

Varndean College

Inspection report

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Varndean College is a sixth form college in Brighton, East Sussex. Its mission is 'through the quality of its provision and support for a diverse community, encourage and inspire all its students to fulfil their potential'. The college is based at the Surrenden campus just outside the city centre which it shares with an infant school, a junior school and two 11 to 16 schools. The college works closely with Downs View Link College. It shares facilities and accommodation with the Link College where students all have severe learning difficulties and some, in addition, have physical disabilities. The college's main catchment area covers the unitary authority of Brighton and Hove, but also takes students from surrounding areas in East and West Sussex. Brighton and Hove has one other sixth form college, a medium size general further education (GFE) college and

two universities. Varndean College has a formal accord with the two local colleges. The principal is chair of the accord.

2. Brighton has a population of approximately 250,000. Those of working age are well educated but the proportion of young people achieving five A* to C GCSE grades in 2006 was 55.2%, below the national average of 59.2%. The city is a major tourist, leisure and conference destination and economic growth is improving steadily. At 2.9%, unemployment is above the regional average and earnings are below the national average. Approximately one third of children are estimated to be living in poor households.
3. In 2006/07, the college enrolled over 1,200 full-time students aged 16 to 18, and 1,200 part-time adult students. The college also has 50 mature students on full-time Access courses and there are a growing number of international students. Two hundred and twenty students have an identified special educational need at the college and there are an increasing number of refugees.

Summary of grades awarded

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

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

4. This is a good college which has a number of outstanding features. Achievement and standards are good. Success rates for those aged 19 and above on level 3 courses improved significantly between 2004/05 and 2006/07. The large majority of students aged 16 to 18 follow level 3 courses and achievement rates are good. A good proportion of students on GCE A level courses gain high level (A, B) grades. Students on these courses make particularly good progress in relation to their prior attainment and the standards of work are good or better. Progression between levels is good. Key skills success rates are poor overall although the number of students who gain partial achievement is high. The college has put appropriate measures in place to improve this although it is too early to see the full impact. Actions taken to improve overall attendance between 2004/05 and 2006/07 have been successful. Attendance is good at 89%.
5. Teaching and learning are good. Most students make good progress and demonstrate particularly high standards of work. Students enjoy their lessons and contribute well to discussions. Assessment practice is good. Whilst most teaching resources are adequate and students have good access to computers, accommodation in some areas is tired and cramped.
6. The range of provision to meet the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. Opportunities for enrichment and curriculum enhancement are also outstanding. There are highly effective collaborative links with local schools and in particular the Downs View Link College. Staff work well with students from the Link College on specific projects and are given very good support. Employer engagement is good. The provision for learners aged 14 to 16 is strong and the college's approach to safeguarding students is good.
7. Guidance and support for students are good and the college's response to educational and social inclusion is outstanding. The college attracts a high proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Access for students with mobility difficulties is good and the college has responded very well to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 (SENDA). Only a small part of the campus remains inaccessible to students with mobility difficulties although this does not affect access to learning.
8. Leadership and management overall are good. Leadership by the principal, governors and senior managers is outstanding. They give a good strategic direction and there is a strong focus on achievement. Success rates for those aged 19 and over have improved significantly. Recent restructuring of curriculum management has led to a clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities. Although some areas of accommodation are unsatisfactory, much has been done to ensure that this does not impact significantly on learning. The college has well developed plans to rebuild and improve

accommodation. Value for money is good. The college's self-assessment is well written, evaluative and broadly accurate.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: Grade 1

9. The college has outstanding capacity to improve. Since the previous inspection, the principal and senior managers have successfully established a culture of openness and trust. Recent middle management restructuring has given clear lines of accountability and staff share in the common strategic vision of the college. More level 1 and 2 provision is now offered along with a broader range of courses in each curriculum area. Quality improvement procedures are generally good. Self-assessment is robust and evaluative and is used well to improve provision.

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

10. The college has successfully addressed most of the weaknesses identified at the last inspection although the low success rates for key skills have not been rectified. Identified strengths have been consolidated and a wider range of courses is now offered across all levels. Success rates for those aged 19 and above have improved. Data are robust and have been significantly improved. Data are now used particularly well to inform improvements. The college's financial position is good and there are advanced plans to improve the quality of accommodation.

