

Blackburn College

Inspection report

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Blackburn College is a large general further education (GFE) college situated in the centre of Blackburn. Blackburn College aims to be a centre of excellence for demand led education, to be the provider of choice for employers and to work with learners and stakeholders to enhance employability and social cohesion.
2. Blackburn with Darwen is a multicultural borough. Its population is over 140,000 with a minority ethnic population of 23%. The borough has high levels of deprivation and unemployment is high. At the time of the inspection, the college received additional funding from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for 57% of full-time 16 to 18 year olds and 63% of adult learners, who are categorised as being disadvantaged. Within a mile of the college, there is a sixth form college and three schools with sixth forms.
3. In 2006, 51.1% of year 11 school leavers in the borough obtained five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grades A* to C, which was much lower than the national average of 59.2%. In Blackburn 11.5 % of young people and 12.6% of those in Darwen are not in education, employment or training and a further 9% of young people are in jobs without training.
4. The college has over 11,000 students, the majority of whom are adults. Around 4,000 learners are aged 16 to 18. Some 29% of 16 to 18 year olds and 19% of adult learners are from a minority ethnic background. Most 16 to 18 students come from Blackburn and Darwen, while equal numbers of adult learners come from Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen. Almost 900 students have a learning difficulty and/ or disability in 2006/07.
5. The college has provision in all 15 sector subject areas there is very little landbased provision and very few students on courses in retailing, customer service and transportation. The curriculum includes courses at all levels from pre-entry to degree and postgraduate degree. The college has four Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in childhood studies, digital communications technology, textiles and fashion, and school support staff.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Capacity to improve	Outstanding: Grade 1
Achievement and standards	Outstanding: Grade 1
Quality of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Leadership and management	Outstanding: Grade 1
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Outstanding: Contributory Grade 1</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

6. Achievement and standards are outstanding. Overall success, retention and achievement rates increased rapidly over the last three years. Success rates including those of most work-based learners are high. GCE A level students make outstanding progress. Success rates of key skills are significantly above the national average. Success rates of advanced apprentices are improving. Learners' attendance has improved and retention is good. Progression rates are very good and continue to increase. The standard of learners work is good; those on vocational courses develop good workplace skills.
7. The overall quality of provision is outstanding. Teaching and learning are outstanding. A range of highly successful actions has significantly improved the quality of teaching and learning. Lessons are well planned and matched to the needs of individual learners. Highly effective learning support assistants provide good support for learners. Much assessment feedback is detailed, very effective and developmental; however, some lack sufficient detail to help learners improve.
8. The college's provision for meeting the needs and interests of learners, employers and the community is outstanding. Students benefit from a wide range of courses. The college's approach to social inclusion is outstanding. Effective partnerships with external agencies have removed barriers to education and widened participation. Employer engagement is outstanding. Varied enrichment activities enable students from diverse backgrounds and cultures to enhance their personal development.
9. The college's provision for the advice, guidance and support for learners is outstanding. Students make informed choices about their courses. Induction is good and transition from school to college well supported. There is prompt implementation of additional learning support and regular monitoring ensures it meets changing needs. The college seeks students' opinions innovatively and uses their views well to make changes. Teachers monitor student progress effectively, but some target setting does not make expectations of progress clear. A wide range of activities supports the development and promotion of the five Every Child Matters themes.
10. Leadership and management are outstanding, and provide very strong strategic direction and management for the college. Governors and managers at all levels have supported a consistent drive for the high standards that have now been achieved. Curriculum management is outstanding and the management of work-based learning is good. Service areas provide excellent support. Management information is clear, accessible and timely. Quality assurance arrangements are effective. Close attention is given to the views of students and staff. Governors are highly experienced and well informed. Arrangements to eliminate discrimination and promote

equality of opportunity are outstanding. Accommodation is good overall, but the college continues to improve its estate. Financial management is outstanding. The college delivers outstanding value for money.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: Grade 1

11. The college's capacity to improve is outstanding. The self-assessment report is accurate; the college has an accurate view of its areas for improvement. Arrangements to recruit and support students, and challenge them to make good progress are effective. Learner achievement data is accurate and accessible. Quality improvement and development planning are clearly focused and effective. Under-performing courses receive close attention. The college considers and acts on the views of stakeholders. Staff receive wide-ranging professional development focused on achieving government priorities, meeting local area needs and improving teaching and learning. The college has an impressive recent history of improving learners' achievements. Governors monitor college academic performance carefully.

