

Strode 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. Strode College, located in Street, Somerset, is a tertiary college that serves the education and training needs of the Mendip area, which consists of a number of small towns and dispersed rural areas. The local economy is characterised by relatively low unemployment and a high proportion of small businesses. In 2006/07, the college enrolled 1,600 full-time students, mainly aged 16 to 18, and around 2,000 part-time learners, mainly adults, equivalent to around 500 full-time equivalent students. There are significantly more female learners than male learners. The proportion of minority ethnic learners is low, reflecting the composition of the area served by the college. The college recruits students from its partner schools in the local area, from a wide range of other state and independent schools, and from local communities. School leavers' attainment in the area is broadly in line with the national average.

2. The college was designated a Beacon College in 2004. The college is a lead partner in a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in business and management skills and leads a Train to Gain partnership of three Somerset colleges. In July 2007 it achieved Matrix accreditation for information, advice and guidance.
3. The college offers courses in all sector subject areas except construction and land-based industries. Around two thirds of students aged 16 to 18 study at level 3, mainly on GCE advanced level courses. Adult learners, who constitute just over a quarter of full-time equivalent students, are more evenly spread across different levels of study. In partnership with local schools, the college offers courses for around 250 students aged 14 to 16. The college has a small number of learners on work-based learning and Train to Gain programmes. The college also holds a large contract for offender learning in regional prisons.
4. The college's mission is 'to provide high standards of education within an inclusive and supportive learning environment'.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Outstanding: Grade 1
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Good: contributory grade 2</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

5. This is a good college, with outstanding capacity to improve. Student achievement is good. Success rates are high, although they have not risen as quickly as the college would wish over the last three years. The college is confident that the trend of improvement in students' performance will quicken, and inspectors found that confidence to be well placed. The college is seeking to raise aspirations further by comparing its A/AS provision with that found in sixth form colleges. Students enjoy life at college, the standard of their work is good, and they make a positive contribution to the local community.
6. The quality of provision is good. Teaching and learning are good, and the arrangements the college has in place to improve further the quality and consistency of lessons are secure. The range of programmes and activities offered to students is outstanding. The curriculum continues to broaden to better meet the needs and interests of learners in the local area. The breadth and quality of enrichment activities available to students is outstanding. The college is rightly proud of its good approach to promoting educational and social inclusion. Guidance and support for students are good. Pastoral care is very good, and students benefit from a safe and caring ethos with a strong emphasis on inclusivity. The college recognises there is further work to do to improve the consistency and quality of tutorial provision and the monitoring of students' progress.
7. Leadership, governance and management are good. Leaders set a very clear strategic direction, and a culture of self-improvement is well embedded throughout the college. Although improvements in students' outcomes have not been sufficiently rapid over the last three years, a more focused culture of accountability and performance management is having an impact. Quality assurance and self-assessment arrangements are thorough and comprehensive. Although the commentary contained within the self-assessment report is largely accurate and frequently incisive, some of the grades awarded are over-generous. Financial management is good, and there have been significant improvements to accommodation and resources.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: Grade 1

8. The college demonstrates an outstanding capacity to improve. The senior leadership team have been successful in strengthening lines of accountability and managers at all levels are tackling pockets of under-performance more swiftly. Highly effective quality assurance and staff development arrangements are leading to an improvement in the quality of teaching. Despite the over-generous grades awarded by the college in its self-assessment, actions to improve provision are clearly identified and sensibly prioritised. Data are used effectively to identify key areas for improvement. Curriculum managers are intervening with increasing effect to remedy the remaining shortcomings in the quality of provision.

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

9. The college has made good progress in improving the quality of provision since the last inspection. Arrangements for assessing the quality of teaching and learning are now objective and rigorous. Data are being used more effectively to assess students' progress and the value that the college adds in comparison with students' prior attainment. The curriculum has been broadened, especially at level 2. Students' outcomes improved significantly in the two years following the last inspection, although over the last three years the rate of improvement has slowed. Curriculum management and team working have become more effective. Students have benefited from significant improvements to accommodation and resources.

