenge to students when talking about their emotions and the use of body language. In a session in the extended curriculum, staff provided a safe framework for a discussion on touch as a means of communication. The young men participated well and gained a greater understanding of styles of behaviour.

58. Teachers were always careful to explain to students the purpose of the lesson. In a small number of lessons, teaching began and ended with a review of the students' learning goals and of the specific objectives of the lesson. The link with previous learning was made and activities were well planned using a good range of verbal and visual stimuli. In a self-awareness lesson exploring the way in which happiness is conveyed, students learnt about the difference between body language and facial expressions in the construction of a poster. In an outstanding art lesson, the overall aim of the lesson and a small number of learning outcomes for each student were clearly displayed. These learning outcomes took into account the relevant autism-related learning goals for the student and the subject-specific knowledge and skills to be gained. This excellent focus on the learning of the individual enabled the teacher and the students to evaluate and celebrate the progress made during the lesson.

59. In the less effective lessons, teaching was not planned effectively to meet students' individual needs. In some of these lessons, teaching did not provide sufficient challenge for the more able students. In a fitness lesson, a small group of students that included a student with severe learning difficulties and more able students successfully climbed to the top of a local hill. The lesson objectives were to familiarise the students with the use of binoculars and a compass and to enable them to identify key points of interest in the surrounding area. The planning and organisation of the lesson did not take sufficient account of the range of abilities of the students.

60. Initial assessment of students' personal, social and emotional development is very good and is reflected well in the individual learning plan. This assessment is not used explicitly to inform lesson planning and evaluation. Initial assessment within the subject area is less well developed. Students receive frequent verbal feedback and, in the best lessons, teachers review their progress against the learning objectives. However, the monitoring and recording of students' progress in lessons and over time are inconsistent and too informal.

61. The core curriculum framework is excellent and provides a good foundation for the development of formal and informal opportunities for learning. Within the curriculum area, the emphasis on personal, social and emotional development is strong and effective. The

extended curriculum complements well the college-based courses and contributes effectively to the development of communication, leisure and social skills, significantly enhancing the potential for students to live independently. Opportunities for students to gain qualifications are good.

62. Curriculum planning needs further development where assessment is driven by criteria rather than the experience and learning needs of the student. In some courses, teaching is too focused on personal and social development at the expense of subject-specific learning. Good practice was seen in the area of creative arts where autism-specific objectives and learning about arts and crafts have been successfully combined into project themes. Students developed their perceptual abilities and their understanding of artistic composition, in a discussion about the way in which paintings convey relationships.

Leadership and management

63. The ESPA core curriculum is well established within the ethos of the college. As a result, the day-to-day practice of teachers and support staff makes a significant contribution to students' personal, social and emotional development. There are good and developing links between the extended and the formal curriculum that promote a holistic approach to learning and achievement. Curriculum leadership and the co-ordination across the college of related courses and other learning opportunities designed to respond to the specific developmental needs of students on the autistic spectrum are inadequate.

Information and communication technology

Overall provision in this area is **unsatisfactory (Grade 4)**

Strengths

- good achievement of learning goals specific to autism
- well-equipped ICT suite at Tasker College.

Weaknesses

- some unsatisfactory ICT achievements
- unsatisfactory teaching
- insufficient specialist ICT resources
- poor assessment, target setting and recording of progress
- many inappropriate learning activities
- poor co-ordination of ICT.

Scope of provision

64. There are a range of qualifications available which have been developed in an ad-hoc fashion. All students have the opportunity to develop information technology skills as part of the core curriculum. Accreditation is available through OCN, LEAF Awards, Oxford and Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts (OCR) the national skills profile, computer literacy and information technology and the integrated business technology stage II. In-house qualification certificates are awarded to students who take courses in desktop publishing and the use of the Internet. Students are able to study Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) first and national diplomas, the City and Guilds 7261 certificate and GNVQs at the local further education college.

Achievement and standards

65. The potential of ICT to develop young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is not realised. Students' ICT skills are not well integrated into the wider curriculum. Students do not fully develop their ICT skills. Standards vary widely. For example, many students have been successful in gaining the OCR national skills profile. However, the in-house certificates taken by students at Tasker College are not linked to measurable criteria or standards for achievement. Students' course work in computer literacy and information technology (CLAIT) has not been sent to the awarding body and has not been accredited. Standards of completed work are variable, often with uncorrected errors and disorganised files. Some of the more able students are not sufficiently challenged.

Quality of education and training

66. Teaching was unsatisfactory in about half of the lessons observed. In the few lessons where good teaching was observed, there was a successful balance between ICT and autism-specific goals. Most lessons were based on completing whole-group activities with little evidence of differentiation. For example, one clipboard with photographs was shared amongst four students when checking for ICT equipment. The activity was of little value, since it took no account of the literacy levels of the students and some could not complete it.

The development of ICT skills was limited in half of the lessons observed with an inappropriate focus on the knowledge-based requirements of the qualifications. This practice often led to uninspiring activities of minimal value. Opportunities to extend learning were also missed. For example, when more able students asked for assistance, the teacher, rather than giving prompts to enable students to learn, completed the activity for students. The lack of a brief or marking scheme for a desktop publishing project for the CLAIT award, meant that students did not develop the ability to follow instructions or check their own work for accuracy and completion.

67. Two out of the three teachers lack teaching and ICT qualifications. Both of them are currently enrolled for relevant training courses. General ICT equipment is available at all sites and the suite at Tasker College has good resources, including two scanners and a digital camera with appropriate software. In contrast, there are some unsuitable resources at South Hill, including inappropriate desks and materials. Access to on-line materials is limited at the colleges and the residential sites. There is insufficient specialist equipment for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

68. The individual learning and behavioural plans establish a consistent approach, which enable students with significant behavioural, emotional and mental health issues to successfully attend lessons. Baseline assessment, target setting and recording of achievement for ICT is underdeveloped. Feedback to students through discussion and marking is unsatisfactory and does not enable students to make progress.

69. Some very effective one-to-one support is in place. For example, a student with significant communication difficulties made progress as a result of very effective signing and encouragement. In some lessons, students were unable to work independently and this limited the achievement of ICT skills. In one lesson, sweets were inappropriately used as a reward.

Leadership and management

70. The co-ordination of ICT provision across the colleges is poor and the lack of a college-wide strategy means that key teachers, at each location, work in isolation. There is limited understanding of the potential for using ICT to extend students' achievements and support the management of learning across the core curriculum. Good practice is not shared effectively. Overall, ICT targets are not well defined to support the core curriculum, and quality assurance, review and evaluation of the curriculum area are limited.

71. There is good access to ICT lessons for all students, including access to the local colleges of further education. The rationale for the choice of ICT qualifications is unclear and many inconsistencies exist.

