

Northumberland College

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 130773

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Type of provider: General Further Education College

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Information about the provider

1. Northumberland College is the only general further education (GFE) college in the county. It has a main site in Ashington and additional sites at Kirkley Hall, Alnwick, Blyth and Berwick-upon-Tweed. It also works with the Tynedale Virtual College to deliver construction at Prudhoe. The college offers outreach provision across the county using two learning buses. The majority of the mainly rural population is White British with only 1% of black and minority ethnic heritage. Achievement at age 16 in Northumberland maintained schools is below the national average with 52% of pupils gaining five GCSEs at grades A* to C in 2009. The college's mission is 'to provide education, training and services that are of high quality to meet the needs of people and industry in Northumberland and beyond'.
2. In 2008/09 the college offered provision in 14 subject areas including a substantial contract for work-based learning. The largest funded subject area is land-based provision which is substantially delivered at Kirkley Hall. The college works in partnership with high schools across the county to provide programmes for over 500 pupils aged 14 to 16. Most of the 1,300 learners aged 16 to 18 study full time; over 3,000 adults study part time. There are over 1,500 learners on employer facing provision.
3. The college provides training on behalf of the following providers:
 - University of Sunderland (higher education)
 - Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (apprenticeships)
 - Retail Motor Industry Training Limited (apprenticeships)
 - TDR Training Limited (apprenticeships and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) at level 2 for students aged 14 to 16)
 - JTL (apprenticeships)
 - North East Chamber of Commerce (Training) (advanced apprenticeships)
 - VT Training PLC (apprenticeships)
 - South Tyneside Council (adult and community learning, apprenticeships)
 - Tyne North Training Limited (apprenticeships)
 - Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Council (apprenticeships).
4. In 2008/09, the following organisations provided training on behalf of the college:
 - Learning First Limited
 - Interactive Development Limited
 - Talent Training (UK).

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2008/09
Provision for young learners: 14 to 16	587 learners
Further education (16 to 18)	1,022 full-time learners 325 part-time learners
Provision for adult learners: Further education (19+)	480 full-time learners 3,141 part-time learners
Employer provision: Train to Gain Apprenticeships	1,011 learners 515 apprentices
Informal adult learning	323 learners

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Grade 2
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	3
Quality of provision	3
Leadership and management	3
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	3
Subject areas	Grade
Health, care and public services	2
Land-based industries	3
Engineering and manufacturing technologies	2
Construction	2
Sport, travel and tourism	2
Welfare provision (Kirkley Hall)	3

Overall effectiveness

- The overall effectiveness of the college is satisfactory. Outcomes for learners are satisfactory and improving; learners are making the progress expected of them. Success on apprenticeships is satisfactory and on Train to Gain programmes it is good. Provision in four of the subject areas inspected was judged to be good; nevertheless, across the college teaching and learning are satisfactory and there are pockets of underperformance in other curriculum areas. Welfare provision for 16 to 18 year-olds in Kirkley Hall is satisfactory. Leaders and managers are ambitious for the college to be 'exceptional'; staff have a good understanding of strategic goals. Partnership working, particularly with schools and employers, is productive; as a consequence a broad range of programmes is provided in college, in schools, at the workplace and in the community. Learner engagement is satisfactory. Whilst a learner parliament has been established, the college recognises that attendance at meetings has been

low. Learners speak positively about teachers at the college whom they regard as accessible and supportive. Employers appreciate the responsiveness of the college to their training needs; some feel that reporting on employees' progress could be more frequent.

Main findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory and improving. The long course success rate has improved over the last three years and is now comparable to the national average for similar colleges. Data for 2008/09 indicate significant improvement in some subject areas.
- Achievements on advanced apprenticeships and apprenticeship programmes have improved significantly and are now close to national averages. Outcomes on Train to Gain programmes are good.
- Learners make the progress expected of them although there are significant variations between programmes. Practical skills are well developed in many subject areas. Learners' attendance is satisfactory overall but is a target to improve.
- Learners feel safe, and health and safety in the workplace are given a high priority by staff.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Teachers use their industrial or commercial expertise well to link theory and practical work and effectively develop learners' employability and vocational skills. However, too many lessons do not sufficiently engage and challenge all learners.
- Partnership working is strong. Close collaboration with employers, schools, the local authority and community groups is successful in enabling a broad range of courses to be provided within the college and across Northumberland. Feedback from employers is not sufficiently analysed.
- Learners who are at risk of being excluded from school benefit from individually designed courses at the college. Many of these individuals continue in learning after the age of 16.
- The college ensures that parents and carers of school pupils aged 14 to 16 are kept well informed about their progress. However, this is not the case for learners aged 16 to 18, where liaison with, and feedback to, parents and carers are inconsistent.
- Welfare provision at Kirkely Hall is satisfactory and the college meets all key minimum standards.
- The college strategic plan provides an ambitious direction for development and improvement and also ensures that the college responds well to meeting local needs within the community it serves.
- Curriculum management is largely good in the subject areas inspected. However, quality improvement plans are insufficiently evaluative.

