

Darlington College

Inspection report

Provider reference 130656

Published date May 2009

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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. Darlington College is a medium sized general further education college (GFE) in the Tees Valley. It relocated in August 2006 into a newly built main campus in a regeneration area close to the centre of Darlington. In addition to the college, there is a sixth form college and two schools that provide post-16 provision in Darlington. The college serves a population of around 850,000 learners drawn from Darlington and the neighbouring areas of North Yorkshire and County Durham. Its second campus at Catterick primarily serves the Ministry of Defence (MoD) Super Garrison, which is the largest in Europe. This centre offers, as part of a partnership with the MoD, National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2 public service programmes, Skills for Life courses and bespoke programmes developed for Infantry Training, the Army Education Centre Resettlement. It serves the local community of army personnel, their dependants and the wider North Yorkshire population. The college mission is 'Excellence in Learning and Skills'.
2. Darlington is the third smallest unitary authority in the country and is ranked as the 90th most deprived local authority. Levels of employment are comparatively high by regional and national standards but the average income is well below that found nationally. Levels of deprivation are higher than the national average, although there is a wide variation across the borough. In 2008, the proportion of school leavers with five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades A* to C or above was 69%, which is above the national average. However, across the borough there is wide disparity between the results of individual schools.
3. The college provides courses in 13 of the 15 sector subject areas funded by the LSC and bespoke provision for commercial and industrial clients. It provides higher education (HE) courses in partnership with Teesside University which has a presence on the college's main campus. Teacher training programmes are delivered in partnership with Huddersfield and Sunderland Universities. Learndirect programmes are provided at the main college campus, a community centre and at Linear Park, Catterick. In the majority of the college curriculum areas it is possible to progress from levels 1 to 3. In 2007/8 the college enrolled 1,368 learners aged 16 to 18 and 240 adults studying full time on LSC core provision; 111 full-time and 47 part-time students aged 14 to 16; 752 HE funded students; 58 apprentices, 121 advanced apprentices and 185 Train to Gain learners. Around 6,000 part-time learners were enrolled in 2007/8, of which 4,058 were from the MoD partnership. The college has National Skills Academy status for hospitality and catering and holds the BECTA Technology Exemplar Network Award.

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

4. Darlington College is an outstanding organisation. Success rates improved significantly in 2007/08 and are very high. Teaching and learning are outstanding. Learners make good progress; they develop positive attitudes to work and enjoy their time at college. The college provides excellent support to help students learn and for staff to continue to develop their skills.
5. Arrangements to promote and reinforce equality, diversity and inclusion are outstanding. The principal, governors and college managers engage extensively in local and regional initiatives that enhance learning opportunities. Strong partnership working with the MoD provides a distinctive skills development programme for newly recruited infantry soldiers. The college offers an outstanding range of provision. The range of courses available at level 1, for work-based learning and for Train to Gain has increased. The proportion of learners at the college from disadvantaged areas has increased significantly and is high. Support to help learners to complete and achieve qualifications is outstanding. An excellent range of welfare services, including 'Bump and Beyond' a programme that provides targeted support for young parents, ensure that learners at risk of leaving early complete their courses. Support for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is outstanding. Provision for 14 to 16 year olds is diverse and highly effective. Careers guidance is excellent. The proportion of learners that progress within the college and to HE is increasing. Educational and social inclusion are outstanding.
6. Leadership and management are outstanding. Governance and financial management are strong. Visionary strategic planning has ensured that the college meets the needs of the communities it serves very well. Improvement strategies are very effective in driving up success rates. Outstanding accommodation and facilities are used very well to celebrate learners' achievement. The college has the resources to continue to grow and develop further. It offers outstanding value for money.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: Grade 1

7. The college demonstrates outstanding capacity to improve its provision. College plans are supported by key stakeholders and are consistent with national, local, employer and community priorities. Leaders at all levels of the college provide strong direction and support to raise standards. Areas of underperformance are identified and appropriate strategies for improvement implemented. Teaching staff are very well-qualified and have excellent opportunities for professional development. The college is financially stable and has resources for further improvements. Management information is reliable and well-used by staff. While inspectors agreed with most of the grades awarded by the college through its self-assessment process some strengths quoted in the report are

norms and areas for improvement in relation to lower performing courses are not clearly identified in all cases.

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

8. The college has made outstanding progress since the last inspection. The areas for improvement have been addressed successfully and the quality of the provision has improved. The new accommodation provides stimulating learning environments that raise the aspirations of learners and staff. Success rates have increased year-on-year and are very high. On additional qualifications success rates have improved and are now high. Attendance and punctuality are significantly improved. Poor assessment and review practices in work-based learning have been addressed. The management and leadership of sport and leisure programmes are now effective. The range of provision available at levels 1 and 2 and for 14 to 16 year olds, has widened.

