



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards
in Education

Inspection report

Portland College

Dates of inspection: 22–26 November 2004

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Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Portland College
Type of college:	Specialist, residential, independent college
Principal:	Mr MEA Syms OBE
Address of college:	Nottingham Road Mansfield Nottinghamshire NG18 4TJ
Telephone number:	01623 499111
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Chair of governors:	Professor C O'Brien OBE
Name of reporting inspector:	Joyce Deere
Dates of inspection:	22–26 November 2004

**charity or registered business number of the company running the college*

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

Portland College is an independent, specialist residential college. It is located near Mansfield, on a 40-acre site in Sherwood Forest. The college was founded in 1950, originally to provide vocational training for former miners who had acquired injuries and could not return to work. The college is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. The principal reports to the governing body of the trust. The college provides for students aged over 16 with physical disabilities and associated neurological conditions, many with complex needs. Several have cerebral palsy. It does not provide for students with significant behavioural or emotional difficulties.

The college receives funding from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and through the residential training unit (RTU) of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The 132 students funded by the LSC are in the learning and skills department. Of these, 82 are aged over 19 years, 75 are male, 13 are from minority ethnic backgrounds and 7 are non-resident. The 127 students funded by the RTU are in the employment department. All of these are aged over 19 and many are in their 50's, 113 are male, seven are from minority ethnic backgrounds and 30 are non-resident.

Students in the learning and skills department study a range of courses designed to develop their skills of independence and to study pre-vocational subjects at entry level and pre-entry level. New accreditation has recently been introduced, and all students take literacy, numeracy and communication skills. The use of alternative and augmentative technology to assist in vocalising, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy are integral aspects of the curriculum for many of these students. The RTU-funded students work at levels 1, 2 and 3, studying business-related subjects and information and communication technology (ICT). A few students study horticulture. The students can study for a range of qualifications, including industry qualifications, and the college is a recognised academy for computer software qualifications.

How effective is the college?

The quality of provision in business studies is good. In ICT, independent living skills, literacy, numeracy and communications and in pre-vocational studies, the quality of provision is satisfactory. The standard of specialist support for students is high, as are the standards of residential accommodation and residential care and support for students. The college is adequate to meet the needs of learners.

The college's key strengths and areas that should be improved are listed below.

Key strengths

- gains in communication skills by LSC-funded students
- inclusive teaching and learning in business studies
- high standards of residential accommodation
- good progression to employment by RTU-funded students
- care for and support of students
- outstanding multi-disciplinary teamwork to meet students' augmentative communication needs
- clear focused and well-understood mission
- financial management
- governance.

What should be improved

- the overall quality of teaching and learning
- the level of challenge and innovation in the curriculum for LSC-funded students
- the specialist support to meet the needs of a minority of students
- the use of quality assurance procedures
- the timetabling of classes to ensure that students are all in appropriate groups and room sizes.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the 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 (2), Satisfactory (3), Unsatisfactory (4), Very Poor (5)

Area	Overall judgements about provision, and comment
Business studies	Good: Business administration students achieve high results and make good progress in their personal, vocational and career development. Teaching is very well planned and is closely matched with the needs of individual students. Students receive a wide and effective range of support from their teachers and other staff. Leadership of the area is good but insufficient use is made of quality assurance information to help promote further improvement.
ICT	Satisfactory: Progression to employment and the planning and tracking of learning are good. Standards of work are generally high and there is good use of realistic work environments and work placements. Individual learning plans are not used well, and quality assurance information is not used to improve provision. Tutorials are not well implemented and not all students receive the assistive technology support they require.
Independent living skills	Satisfactory: Good development of practical skills across the whole curriculum. The multi-disciplinary approaches with effective use of accommodation and equipment further develop students' confidence and skills. There is inadequate planning within lessons for individual needs and the curriculum does not provide sufficient challenge for all students.
Literacy, numeracy and communications	Satisfactory: The development of students' communication skills is good, as is the additional support provided for RTU-funded students. Good partnership working has improved the provision. The formal planning and recording of learning is poor, and there are insufficient resources to meet the support needs of a minority of students.

Area	Overall judgements about provision, and comment
Pre-vocational studies	Satisfactory: Teaching of practical subjects is good and students develop skills, knowledge and understanding well. In theory lessons, the targets are too general and small steps of progress are not recorded. Tutorial support is good. The self-assessment report is evaluative, but the teaching observation scheme is in the early stages of development and does not foster improvement.

How well is the college led and managed?

Leadership and management are good. The principal has spearheaded substantial improvements since the last Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) inspection in 1999 and the Training Standards Council inspection in 2000. The changing needs of the students drive planned change and development. College self-evaluation is appropriately self-critical. The college mainly understands what it does well and less well. The determined use of local, regional and national partnerships improves opportunities for students. Some aspects of the college timetable restrict opportunities for students. Governance is outstanding. The governors hold the college to account for all aspects of its work. Strategic and operational planning are well structured and focus on improvement and performance targets. There is ineffective use of data and the outcomes of other quality assurance processes to promote improvement. Equal opportunities, disability and diversity legislation are understood well and applied in the college. Good training opportunities for staff are linked to individual students' and the college's needs. Financial management is very good. The college provides good value for money.

To what extent is the college educationally and socially inclusive?

The college's response to social and educational inclusion is good. Students are drawn from across the country, with ages ranging from 16 to over 50. The gender balance is roughly even in all parts of the provision apart from ICT, where the large majority of students are male. The college is aware of this and has been marketing the provision to increase participation by women, as well as by students from minority ethnic backgrounds. Although the proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is, at 11%, just above the national average, there is lower percentage of adults from minority ethnic backgrounds. The college is situated in an area where just over 1% of the community is from minority ethnic backgrounds. The college has a very active equality and diversity committee and is compliant with the requirements of the Race Relations (amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA). The college has a continuous programme of updating for equality of opportunity. Members of staff are generally good at responding to the needs of students with disabilities, although there are examples of the support needs of a small minority of students not being met, and a few staff are not up to date with terminology in relation to race. Provision for literacy and numeracy is satisfactory, with good additional support for students funded by the RTU. The approach to the curriculum for business studies students is a good example of inclusive learning.