- The college learner involvement strategy is satisfactory. A learner parliament has been established but the college recognises that attendance at meetings has been low.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory; systems are in place to monitor the achievement of different groups. The promotion of safeguarding is good; all staff and governors have completed appropriate training and understand the systems in place to protect younger learners and vulnerable adults.

What does Northumberland College need to do to improve further?

- Ensure success rates for learners are consistently high across all subject areas. Ensure staff set exacting targets for learners to maximise their progress and potential.
- Continue to monitor and improve attendance levels by ensuring staff in all subject areas address poor attendance in a systematic way. Analyse the reasons for absence and provide support for learners at risk of non-attendance.
- Continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning by, for example, ensuring that lessons are challenging and meet the needs of all learners. Ensure teachers conduct frequent checks on learning and undertake regular reviews of progress to improve the quality of learners' work.
- Ensure all parents or carers receive annual written reports on the progress of learners aged 16 to 18.
- Continue to develop quality improvement mechanisms and ensure that evaluation of their effectiveness takes place; improve the use of data to set targets and monitor progress. Develop more effective systems to analyse and use feedback from all users to support quality improvement.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- accessible and approachable staff who are readily available to provide support on course-related, personal and financial issues
- teachers who demonstrate expert subject knowledge and extensive vocational experience
- the practical aspects of learning, leading to the development of new skills
- being provided with the information needed to make decisions about what to do when completing the course, including applying to higher education
- being able to make informed decisions about the amount of additional support provided
- the opportunities to gain qualifications beyond the main course of study.

What learners would like to see improved:

- a common room to meet with other students
- the reliability and accessibility of computers
- the timing of assignments so that the workload is more manageable
- more regular feedback on progress and pointers to improve
- greater variety of activities in the classroom
- fewer lessons being cancelled.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the close working relationship with the college
- prompt response of the college to identified training needs
- flexibility in the timing, location and method of delivery of courses
- being involved in the delivery of their employees' training and in turn, improving their own training skills.

What employers would like to see improved:

- more frequent communication about the progress employees are making in their training and quicker return of assessed work
- a reduction in the number of cancelled training sessions
- the quality of accommodation in some locations.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

6. The college's capacity to make and sustain improvements is good. Success rates improved in 2007/08; college data for 2008/09 indicate further improvements in retention rates in most subjects and overall success rates are predicted to increase. Success rates on apprenticeships have improved significantly; Train to Gain success rates are good. Subject inspection grades in engineering, health and social care and land-based provision represent an improvement from the self-assessment grades awarded by the college.
7. The self-assessment report is broadly accurate in identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Key underperforming courses have been identified; a number have been withdrawn and in others, course teams have received effective support and monitoring from senior managers. This has led to rapid improvements in success rates in some subjects, particularly in land-based provision in 2008/09. The subject improvement plans vary in quality and in many cases do not establish sufficiently clear or robust targets against which improvements can be measured. The college is making good progress in improving the quality of its provision. The profile of lesson observation grades has improved; overall the quality of teaching and learning remains satisfactory.
8. The quality of governance has improved since the last inspection. Governors closely monitor and review the college's financial and academic progress. Following considerable financial instability, financial and budget management have improved greatly.
9. The college has made good progress towards rectifying the key areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Success rates for learners aged 16 to 18, retention rates and average class size have all improved. A new management structure and the involvement of staff in the production of the latest strategic plan, provide a clear direction for the college's future. Whilst data are used more widely to monitor the college's performance, the use of specific targets in quality improvement plans and the sharing of good practice between departments remain areas for improvement.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

10. Learners' attainment of qualifications and learning goals is satisfactory and improving. In 2007/08 the overall success rate for long courses improved to a position which is close to the national average for similar colleges. There is little variation in the outcomes between young people and adult learners. Overall for both groups there has been a steady improvement over the last three years; however, for adults on level 2 courses, the rate of improvement has been slow. Achievements for pupils aged 14 to 16 are good; in construction, for example, all pupils recently taking the GCSE course passed with A* to C grades. There

are some significant differences in attainment across subject areas. For land-based provision, long course success rates in 2007/08 were well below 60%, whilst for services industries they reached 80%. Provisional data for 2008/09 indicate significant improvements in some sector subject areas, particularly land-based and engineering. The college recruits a low proportion of students from minority ethnic groups. Data show that most of these learners are of Asian heritage and that they perform significantly better than learners as a whole. An analysis of success rates by gender shows females performing better than males at levels 1 and 2 but this is reversed at level 3 where male learners have demonstrated significant improvement.