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

12. The college has made outstanding progress in addressing the issues raised at the last inspection. Success rates at all levels have improved, particularly for adult learners and apprentices. Students' achievement of key skills is now above the national average. Value added measurements show that the college is among the top 5% of all LSC funded providers by this measure. The college has invested in new buildings and has significantly improved the quality of learning resources. Teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) well to enhance learning.

Key strengths

- strong, supportive and empowering leadership and management
- rigorous monitoring of performance and progress
- improved and now high success rates
- outstanding progress of GCE A level students
- very good teaching which challenges and meets learners needs
- highly effective strategies to promote inclusion and widen participation
- very productive external collaboration, partnerships and employer engagement
- outstanding support for students
- very successful arrangements to listen to and act on student views
- robust and well informed governance.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- the unsatisfactory accommodation in some areas.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Outstanding: Grade 1

13. Achievement and standards are outstanding. Overall success, retention and achievement rates increased rapidly over the last three years. Success rates are high and exceed the national averages for similar colleges for all key indicators. Retention rates have also increased.
14. GCE A level students make outstanding progress. Value added measurements show that the college is among the top 5% of all LSC funded providers by this measure.
15. The college analyses success rates by gender and ethnicity. Women outperform men on long courses but the success rates of male learners have increased. Adult males outperform women on short courses. Indian and Pakistani learners continue to do well. The lowest performing group is white young people; the college has identified the success rate of this group as an area for improvement.
16. There has been an upward trend in success rates of key skills. Success rates are significantly above the national average but are still low. Success rates for apprentices and other learners on work-based learning courses such as Train to Gain and Entry to Employment (E2E) are high. Action is being taken to improve the success rates of advanced apprentices.
17. Attendance of learners on courses increased significantly over the last three years. In the current year, attendance has increased to 91%. Retention is good and in 2007, 98% of learners who started their courses remained on courses in November. The college monitors the number of learners who progress to higher level courses. Overall progression rates are very good and continue to increase.
18. The standard of learners' work is good and many produce work of a very high standard. Apprentices and those on vocational courses develop good workplace skills. Learners are well motivated and enjoy their courses. The college celebrates learners' achievement widely, which motivates learners to succeed. Many learners contribute to the college and the community through voluntary work, part-time employment and raising money for charity.

Quality of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

19. The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding. A range of highly successful actions has significantly improved the quality of teaching and learning. Staff are empowered to make improvements that benefit learners and their morale is high. Managers use the results of the rigorous annual observations of teaching and learning in staff appraisal. They produce and monitor action plans to support those lecturers whose sessions are

satisfactory or less to improve. The results of teaching and learning observations are analysed and used to produce a responsive programme of staff development. Lecturers also benefit from informal observations, sharing best practice and the support of teaching and learning advisers and subject coaches.

20. Inspectors agreed with the college that teaching is very good, provides challenge and meets learners' needs. Lecturers are well qualified, experienced and have current subject knowledge; many use information and learning technology (ILT) well to enhance learning. Most schemes of work and lessons are well planned, detailed and matched to the needs of individual learners. Learners are enthusiastic and work hard. They have easy access to good resources.
21. Highly effective learning support assistants work closely with lecturers and provide good support for learners. Key and basic skills are an integral part of all programmes.
22. The college has robust assessment and verification processes which effectively supports learners' development. Assessment is timely, well planned and organised. Much of the feedback is detailed, very effective and developmental; however, some lack the required guidance to help learners improve.
23. Parents are very well engaged in their children's attendance and progress. The college operates a successful programme of well attended parent evenings supported by written and telephone contact with parents.
24. The college's provision for meeting the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. Students choose from a wide range of programmes at different levels, including work-based learning and provision for adults. Year 10 and 11 pupils sample subjects through short tasters or enrol on courses from entry level to level 2. Forty vulnerable school pupils successfully infill post-sixteen programmes and experience college life. The college's approach to social inclusion is outstanding. Effective partnerships with external agencies have removed barriers to education and widened participation. There are many students from underrepresented groups.
25. The college works successfully with an extensive range of local schools, training providers and other key partners who reflect the cultural, ethnic and social environment of Blackburn. The principal chairs the strategic partnership group responsible for developing coherent learning opportunities for 14 to 19 year olds in the borough. This collaboration enables and encourages effective curriculum development, student support and recruitment. Students benefit significantly from these arrangements.
26. Inspectors agree with the self-assessment report that employer engagement is outstanding. The college works successfully with a wide range of employers. There is a proactive approach to meeting the needs of employers

