

ESPA College

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 131872

Name of lead inspector: Kath Smith HMI

Last day of inspection: 22 January 2010

Type of provider: Independent specialist college

Address: 6-7 The Cloisters
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Information about the provider

1. ESPA College is part of Education and Services for People with Autism (ESPA) which is a limited company with charitable status and provides a range of services for individuals with autism and associated conditions. ESPA College provides for day and residential learners, aged 16 to 25 years of age, from within the region and nationally, most of whom are funded by the Learning and Skills Council. There are 81 male and 20 female learners. A small number of learners are from an ethnic minority background.
2. The college is based across three sites situated in Sunderland and Newcastle, two of which provide residential programmes in separate halls of residence. Learners follow an autism specific core curriculum which focuses on emotional literacy, social understanding, thinking and problem solving. These are incorporated into five strands of the curriculum and include personal and social development, vocational and employability skills, enjoying and achieving, independent living skills and Skills for Life. Academic and vocational skills are delivered within the college and through partner further education (FE) colleges and work experience providers. The college's mission is to provide 'a high quality, autism specific, educational experience to enable students to maximise their full potential for future life, well-being and work'.

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
Provision for young learners: Further education (16 to 18)	58 full-time learners
Provision for adult learners: Further education (19+)	43 full-time learners

Summary report

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

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Grade 2
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	1
Equality and diversity	2

Overall effectiveness

3. The college's overall effectiveness is good. The college successfully promotes a culture based on mutual respect and learners make good progress in gaining the skills needed to integrate successfully into mainstream provision and the wider community. Through excellent care, support and guidance learners become much more mature in dealing with social pressures and anxieties and gain a deeper insight into how their disability impacts on their learning. Many use these skills successfully to attend local FE colleges and to secure work placements with local employers. At the end of their courses many learners move or continue into further education, training and supported employment and a significant number move into independent supported living arrangements. Learners benefit from the wide range of activities on offer and enjoy the teaching and learning which are good overall. In most cases students are actively involved in their learning. On occasions learning is insufficiently planned to meet the needs of all students and a few become disengaged. The college's observers do not place sufficient emphasis on the learning in the lesson when they are observing sessions and giving feedback to tutors. The programmes learners follow are highly individualised. However, the progress in relation to the targets set for achievement within individual learning programmes is not always effectively identified. The quality of the delivery of tutorials is too variable. Partnership working with other organisations is outstanding and has had a positive impact on outcomes for learners and the quality and range of provision. The college has outstanding safeguarding practices. The promotion of equality and diversity is good, and particularly effective in relation to the promotion of disability awareness. Self-assessment

has improved significantly although data are not sufficiently analysed to inform quality improvement planning. ESPA College provides good value for money.

Main findings

- Outcomes for learners are good. Learners achieve well on internal and externally accredited programmes from pre-entry to level 3. They make good progress in relation to their personal and social skills development and integrate successfully into mainstream provision and work placements.
- Progression made by learners onto further education, training and supported employment is good. Learners very effectively learn to live more independent lifestyles. Many learn to travel unsupported using public transport and develop the domestic and functional skills to live in more independent living arrangements within the community.
- Teaching and learning are good overall. Learners enjoy and play an active role in learning within practical sessions. However, not all learning is planned effectively. Too much emphasis is placed on the quality of teaching rather than learning within the college's observation system and feedback to tutors.
- Initial and ongoing assessment is comprehensive and rigorous. Staff know the learners well and devise targets and strategies based on a thorough knowledge of the learner and their disability. However, learners' progress is not always tracked well enough in relation to the targets set for achievement.
- The college's approach to meeting the needs and interests of learners is good. Learners follow highly personalised programmes based on the autism specific curriculum. However, the Skills for Life provision is inconsistently implemented.
- Partnership working is outstanding and a major strength of the college. Its links with other educational partners has led to better outcomes for learners with improved transition into FE colleges and access to a wide range of work experience opportunities.
- Learners' active involvement in general awareness raising of autism amongst other organisations has been promoted very effectively.
- Arrangements for care, guidance and support are outstanding. The range of specialist support and the attention given to improving the health and well-being of learners are excellent. However, the quality of tutorials varies too much.
- The college managers and the board of trustees set a clear strategic direction for the college. All the areas for improvement since the last inspection have been addressed. Staff are well trained and very committed to delivering a good quality of provision for learners.
- Arrangements to secure the safeguarding of learners are excellent. Staff and students have a very clear understanding of all aspects of health and safety. Risk assessments are extensive and very effective.