11. The college recognises that although, overall, learners aged 16 to 18 are making satisfactory progress, there are significant variations between programmes. For example, those on childcare diplomas are performing much better than predicted whereas those on national diplomas achieve below expectations. The college is now in the process of establishing more stringent target setting for this group of learners which takes into account their expected grades.
12. Achievements on employer responsive provision have shown significant improvement. For example, successful framework completion on apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships has nearly doubled over the last three years; the success rate is now close to the national average. Outcomes on Train to Gain programmes are good. In particular, success rates for construction are higher than 80% with relatively large numbers of employees participating.
13. Practical skills are well developed in many subject areas. In Berwick, for example, two separate town centre salons for hairdressing and for beauty therapy provide a high quality and busy work environment serving clients of different ages. In construction a particularly broad set of skills are demonstrated including floor and wall tiling and gas boiler maintenance. The aircraft simulator in travel and tourism enables a wide range of cabin crew skills to be developed.
14. Overall attendance in 2008/09 was satisfactory and similar to levels in the previous year. It is significantly better than historical rates which were below 80% in 2006/07. Learners' progression to related employment, further or higher education is good. According to data from the Learning and Skills Council's Framework for Excellence, 79% of learners progressed to 'positive' destinations in 2007/08.
15. Students speak positively about feeling safe at the college. They feel the college provides a secure and safe working environment with a low incidence of bullying or harassment. Health and safety in the workplace is given a high priority by staff; any concerns about safety can be readily discussed with course tutors. The college has started to use local health service data to identify the priorities for its health-related activities but has not yet measured participation rates. Learners make a positive contribution to the community through a variety of fundraising events and work experience. The promotion of economic well-being is supported by a variety of initiatives to develop enterprise awareness

across the college. This has included social as well as commercial enterprise with, for example, large numbers of apprentices taking part in an enterprise induction activity exposing them to the skills and knowledge required to start and run a business.

The quality of provision

Grade 3

16. Teaching and learning are satisfactory, in line with the judgement in the self-assessment report. Inspectors graded teaching and learning as good in four subject areas and satisfactory in land-based courses. In the sample of lessons inspectors jointly observed with college staff, there was broad agreement about the strengths and areas for improvement. Overall, too many of these lessons were satisfactory. The self-assessment report does not clearly identify how teaching and learning should be improved.
17. Standardised schemes of work have been implemented across the college. In most courses links between theory and practical work are good. However, lesson plans vary considerably in quality and many do not clearly identify how the needs of individual learners will be met. In the best sessions, staff use their vocational expertise and a broad range of stimulating activities to engage learners and ensure a good pace of learning. However, activities are not always sufficiently challenging and do not adequately develop skills of analysis, particularly on advanced level courses. Teachers can be too reliant on the use of open questions rather than checking the understanding of individual learners. The college's new virtual learning environment is used well to support learning and to develop independent study and research skills. However, technology is under-utilised in the classroom and often limited to the repetitive use of electronic presentations. Learners aged 14 to 16 enjoy their lessons and teachers are adept at managing behaviour to maintain interest. Learners' awareness of equality and diversity issues is satisfactorily promoted in lessons. Inspectors agree with learners that lessons help develop their confidence.
18. Initial assessments of learners are used effectively to identify additional support but the role of support workers in lessons often lacks clarity. Course assessments are satisfactory and meet awarding body standards. Inspectors agree with learners that the verbal support and feedback from their teachers is good. However, written feedback to learners on how to improve the quality of their work often lacks detail and does not always pay sufficient attention to correcting spelling and grammar. Assessment of practical skills is good in engineering and construction but less well developed in land-based courses. Assessment practices on Train to Gain and apprenticeships are good.
19. The college's arrangements to meet the needs of users are good. Learners of all ages benefit from a wide choice of courses and many successfully progress to higher levels of study. A significant number of courses from entry level to level 3 are delivered in the workplace and in a range of community locations. Two learning buses deliver courses to more rural locations. The college has