How well are students and trainees guided and supported?

Support and guidance for students are good. The multi-disciplinary support in relation to the development of alternative forms of language and mobility skills is outstanding, and significantly underpins the successful achievements of many students. The college's procedures for safeguarding are satisfactory. However, the support needs for a minority of students with other disabilities, such as visual impairment are not always well met. Entry and

transition procedures are satisfactory and involve an effective multi-disciplinary approach. Induction is satisfactory. Effective partnership-working with Connexions, disability employment advisers, and the local health care trust contributes to successful guidance and support for students. The job club, benefits advice and the work of placement officers contribute significantly to the success of the RTU-funded students in finding employment. The tutorial support is good in many areas, but is not effective in ICT.

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

- good physiotherapy
- being able to try new things
- the opportunity to make friends
- the evening activities
- being able to express opinions
- safe, accessible and friendly environment
- friendly and helpful staff
- access to work experience.

What they feel could be improved

- wheelchair access to the woods
- the lack of cover between buildings in bad weather
- not enough transport provided by the college for community activities
- slow progress on some courses
- too high a staff turnover
- meal times too close together.

Other information

The college inspection report will normally be published 12 working weeks after the inspection. Once published, the college has two months in which to prepare its post-inspection action plan and submit it to the local LSC. The college's action plan must show what action the college will take to bring about improvements in response to issues raised in the report. The governors should agree it before it is submitted to the local LSC. The local LSC should send to Ofsted only action plans from colleges that have been judged inadequate or have been awarded a grade 4 or 5 for curriculum provision, work-based learning and/or leadership and management.

Part B: The college as a whole

Achievement and standards

1. Students on RTU-funded programmes make good progress to employment. Data produced by the RTU show the percentage of students who are successful in finding employment is high at 61% for 2003/04. This was the highest percentage of all comparable colleges. Results have been consistently good for the past three years. In ICT, students develop commercially relevant technical skills and in business studies they pass significant numbers of national vocational qualification (NVQ) units, or units of other qualifications in line with their individual goals. Students in business studies produce work of high standards in work placements. However, progress for a minority of students on ICT networking programmes is slow, and they achieve very few units.

2. LSC-funded students make good progress in developing their communication skills. The speech and language therapists and physiotherapists play a key role in helping students to improve their communication skills. Where appropriate most students develop their skills in using their voice output communication aids, which become increasingly sophisticated as students become more proficient in their use. Students also develop skills of independence in all aspects of the curriculum and in pre-vocational studies, they develop good skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to practical areas. However, not all students' achievements are adequately obtained in the recording and review processes and the college has yet to capture the full extent of individual students' progress over time. For many students, the achievements, such as being able to take part with dignity in leisure activities, are very significant for the development of self-confidence, but are not always secured effectively.

3. The accredited provision for LSC-funded students has recently been introduced. It is too soon to make judgements about pass rates, although results in the first few months are encouraging. Students' achievements in extra-curricular activities are celebrated, and pictures of students taking part in a range of activities are prominently displayed in the college. Particularly popular has been the introduction of the driving licence for wheelchair users.

4. Retention rates for all students are satisfactory and broadly in line with the averages in the sector. Attendance was satisfactory during the week of inspection.

Quality of teaching, training and learning

5. The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory overall. It is best on programmes for RTU-funded students, particularly in business studies, where much teaching is good and meets the individual needs of students well. It is carefully planned, practical, relevant and challenging for students. For example, in a word-processing session, students worked in pairs to create and use their own templates for defined business purposes. In an accounting

session, students of mixed ability and experience traded goods with each other and recorded credits and debits on their individual computers. Teaching is less successful on the LSC-funded provision, where there is an over-emphasis on the requirements of national awards and the planning is too general to provide sufficient challenge for all students. In unsatisfactory lessons, all students are given the same task, which is not suitable for all of them. Most teaching is satisfactory, with relatively little that is good or better. The teaching is most successful in practical lessons where students are encouraged to discuss what they have learnt.

6. The college has invested significantly in its residential accommodation over the past few years. There has been a phased updating of facilities, particularly bathroom facilities. The standard of accommodation is high, with the opportunity for greater independence for students as they develop their skills. The college meets the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) standards. Students benefit from a modern health centre, a youth club, and very good facilities for physiotherapy. The hydrotherapy pool is much used by students, as is the area designated as a training facility for wheelchair drivers. The college is about to start building a new learning centre on the site.

7. Specialist resources to enable students to develop their language and mobility skills are of a very high standard. The college's alternative, augmentative communication team has the capacity to design and provide a very high standard of voice output communication aids and appropriate switches for students with little or no natural speech. However, a few students with disabilities that are less commonly accommodated by college, such as sight loss or dyslexia, do not always have appropriate adjustments made to assist their learning. ICT facilities across the campus are of a good standard and are routinely updated. Much teaching accommodation has been refurbished, and equipment for RTU students is up to industry standards. In 2003, the college commissioned a thorough audit of its accessibility and has implemented many of the recommendations. Health and safety is a priority. Extensive improvements have been made to the campus since the previous FEFC and TSC inspections to ensure that most of the facilities are accessible in a wheelchair under cover. Classrooms and all facilities are adapted for wheelchair users. The classrooms have good facilities for teachers, including interactive whiteboards that are well used. However, students in the LSC-funded provision are too often timetabled in groups that are too large for the capacity of the room, or with two different groups in a room that is too small.