- The promotion of equality and diversity is good with a clear emphasis on meeting the individual needs of all learners.
- The college has a good understanding of its strengths and areas for development and uses this well to bring about improvements. Monitoring of teaching and learning is regular but tutorials are not monitored sufficiently. The college gathers a lot of data to inform self-assessment but analysis of this is underdeveloped.

What does ESPA College need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of feedback to tutors by placing more emphasis on the learning observed in sessions, to ensure the consistency and quality in the planning for learning.
- Arrange further staff development to ensure the better recording and tracking of learner progress.
- Develop better monitoring and evaluation of the quality of tutorials and their implementation across college sites.
- Improve the analysis of data to inform quality improvement action planning.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- The residential experience; making friends and taking part in the many activities
- The very helpful and supportive staff
- Taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh award
- The wide range of sporting and leisure activities on offer
- The active involvement they play in raising awareness of autism
- The very good teaching and learning.

What learners would like to see improved:

- The sometimes over-emphasis placed on health and safety in sessions
- Their involvement in choosing courses and activities
- Not knowing if their programmes have been approved for funding for the coming year.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

4. The college has good capacity to improve. Effective action has been taken to address weaknesses identified at the last inspection. Strategic planning is well informed by national and local priorities and the college works well with partners in the development of its provision. The levels of staff resource, expertise and commitment to implement the development plan are good. The college has a good understanding of its strengths and areas for further improvement and uses learner feedback well in its self-assessment processes. The trustees are well involved in setting the overall direction of the college; their oversight of the college work is satisfactory and particularly robust in terms of safeguarding and the promotion of equality and diversity. Financial management is good. Although accommodation is dispersed and dated, it provides a satisfactory environment for teaching and learning; plans for capital rebuild are being reviewed following national funding changes.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

5. Outcomes for learners are good. There is no difference in the achievements of different groups of learners. Many learners gain internal and external awards in accredited programmes relevant to their long term goals. Pass rates in relation to nationally recognised qualifications from pre-entry to level 3 are very good as are the number of learners gaining vocational NVQ awards and Skills for Life qualifications. The vast majority of learners achieve good results in the internal college awards based on the autism specific curriculum.
6. Learners make good progress and develop a deeper understanding of autism and how their condition impacts on their learning. They become very adept at managing their behaviour to enable them to integrate successfully into the wider community. Their confidence and self-esteem increases and their ability to interact appropriately and meaningfully with others improves significantly. With this confidence they achieve more independence and self-reliance. They become more practised at functional and domestic skills in preparation for their future living arrangements. A significant number of learners progress into more independent supported living environments.
7. Many learners successfully develop skills required in the workplace through work experience. They learn to deal with the associated pressures, co-operating with others, the importance of time keeping, and working in an adult environment. Destination outcomes have steadily improved with a high proportion of learners progressing onto further education, training or supported employment.
8. Learners enjoy the college experience, are very positive about their education and learning and both attendance and retention levels are high. Learners

successfully adopt safe working practices. The college creates a culture in which mutual respect is actively encouraged, and learners, often for the first time in their education and training, feel safe and secure.

9. Learners' improved mental health and raised awareness of their disability enables them to cope more effectively and appropriately with concerns and anxieties that affect their ability to learn. Participation in sport and leisure activities is high. Students' involvement in the community, which includes raising the profile and awareness of autism with newly appointed college staff and within the wider community, is seen as very valuable and highly thought of.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

10. Teaching and learning are good overall. Learning is more evident in practical sessions. The excellent relationships between learners and staff, based on mutual respect, mean that students participate fully in the tasks and are actively involved in their learning. The focus given in sessions on improving learners' social communication skills is clearly evident and highly relevant in increasing their ability to manage their own behaviour and to interact effectively with others. The use of ICT in learning is satisfactory and used innovatively in a few cases to engage learners. Good practical literacy and numeracy skills are developed by learners in both independence skills training and in the practical sessions. However, there are some missed opportunities for learners to practice these skills.
11. Planning for learning is less effective when tasks are insufficiently matched to individual learners' level of ability. Much work has been done to improve the rigour of college observations and these are now more systematically applied, leading to overall improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. However, college observers place too much emphasis on the quality of teaching and in their feedback to tutors not enough emphasis is placed on learning.
12. Initial and ongoing assessment is rigorous, comprehensive and highly effective in the development of individual learning plans (ILPs), particularly in relation to the autism specific learning targets. Termly reviews of student progress effectively identify how well learners are progressing in most curriculum areas. However, not all reviews of progress link well enough to the learning targets to ensure the rate of progress learners are making is successfully identified.
13. The college is highly responsive to individual learners' changing needs and interests. A wide and extensive range of courses is available and highly individualised programmes of study are developed in line with learners' long-term goals. The college has recently extended the range of courses. The introduction of the Duke of Edinburgh Award effectively provides for entry and pre-entry learners as well as additional enrichment activities for residential and weekend learners. Although each college site has a different approach to the delivery of Skills for Life, steps are being taken to adopt a more consistent approach across the college. An extensive range of daily enrichment activities

are available for learners in residences, which are usually selected and arranged by the learners.