- expanded its work-based learning and Train to Gain provision to meet the needs of employers across the county.
20. Partnership arrangements are strong; collaborative working is well established. The college works closely with a range of different organisations, such as schools, voluntary organisations, the local authority and community groups, to develop and deliver a responsive curriculum. Collaborative work with schools has been very effective in the development of courses for learners aged 14 to 19, including delivery of the new Diploma programmes. Currently over 500 learners aged 14 to 16 participate in vocational learning provided by the college. College staff also teach in schools across the county, enabling many learners to have access to a varied and practical curriculum. A well established programme, supported by the local authority, effectively supports learners who are at risk of exclusion from school. In 2007/08, over 75% of these learners progressed to further education or employment.
 21. The college regularly collects feedback from employers to evaluate the quality of its provision. Although their responses have been used effectively to develop the curriculum in construction and travel, more generally, systems for analysing findings and reporting actions are underdeveloped. Mechanisms for collecting students' views have recently been improved through student surveys, focus groups and the establishment of a learner parliament. However, learners were not sufficiently clear about how their responses were acted upon.
 22. Learners benefit from a broad range of additional study opportunities provided by the college. In a number of curriculum areas they are able to participate in international visits, competitions and other activities relevant to their learning. Many gain relevant additional qualifications that enhance their progression and employment opportunities. College enrichment opportunities have been re-structured to encourage greater participation. However, learners reported that it can be difficult to take part in activities due to timetabling clashes. Opportunities to participate in work experience vary across curriculum areas. In the subject areas inspected, opportunities for work experience were mainly good; however, students in other areas were less positive about this aspect of study.
 23. The effectiveness of care, guidance and support is satisfactory. Helpful initial advice and guidance enable learners to make informed decisions about their choice of programme. Appropriate systems are in place to welcome learners to the college and to ensure that they are on the right course. A number of the learners spoken to reported that their induction programme relied too much on teacher exposition with insufficient practical activities.
 24. Diagnostic assessments are timely and comprehensive and subsequent support is responsive and effective. Appropriate mechanisms are in place to provide learners with specialist support. The success rates of learners who receive additional support appear to be broadly in line with those for the college as a whole but arrangements to monitor and analyse the effectiveness of this support are insufficiently developed.

25. Recent improvements to tutorial support have been designed to provide an entitlement for all learners. The new group tutorial programme has been aligned to the 'Every Child Matters' themes and effective use is made of outside speakers to deliver some aspects of this programme. However, as the college recognises, the new arrangements are not yet fully embedded across the college. Targets set in individual tutorials lack precision and do not always challenge learners to achieve their potential.
26. Systems for reporting to parents are under-developed. Whilst arrangements for reporting the progress of pupils aged 14 to 16 are firmly embedded, this is not the case for learners aged 16 to 18. All departments hold evenings for learners and their parents or carers. However, arrangements to ensure all parents receive regular and systematic feedback are inconsistent and some departments do not routinely send out written reports. The monitoring of attendance is improving and plans are in place to implement a college-wide process from November 2009.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

27. The college's strategic plan provides an ambitious direction for development and improvement. Staff have been fully involved in its development and value the opportunity to help shape the college's future. The strategic objectives are well understood by staff and they have a good appreciation of the part they need to play in helping the college achieve its goals. Collaborative working is a key part of the strategy which helps the college respond well to meeting local needs within the community it serves. The college restructured the management of provision during the summer; staff were clear about the need for change and high morale has been successfully maintained.
28. In the subject areas inspected, curriculum management is mostly good. Actions to improve learners' success have been effective; courses are well structured and organised; communication is effective and new staff are well supported. However more generally, targets for success, for example, attendance, retention and expected learner grades, are not systematically reviewed. In addition, there is insufficient focus on analysing and promoting the characteristics of effective teaching and learning.
29. The governance of the college is satisfactory. The quality of governance has improved since the last inspection through the introduction of governors with specific skills to help promote leadership and ambition. Governors provide proper scrutiny and challenge to senior managers. They are working hard to improve their committee structure to help shape the strategic direction of the college. The quality of information provided for governors has improved; however, it is not always provided in a timely manner.
30. The promotion of safeguarding of learners is good. Policies and procedures for safeguarding young learners and vulnerable adults are appropriate. All staff and

governors have undergone suitable training and have a good understanding of the systems in place designed to protect learners. The college has completed required Criminal Record Bureau checks and has a single register of all staff employed. Risk assessments of work placements are systematically undertaken, together with frequent monitoring visits. Pupils aged 14 to 16 are effectively supervised and there are good lines of communication between the college and feeder schools. The college has close links with the Local Children's Safeguarding Board and training of staff has taken place to meet their standards. The college is in the process of fully implementing the Independent Safeguarding Authority vetting and barring requirements.