Key strengths

- high success rates on most courses
- the proportion of students achieving high grades on advanced level courses
- effective focus on improving teaching and learning
- good progress in broadening the range of opportunities offered by the college
- outstanding opportunities for, and participation in, enrichment activities
- successful promotion of an ethos of inclusivity and respect for all
- highly effective staff development
- successful strategy to improve accommodation and resources
- good leadership, governance and management
- outstanding capacity to improve.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- the slow progress in further improving long course success rates for students aged 16 to 18
- the slight decline in the proportion of students who successfully complete AS level courses
- arrangements for identifying and raising the proportion of outstanding lessons
- the use of appropriate national averages to make judgements about the quality of A-level provision
- the rigour of procedures for deciding and moderating graded judgements about the quality of the college's provision.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

10. Students' achievement, and the standard of their work, are good. Students do very well at the college, although students' outcomes do not justify the college's own judgement that achievement and standards are outstanding. Success rates for students' aged 16 to 18 on long courses remain high, but they have not improved over the last three years. Success rates for adult students were significantly above the national average in 2004/05, but did not improve over the following two years. However, in 2007/08 they rose by four percentage points to above the previous year's national average. There are no significant differences in performance between different groups of students.
11. Success rates for students aged 16 to 18 on advanced level courses are significantly higher than the national average for general further education (GFE) and tertiary colleges. The college agrees with inspectors that in the future its large amount of A-level and AS provision should be compared with the same provision in sixth form colleges, as the prior attainment of the college's students on these courses is similar to that of students at a typical sixth form college. By this measure, success rates are broadly in line with the sixth form college averages, although the proportion of students who achieve high grades on AS, A-level and advanced vocational courses is impressively high and is significantly above the sixth form national average. Success rates on AS courses have declined slightly over the last three years. Value-added measures demonstrate that students make good progress in comparison with their prior attainment. Success rates for adult students studying at level 3 are good.
12. For both age groups of students, success rates on level 2 courses were disappointing in 2006/07. However, success rates improved in 2007/08 to be above the national average for 2006/07. The relatively small number of students taking courses at level 1 achieve well. Success rates in key skills qualifications are low. Adult students' achievement on short courses are very good. The small number of learners on work-based learning programmes achieve satisfactorily.
13. Students like being at the college, and enjoy most of their lessons. The standard of work they produce is good, and their attendance on their main programmes is high. Those on vocational courses develop good workplace skills. Progression rates between courses are generally good, although there is scope for improvement in the proportion of students who continue from AS courses to the full A-level. Students are well prepared for the next stage of education, training or employment.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

14. The quality of provision is good, although the college's self-assessment report judges it to be outstanding. Teaching and learning are good, a judgement that accords with the college's profile of the quality of lessons from its own observations. The college has established good procedures to monitor and

improve teaching and learning. Lesson observers are skilled at identifying astutely the quality of teaching and learning in most lessons, and suggesting areas for improvement. These are well linked to staff development activities. However, observers are less adept at identifying outstanding teaching and learning, and inspection evidence suggests that a minority of lessons judged to be excellent do not meet this descriptor. The quality of lessons on courses at levels 1 and 2 and for adult learners, which was an area for improvement at the last inspection, has improved and is now good. The use of technology both within and outside the classroom is good in most curriculum areas, and students benefit from a wide range of electronic resources. The college has introduced some good teaching and learning initiatives, such as an emphasis on reflective practice for teachers to identify improvements and strengths in their teaching, and a scheme to involve students in lesson observations. Teachers assess and monitor students' work well. Students with additional learning needs are identified effectively, and those who take up the offer of support benefit from it. The integration of key skills into students' main programmes is satisfactory.

15. The range of opportunities offered to students, both through the formal curriculum and through additional activities, is outstanding. The curriculum is increasingly broad and inclusive, and is responsive to local and community needs. Although most students study at advanced level, the college has made significant efforts to attract students at lower levels, and provision at levels 1 and 2 is expanding both to meet and promote demand. Provision for students aged 14 to 16 from local schools is good. Students enjoy an extensive and stimulating range of enrichment activities that both extends their learning and provides excellent personal development. The college is continuing to improve and develop training in response to employers' needs. Arrangements for providing appropriate work experience to students are good. Management of the college's large offender learning contract is good.
16. Guidance and support for students are good. Support services to students have kept pace with new support requirements and national initiatives. Support staff and teachers provide skilled and knowledgeable information, advice and guidance. Arrangements for ensuring students are on the right course, and given good advice on their progression opportunities, are sound. Links with partner schools are good, and arrangements for helping students settle into college life are particularly thorough. The college is adept at supporting learners with different needs, and additional support for students with specific learning difficulties is good. Pastoral care to meet students' emotional, health, financial and other needs is of a high standard. Staff and students throughout the college foster an ethos of inclusivity, tolerance and mutual respect. The quality of most tutorial provision is good, although students report some inconsistency in the effectiveness of tutorial time. Inconsistencies in the rigour of individual progress monitoring are being remedied through the introduction of an electronic tracking system.