8. Staff qualifications are satisfactory. There has been a significant staff turnover, following restructuring and a re-focusing of the work of the college. The college is working towards meeting Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) standards. Many members of the teaching staff recently recruited have teaching qualifications, and those who are not qualified are expected to become qualified. Care staff, learning support staff, medical staff and therapists are appropriately qualified and the college encourages care staff to take level 3 qualifications. Staff teaching on business studies and ICT programmes have appropriate vocational qualifications. In ICT, consultants are used where highly specialist experience is required.

9. The process of pre-entry and initial assessment is thorough and provides an accurate picture of the abilities and needs of students. The initial assessment takes account of information from previous schools and employment experience, as well as information from clinical practitioners and disability employment advisors. The assessment results feed into individual learning plans. However, the targets in the plans are too general and the language to identify targets is not always understood by students and staff. Teaching and support departments do not break the general targets into smaller steps of learning so that student achievements and attainments can be measured effectively over time. The electronic recording system, designed to assist in target setting and recording, is still being modified. Teachers in many areas of the curriculum give good oral feedback to students during lessons. On the LSC-funded programmes, the recording of learning is too heavily focused on the assessment of accredited programmes. This is recognised in the self-assessment report.

10. Internal verification procedures are not satisfactory. Teachers and managers can describe clearly the process of internal verification. However, the internal verification policy in the employment department is still in draft, and the policy in the learning and skills department is yet to be developed. The external verifier report for Skillpower identifies slow completion of portfolios. In ICT, some teachers have verified areas for which they are not qualified.

11. Programmes for RTU-funded students meet the aspirations of learners and the needs of employers. Business studies programmes are particularly effective. Staff use a customised and flexible approach that is based on students' aspirations and identified job role. The business studies programmes effectively prepare students for employment, and enable students to achieve units of accreditation relevant to their requirements. Provision for work placements, a weakness at the previous inspection, has been well addressed, and this aspect is now a strength, both in business studies and ICT.

12. Programmes for LSC-funded students, including literacy, numeracy, pre-vocational studies and independence skills have been introduced over the last four terms and are being enthusiastically developed. The learning and skills curriculum framework allows students to progress between levels, although in the vocational area there is a gap in provision between pre-entry level and entry level. The key focus of the learning and skills curriculum is to support students to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding they require to move to independent living and/or further study as day students at general further education (GFE) colleges in their home area. The current programme for these students is closely linked to activities to provide evidence for accreditation. Although staff are aware that accreditation needs should not dominate the planning, this is a key weakness, as it was at the previous inspection. The current curriculum is satisfactory, but it does not involve sufficient opportunity for project work, and does not challenge all students sufficiently.

13. Cross-college timetabling does not meet the individual needs of all students on the LSC-funded programmes. In a third of lessons, the numbers of students in the classrooms are too high and, occasionally, there are not enough staff to provide students with the support they require. The timetabling requires students to leave teaching groups to attend therapy sessions. Those students with particular personal care needs leave lessons half an hour before

the lunch break, which means they miss significant parts of their lessons. Students do not welcome the close timetabling of the midday meal with the evening meal, which is at 16.30.

14. A wide range of enrichment activities is available in the evenings and at weekends. Students are actively encouraged to visit the local and regional community through regular shopping, leisure and sporting activities. For example, students go Christmas shopping, visit local pubs and restaurants as well as local sites of interest such as the Space Centre. The provision is further enhanced and enriched by the 'choices day' when students can extend their programme by studying, for example, history, digital photography, sensory cookery, wheelchair driving license or outdoor pursuits. Pastoral tutors, key workers and the enrichment team work co-operatively to support students to develop social and leisure skills. Although staff from across college acknowledge the importance of recording incidental learning outside formal classroom activities, the planned training programme has not yet been attended by all staff, and this aspect of learning is not always recorded.

15. The promotion of equality and diversity and the celebration of cultural diversity are actively pursued. Students are enthusiastic about the events within the one-day programme, where religion and beliefs, cultures and customs are described and demonstrated. Prior to the day, classroom activities within personal and social education were linked to activities in the day. The development of the 'moulded meals' project provides students who have eating and swallowing difficulties with the facility to enjoy meals and drinks on equal terms with their friends. For example, the thickening of a drink allows one student to join his friends at the bar without loss of dignity.

16. Support and guidance for students overall are good, some areas are outstanding. The team of specialist staff which includes: physiotherapists; speech and language therapists; augmentative and alternative technology technicians; wheelchair specialists; nurses and care tutors; placement officers and job search staff, plays a central role to enable students to engage in and benefit from the curriculum and from enrichment and leisure activities. The college's arrangements for safeguarding are satisfactory. The level of co-operation and mutual support within and between these disparate professional groups in order to meet the individual needs of students is outstanding. However, the college has been slow to provide support for students with dyslexia, screen magnification and equipment for students with arthritis. Individual care plans are detailed and are shared with students and reflect the care needs identified on the learner schedules agreed with the LSC.

17. Tutorial support is good for many students with tutors providing substantial personal support. However, personal tutorials in information technology (IT) are less effective. Where tutorials are effective, personal targets are regularly and systematically reviewed by pastoral tutors and support departments, and are shared with students. Transition planning is effective and central to preparing students for lives beyond the college. Strong support and encouragement from staff in the job club and through work placement significantly improves the employment prospects of the majority of RTU-funded students. The efforts of the local Connexions personal advisor allows students to be firm advocates about where they want to progress to, beyond their placement at Portland College.

Leadership and management

18. Leadership and management are good. The governors have a broad and distinctive set of skills and interests used well to hold the college to account for its outcomes and support its growth and development. The governors skilfully underscore the principal in setting a clear strategic direction for the work of the college. Leadership across the college is focused on driving improvement to meet the needs of students, which is well understood by staff. Operational systems have been set up to identify and meet those needs. Many of these systems are having a positive impact on outcomes for students.

19. All staff are able to contribute to the strategic and operational planning processes through the college's self-assessment. Departmental, operational and strategic plans are aligned and costed. Targets are set, and staff and departments are held accountable for their performance through regular programme reviews.

