

Ruskin College

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Contents

Background information	3
Inspection judgements	3
Scope of the inspection.....	3
Description of the provider.....	4
Summary of grades awarded	5
Overall judgement.....	6
Effectiveness of provision	6
Capacity to improve	6
Key strengths	7
Key areas for improvement.....	7
Main findings	8
Achievement and standards	8
Quality of provision.....	8
Leadership and management	9
Equality of opportunity	9
What learners like	11
What learners think could improve.....	11
Sector subject area	12
Social sciences.....	12

Background information

Inspection judgements

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.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

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

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Social sciences

Description of the provider

1. Ruskin College (the college) is a small adult residential college in Oxford. The college is one of 10 specialist designated institutions in England and is funded by Thames Valley Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The college mission is to provide educational opportunities to adults who are excluded and disadvantaged, and to transform the individuals concerned along with the communities, groups and societies from which they come. The college has a long history of contributing to lifelong learning, widening participation and social justice. It has strong historical links with the labour and trade union movement, the local community and networks further a field.
2. The college is based on two sites, three miles apart. Walton Street, close to the city centre and Ruskin Hall, Headington, on the outskirts of the city. Both sites have teaching and residential facilities. The main administration centre and the college library are located at Walton Street. The college has strong links with Oxford University and learners have access to a range of facilities at the university, including the Bodleian Library.
3. The college offers a range of programmes from levels 1 to 5. The certificate in higher education course is validated by the Open University Validation Service at Level 4 and funded by the LSC. Residential short course provision is offered throughout the year and the college also has some literacy and numeracy provision. Most courses are in the further education sector. However, the college has substantial higher education programmes.
4. The local economy in Oxfordshire is varied; economically the county is prosperous and unemployment is below the national average. However, some areas in the south and east of the city have unemployment levels of around 4%. One of Oxford's 24 wards falls within the worst 10% in England in terms of indices of deprivation. According to the 2001 census, the proportion of people in Oxford from minority ethnic backgrounds is 12.9%, compared with 9.1% for England as a whole. The college as a whole has 17% of its learners from minority ethnic communities.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

Sector subject area

Social sciences	Good: Grade 2
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

5. The overall effectiveness of the provision is good. Achievement and standards, the quality of provision, leadership and management, equality of opportunity and social inclusion are good. Provision in social science including community learning is also good.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

6. Ruskin College has good capacity to improve. Success rates on most courses have improved and are good. Success rates on trade union short courses are particularly high while most short courses' success rates have improved and are good. Success rates on the short course provision called the Ruskin Learning Project have improved since the previous inspection and are satisfactory. Since the previous inspection the college has improved aspects of equality of opportunity.
7. Effectiveness of steps taken since the previous inspection are satisfactory. The college has made good progress in improving weaknesses identified in the 2003 report by the time of reinspection in 2004. Since then it has effectively consolidated and advanced in many of those areas, such as management and leadership of the college. However, it has not maintained a key strength in its observation of teaching and learning system which was identified at the reinspection.
8. The college self-assessment process is good. The areas for improvement and plans for addressing areas that the college identified are appropriate. Self-assessment is suitably inclusive. Consultation with learners is particularly extensive. Staff involvement is good throughout the process. Governors and some external partners have appropriate involvement. The report uses equality and diversity data well. The use of data on learner retention is satisfactory. The process is regular and timely. Judgements in the report are self-critical and mostly supported by detailed evidence. However, the evidence from the observations of teaching and learning system is insufficient. Very few tutors were observed last year and the college does not have a sufficiently thorough overview of the quality of teaching and learning. The college is in the process of revising its system for observing teaching and learning.
9. Grades in the self-assessment report matched those awarded by inspectors. The review of college activity and judgements against the common inspection framework are thorough. Most strengths and areas for improvement in the report have an impact on learners.