Key strengths

- visionary strategic leadership from the principal and governors
- outstandingly effective equality, diversity and inclusion
- stimulating learning environments that raise aspirations
- very high success rates
- excellent support for learning
- diverse and highly effective provision for 14 to 16 year olds
- highly responsive curriculum
- very successful MoD skills development programme
- exemplary partnership working
- very effective improvement strategies.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- the lack of rigour in some aspects of self-assessment.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Outstanding: Grade 1

Contributory grades:

Work-based learning

Train to Gain

Satisfactory: grade 3

Good: grade 2

9. Inspectors judged achievement and standards as outstanding, which is higher than the college's self-assessment of good. The overall success rate on long courses has improved consistently over the last three years. In 2008, success rates improved significantly at all levels for learners aged 16 to 18, to well above the national average and are very high. For learners aged 19+ success rates have improved at all levels over a three year period, with significant improvements at levels 1 and 3 in 2008. All rates are now above the national average, significantly so at levels 2 and 3. Success rates on short courses have been high for the last three years. Key skills communication success rates are good; for application of number they are satisfactory.
10. Arrangements for monitoring and improving retention are extremely effective. At the time of the inspection retention rates had been maintained at the high levels of the previous year or had improved further. Retention is outstanding, particularly at levels 1 and 2. Pass rates improved significantly in 2008 and are good. For 16 to 18 year olds, pass rates are high at levels 1 and 3. The rates are around the national average for learners aged 19+.
11. The college provides NVQ level 2 public services programmes for infantry soldiers from across the country stationed at Catterick Garrison for basic training. Success rates on this provision have been consistently above the national average.
12. Success rates for learners from the Darlington area are outstanding. Students make the progress expected and an increasing proportion achieve high grades in their main qualifications. Most learners are successful in developing their literacy and numeracy skills and acquire additional qualifications that enhance their chances of gaining employment. Learners enjoy college. Their attendance and punctuality are good. Levels of progression to further study within the college are good, particularly from levels 1 to 2. Increasing numbers progress to HE and employment.
13. Success rates for the substantial number of 14 to 16 year olds who attend the college are outstanding and a very high proportion progress to further education. On work-based learning success rates are satisfactory and on Train to Gain are good. The college has a contract to provide apprenticeship programmes for learners from construction skills in addition to its own learners. Overall success rates on apprenticeships although declining over the last two years are satisfactory. Timely success rates have increased at a faster rate than nationally and are now satisfactory. Advanced overall and timely success rates are satisfactory. The college is taking effective action to improve this provision

and at the time of the inspection retention was high and learners were making good progress across all aspects of the framework.

14. Learners from minority ethnic backgrounds achieve as well as their peers. Learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities achieve at least as well as those without a disability. Those receiving support to help them improve their levels of literacy and numeracy also achieve at least as well as others.

Quality of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

Contributory grades:

Work-based learning

Satisfactory: grade 3

Train to Gain

Good: grade 2

15. The quality of the provision is outstanding which agrees with the college's self-assessment. It is satisfactory on work-based learning and good on Train to Gain. Teaching and learning are outstanding. Evidence from rigorous observations of teaching and learning is carefully scrutinised and leads to highly effective staff development. Peer observations, master classes and the sharing of best practice are used routinely to support teachers to maintain and develop their skills further. The college recognises that in some lessons teachers' questioning techniques are not always used effectively to challenge learners' understanding. Appropriate actions to address this are in place. Key skills lessons are particularly well-planned. Employers provide their learners with good on-the-job training. They are actively involved in planning their employees' training which is integrated effectively into the work that learners undertake in college.
16. Information and learning technology (ILT) is used widely to enhance learning. The college's virtual learning environment offers an excellent facility for learners to extend their learning outside of lessons.
17. External verification reports are carefully analysed to inform robust action plans that are highly successful in improving course planning and assessment. Teachers' feedback to learners on the quality of their work is timely and mostly effective in helping them understand what they need to do to improve. In a minority of cases spelling and grammatical errors are uncorrected on learners' work.
18. An outstanding range of provision meets the needs and interests of learners and employers very well. The college regularly reviews the curriculum to ensure that it is very responsive to local and regional skills needs. Courses are offered from foundation learning tier to post-graduate level. In the majority of curriculum areas learners can progress from levels 1 to 3. A good range of additional qualifications enhance learners' employability skills. Bespoke provision for employers responds effectively to their varied needs.
19. Links with schools are excellent. Strong 14 to 19 curriculum planning responds effectively to the need to increase the number of learners participating in post-16 education and training. The college provides diverse and highly effective

programmes for 14 to 16 year olds. This includes full-time and part-time options that have been successful in raising achievement and improving attitudes to learning.