20. Self-evaluation is effective. The college has a good grasp of what it does well and less well. This understanding is based upon policies and procedures that are reviewed regularly. The formal observation of staff at work is a regular feature of college life. However, not all areas of the college use this information well to promote improvement. There is ineffective use of data and other quality assurance outcomes to identify and promote improvement. Whilst some performance data accurately reflects students' achievements, many areas of the college are not yet able to use this information to fully understand changes in performance over time. As a consequence, some targets for achievement are insufficiently rigorous.

21. Staff appraisal and professional development are linked well to college priorities and staff are encouraged and supported to gain appropriate qualifications. Staff are generally well deployed to meet the needs of students, although recent staff changes have put some staff under considerable pressure, especially in the learning and skills department, where some classes are too large. Overall, the college's timetable does not give all students the most appropriate access to all aspects of provision. For example, students miss parts of lessons to attend physiotherapy sessions, and some curriculum areas provide a formulaic, accreditation-driven and overly didactic approach to meeting the needs of students.

22. Through 'student voices' the views of students are sought and then used to bring about improvements. Regular opportunities are sought for external evaluation. Through the impact of a wide range of external partnerships, students grow in confidence and their experiences are enhanced. An outstanding example of the effectiveness of these partnerships is the new Information and Communication Technology Centre, due to be completed in 2006.

23. The college's policies are clear and cover all aspects of students' life. The policies relating to health and safety, student protection and to making complaints are well understood. Staff and volunteers are Criminal Records Bureau checked. The college is effective in its promotion of equality of opportunity and issues of diversity. The equality and diversity group has wide membership and is responsible for ensuring the college is responsive to the needs of all students and compliant with legislative requirements. Its work

is scrutinised by the governing body. The college's equality and diversity policy is frequently revised and takes into account the requirements of the Race Relations (amendment) Act 2000 and SENDA. The college applies this policy conscientiously and is beginning to assess its impact. It monitors achievements by ethnic group and staff recruitment by racial group. A detailed access audit has been completed and its recommendations acted upon.

24. Financial procedures are thorough and detailed. Both current and planned provision is well costed, and the college carefully measures the cost-benefits of its developments. The college provides good value for money.

Part C: Curriculum and occupational areas

Business studies

Overall provision in this area is **good (grade 2)**.

Strengths

- very good achievements
- good teaching and learning
- inclusive approach to individual students' programmes
- good support for students
- good team leadership.

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of quality assurance information.

Scope of provision

25. There are 24 full-time students aged over 19 studying business administration and related subjects. They are referred to the area by disability employment advisers and funded by the RTU. Students choose to study NVQ units in business administration and customer care at levels 1, 2 and 3, and commercial accounting packages. Students also study word and text processing, and computer software specialist awards. They are also able to study other subjects such as Spanish.

Achievement and standards

26. Achievement in business administration is good. Students pass significant numbers of individual qualifications in line with the intended outcomes of their programmes. For example, eight learners achieved 47 NVQ level 2 business administration units between them, and 10 learners achieved 83 NVQ level 3 units between them in 2003/04. There have been 50 passes in computer software specialist examinations at core and expert levels since October 2003. A large number of students progress into employment. RTU data show that 61% of students who completed college in 2004 progressed into jobs, which is high in comparison with similar providers. Students are employed in a wide variety of business administration-related work, such as accounts, payroll, reception, web design and general administrative duties, both locally and across the country. The area's well-established work placement initiative offers good employment experience for students, many of whom have been offered jobs as the result of a successful placement.

27. Students produce high-quality work of a good vocational standard throughout the area, and present accurate evidence of this in their portfolios. The area has a good 'live work' general office which provides students with a realistic working environment where they can acquire experience and practice in reception duties, stock control, retailing, document production and other business administration skills. Some of this work is for external customers, who value its quality; they give good feedback and repeat orders.

Quality of education and training

28. Teaching and learning are mostly good. Lessons are well planned and structured. Teachers focus on individual learning plans and they incorporate details of individual students' targets in their own lesson plans and weekly schemes of work. Effective tracking is in place to ensure that the progress of individual students is accurately monitored and recorded. Teachers recognise that students learn differently as individuals and they incorporate different learning strategies, activities, resources and materials into the planning and delivery of lessons. In a general office workshop session for example, the teacher provided some group activity and then managed individuals' learning in three separate training places. In a word-processing core session, students worked in pairs to create and use their own templates for defined business purposes. In an accounting session, students of mixed ability and experience were trading goods with each other and recording credits and debits on their individual computers. Students are engaged in their work, and enthusiastic about what they are doing. Teachers encourage students to recognise both the vocational development and career opportunities which may arise from their work. Students recognise this and comment on the confidence that it gives them when they are engaged in job searching. However, in a few group lessons, teachers present too much detailed information without fully checking the understanding of all students.

29. Teachers are well-qualified with good teaching experience and vocational qualifications. They have access to continuous professional development, and team members have received recent training in equality and diversity, adult protection, differentiation and specialist computer skills as well as teacher training. There is no established systematic programme in place to update teachers' business administration experience and skills. Teaching rooms are clean, bright and fit for purpose. Specialist vocational areas for reception, stock control and administrative duties provide a useful realistic learning environment. Access to IT is good, readily available and extensively used by students. Interactive whiteboards are in place and teachers encourage students to actively use these in lessons. Some assistive and adaptive technology is provided. For example, one student with restricted arm mobility is currently using a one-sided keyboard.

30. Assessment is satisfactory. Effective initial and baseline assessment procedures are in place to identify students' individual learning needs. Students have individual learning plans based upon the skills they already possess, their particular job aspirations, and the skills required by prospective employers. Students understand the assessment requirements of their programmes and are given regular feedback on their progress from their teachers. They know what they need to do in order to improve their work. Students meet with their tutors every six weeks to review their progress in detail, and action points are discussed and agreed.