Key strengths

- High pass rates and standards of work
- Good teaching and learning
- Exemplary financial, personal and academic support
- Exceptionally good partnerships to reach disadvantaged and new learners
- Very effective strategies for engaging learners with low aspirations and poor prior attainment
- Strong leadership and clear direction

Key areas for improvement

- Amount of initial assessment for literacy on trade union studies and short day courses
- Use of data to critically analyse aspects of provision
- Arrangements for quality assurance

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

10. Achievement and standards are good. Standards of work are good with many learners making significant achievements particularly on the certificate in higher courses. Learners are confident and able to successfully research projects independently. Learners thoroughly enjoy their work and take pride in their achievements. Learners on trade union courses gain confidence and analytical skills and apply their knowledge to support work colleagues effectively. Learners on short courses including non residential provision are developing a good understanding of some difficult concepts. They take part in lively debate in lessons.
11. Pass rates are high on most courses. Success rates have improved significantly on the certificate in higher education over the last two years. However, retention on this course has declined over the last three years to 74% in 2006-07. Success rates are high on most short course provision. However, on the weekly short course called the Ruskin Learning Project success rates, while improving, are satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

12. The quality of provision is good. Teaching and learning is mostly good. Most tutors plan activities and tasks well. Tutors quickly gain their learners' confidence by using lively interaction and creating good rapport. Tutors break down barriers well and set out learners' responsibilities clearly at the start of courses. Tutors are adept at handling a range of learners' abilities within most lessons. Tutors often adopt a helpful and inquiring approach by asking learners if they have any questions. However, sometimes tutors' questions are too general and they do not check that all learners understand sufficiently well. The college recognises this issue. Comprehensive testing and diagnosis of learners' levels of literacy and subsequent support takes place at the start of the certificate in higher education course. However, no form of diagnosis for these aspects is carried out when learners start some other courses.
13. Provision to meet the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. The college has a range of very successful partnerships with statutory and voluntary bodies who value the college's innovative and creative approach. The college ensures that, where possible, its programmes support the infrastructure of partner organisations, for example by training other key workers. The college carefully plans collaborative provision and avoids competition with other providers wherever possible. Curriculum planning ensures that there are clear progression routes at, through, and from all levels. Tutors on short course provision provide learners with information about other courses run by Ruskin, and learners are effectively encouraged to become independent lifelong learners. Tutors ensure learners understand that further courses are accessible to them. However, in a few off-site trade union courses, tutors do not sufficiently promote Ruskin College courses or its values.
14. Support and guidance for learners is outstanding. The college provides exemplary financial, personal and academic support to break down barriers to learning. A team of staff with extensive expertise and experience provide learners with skilful one-to-one

additional support. Many learners are resident at the college and are helped to settle in effectively. They are supported well on the courses and to build their confidence quickly and create good social networks. Support for learners with dyslexia is very good. Academic tutorials are available on most courses and provide learners with very effective support individually or in small groups.

15. The quality of information, advice and guidance is good. The college has recently improved the arrangements for recruiting learners onto the certificate in higher education programme by using a short course as preparation for study. Learners are advised to study a short course and benefit from a taster of the subject first if the interview panel think it is appropriate. The college has also introduced more specific pathways on this course to extend the type of provision to suit a wider range of learners' needs. Induction is appropriate and particularly good for longer courses with interesting activities and clear information. Since the previous inspection the college has improved the speed at which financial support for learners is processed.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