20. A long standing partnership with the MoD provides literacy and numeracy and public services courses for newly recruited infantry soldiers. Courses are also provided for the families of army personnel and resettlement.
21. Enrichment activities are well-planned to interest, challenge and develop learners' personal and social skills. A good range of courses covering health issues, community involvement, sport and outdoor adventure and fund raising activities helps learners to develop the skills to make a positive contribution to the community. The college recognises that in some areas learners do not participate in cross-college activities and have appointed a sports coordinator to increase participation.
22. Learners receive outstanding guidance and support that helps them to succeed. Effective links with local schools and useful course information ensure that prospective learners are well-informed about the college. Great care is taken to make sure that they enrol on the right courses. Interview and admission processes are rigorous. Swift initial assessment is followed by the prompt provision of additional learning support where required. An excellent range of support services meet the needs of learners at risk of not completing or underachieving. For example, student support advisers provide high quality mentoring and close monitoring and follow-up of absent learners. Tutors regularly review learners' progress. However, the college recognises there are inconsistencies in target setting across sector subject areas and is making significant progress in tackling this issue. Support for learners on apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes is good.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: Grade 1

Contributory grade:

Equality of opportunity

Outstanding: grade 1

23. Inspectors agree with the college that leadership and management are outstanding. The principal and governors provide visionary leadership and a clear strategic direction. Governors have a very good range of strategic experience and expertise. Exemplary community and employer partnerships have widened participation. The college serves its communities very well and is making a significant contribution to the economic and social regeneration of the local area. The partnerships with the army garrison at Catterick, schools and local universities are particularly successful.
24. The quality improvement strategy is comprehensive and effective and is supported by an embedded improvement culture. The key indicators of learners' success, including attendance, retention and pass rates, have improved significantly over the last three years, to high levels. Inspectors agreed with most of the grades awarded by the college through its self-assessment process but some aspects of the report lack rigour and accuracy.

25. The summary report presented to governors places insufficient focus on the relative under-performance of apprentice training and does not identify all of the areas for improvement in sector subject areas. The teacher observation scheme and performance review processes are robust. The quality of teaching and learning has improved significantly and is now outstanding in most areas. Data from a reliable management information system are used effectively to monitor performance and inform actions for improvement. Programme management is very effective and appropriate actions have been instigated to improve the quality of work-based learning.
26. Staff are very well-qualified and have extensive opportunities for continuous professional development. Learners are highly satisfied with their experiences at the college and consider it a very safe and enjoyable place to study. Employer and community stakeholder satisfaction are also high.
27. The promotion and reinforcement of equality and diversity are outstanding. Policies and practices to increase the diversity of the student body are effective and respond appropriately to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Policies have been developed in consultation with learners and impact analyses have been carried out to identify gaps. Staff and governors are trained in their respective responsibilities in implementing policies. A Single Equalities policy has been developed in advance of statutory guidelines. Effective systems to eliminate all forms of discrimination and harassment are in place and carefully monitored. The college has more than twice as many minority ethnic students as are in the local population. Governors are carefully selected to ensure they represent the communities the college serves. They closely monitor the performance of different groups of learners through a robust standards committee and regular strategy reviews. Robust action has been taken to meet the Children Act 2004 and to ensure the health and safety of staff and learners. Appropriate checks are carried out on all staff.
28. Accommodation and facilities are excellent. The newly-built campus is attractive to learners and makes a strong statement of the college's central role within the borough. Buildings are fully accessible to learners with mobility difficulties and incorporate sustainability elements. High quality vocational areas effectively support the development of learners' practical skills to industry standards. Learning resource centres and student social spaces are welcoming and well-equipped. Access to computers is good for both staff and learners.

Learners' achievement

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, 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 | Diff | Starts - Transfers | College Rate | National Rate | Diff |
| All Long - Level 1 | 05/06 | 359 | 76 | 69 | 7 | 372 | 80 | 65 | 15 |
| | 06/07 | 700 | 78 | 74 | 4 | 481 | 60 | 70 | -10 |
| | 07/08* | 713 | 88 | | | 296 | 76 | | |
| GNVQs/ AVCEs | 05/06 | 11 | 82 | 73 | 9 | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 06/07 | 15 | 87 | 72 | 15 | 1 | 0 | ... | ... |
| | 07/08* | 15 | 87 | | | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| NVQs | 05/06 | 79 | 67 | 72 | -5 | 11 | 45 | 74 | -29 |
| | 06/07 | 85 | 62 | 75 | -13 | 4 | 75 | 75 | 0 |
| | 07/08* | 52 | 85 | | | 7 | 100 | | |
| Other | 05/06 | 269 | 78 | 69 | 9 | 361 | 81 | 65 | 16 |
| | 06/07 | 600 | 80 | 74 | 6 | 476 | 60 | 70 | -10 |
| | 07/08* | 646 | 89 | | | 289 | 75 | | |

*college data (produced using proprietary software)