Students are aware of the correct grievance procedures to take if they are unhappy with any assessment decisions. Internal verification arrangements involve staff sampling and discussing students' work every six weeks and portfolios are returned to teachers for further consideration. Internal verification procedures are currently being reviewed in line with college developments.

31. Learning programmes are designed to match individual learners' needs rather than to provide set accredited courses of study for all students. Business education is provided to meet learners' needs and aspirations as well as community and employer requirements. Students create their own portfolio of education and training with the guidance and advice of their teachers. It is modified and changed as the student progresses and their individual circumstances change. Students access a flexible programme they can start throughout the year which encourages personal development as well as promoting sound vocational practice. Students are able to benefit from carefully selected work placements, usually towards the later stages of their programmes. Students find this experience beneficial and some satisfied local employers have worked with students from the business studies area for many years

32. Students receive a wide range of good individual support on formal and informal levels. They have regular group and individual tutorials, and detailed six weekly reviews. Teachers give students support on personal, emotional, vocational and career matters, as well as helping organise access to specialist support and guidance such as telephone counselling and financial advice. A particular strength of the area is the way in which students who are entering the area after adverse personal experiences are welcomed by their fellow students. One student, observed in the first few days of her work taster week in college, said that the encouragement of teachers and students was exceptionally helpful and had already begun to give her the confidence to continue after many years living in isolation.

Leadership and management

33. Leadership and management are good. The business studies team is well led by the team leader and has a strong sense of purpose and direction. Teachers are enthusiastic and innovative, and encouraged to bring in new ideas. The team is committed to the central belief of putting the student at the heart of things and teachers have a clear commitment to providing an inclusive service for all learners. The curriculum is accessible to a wide range of people and there is satisfactory representation of students in terms of gender and age balance. Quality assurance arrangements are in place but insufficient use is made of quality assurance information. Statistical data on achievement and retention rates, for example, are not used efficiently to measure, monitor and set targets for improvement, as part of strategic planning. The teacher observation profile is not used to help improve teaching and learning for the team, and does not emphasise issues such as ineffective checking of understanding in some lessons.

Information and communication technology

Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**.

Strengths

- very good progression into employment
- good standards of work on computer-aided design and network courses
- good tracking of progress in workshops
- very good matching of the programme to the needs of industry.

Weaknesses

- ineffective use of individual learning plans on computer network courses
- insufficient specialist advice about adjustments to assist learning
- unsatisfactory implementation of the tutorial system
- insufficient use of data to improve practice.

Scope of provision

34. There are 90 RTU-funded students who study ICT, seven of these were on work-placements at the time of inspection. Some 9 % of students are female and 2 % are from minority ethnic groups. All students have physical disabilities, many recently acquired. The college offers a range of NVQs and other industry-standard qualifications in installing and supporting computers and computer networks at levels 2 and 3, and two-dimensional and three-dimensional design at levels 2 and 3. Most students undertake external work placements as part of their programme. They also work in the college's commercial draughting agency or in the college's computer department. All students have the opportunity to develop ICT skills as part of the core curriculum.

Achievement and standards

35. Students make good progress to employment with 60 % progressing to employment after leaving the college. Most students develop a good work ethic, and adopt a dress and behaviour code as would be found in a typical office. They are generally punctual for taught lessons, but are less careful to turn up on time for self-directed work in the workshops. Computer-aided design classes demonstrate levels of skills commensurate with commercial practice. Students work successfully on commercial commissions, producing two-dimensional and three-dimensional architectural plans and engineering drawings for customers. Networking students are able to troubleshoot networking problems. Achievement of qualifications is satisfactory and 70 % of students complete their intended

learning goals, and gain units of accreditation. However, a minority of students on networking programmes make slow progress. Retention and attendance rates are satisfactory.

Quality of education and training

36. All teaching and learning is satisfactory or better. The tracking and planning of workshop lessons is particularly good. Here, teachers use the management information system well to produce good, detailed individual lesson plans that are clearly related to short-term action plans. Good online resources enable students to follow their own learning pathways at their own speed. Most students make good or satisfactory progress. They develop good individual and online learning skills. In one lesson, students were able to use good online materials to teach themselves the basics of binary arithmetic. The computer workshops are supplemented with a traditional classroom lesson taught by technically competent teachers. In one lesson, the teacher went through the details of subnet mask addressing with two students who were struggling with this concept. After following the detailed explanation on the whiteboard, they were able to complete the exercises. However, in a minority of lessons, classroom management is less effective.

37. Although lesson planning is mostly effective, individual learning plans for students on computer and network support courses are poor, with few targets that are meaningful. The medium-term and long-term goals identified for most students are identical. One learner with no ICT experience had the same goals as a student with eight years technical support experience. Recording of target qualifications is inaccurate and individual learning plans are often over-ambitious in planning the intended learning outcomes.

38. Resources are satisfactory overall. Staff are mainly well-qualified in their subjects. However, following recent changes, external consultants have been brought in to help with technical training, as a few members of staff have yet to become fully trained. The computing rooms are clean, spacious, welcoming and well decorated with workstations that meet commercial expectations. The computer-aided design suite has industry standard equipment. Some rooms have interactive whiteboards or other screen projection equipment. Some rooms are poorly ventilated and too hot. A minority of rooms have hard vinyl floor and chairs with free-running casters which combine to be a potential hazard for those with restricted mobility. There is a good range of adapted equipment available, including specialist chairs, equipment to alter the height of tables, and specialist software and input devices.

39. Assessment is satisfactory. Initial assessment identifies students' skills, career aspirations, learning preferences and support needs well. Assessments of work are accurate and frequent, and teachers provide helpful and supportive feedback. Placement officers assess students' readiness for placements well and students are effective and self-reliant in their placements, many keeping diaries of progress. Assessment practices generally meet the requirements of external regulatory bodies. However, although internal verification is mainly satisfactory, some staff verify subjects for which they are not fully qualified.