14. The college's use of partnerships to develop its provision to meet learners' needs is outstanding. The college has strengthened links made with local employers who now provide an extensive list of work placements for learners. The college has been actively involved in establishing a centre of excellence in teacher training in the area. This has successfully raised the profile of teacher and learning support training within the college. As a result learners are actively involved in a training awareness group. This group delivers awareness training in autism to other organisations. The college has developed close and very effective partnership arrangements aimed at improved quality assurance with other Independent Specialist Colleges within and outside the region.
15. The college has close and effective relations with the specialist units in local comprehensive schools and offers flexible programmes that ease the transition for learners with autism into mainstream provision. Free training in effective approaches to people with autism has been given to staff in local FE colleges to increase the opportunities and experiences of learners from ESPA. The learners' involvement in the local community is strong and has been effectively increased by regular visits to a local home for elderly people to sell goods and invite the residents to the college to pursue handicrafts activities and social interaction.
16. Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Learners' management of their own behaviour is impressive. Highly specialised practitioners help learners to develop skills and strategies that improve their lives and lead to excellent transitions. The quality and range of specialists in therapy, psychology, psychiatry, counselling and nursing are very good and make a significant contribution to successful outcomes for learners. Regular clinical and behaviour evaluation reviews identify particular learners' mental health needs and the resultant strategies and progress of learners is thoroughly monitored. However, the quality in the delivery of tutorials is too varied.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

17. Leadership and management are good. Successful changes in the culture of the organisation have led to significant improvements in a number of areas. Staff are clear about the college's key priorities and their roles and responsibilities. The development of systems to bring coherence across the different college sites has led to much better sharing of good practice between staff. Significant investment in staff training is having a very beneficial impact on outcomes for learners.
18. The board of trustees provides a clear strategic direction for the college. Since the last inspection the membership has been expanded to develop the range of skills on the board. Trustees undertake regular training to assist them in their role. They provide a satisfactory level of challenge in monitoring the work of the college.

19. Arrangements to promote the safeguarding of learners are outstanding. Training for staff is excellent. Policies and procedures for the protection of learners are comprehensive and updated regularly. The college complies well with legislative requirements to ensure appropriate checks on staffing take place and there is good awareness of national changes to requirements. Risk assessment is carried out to an exemplary standard. The promotion of health and safety with learners is outstanding. They show a very good awareness of all aspects of their personal safety and well-being and are clear about how to raise any concerns.
20. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. A major strength of the college is the development of an understanding of autism within the community as well as across the college. Promotion of other aspects of equality and diversity is delivered effectively through the curriculum, enabling learners to develop their understanding of other cultures. Links with a range of community groups are good; learners participate in community based projects, such as an anti-racism project. Mandatory training on equality and diversity is in place for staff and trustees. Data on the achievement of different groups of learners are monitored by the equality and diversity committee and show no significant differences. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place to comply with legislative requirements. These are backed up by action plans and impact measures, although they do not always have targets that are easily measurable.
21. The effectiveness of the self-assessment process has developed significantly since the last inspection. A quality improvement cycle is in place and staff ownership of this is good. The college collects a wide range of data to inform self-assessment. However, the analysis of data is less well developed and does not always provide a useful basis for action plans. Monitoring of teaching and learning is carried out regularly but there is insufficient monitoring of tutorials. The monitoring of provision that takes place off-site, including the experience of learners who attend local FE colleges as part of their programme, is good. The college is very effective at encouraging learners to give their views and uses this information well in self-assessment.
22. Value for money is good. Staffing expertise is good and generally well deployed. Accommodation is dated and spread across a number of sites but is well maintained. Financial management within the company is good and pilot work is in place to devolve control of the budget to the college principalship.

Information about the inspection

23. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the college's deputy 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 Learning and Skills Council (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.
24. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners had recently completed on behalf of the college. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and tutorials.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

ESPA 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	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners	101	51	51
Full-time learners			
Part-time learners			
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2
Capacity to improve	2		
Outcomes for learners	2	2	2
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2		
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2		
How well do learners progress?	2		
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2		
How safe do learners feel?	1		
Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	2		
How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	2		
Quality of provision	2	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2		
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?	1		
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	1		
Leadership and management	2	2	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2		
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	3		
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	1		
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2		
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?	2		
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2		

*where applicable to the type of provision

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