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, 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 | Diff | Starts - Transfers | College Rate | National Rate | Diff |
| All Long - Level 2 | 05/06 | 1423 | 67 | 66 | 1 | 1138 | 75 | 66 | 9 |
| | 06/07 | 1513 | 70 | 70 | 0 | 1042 | 77 | 69 | 8 |
| | 07/08* | 1895 | 79 | | | 1654 | 79 | | |
| GCSEs | 05/06 | 19 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 50 | 64 | 67 | -3 |
| | 06/07 | 32 | 91 | 71 | 20 | 25 | 88 | 70 | 18 |
| | 07/08* | 18 | 94 | | | 21 | 86 | | |
| GNVQs/ AVCEs | 05/06 | 5 | 60 | 69 | -9 | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 06/07 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 07/08* | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| NVQs | 05/06 | 964 | 70 | 65 | 5 | 821 | 76 | 68 | 8 |
| | 06/07 | 934 | 72 | 68 | 4 | 779 | 78 | 69 | 9 |
| | 07/08* | 1279 | 76 | | | 1421 | 79 | | |
| Other | 05/06 | 435 | 62 | 66 | -4 | 267 | 74 | 65 | 9 |
| | 06/07 | 547 | 67 | 70 | -3 | 238 | 71 | 69 | 2 |
| | 07/08* | 597 | 86 | | | 212 | 79 | | |

*college data (produced using proprietary software)

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, 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 | Diff | Starts - Transfers | College Rate | National Rate | Diff |
| All Long - Level 3 | 05/06 | 395 | 70 | 71 | -1 | 626 | 65 | 64 | 1 |
| | 06/07 | 469 | 70 | 73 | -3 | 578 | 73 | 68 | 5 |
| | 07/08* | 465 | 81 | | | 546 | 83 | | |
| A/A2 Levels | 05/06 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 06/07 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 07/08* | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| AS Levels | 05/06 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 06/07 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 07/08* | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| GNVQs/ AVCEs | 05/06 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 06/07 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| | 07/08* | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| NVQs | 05/06 | 85 | 75 | 71 | 4 | 307 | 63 | 63 | 0 |
| | 06/07 | 61 | 80 | 74 | 6 | 273 | 75 | 69 | 6 |
| | 07/08* | 60 | 92 | | | 214 | 85 | | |
| Other | 05/06 | 310 | 68 | 65 | 3 | 319 | 67 | 64 | 3 |
| | 06/07 | 408 | 68 | 70 | -2 | 305 | 72 | 69 | 3 |
| | 07/08* | 405 | 80 | | | 310 | 83 | | |

*college data (produced using proprietary software)

Table 4

Success rates on work-based learning apprenticeship programmes managed by the provider/college, 2006 to 2008.

| Programme | End Year | Success rate | No. of learners* | Provider/college NVO rate** | National NVO rate** | Provider/college framework rate** | National framework rate** |
|--------------------------|----------|--------------|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Advanced Apprenticeships | 05/06 | overall | 31 | 32.3% | 52.3% | 19.4% | 42.9% |
| | | timely | 40 | 27.5% | 34% | 15% | 27.3% |
| | 06/07 | overall | 45 | 69% | 62.8% | 53.3% | 56.4% |
| | | timely | 49 | 55.1% | 42.7% | 42.9% | 38.1% |
| | | overall | 32 | 72% | 67.8% | 40.6% | 62.8% |
| | timely | 43 | 39.5% | 48.2% | 23.3% | 44% | |
| Apprenticeships | 05/06 | overall | 93 | 54.8% | 57.2% | 46.2% | 51.5% |
| | | timely | 98 | 32.7% | 37.1% | 27.6% | 33.4% |
| | 06/07 | overall | 86 | 68.6% | 64.4% | 65.1% | 60.2% |
| | | timely | 81 | 44.4% | 47.1% | 42% | 44.5% |
| | 07/08 | overall | 61 | 73.8% | 67.3% | 62.3% | 64.4% |
| | | timely | 59 | 69.5% | 52.4% | 62.7% | 50.1% |

* 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/provider and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the Individual Learning Record (ILR)

Table 5

Success rates on work-based learning Train to Gain NVQ programmes managed by the college, 2007 to 2009.

| Programme | End Year | Success rate | No. of learners* | college/provider NVQ rate** |
|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Train to Gain NVQ | 2006/07 | overall | 252 | 90% |
| | | timely | 252 | 60% |
| | 2007/08 | overall | 147 | 90% |
| | | timely | 175 | 34% |
| | 2008/09 (6 months) | overall | 93 | 65% |
| | | timely | | |

Note: 2008/09 data is 'part year' only and is representative of the first three months or greater of the LSC contract year

- * 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
- ** NVQ qualification success rates are calculated using data supplied to Ofsted by the college/provider prior to inspection