40. The programmes offered meets the needs of industry well. They provide opportunities to gain qualifications that are well regarded by potential employers. The college is recognised as an academy for computer software qualifications. Internal and external placements provide good opportunities to gain valuable work experience and develop interpersonal skills in a real work environment. Staff monitor the progress of students on placements well. Placement officers visit to discuss the job role, and carry out risk assessments. They also visit all students during their placement. Students can phone for support if required. The computer-aided design 'live office' provides opportunities to do real work to commercial standards. The jobsearch programme is also effective, and students make good use of the job club.

41. General support for students is satisfactory. Staff provide good advice and guidance to prospective students. Induction is good, with clear explanations of the college and its conventions and rules. Students may attend taster sessions, or attend presentations by ex-students to confirm their choices. Students receive benefits advice to help in their decision-making about employment. However, the implementation of the tutorial system does not meet the needs of all students. Most reviews are not face-to-face. Tutor and student both complete a form showing their view of progress to date. This often produces good short-term action plans. However, some students are inhibited by the practice of having to request face-to-face reviews with their tutors. The use of individual learning plans in reviews and elsewhere is weak. Tutors pay insufficient attention to attendance and punctuality, jobsearch activities and personal development. Individual learning plans lack detail of support that is needed. Some tutors fail to follow the complaints procedure and do not record complaints made by students.

42. Specialist support for students is not always satisfactorily provided. Several learners with arthritis were not advised of the technology that might help them, and others waited an unacceptable length of time to receive support identified at their initial assessment. Students, placement providers and potential employers are not always advised on how support needs can be met, or how to access financial support to meet these needs.

Leadership and management

43. Curriculum leadership and management are satisfactory. Managers work hard to ensure that students receive training at an appropriately high level, following restructuring and recent staff changes. The self-assessment report is largely accurate and self-critical. Action has been taken to try to address the low proportion of female students and students from minority ethnic backgrounds, although this has had little impact as yet. Teaching resources are checked for discriminatory language. However, one member of staff displayed a lack of understanding of the appropriate use of language in relation to race. The use of data is underdeveloped and data are not used to set targets for improvement, as part of strategic planning. The information used for course reviews is accurate at a general level, but not sufficiently specific to provide information about success rates of specific courses over time. Weaknesses identified in course reviews are not always addressed. The results of lesson observations are not well used.

Independent living skills

Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**.

Strengths

- good teaching of practical skills
- good support for students
- good use of accommodation and equipment.

Weaknesses

- insufficient planning for individual needs in many lessons
- too little opportunity for challenging activities.

Scope of provision

44. Independent living skills form a significant element of the programme provided for the 132 students in the learning and skills department. There are five levels of programmes which relate broadly to level of cognitive ability, maturity and desired destination. Each programme includes taught lessons and community and enrichment activities. Physiotherapy, hydrotherapy and speech and language therapy are integral to the curriculum.

Achievement and standards

45. Achievement in independent living skills is satisfactory. Students gain in confidence and skill, increase their ability to operate independently, and take increasing responsibility for their own care, nutrition and recreation. However, the accreditation framework has only recently been introduced and it is too early to evaluate progress. Through the enrichment programme, sports teams and individuals are successful in reaching regional and national finals. To date, 40 students have achieved silver and bronze awards for the innovative wheelchair driving licence. Many students have gained substantial improvement in mobility, though this is not reported other than through confidential records. Throughout these programmes incidental learning is frequent and important but is not fully recognised. The volunteer work undertaken by students is recognised through the Millennium Awards.

Quality of education and training

46. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Over half of the lessons observed were good or better but a minority were unsatisfactory. Lessons are particularly effective where there is a substantial practical focus. Tutors and support staff make good use of residences and college accommodation to develop the students' practical skills. In one good lesson, three students who live in the flats were sensitively supported to make their breakfast. Several aids were explored to enable one resident to make and transport a hot drink safely to the table.

Students were guided verbally and encouraged to discuss their successes and shortfalls. Reinforcement activities encourage the discussion of nutrition and health and safety issues. In several lessons, literacy and numeracy skills were integrated. In a good laundry session, involving sorting clothes and loading machines, students were required to manage money to access the token system, recognise symbols, read instructions and then discuss the effects of using the wrong wash cycle on a range of items.

47. In the unsatisfactory lessons, individual learning needs were not met. All students were required to do the same task, using the same worksheet or handout in spite of differing levels of reading and writing ability. For some students there is lack of challenge and for others a lack of involvement. In one session, three young men with very short hair were required to discuss different hairstyles appropriate for different occasions and given magazines predominantly depicting female styles. In some lessons tutors failed to encourage students using communication aids to provide detailed responses and on other occasions the teaching and learning materials were not suitable for those with visual impairments.

48. Physical resources across the area are good. The residences are well used to teach and reinforce independent living skills, and the semi-independent flats are used in a structured way to provide further progressive opportunities. Teaching accommodation is of a high standard with suitable, equipped kitchen areas, well-equipped classrooms and effective use of the college and local environment to address everyday living needs. Recreational spaces such as the bar, youth centre, shop and dining room, provide natural settings for the practice and development of independent living and social skills. The physiotherapy department is very well equipped. The hydrotherapy pool has excellent up-to-date features and is well used for therapy as well as confidence and independence training purposes. Staff are generally experienced, well qualified or working towards suitable qualifications. Recently appointed staff need further training in the new accreditation framework. Learning support staff provide sensitive constructive support. There are some timetabling difficulties that lead to dual use of some rooms. Mobility training takes place in a suitably large space, which is a communal recreation area used by other students part of the way though the session. This causes disruption and distraction for both sets of students.

49. Initial and baseline assessment are good. They provide an accurate picture of the abilities and needs of each student, taking account of changes between first contact and entry. Detailed and informative assessment undertaken by the therapists and care team provide the structure for the provision offered to each student. The recent addition of a part-time occupational therapist has enhanced the assessment ability of the team. The reviews are multi-disciplinary and provide regular updates with changing targets and equipment where needed. Staff have insufficient understanding about setting individual targets in lessons, or breaking down the lesson objectives into smaller steps. Opportunities for students to discuss their progress and to evaluate their own work are hindered by a lack of specific targets which they can recognise.