31. Equality and diversity are promoted to a satisfactory standard. The monitoring of the performance of different groups of learners is undertaken at college level but the analysis is not routinely available at subject level. The promotion of equality and diversity in teaching, learning and assessment is satisfactory. The college has appropriate policies and plans to meet its duties with regard to race, disability and gender legislation. Equality impact surveys have yet to be fully completed. The college's legal duties towards staffing and employment are satisfactory and the ethnic profile of staff broadly reflects that of learners. Information to employers providing work placements about the need to promote equality and diversity is good. Appropriate policies are in place to cover bullying and harassment. The college attracts many learners from disadvantaged areas and works with external agencies to recruit learners who have not traditionally studied in further education. However, data to assess the effectiveness of this approach are not sufficiently analysed. The overall impact of support for individual learners on their progress, achievement and progression is also not evaluated in detail. The college complaints procedure is appropriate; responses to complaints are dealt with in a satisfactory way. Students have clear guidance on the standard of behaviour expected; they work with staff to promote the values of tolerance and respect whilst at college.
32. Employer engagement is effective. Employers are closely involved in the design and delivery of bespoke programmes. The learner involvement strategy is satisfactory. Learners have opportunities through the learner parliament to contribute to college operations. However, attendance at the learner parliament has been low and those learners spoken to were sometimes unsure about its purpose.
33. The college quality improvement arrangements are relatively new. An evaluation of the effectiveness of the process has yet to take place. The new staff appraisal process is not fully embedded. Compliance audits and reviews of college policies and procedures are not sufficiently systematic. A quality calendar has been introduced to ensure that staff are clear about the milestones in the quality assurance plan. The college self-assessment process is satisfactory; however, links between the self-assessment report and the quality improvement plan are insufficiently clear.
34. The college provides satisfactory value for money. Accommodation overall is adequate. However, some classrooms are poorly heated and ventilated. Most

college buildings are in need of modernisation. Funding for a proposed new college building has been withdrawn by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Staff and learners are working hard to develop alternative accommodation strategies and staff morale remains high. The hairdressing and beauty salons and restaurant on the main site are poorly located to attract a wide range of clients. By contrast, the hairdressing and beauty therapy salons at Berwick are in an excellent town centre location. Overall, learner outcomes are satisfactory. Class sizes have increased during the current year. The college is engaged in a variety of projects to promote sustainability and manage resources in a sustainable way.

35. The college's financial health has improved. Following a period of considerable financial instability where the college incurred a deficit in its operating costs, actions have been taken to reduce expenditure and secure further efficiencies. Robust budget management systems are now in place. Senior management and the governing body closely monitor the financial position of the college.

Subject areas

Health, care and public services

Grade 2

Context

36. Currently there are 775 learners on programmes in health, public services and care from entry level to advanced level. Just over half of these are aged 16 to 18 and attend full time. Of the 70 learners on work-based learning programmes, 15 are apprentices in health and social care. The rest are completing NVO qualifications. The majority of learners are female and of white European heritage.

Key findings

- Success rates on full-time courses are high and a significant proportion of learners achieve high grades. College data for 2008/09 indicate further improvements in success rates. Success rates are high on most NVOs. Success rates on the intermediate uniformed services course are low.
- Teaching and learning are good. A few teachers are inspirational in their approach and together with learners' enthusiasm and motivation, create a very positive culture of learning. In a few lessons there is insufficient focus on the needs and abilities of individuals. Learners' creative and display skills are well developed.
- Learners are very well prepared for eventual work in careers of their choice. The core values of equality and diversity, central to this preparation, are well reflected in staff and student relationships and in how learners describe experiences in the workplace. However, these values require further development on public services courses.
- Opportunities to make the importance of key skills clear to learners, and to gather evidence, are missed in vocational lessons. In previous years learners' progression to level 3 childcare courses has been problematic due to the lack of achievement in key skills whilst on level 2 courses.
- The range of provision is good and reviewed regularly to meet the needs of the community. For example, the college introduced apprenticeships in health and social care in September 2008 in response to local demand. There are some exciting opportunities for enrichment activities including being part of care and education schemes in Malta and Germany.
- A broad range of enthusiastic and productive partnerships clearly benefits learners. For example, the college is developing a foundation degree in playwork with the local workforce development for early years and childcare services. This partnership helps develop professional standards, supports the college in expanding the range of childcare placements and provides opportunities to link with other relevant organisations and employers.
- Curriculum management is good. A cohesive team displays ambition and determination to bring about improvements. Quality improvement plans are

clear and are regularly monitored and up-dated. Targets are effectively set and monitored. Programmes are generally well structured and organised. However, at the beginning of the year, both health and social care and childcare students spend three weeks of the first six weeks in 'directed study' at home. Though this is carefully monitored and tied into the assessment calendar, some students describe this arrangement as 'just staying at home'.

- Resources are satisfactory. A few rooms are too small for the size of group. Students complained that computer systems can be slow and unreliable. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced and satisfactorily deployed.

What does the college need to do to improve further?

- Maintain recent actions to further improve success rates.
- Further develop the values of equality and diversity on public services courses.
- Ensure all lesson plans include activities that meet learners' individual needs and abilities.
- In order to improve the achievement of key skills, make their development more discrete in vocational lessons. Take all opportunities in these lessons to gather evidence for their application.
- Review the model of 'directed study' at home at the beginning of the year to evaluate the outcomes and whether learners, parents and carers fully support this approach.