16. Leadership and management is good. The principal provides clear direction, with good support from governors and senior managers. The college's overall development strategy is sound. The college has ambitious accommodation plans. Academic middle management posts introduced over the last two years have significantly strengthened the college's decision-making. Curriculum management is effective. The college manages its learning resources well within tight budgets. In the classroom, management of learning is mostly good. The college recognises the need to improve in areas such as quality assurance. It has good partnership arrangements with Northern College, and well advanced plans to adopt quality assurance systems and good practice that they have developed.
17. The college is successful in reaching people who are under-represented in learning. The college effectively fulfils its long-established mission to work with disadvantaged adults and those traditionally excluded from education. The proportion of its learners from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds significantly exceeds the local and national averages. More than a third of learners on long courses are from disadvantaged groups. The college's curriculum and support services cater very effectively for learners poorly served by more conventional academic pathways. Many learners make progress rapidly and successfully to higher education programmes. The Ransackers programme, which expressly targets mature learners who have few qualifications, is particularly effective. However, the college has no written strategy for meeting the language, literacy and numeracy needs of its learners. Practice in this area is not sufficiently well developed across all provision.
18. Promotion of equality of opportunity is good. The college facilitates learners' understanding of their rights and responsibilities very well. Curriculum teams use the college's data on existing learners' ethnicity, gender and disability routinely and effectively when planning improvement. The college has an extensive and highly appropriate range of policies on equality and diversity. Training for staff and governors in this area is regular. Access to college facilities for people with restricted mobility is much improved since the previous inspection. The college complies with the Disability

Discrimination Act (DDA) and Race Relations Act (RRA) and has appropriate safeguarding arrangements.

19. The college uses feedback from learners well to improve provision. Learners evaluate their programmes regularly and thoroughly. Arrangements to respond to their feedback are particularly systematic and effective. Inclusion of learners' views in a range of college activity is well established. Learner feedback contributes strongly to self-assessment and other quality improvement activity.
20. The college does not use data to plan and improve provision adequately. Financial data is readily available but the capacity to produce timely detailed reports on academic matters such as retention is insufficient. At middle management level routine access to reports is poor. The college has purchased appropriate software to report on a wide range of management information but training for staff responsible for their production is very recent. It is too soon to judge the impact of these changes.
21. The college has a range of appropriate internal and external arrangements to improve and assure quality. Its academic quality and standards committee offers effective scrutiny of college activities, such as new course proposals and self-assessment reporting. External reports provide a useful basis for actions to improve provision. However, aspects of quality assurance are incomplete. It is not sufficiently clear how quality assurance processes and procedures link together, or their relative importance. Monitoring of course documents is not sufficiently systematic. Arrangements to monitor and improve standards of learning and teaching through observation of learning sessions are not sufficiently thorough. Staff and managers readily acknowledge benefits from the process and subsequent professional development activity, but too few tutors receive such observations. Records of observations do not adequately identify areas for improvement or contain sufficient clarity on the grade awarded by the observer. The college relies too heavily on learners' evaluation in its assessment of standards of teaching and learning. The college is in the process of establishing a new system for observing teaching and learning.

What learners like:

- That tutors are kind and patient – ‘tutors can’t do enough for you’
- The environment and the way the staff create a sense of community – ‘it’s a wonderful place to learn’
- The way tutors make lectures interesting, challenging and fun
- Learning alongside other mature adults
- The way learners are treated as individuals and feel able to express themselves – ‘we can be ourselves and feel safe’

What learners think could improve:

- The repetitive completion of information on forms – ‘we have to provide the same information over and over again’

Sector subject area

Social sciences

Good: Grade 2

Context

22. Some 94 learners study either full- or part-time on a certificate in higher education course accredited at Level 4. Pathways include history, law, social science, English and creative writing. The Ransackers course, intended for older adult learners, is offered full time over ten weeks and has 19 learners enrolled. The college also offers a range of community short courses throughout the year. These programmes are generally run as residential short courses over two or three days and as summer schools. During the inspection only one social science residential short course was running with 13 learners.