50. The range of courses is appropriate, but the targets at different levels are not sufficiently differentiated or precise and it is not always possible to demonstrate progress significantly from one level to another. The current focus on a portfolio of evidence to meet

the needs of accreditation results in the use of inappropriate activities and an over-emphasis on written materials and photographs. There is insufficient use of realistic and natural environments and the activities are not sufficiently challenging for students. The curriculum does not pay sufficient attention to the possibility of developing independent living skills in other contexts. For example, the college has a café and shop open to the public which is not used by students as part of the development of their skills. Many students have the ability to engage in these types of activities or projects. However, the enrichment programme augments the opportunities to extend experiences and the multi-disciplinary approach of education, therapy and mobility training supplements the curriculum and provides a supportive and active approach to developing independence.

51. Support for students is good. Physical support is offered through physiotherapy, speech therapy and communication aids, mobility support and hydrotherapy. Individual needs are well identified and suitable support is offered throughout their time at the college. Personal care is carefully matched to individuals and decreases as independent ability increases. Students in emotional distress are carefully supported. Towards the end of the programme, staff make thorough assessment of students' transition requirements and links with the home network. Specific activities prepare students for the environment into which they will move. The team is developing pictorial resources to enhance involvement and consent for those with complex communication needs. The tutorial, review and transition provision is good. It supports individuals with all aspects of their college life and prepares them for forthcoming reviews and case conferences.

Leadership and management

52. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Four new managers, who have taken up post within the last year, have had an immediate impact upon the curriculum. They have a clear joint focus and direction, know where they wish the provision to be and have shared strategies for development. They have a clear sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the current situation, making the self-assessment report an accurate and honest reflection of the programme area. However, a large number of staff have recently been appointed and not all quality assurance arrangements have impacted fully on the quality of the teaching programme. The electronic database that is used to plan and record progress is in the early stages of development and not all staff are able to use it effectively for strategic planning. Staff are very much aware of the implication of SENDA and provide good practical support for individual students. However, a minority of staff require more development in lesson planning to provide individual tasks suitable for students.

Literacy, numeracy and communications

Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**.

Strengths

- good development of communication skills
- good additional literacy and numeracy support for RTU-funded students
- good use of working partnerships to improve provision.

Weaknesses

- insufficient resources to meet students' needs
- poor planning and recording of learning.

Scope of provision

53. The majority of students have some form of literacy, numeracy and communications provision. RTU-funded students can attend the Skills for Life centre for one hour each week of literacy and one hour of numeracy support. All learning and skills students have literacy, numeracy and communications embedded into their daily programme as well as in discrete lessons. Students are able to take qualifications from entry level to level 2.

Achievement and standards

54. The introduction of accreditation for literacy, numeracy and communications is very recent. Pass rates for the first few months are very positive. For example, the English Speaking Board Certificate of Achievement had a 100 % pass rate. However it is too soon to measure trends over time or the impact of the new accreditation on the students.

55. There is good development of communication skills for the LSC-funded students. The alternative and augmentative communication support staff work on a one-to-one basis with students. They help students to develop their communication by adding relevant vocabulary to their voice output communication aids and by familiarising students with their devices to enable them to become more independent communicators. Staff also work alongside students in classrooms to further the development of these skills and to check that students are using their newly acquired vocabulary in a variety of settings.

56. The speech and language therapy staff provide discrete lessons for students on a one-to-one basis, as well as classroom support. There is good use of speech and language therapy to assist students' self-advocacy. Staff work with those students who have communication problems before they have a case review to help them to make independent choices about their futures. For example, students are encouraged to use a talking mat with

relevant symbols or photographs on it which allows them to indicate their preferences to staff who are involved in planning for their transition.

Quality of education and training

57. Teaching is satisfactory overall, and a few lessons were very good. In the better lessons, staff link situations relevant to students' lives to their teaching and use this as a point from which to develop their knowledge and experience. For example, in an entry level communication lesson, students were presented with photographs of British wild animals and encouraged to talk about them. The lesson was brought to life for the students when the learning support assistant showed them a live hedgehog which he had found the evening before and which they then gave a name to after a class vote. In the less effective lessons, students were asked to complete tasks which had little relevance to their lives and which they found difficult to understand.

58. Adult students have the opportunity to receive additional support to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. The support provided is good. A significant number (over 50 %) of the students have chosen to take this option and work either individually or in small groups on topics that have relevance to their future lives. Students value the help they receive from the staff at the centre and are able to talk about the skills they have gained. For example, one student who was on a work placement at the college shop was able to write a well-structured report relating to this after a lesson on report writing in the Skills for Life centre. Students make good progress with their literacy and numeracy skills, and in some cases they have progressed from level 1 to level 2.

59. The resources to meet the needs of students with visual impairment and dyslexia are insufficient. For example, there are no on-screen magnification programmes, and not all worksheets and related exercises are accessible to all of the students, either due to problems with manual dexterity or to the size of the print. Accommodation is not always suitable. Some group work take place in shared classrooms which are cramped and noisy. Several students were observed who were very passive in large group situations and who then became much more actively involved in lessons when the group size was smaller and therefore more appropriate to their needs. Occasionally, there is insufficient cover for staff absences.

60. Planning and recording of learning is poor, particularly in lessons where literacy and numeracy are integrated. The majority of the students' objectives are lifted from the electronic system and are termed in the language of course requirements rather than in language that can be easily understood by the students themselves. The objectives give insufficient detail to other members of staff as to how best to develop students' literacy, numeracy and communication skills. They frequently contain little specific relevance to particular lessons. There is little evidence of objectives evolving over time. It is difficult to measure how well the LSC-funded students have done, particularly in those courses where the content is based on the requirements of the curriculum rather individual needs of students.