Land-based industries

Grade 3

Context

37. There are currently over 300 learners following land-based courses at the Kirkley Hall campus. Courses include animal care, agriculture, horticulture, arboriculture, countryside management and equine. Sixty three per cent of learners are aged 16 to 18; 57% are male. Close to 30 learners are on apprenticeship programmes, primarily in horticulture. Courses range from level 1 to level 3 with progression opportunities to higher education land-based courses.

Key findings

- Success rates on full-time courses are low but improving. Data indicate improved overall success rates in 2008/09 to just below the national average. Success on the national diploma in animal care is still poor. Although achievement rates were good in 2008/09, retention rates are still unsatisfactory. Apprenticeship success rates have been low but were good in agriculture and horticulture in 2008/09.
- Students' work is satisfactory. Learners are attentive and work diligently; they like the range of practical activities. Equine students undertake regular well planned yard duties which develop their skills for employment.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Teachers use industry knowledge well to illustrate links between theory and practice; however, there is insufficient attention given to meeting the needs of all learners. Technology is not used effectively in teaching. There is insufficient checking of learning. Opportunities to reinforce health and safety were missed in some lessons.
- Good use is made of the college virtual learning environment by learners and staff to check progress and access schedules and learning materials.
- The learner review process is underdeveloped. Learners receive support on an individual basis from tutors informally but the recording of tutorials lacks rigour; few tutors set challenging targets for learners to drive improvement. Individual learning plans are not well used.
- Assessment is satisfactory; students undertake a range of planned assignments and work is marked appropriately but the quality of feedback to learners is varied and often lacks constructive guidance on how to achieve higher grades.
- The range of provision is satisfactory; appropriate courses are available to meet learners' needs with progression from level 1 to higher education. The college has led the successful development of the new land-based diploma. Employer links are well established and links with local farmers allow students to work with modern equipment.
- Satisfactory action has been taken to address low success rates. The college implemented a recovery plan and, following a restructure of staffing in 2009,

curriculum management has improved. Improvements in attendance monitoring have led to increased attendance in classes.

- Management actions to address the low success rates have included the development of a student tracking system which highlights 'at risk' learners who are given additional support. Low success on national diploma programmes is being addressed through the introduction of a separate national award for all learners in year one.
- Resources to support learning are satisfactory. There is a good range of vocational resources. The college has improved aspects of the resources at the Kirkley Hall site, information technology resources have been significantly improved and the learning resource centre has been modernised. Facilities are basic in some classrooms and some vocational resources need updating.

What does the college need to do to improve further?

- Raise the standard of teaching and learning by improving lesson planning, adapting learning activities to challenge more able learners and improving the use of technology.
- Maintain the recent improvement in success rates. Use course data effectively to set clear plans and targets for improvement with regular reviews of progress.
- Improve learners' progress through more regular individual reviews and target setting to ensure they all reach their full potential.

Engineering and manufacturing technologies

Grade 2

Context

38. Provision consists of full-time, part-time and work-based learning programmes in a range of mechanical, electrical and vehicle engineering disciplines from entry level to level 4. At the time of the inspection there were nearly 400 learners, 100 of whom were full time and mainly aged 16 to 18. There are significant numbers of work-based learners and pupils aged 14 to 16 from local schools.

Key findings

- Success rates, including key skills, are satisfactory and improving. With few exceptions, success rates at all levels have improved since 2006 and college data indicate that further improvements in 2009 will take success rates significantly above national averages. In 2008/09 the proportion of apprentices completing their framework in the agreed timescale is good.
- Teaching and learning are good. There is an appropriate balance of theory and practical sessions, and a variety of methods is deployed to sustain interest, including the effective use of technology where specialist software is frequently demonstrated. Working relationships between teachers and learners are productive; a high priority is given to ensuring safe working practices.
- Lesson planning can sometimes be perfunctory and does not always incorporate strategies to meet the needs of all learners. Learners stated that they did not find the recent induction programme to be especially useful. The role of additional support workers in lessons is not sufficiently clear.
- Learners are encouraged to develop a high standard of practical skills by competing in regional and national skills competitions, in which they have achieved considerable success. The importance of practising and achieving key skills is appreciated by learners.
- The coordination of on- and off-the-job training on apprenticeships is effective. Where employers have appropriate resources, learners can reinforce the vocational skills they are developing at college.
- The range of provision is broad. Full-time learners add to their skills through additional study. For example, in motor vehicle engineering, an additional NVQ in welding is available. The curriculum is flexible to meet learners' needs. For example, those successful in gaining employment can convert from full-time learning to apprenticeships.
- There are insufficient opportunities to take part in broader enrichment activities. More opportunities have recently been introduced, although it is too early to judge the take-up of these by engineering learners.
- Leadership and management are good. Managers are ambitious to improve the department. A clear and measured strategy, now in its second year of implementation, has improved learners' outcomes. The department has been

successful in addressing the gender imbalance in engineering and has been involved in a project to promote vocational training for women. The actions resulting from self-assessment are not sufficiently linked to the quality improvement plan.