Strengths

- High achievement rates on the certificate in higher education course
- High standard of learners' work
- Highly effective promotion of learning
- Good progression

Areas for improvement

- Declining retention rates on the certificate in higher education course

Achievement and standards

23. Achievement and standards are good. According to college data in 2006-07 success rates are high at 92% on the community short courses. Success rates are also high on the Ransackers programme at 90% in 2006-07. On the certificate in higher education course pass rates are high at 89%. However, retention rates have declined on this course over the last three years from 79% in 2004-05 to 74% in 2006-07. The college has recognised this trend. The college now conducts more robust pre-course interviews and makes greater use of short courses and the summer school as alternative pathways for prospective certificate learners. Learners who may be at risk of leaving the course are identified earlier.

24. The standard of learners work is high and attainment is good. Although many learners start with low levels of prior attainment and significant barriers to learning many of them reach a standard equal to, or above that expected for first year undergraduates. Many learners make very good progress quickly and are able to discuss complex theoretical issues and apply them appropriately to their practical assignments. Written work is of a high standard. Many learners produce detailed and closely argued essays that display good presentation skills and a capacity to develop critical argument that is appropriate and relevant for the level of accreditation.

25. Progression routes for learners in the college are good and clearly identified. In 2007 62% of learners on the certificate in higher education went on to further study. Many progressed to diploma or BA courses and some to MA courses at the college. Learners on short courses often progress from the short course programme onto the certificate in

higher education. Many learners attain skills and gain increased levels of self-confidence that enable them to progress into employment.

Quality of provision

26. The quality of provision is good. Teaching and learning is good. The college has created a highly supportive environment that allows learners to develop their personal and intellectual skills. Learners are highly motivated in lessons. Tutors ensure learners are consistently challenged with a good variety of tasks and activities. Tutors plan a variety of group and individual oral work which helps develop learners' confidence and presentational skills. The residential aspect of many of the courses clearly supports the development of much good peer group learning which extends beyond the classroom. Staff organise valuable external visits such as to law courts and the theatre. Many learners make good use of the access they have to the Bodleian library and other university facilities in Oxford.
27. Guidance and support are outstanding. Learners on the certificate in higher education programme and on the Ransackers course complete a comprehensive initial assessment process that identifies their individual needs well. Specialist staff offer support to meet these needs and work closely with the learners and personal tutors to monitor progress. Learners receive very good academic and pastoral support from tutors through the tutorial system. Learners studying on the Ransackers programme are offered sessions in IT to help support the production of their projects. The effectiveness of this is closely monitored within the tutorials. Additional IT support is offered individually.
28. Resources are satisfactory. Residential accommodation is satisfactory and the refectory provides a range of freshly prepared hot meals including healthy options. Most classrooms are adequate for the size of groups. Tutors are using the recently installed electronic whiteboards well. This includes reproducing classroom notes for learners.
29. Learners receive detailed feedback on their assignments, some of which has great depth. On the certificate and Ransackers courses the tutorial system is used to carefully set and monitor assignments. Tutors set challenging deadlines.
30. The provision meets the diverse needs of learners well. It is especially effective in meeting the college's mission to attract learners who have been socially excluded from educational opportunities. Significant numbers of learners on the certificate programme self-declare as either being disadvantaged or having a disability. A further 10% of learners enter the programme with no formal educational qualifications. On average 30% of learners on the short course programmes come from a disadvantaged background.

Leadership and management

31. Leadership and management of the curriculum are particularly effective in promoting an academic environment in which learners are encouraged and challenged to complete their course successfully. Staff are well qualified and encouraged to attend a programme of continuous professional development with many courses which use the skills and experience of current staff and external consultants. Course evaluation takes place through boards of study but judgements about the quality of provision rely too heavily on learner feedback. There is little systematic observation of teaching. However, staff share good practice informally.
32. Inspectors agreed with most of the key strengths and areas for improvement in the self-assessment report and awarded grades which matched those proposed by the college. Staff are involved systematically in the production of the self-assessment report through regular course team meetings.
33. The college promotes equal opportunities thoroughly. Learners help develop a code of practice for all courses that values diversity, respect and rights for all groups and individuals. Tutors ensure learners fully understand their rights and responsibilities.