61. The college is involved in many productive working partnerships. The Skills for Life senior tutor is working with a local general FE college to develop materials for students

at pre-entry level. She also has working links with two universities, trialling IT-based resources and improving initial assessment for entry and pre-entry level students. The college is a member of a national partnership which has produced materials to enable students to improve their skills through the use of IT. For example, the development and production of an assistive technology device which develops students' understanding of cause and effect and reinforces the concept of reading text from left to right. There are many other similar products in development.

62. The speech and language therapy staff are employed by the local health authority and keep up to date with current developments. They use a model for language therapy developed locally to improve their students' independent communication. They have also introduced workshops for parents about student travel days. These give information and advice on how to effectively further students' communication skills.

Leadership and management

63. Leadership and management are satisfactory. The middle management of the area is good. A recently appointed member of staff has put a significant number of strategic initiatives in place which are beginning to have a positive effect on the learners; for example, a comprehensive programme of staff development to raise awareness of literacy, numeracy and communication needs throughout the college. However, cross-college issues impinge on the student experience for a minority of the students whose needs are not being met. For example, some lessons are interrupted by students having to leave early or arrive late due to attending physiotherapy session. There are new quality assurance systems in place and there is some indication of improvement. However, it is too soon to form a judgement as to their impact. Equal opportunities are satisfactory overall but appropriate adjustments have not been made for some students. Very good use is made of self-advocacy for students to give them a choice in deciding their futures and to increase their confidence and self-esteem. The judgements in the self-assessment report are mainly accurate.

Pre-vocational studies

Overall provision in this area is **satisfactory (grade 3)**.

Strengths

- good acquisition of skills, knowledge and understanding in practical areas
- good teaching and learning in areas related to practical skills
- very good tutorial support
- good, critical and evaluative self-assessment.

Weaknesses

- imprecise lesson aims and learning objectives in a significant minority of lessons
- inadequate recording of the small steps in students' progress
- ineffective quality assurance of teaching and learning.

Scope of provision

64. All 132 students in the learning and skills department have access to pre-vocational programmes. These include community access, social skills, vocational activities and work experience. The more able students, who have a realistic prospect of employment, tend to have a higher proportion of vocational elements in their timetables. For other students, the emphasis is on acquiring personal and social skills. Students also have access to the facilities of the employment department, and can benefit from preparation for employment, transition advice, work placement and job club. In 2003-04, the department introduced an improved range of awards which are supplemented by a further range of qualifications to meet the individual needs of students.

Achievement and standards

65. Students achieve well in developing their skills, knowledge and understanding, especially in areas related to practical skills. They have a good knowledge of health, safety and hygiene in work situations. Students know the importance of thinking about how they should approach tasks and will often refer to specific advice they have received. They make good progress in developing better hand control and accuracy when using small tools and implements. Students have a good understanding of the main facilities available to them at college and in the community. Many are able to locate shops, cafes and the library in the local town, and move between them independently. These good achievements are reflected in the high rate of successful completion of the accredited units students take.

66. Most students make good progress on their courses. A few of the most able only make satisfactory progress, because they often repeat skills already learnt, and they have not yet moved on to more advanced learning.

Quality of education and training

67. Teaching is good in lessons directly related to practical skills. In these lessons, learning activities are thoroughly planned and there is a clear structure to all aspects of the lesson. Teachers provide good introductions, which revisit previous learning and provide students with a good sense of the next stage. Classroom discussions are well managed; all students are encouraged to make contributions. Students are enthusiastic about demonstrating their understanding and offer opinions about the topics for discussions. Teachers are skilled in their questioning and recognise that many students need to be given time to consider their answers or to prepare their communication aids to respond. Staff have a good understanding of basic vocational and life skills, which they explain well. There is increasing co-operation with the specialist teachers in the employment department, who are able to provide more detailed demonstrations of vocational skills.

68. In less effective lessons, which are mainly those less closely related to practical activities, the aims and learning objectives are too general and do not describe the specific skills that students are expected to learn. The broad aims described in the scheme of work are not broken down into sufficiently detailed stages of learning. Although activities are broadly suitable for the abilities of students, there is too little planning for the individual needs of students.

69. There are sufficient staff to meet the needs of students, although many are relatively new to the college. Students are very well supported by tutors, who help them to resolve any difficulties and offer advice about suitable options. Students feel there is always someone to turn to when they need help. Most accommodation is of a high quality, with rooms which are well equipped. Initial assessment is thorough and enables the college to place students at the correct level of learning. Recording of students' progress towards the completion of accredited modules is reliable, but additional areas of progress are often not recorded. Written information about the students is bland and generalised, despite the good discussions which take place at review meetings.

70. The range of courses has been substantially improved since 2003 and now provides a combination of core programmes and options for most students. A minority of students are working at a lower level than they are capable of, because of a gap in provision between the two main courses. The college is beginning to rectify this by considering additional awards, tailored to the specific needs of these students. The emphasis on awards as the basis of provision does not encourage more creative approaches to the curriculum.

Leadership and management

71. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Managers have established a clear strategy for further development, which is understood and shared by staff. Future actions are

based on a good process of self-assessment, to which all staff have contributed. The structure of regular meetings and reviews helps to develop a sense of common purpose. The self-assessment report for the area is critical and evaluative. Managers recognise that they are only part of the way through a process of improvement. The liaison between the director of studies and the programme team leaders is good. There are also good links with the employment department, which are leading to greater flexibility in the curriculum. Staff appraisal is well linked to professional development. Staff have access to suitable training opportunities. A system for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning has been introduced, but it has only resulted in very broad targets for improvement. More precise guidance, which would be of particular benefit to the less experienced teachers, has yet to be developed. The strong commitment to equal opportunities for all students is driving many of the improvements which are being put in place. There is a determination to create a better range of pre-vocational opportunities, which are suitable for each individual student, and take their varied needs into account.

Notes