- Resources in engineering workshops vary from good to satisfactory. Some machines are old but are regularly maintained in-house to ensure that they continue to work.

What does the college need to do to improve further?

- Sustain the recent improvement in success rates and undertake a more systematic analysis of learners' progress to improve performance.
- Improve lesson planning to incorporate strategies for meeting the needs of all learners and make clear the role of additional support workers.
- Make self-assessment more evaluative, take greater account of learners' views and ensure that the quality improvement plan is closely linked to the improvements identified in the self-assessment report.

Construction

Grade 2

Context

39. The main focus of the inspection was on employer responsive provision comprising full-time, part-time, evening and block release courses from entry to level 4. Specialist courses in wall and floor tiling, floor covering, plastering, highways maintenance and interior systems are available. There are short bespoke programmes for employers. Of the 500 learners, a third are adults and about half study part time. There are large numbers enrolled on work-based learning and Train to Gain.

Key findings

- The overall completion rate for learners on apprenticeship frameworks is satisfactory. For advanced apprenticeships, the rate is good. Whereas the timely completion rates for advanced apprentices are improving, they are declining for apprentices. A high proportion of learners on Train to Gain programmes complete their programmes within the agreed timescale.
- Overall success rates on level 1 long courses are high. They are satisfactory on level 2 courses but declining and below the national averages at level 3.
- Learners develop good vocational skills and demonstrate a high level of attainment. They carry out realistic and complex practical work in the college that mirrors industrial practice. For example, learners on bricklaying courses are able to construct industry standard segmental arches, twisted columns and textured surfaces. In plastering courses, they work on curved surfaces and produce ceiling roses.
- Teaching and learning are good. Teachers use sufficiently demanding activities to challenge and motivate learners and regularly check their progress. In practical lessons, teachers emphasise health and safety strongly and learners carry out risk assessment well, identifying hazards and taking appropriate action. Learners enjoy their lessons and their attendance is good.
- Teachers do not sufficiently articulate in lesson plans strategies to extend the knowledge of the most able learners or how they intend to support the least able. Lesson plans tend to be brief and, in a minority of cases, teachers' intentions are not clear.
- Learners are well supported and guided by teachers and learning support assistants. They receive constructive and helpful feedback on their assessed work that helps them to improve the quality of their work and make progress.
- Assessors carry out on-site assessments and reviews within the expected timescale. Work-based learners are given assessment plans showing when assessments and reviews take place.
- Links with industry are effectively promoted through a construction employer forum. As one of only five national Unibond Centres of Excellence, the college enjoys extensive sponsorship and receives substantial construction materials

from industry. Links with schools are good; over 100 pupils aged 14 to 16 are enrolled on the GCSE double award in construction with high levels of success.

- Leadership and management are good. Team meetings focus on improvement; newly appointed teachers are mentored by the more experienced teachers. The management of work-based learning is good. The coordination of on- and off-the-job training is effective.
- The self-assessment report is insufficiently evaluative. Statistical data are presented but not analysed. There is insufficient emphasis in the reports on teaching and learning and on work-based learning.

What does the college need to do to improve further?

- Review level 3 courses and establish reasons for the decline in success rates to effect rapid improvement.
- Articulate, in lesson plans, strategies to show how the knowledge of the most able learners could be extended and how the least able learners might be better supported. Ensure lesson plans provide sufficient detail of the content to be covered.
- Provide more evaluation in self-assessment reports. Analyse trends in achievement data more thoroughly and provide a supporting commentary which includes action to address poorly performing courses.

Sport, travel and tourism

Grade 2

Context

40. Currently the college delivers a range of courses from foundation to advanced level to over 300 full-time learners. Of these, there are 88 learners aged 16 to 18 studying sport and 55 studying travel and tourism. Most full-time learners complete a range of additional qualifications. These include resort representatives, cabin crew, Spanish, community sports leaders awards, coaching paddle sports, first aid and fitness testing. A good range of part-time courses for adults is delivered at college and in the workplace. Two thirds of the adult learners study tourism and the remainder sport. Training is provided for a number of local employers.