- including bespoke courses well supported by the four CoVEs. Parents and employers are highly satisfied with the choice and quality of provision and the support available. Varied enrichment activities enable students from diverse backgrounds and cultures to enhance their personal development. Some employers offer particularly good enrichment opportunities.
27. As at the previous inspection the college's provision for the advice, guidance and support for learners is outstanding. Impartial advice, guidance and attractive college information enables students to make informed choices about their courses. Induction is good; students are welcomed and well informed. Transition from 14 to 16 schools to college is well supported, particularly for students with additional needs and looked after children. Parents of new students receive helpful information on student finance, personal tutorship and support. Basic skills initial and diagnostic assessment of all students, including work-based learners accurately identifies support needs. There is prompt implementation of additional learning support and regular monitoring ensures it meets changing needs. There is full integration into the mainstream curriculum of students with complex learning difficulties. They receive very good specialist support which promotes and develops independent learning skills. The college seeks students' opinions innovatively and uses their views well to make changes.
28. Subject teachers assess student progress effectively. In tutorials personal learning plans are used well to record improvements and monitor progress. It is particularly effective in work-based learning. Some target setting does not make expectations of progress clear. Inspectors agree with the college that there is highly effective development of the five themes of Every Child Matters through activities such as anti-bullying week. There are good work placement opportunities and effective advice to help students apply to higher education or employment.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: Grade 1

Contributory grades:

Equality of opportunity

Outstanding: Grade 1

29. Leadership and management are outstanding. The college has achieved its challenging vision of "working as a team to be outstanding". The principal, senior managers and governors provide very strong strategic direction and management for the college, and delegate responsibility and authority appropriately. Staff at all levels feel empowered and trusted to do their jobs well and they respond admirably to the challenges they face. Service areas provide excellent support to curriculum centres. The college is highly responsive to the needs of its stakeholders and meets their needs well. Financial management is outstanding. The college delivers outstanding value for money.

30. The college responds well to government priorities and local needs. Managers review the vision and mission annually. Strategic objectives are clear, appropriate and understood by staff. College development planning is systematic and effective. Governors and managers regularly monitor the college's progress and performance. The college meets its clear and challenging targets. Success rates and work-based learning achievements have risen rapidly in the three years to 2006/07 and are now high. GCE A level students make outstanding progress.
31. Curriculum centre managers carry a high degree of authority and discharge their responsibilities well. Curriculum management is outstanding and the management of work-based learning is good. Management arrangements are clear and effective in ensuring the centres respond appropriately to college priorities. Management information is clear, accessible and timely and focused on key targets. Quality assurance arrangements are effective. They are clearly documented and understood by staff. They give strong attention to correcting underperformance and are successful in ensuring improvements take place. Close attention is given to the views of students and staff. The self-assessment report is accurate, if a little long. The college effectively shares good practice between centres.
32. Governors are highly experienced and well informed. They contribute well to the formation of policy and decisions about the college's strategic direction and monitor college performance, both academic and financial, carefully. They provide suitable challenge and monitor areas of underperformance closely.
33. Arrangements to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity are outstanding. Their management and promotion are high priority. Policies and procedures are clear. Data is analysed thoroughly by gender, ethnicity and age. Appropriate targets are set and action taken to improve areas of underperformance. The college complies with the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 and has appropriate arrangements for safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults including a central register of the checks undertaken on staff.
34. Accommodation is good overall. The accommodation strategy is ambitious and well devised. New buildings, completed on time and to budget, are innovatory in their attention to environmental sustainability and provide excellent learning environments. Some teaching takes place in buildings that are in need of renovation. Plans are well advanced to remedy this. Staff are appropriately qualified. Staff induction and appraisal are good. Professional development meets the strategic needs of the college and the needs of the individual and provides good support for quality improvement. There are effective arrangements to disseminate good practice. Learning resources overall are at least satisfactory. Some resources, for example, in specialist information technology and digital media are outstanding.

