

Hugh Christie Technology College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118903
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	326925
Inspection dates	13–14 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Helen Hutchings

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1218
Sixth form	168
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Lesley Broom
Headteacher	Jon Barker
Date of previous school inspection	24 May 2006
School address	Whitcottage Road Tonbridge TN10 4PU
Telephone number	01732 353544
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors.

Description of the school

Hugh Christie is a large school in an area where over a third of pupils attend grammar schools. The roll is increasing year on year and more boys than girls attend the school. Most pupils are from White British backgrounds and there are a small number from a range of minority ethnic heritages. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is average. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, mostly associated with specific learning or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, is above average. The school has held Technology College status since 1994 and moved into a new 'state of the art' building less than two years ago.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Hugh Christie is a good school. Academic performance has strengthened since the last inspection and the move into new buildings means that learning takes place within a first-rate environment. The college successfully uses twenty-first century technology to give students the skills they need for their future economic well-being and working lives. The large majority of parents and carers are positive about all aspects of the college's provision, making comments such as 'We are so happy we chose this school.' Some parents of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are particularly appreciative of the pastoral care, indicating that problems are responded to quickly and efficiently. Good care, guidance and support help students to understand their learning and achievements, and to take advantage of the college's innovative curriculum which gives students good opportunities to match courses closely to their individual needs and interests. The college's technology status has a positive impact in the way information and communication technology (ICT) supports students' learning in all subjects and in the development of applied learning courses. This makes a significant contribution to students' achievements overall. The opportunity to mix courses at different levels provides motivation and helps promote students' good personal development and well-being. Students' standards by the time they reach Year 11 or leave the sixth form are broadly average, which represents good achievement during their time in the college. The attendance of a few students, mainly girls, is low and has a negative impact on their performance.

Much of the college's success is down to the good leadership of the principal and senior staff. Initiatives are carefully researched and planned before implementation and accurate ongoing evaluation means that changes are made when needed. This flexible approach helps to ensure the best possible opportunities for students. Recruitment of suitably experienced staff has been difficult in some subjects, but recent appointments are strengthening the college's good capacity for ongoing improvement. Teamwork and staff morale are good, with middle leaders keen to develop the skills which will enable them to play a fuller part in whole-college review and evaluation. Teaching and learning are good overall, but there is some variation. A few lessons are not stimulating enough for students because they do not understand the relevance of their learning or time is not managed well enough, and consequently students are not sufficiently engaged throughout the lesson.

Community links have been strengthened well through the technology specialism, for example with joint activities with local primary schools or through student-to-student links with a nearby selective school. Initiatives with the local prison and adults with learning difficulties in the community to provide ICT training also make an effective contribution to promoting community cohesion.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Collaborative arrangements with other schools and colleges are growing and broadening the curriculum offered, so that students have a wide choice of academic and applied learning courses. Students' attainment on entry to their chosen courses is lower than that seen nationally, but their achievement in relation to their starting points is good, especially in business studies. Overall attainment is in line with the national average for advanced level study. Progress rates in Year 12 are average overall because some students need time and support to adjust to the expectations of sixth form study and working independently, but progress accelerates in Year

13. Starting sixth form lessons later in the day and extending them through the afternoon matches students' learning styles well and is contributing to improving standards. However, this has not reduced absence rates which, as in the main school, are too high. The flexibility for students to make the transition through different levels at a pace that suits them as individuals also contributes to sixth form success. For example, a few students study Open University modules such as ethics, while some others stay in the sixth form for a third year or some Year 11 students begin advanced courses. A comprehensive enrichment programme helps students to develop key skills for life so that, for example, they gain a good sense of economic awareness. Teaching is good and relationships between staff and students are positive. Sixth form students express high levels of satisfaction with their course options. They particularly appreciate the high level of support, guidance and encouragement that is always at hand for their personal development and to help them to make well-informed choices for the future in higher education, further training or employment. Many take on roles of responsibility both within the college and the wider community, such as working as mentors to younger students and working in nearby primary schools.