Leadership and management Good: Grade 2

Contributory grade:

Equality of opportunity Good: grade 2

17. Leadership and management are good. The principal, senior leaders and governors provide a clear strategic direction focused on diversifying provision, improving accommodation and resources, raising success rates, and improving the quality of teaching. Progress on all these issues is good, although not sufficiently rapid in some instances for inspection evidence to agree with the college's judgement that leadership and management are outstanding. Governors know the college well and have a good understanding of the key issues that need resolution for the college to move to the next stage of its development. The principal and his senior leadership team have developed an open and consultative style of management and communication with staff and students are excellent. Curriculum management is good and improving, and managers at all levels have recently made good progress in engendering a culture of stronger accountability through more effective performance management.
18. Quality assurance procedures are rigorous and comprehensive. Data are used effectively by managers at all levels to analyse provision and set clearly prioritised actions for improvement. Reviews at individual course level are not always sufficiently self-critical. The college's self-assessment report is more effective at identifying strengths than areas for improvement, although the latter are comprehensively documented in the college's improvement plan. Arrangements for agreeing and moderating the graded judgements in self-assessment are insufficiently rigorous. Students' views on the quality of provision are increasingly used to inform self-assessment, and the college has recently appointed a former student as a learner advocate to gather more in-depth views from students. The internal lesson observation scheme is useful in identifying themes for improving the quality of lessons.
19. Accommodation and resources have improved and are good. A significant growth in the number of full-time students has been managed very well. Teaching staff are well qualified, and arrangements for staff training, focused on sensible priorities, are particularly effective. Financial management is good, and the college offers good value for money.
20. College leaders give a high priority to the promotion of equal opportunity. Analysis of the performance of different groups is thorough. A culture of respect and tolerance is promoted through tutorials and a range of cross-college events and enrichment activities. Managers recognise that more could be done to assess the extent to which equality and diversity are promoted in lessons. The college complies fully with the requirements for safeguarding children, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2002. The college is a safe haven for students and staff do much to promote their welfare, encourage them to adopt healthy lifestyles and to make a positive contribution to the community.

Learners' achievement

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rate 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	221	72	65	7	749	79	62	17
	05/06	285	82	69	13	518	75	65	10
	06/07	343	75	74	1	525	75	70	5
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	05/06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06/07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
NVQs	04/05	27	74	68	6	17	18	67	-49
	05/06	16	63	72	-9	...	...	...	...
	06/07	23	74	75	-1	...	...	...	...
Other	04/05	194	72	64	8	732	80	62	18
	05/06	269	84	69	15	518	75	65	10
	06/07	320	75	74	1	524	75	70	5

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rate 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	884	48	61	-13	394	63	60	3
	05/06	680	68	66	2	469	72	66	6
	06/07	895	67	70	-3	502	62	69	-7
GCSEs	04/05	139	73	64	9	39	67	62	5
	05/06	115	65	68	-3	30	70	67	3
	06/07	177	79	71	8	40	73	70	3
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	48	44	67	-23	...	...	...	...
	05/06	19	42	69	-27	...	...	...	...
	06/07	11	55	73	-18	...	...	...	...
NVQs	04/05	83	66	58	8	82	50	61	-11
	05/06	102	66	65	1	96	60	68	-8
	06/07	177	51	68	-17	171	56	69	-13
Other	04/05	614	40	61	-21	272	67	60	7
	05/06	444	70	66	4	342	76	65	11
	06/07	530	69	70	-1	291	64	69	-5

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rate 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	2648	80	68	12	432	68	58	10
	05/06	2770	82	71	11	429	69	64	5
	06/07	2888	82	73	9	495	72	68	4
A/A2 Levels	04/05	698	94	86	8	35	74	69	5
	05/06	854	94	87	7	34	74	72	2
	06/07	845	94	87	7	31	61	76	-15
AS Levels	04/05	1526	78	66	12	77	69	52	17
	05/06	1554	80	67	13	48	58	55	3
	06/07	1684	78	69	9	70	61	59	2
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	109	67	61	6	...	...	...	...
	05/06	114	52	66	-14	7	57	57	0
	06/07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
NVQs	04/05	34	71	63	8	76	50	56	-6
	05/06	37	95	71	24	72	71	63	8
	06/07	52	75	74	1	69	55	69	-14
Other	04/05	281	62	60	2	240	72	59	13
	05/06	211	68	65	3	268	71	64	7
	06/07	307	69	70	-1	325	79	69	10