Learners' achievements

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
1 Long	04/05	2314	61	62	-1	3206	40	61	-21
	05/06	2027	72	68	4	2052	59	67	-8
	06/07	1570	79			1619	75		
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	84	56	64	-8	1	0	-	
	05/06	37	76	70	6	1	100	-	
	06/07								
NVQs	04/05	203	59	66	-7	348	65	71	-6
	05/06	179	69	70	-1	299	68	72	-4
	06/07	88	77	70	7	216	80	72	8
Other	04/05	2027	61	61	0	2857	37	61	-24
	05/06	1811	72	67	5	1752	58	67	-9
	06/07	1482	79	67	12	1403	74	67	7

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
2 Long	04/05	2366	63	61	2	2954	45	60	-15
	05/06	1623	67	65	2	2501	58	66	-8
	06/07	1659	75			2840	75		
GCSEs	04/05	613	69	66	3	307	62	64	-2
	05/06	444	69	69	0	221	76	67	9
	06/07	444	79	69	10	198	69	67	2
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	36	58	67	-9	1	100	65	35
	05/06	39	74	66	8	4	75	65	10
	06/07								
NVQs	04/05	198	65	56	9	415	57	62	-5
	05/06	176	65	64	1	382	67	69	-2
	06/07	163	70	64	6	398	82	69	13
Other	04/05	1519	61	59	2	2230	41	58	-17
	05/06	964	67	63	4	1894	54	65	-11
	06/07	1051	74	63	11	2244	74	65	9

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
3 Long	04/05	2537	69	66	3	1944	42	57	-15
	05/06	2102	69	68	1	1398	60	62	-2
	06/07	1784	77			1213	73		
A/A2 Levels	04/05	656	91	85	6	48	85	74	11
	05/06	377	89	86	3	17	100	74	26
	06/07	311	90	86	4	43	84	74	10
AS Levels	04/05	944	68	64	4	37	76	53	23
	05/06	873	65	64	1	40	88	57	31
	06/07	683	74	64	10	43	84	57	27
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	266	45	60	-15	21	33	52	-19
	05/06	103	68	68	0	8	63	54	9
	06/07								
NVQs	04/05	51	80	54	26	544	43	55	-12
	05/06	71	75	66	9	355	59	65	-6
	06/07	59	76	66	10	393	87	65	22
Other	04/05	620	57	57	0	1281	39	57	-18
	05/06	676	62	62	0	933	57	62	-5
	06/07	731	73	62	11	735	65	62	3

Table 4

Success rates on work-based learning programmes managed by the college 2005 to 2007

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners *	College NVQ rate **	National NVQ rate **	College framework rate **	National framework rate **
Advanced Apprenticeships	04/05	overall	61	44	48	13	34
		timely	69	36	31	9	21
	05/06	overall	92	55	54	41	44
		timely	106	27	34	21	27
	06/07	overall	76	62		41	56
		timely	86	59		35	35
Apprenticeships	04/05	overall	137	69	50	61	38
		timely	168	55	29	49	22
	05/06	overall	157	78	58	73	53
		timely	177	54	38	50	33
	06/07	overall	188	76		75	60
		timely	133	69		64	42
Adult training (long courses) ***	04/05	overall	81	74			
		timely		74			
	05/06	overall	140	72			
		timely		72			
	06/07	overall	63	75			
		timely		75			

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned

** College and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'

*** Adult training (long courses) includes 'Train to Gain' provision, but not 'Skills for Life'

Table 5

Outcomes on Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes managed by the college 2005 to 2007

Year	Number of starts in year	Achieved Objectives *	Progression **	Still in learning
04/05	89	42%	55%	0
05/06	62	43%	63%	0
06/07	50	58%	58%	8

* These are key objectives identified for each learner following an E2E programme

** Progression is measured in terms learners' movement to further education, education and employment, during or at the end of their training period

* These are key objectives identified for each learner following a JC+ programme