Key findings

- Success rates on full-time courses are high and on most courses they exceed the national average. The progress made by learners is broadly in line with that expected from their prior attainment; however, only a small proportion of learners achieve high grades.
- The standard of learners' work is good. Learners demonstrate safe working practices in sport and outdoor education. For example, they regularly lead groups of other learners and groups from the wider community in outdoor and sports coaching activities. In travel and tourism, learners recently completed a detailed analysis of the success factors of a major theme park.
- Teaching and learning are good. Teaching is well planned and there is good pace and variety in learning activities. In most lessons, learners are engaged throughout with frequent checks on their learning. In one fitness testing lesson, learners completed a very well planned muscle location activity. Learners value the extra support provided by teachers.
- In a minority of lessons, inspectors agreed with learners that teaching and learning strategies can be repetitive, involving the overuse of electronic presentations to support teacher-led exposition and explanations. Checks on learning are sometimes limited to question and answer.
- Resources are satisfactory. Cabin crew learners develop their skills in a mock-up of an aircraft fuselage and there are sports halls at Ashington and Kirkley Hall campuses. Outdoor education learners agree that the levels of personal equipment are good but feel they would benefit from additional resources such as a climbing wall to practise their skills. Most learners agreed that access to reliable computers needs to be improved.
- The range of courses is broad. Full-time learners successfully undertake additional qualifications and develop additional practical skills required by employers. Travel and tourism learners benefit from close links with employers. A high proportion of travel and sport learners gain relevant employment or progress to further education or training.

- Learners value the level of academic and personal support provided by their teachers. The process of setting targets for learners is recent. Learners know their target grade but it is too early to judge the impact of this new approach.
- Course management is good. Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities and there are clear lines of communication. Learners report that their courses are well organised. The process of setting course performance targets has improved but performance against these targets is not used regularly to monitor the curriculum or staff.
- The self-assessment report is insufficiently evaluative. The areas for improvement in performance data and teaching and learning are not accurately identified. Lesson observation records do not evaluate sufficiently the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies. Staff development plans and quality improvement plans do not contain enough detail or a clear focus for further improvement.

What does the college need to do to improve further?

- Increase the regularity and variety of learning checks in all lessons so that all learners can demonstrate their understanding.
- Develop the accuracy and detail of the self-assessment report, lesson observations and improvement plans so that there is a sharp focus for improvement.
- Develop further the use of targets and the monitoring of performance against these targets for students and staff.

Welfare provision

Grade 3

Context

41. Northumberland College provides residential accommodation at the Kirkley Hall site. At the time of the inspection there were 12 female students and two male students aged 16 to 18 years in residence.

Key findings

- The arrangements for meeting students' health needs are good and the college is properly promoting the health and well-being of all students. There are very good working relationships with health services in the local and wider community. Students are appropriately supported by all staff. The quality of catering in the refectory is good but some students felt it should be open later in the evening. Cooking facilities in the residential block are rudimentary.
- The safety of students is satisfactorily promoted and assured by the college through its policies and procedures. Students confirm that they feel safe; however, the gender balance amongst the care staff team does not reflect the predominantly female student group. The college has effective anti-bullying and complaints procedures in place which students understand; they report that the incidence of any bullying is very low.
- There is a positive and open approach to student discipline and all of the students feel that the stated rules are fair. The privacy and dignity of students is respected by staff and they ensure no member of the public can enter the residential area.
- Students receive appropriate personal support; there is effective communication between all staff to ensure any concerns or anxieties are shared and addressed. Students report that staff are easily accessible when they need them.
- The induction of students is well managed by the college and enables them to easily settle in. Students, prior to admission, are encouraged to visit the residential site with their parents and are able to discuss their future residential arrangements.
- There is a clear statement of principle in relation to the provision of residential accommodation and student support provided by the college. This document is made available to parents and sets out the terms and conditions governing the tenure of students. Whilst living at the college, students are well supervised and know how to contact staff members at any time. All of the staff have the information they require to promote the welfare of students. The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

What does the college need to do to improve the provision?

- Ensure that the staff group supervising residential students include members of both genders, where it is practicable, within the college's staffing structure.
- Ensure that suitable cookers are provided for self-catering students preparing their meals in the residential kitchens.
- Ensure the future student accommodation action plan is completed within the agreed timescales.

Information about the inspection

42. Four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and six additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's vice-principal, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local LSC or other funding bodies, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
43. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed on behalf of the college. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the college offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)
Northumberland College

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	14-16	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners					
Full-time learners	2,017		1,022	480	515
Part-time learners	5,064	587	325	3,141	1,011
Overall effectiveness	3	2	3	3	2
Capacity to improve	2				
Outcomes for learners	3	2	3	3	2
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3				
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3				
How well do learners progress?	3				
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2				
How safe do learners feel?	2				
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	3				
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	3				
Quality of provision	3	2	3	3	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	3				
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2				
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2				
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	3				
Leadership and management	3	2	3	3	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2				
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	3				
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2				
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3				
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2				
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3				
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	3				

*where applicable to the type of provision

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