Effective and enthusiastic leadership has brought about improvement since the last inspection, particularly in extending the range of courses and qualifications to match students' needs and aspirations more closely. Detailed analyses of strengths and weaknesses underpin an effective development plan. The tracking of individual students' progress is now carried out more rigorously than previously and effective support is provided to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what is expected in examinations.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that all teaching effectively engages students by using time well and placing learning within a relevant context.
- Reduce absence rates, particularly for those girls whose attendance is well below average.
- Develop the roles of middle managers in reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness of their areas of responsibility.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students make good progress throughout the college so that they achieve broadly average standards in GCSE from a below average start in Year 7. As students take the Key Stage 3 national tests in Year 8, rather than at the end of Year 9, comparisons with national averages are not relevant, but college tracking data shows that students make good progress, particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science.

GCSE results compare favourably with national results, with the proportion achieving good grades in five or more subjects consistently in line with the national average. When both English and mathematics are included, results are below the national average, but this still represents good progress from students' starting points in Year 7. Standards in mathematics have improved since the last inspection, and staff have responded quickly to a fall in English results in 2008, when girls did not achieve well enough. However, overall there is no significant difference in the progress made by different groups of students over time, and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well. Results are expected to rise in this year's examinations and students are on course to meet the rigorous targets the college has set for them. Students do particularly well in art and design, information and communication technology, most aspects of design and technology, and in applied learning courses such as business, health and social

care, and travel and tourism. There is some variation across other subjects; for example, results in modern foreign languages have been disappointing for a number of years, although changes in provision are resulting in some improvement currently.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils settle quickly into college life and gain confidence as a result of the organisation in Years 7 and 8, where they spend a large amount of time with one teacher. Throughout the college, students enjoy good relationships with adults and are keen to take on responsibilities when given the opportunity. Behaviour is generally good and pupils say they feel safe. Although some parents, particularly of younger students, reported instances of bullying, incidents are followed up rigorously and older students say bullying has decreased recently. Students know who to turn to for help if they need it. The more challenging behaviour of a small minority of students is managed well so that any negative impact on others is minimised. Students are keen to achieve good results and willingly take the advice offered by teachers on how to improve their work. Despite the robust approach to reduce absence, improvement is slow and attendance is below national average because of the persistent absence of a few students. In most years, students have a generous number of hours of physical activity each week, and enjoy using the excellent indoor and outdoor sporting facilities, contributing to the development of healthy lifestyles. They have a good understanding of the dangers of drugs, alcohol and smoking. Increasing numbers of students choose to take the healthy college lunches provided. Students' spiritual, moral, social and culture development is good, developed, for example, through thought-provoking assemblies or in the college's 'advisory time' when students consider and debate social and moral issues. Students show considerable respect for their environment and the work of others which is attractively displayed around the college. On occasion, students are less considerate of others in shared spaces, for example when some older students go to the front of the queue in the café. It is taking time, particularly for students whose earlier school years were spent in the old buildings, to adjust to the new college ethos where all areas are shared by all age groups.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Students learn well in most lessons. These are characterised by thoughtful planning, effective use of interactive whiteboards and very good relationships between students and teachers. Students concentrate well. In a few less successful lessons, students find it difficult to understand the work they are expected to tackle and they become restless. Teaching assistants offer sensitive and practical help to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college is keen for students to know their National Curriculum levels of attainment, their targets, how to assess the standard of their own and each other's work and what they should do to improve. Just occasionally, the content of lessons is dominated by this focus to the detriment of the enjoyment of learning, and sometimes students are clearer about the next level to be achieved than exactly what they have to do to reach this.

Teachers encourage students to undertake research and guide them how to do it productively. Students use computers regularly and confidently, largely as a result of the readily available laptops. From the time they join the college, pupils learn study skills which are transferable

across subjects, reflecting the college's aim to prepare students for their working lives. Most lessons include reflection on how work relates to the world beyond college but this is not always given enough prominence. The majority of students like the one hour and twenty minutes long lessons but they are less enthusiastic when they sit for too long and do not learn actively. A few teachers let the pace of learning drop off during lessons and could be more imaginative in the range of activities in their lessons.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

For several years, the college has been innovative in how it structures its curriculum. The programme where students in Years 7 and 8 are taught several subjects by the same teacher helps to ease the transition from primary school. The project-and skills-based approach successfully develops independent learners who can cope confidently with further study. This course has many excellent features but the breadth of topics linked to citizenship, history and geography are too limited in Year 7.

The wealth of subjects and courses at several levels give all students the chance to succeed and enjoy their studies. Students are given sound advice to start their GCSE courses in Year 9 and have a wide selection, including vocational courses and a technology subject in line with the college's specialist status. They mix and match the qualifications they choose, to reflect their interests and abilities, and effectively use the flexibility they have to spend two or three years studying them. Some Year 11 students take advantage of opportunities to start AS courses, choose work-related courses or complete their GCSEs. In several subjects, teachers prepare work specifically for gifted and talented students and encourage them to attend extra activities after school, especially those with talents in sport.

The college acknowledges that its provision for personal, social and health education needs strengthening, especially in Years 9 and 10, and has well-considered plans to improve it. There are numerous trips and visits in all years and the range of lunchtime and after school extra-curricular activities is very good.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Students of all ages receive good support which enables them to make good progress towards achieving their learning targets. Marking is generally helpful in identifying what students have done well and how they can improve. The college is quick to identify students, of all abilities, who are at risk of underachieving and use a wide range of effective approaches to give them the extra help they need. The approach to planning for the needs of those students identified as requiring significant additional levels of support has changed this year, but has yet to be evaluated to be sure that their needs are fully met.

The college has successfully transferred its ethos of care as being central to its work into its new environment, particularly for the most vulnerable pupils, who receive good support. They can find a quiet area to relax in during breaks and lunchtimes and 'young carers' and 'behaviour management' groups are valued by students and help them learn more effectively. Safeguarding procedures meet statutory requirements

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Thoughtful leadership and management have enabled staff and students to make a successful transition into new surroundings. The principal and other senior leaders have a clear vision for the future in providing a unique educational experience for young people, and they communicate well with others so that the commitment to innovation is shared. Senior leaders know the college well and the system of annual review for all curriculum areas, including a three-month follow-up review to evaluate progress, is having a positive impact on standards and is supported by middle leaders who see the benefits for staff and students. Their role in self-evaluation is less well developed, and they do not share enough in the leadership of reviews, or in other whole-college innovations such as the 'Coaching Team' to disseminate the most effective practice. They express their readiness and enthusiasm for the plan to involve them more in review and evaluation next year. Another way in which staff show their commitment to ongoing improvement is in a variety of staff development opportunities, such as those leading to additional academic qualifications.

The college promotes community cohesion effectively and takes positive steps to raise students' awareness of their role within the European and global communities, for example through links with schools in Italy, Germany and The Netherlands, and initiatives such as World Foods Week bring their awareness of other cultures to life.

Governance has improved since the last inspection, and statutory requirements are met. Governors have robust systems in place to keep performance under review, so that governors have an accurate understanding of college strengths and weakness. Rigorous financial management and planning have effectively eliminated a financial deficit over the last few years, ensuring future viability and ongoing good value for money.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2	

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

15 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Hugh Christie Technology College, Tonbridge TN10 4PU

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave us during our recent visit and for giving up some of your time to talk to us. I am writing to share some of the main findings of our report and I hope that you will take the time to read the report in full as well.

Hugh Christie gives you a good quality education. These are some of the things we found:

- You make good progress through the college to reach standards in Year 11 examinations in line with others of your age.
- Those of you in the sixth form do well and make a good contribution to whole school activities.
- You have a very wide range of subjects and options to choose from.
- You have a good understanding of your targets and appreciate the extra help that teachers give you when you find work difficult.
- You are lucky to have such wonderful facilities for sport and for using computers to help you learn in many subjects.
- You develop a broad range of personal skills which, together with your academic success, prepare you well for your future beyond school.
- You receive good care and support if you have personal problems.
- The school has good potential to help you to achieve even more.

The inspection team recognises that the principal and staff are committed to getting things right for you and agree with them that the following are the areas which will help you to achieve even better results.

- Make sure that you understand why you are doing the work you do and try to get more variety into some lessons which you find long.
- Give some of you, particularly some girls, who are absent from school too often more help to attend regularly.
- Involve more staff in reviewing how well the school is doing so that they can help to improve it even further.

You can help by making sure that you attend as well as you possibly can and by continuing to concentrate even when work is quite hard. We wish everyone at Hugh Christie well for the future.

Yours faithfully

Mrs Helen Hutchings

Lead inspector