Key strengths

- very good standards of learners' work
- very good progress at A level relative to prior attainment
- good target setting to help students' progress
- particularly good additional learning support
- outstanding educational and social inclusion
- outstanding partnerships and collaborative arrangements
- very good use of data to inform improvements
- good strategic direction
- outstanding senior leadership.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- on-course retention for 16 to 18 year olds
- accommodation in some areas
- the use of teaching and learning observations to inform staff development.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

11. The college accurately judges that achievement and standards are good. High grades (A, B) for students on GCE A levels were good in 2005/06 and have remained so in 2006/07 at 52%. Students on these courses make particularly good progress in relation to their prior attainment. Value-added scores have been consistently high for those on A level courses for the past few years. Attendance is improving and is good at 89%. Success rates for all students on level 3 courses have risen in the last three years and pass rates are good in 2006/07. The college has recognised that the low retention for those aged 16 to 18 has been an issue and appropriate actions have been put into place to ensure this improves. However, it is too early to see the impact of this.
12. The standard of students' work is very good and in some cases outstanding. Students demonstrate a good understanding of their subjects and work in portfolios is of a good standard. Art work is proudly displayed around the college and standards in this area are of a very high quality. This curriculum area, along with the Access programme, has been judged by the college as outstanding. Students enjoy being at the college and find learning fun. Participation in extra-curricular activities adds to their fulfilment. The conduct and behaviour of students are outstanding.
13. Key skills success rates for application of number and communications remain low from the last inspection. However, most students gain partial success on these and much work has been done by the college to try and improve full success rates. It is too early to see the results of actions taken. Information and communication technology (ICT) level 2 key skills success rates are satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

14. The quality of provision at the college is good. Teaching and learning are good. The college's assessment of its strengths and areas for improvement in teaching and learning is accurate. Lessons are well planned and well paced. They include a good range of learning activities to maintain students' interest and motivation. Exercises and activities are imaginative and used well to extend or reinforce students' learning. Their assessed work is generally marked thoroughly and returned promptly. The areas for development identified by the college include better application of the college's policies on behaviour and attendance, more challenge for students and better checking of their understanding. Some teaching accommodation is cramped and uninspiring. Recently introduced policies on student behaviour and attendance and punctuality are not yet well established.
15. The college provides very good additional learning support. Needs are diagnosed promptly and the provision of support is timely. Support is carefully aligned to meet individual needs. A broad range of support is available and includes practical support from individuals, adaptive technology, generic and specialist support to meet specific needs. Arrangements are well publicised and

students are confident that their needs will be met effectively and sensitively. The college keeps detailed records of learners' support needs and the progress they make. Students value the support they receive and make good progress. However, the college does not formally evaluate the impact of additional learning support on students' achievement. Students at the college receive good initial guidance and support. Information and guidance on careers and progression to higher education are good.

16. The college's provision of programmes and activities is outstanding and very successful in meeting the needs and interests of students. Progression within the college, and to higher education and employment, is good. Curriculum planning arrangements at the college are good. It has very effective collaborative arrangements with local post-16 providers in the city to ensure that provision offers a broad range of courses to meet the needs of the local population. Links with local schools provide level 1 courses to reduce the number of young people not in education and training. Outreach provision in several areas of deprivation is successful in increasing participation among adults. Collaboration with Downs View Link College for students with severe learning disabilities is excellent and offers particularly beneficial learning and social experiences for students at Varndean and the Link College. There is good collaborative work between the two institutions.
17. The college provides a wide and varied range of enrichment activities for students. They include activities which are successful in developing students' skills; for example, in raising their awareness of national and international issues through the political society. A good selection of sports and performing arts are represented in the range of activities offered to learners. Trips and visits, though often linked to curriculum activities, are used well to broaden students' horizons. The college's links with employers provide a wide range of work experience for students and visiting speakers in curriculum subjects and enrichment activities.
18. The tutorial system is well organised. The scheme of work for tutorials is clear and linked carefully to Every Child Matters outcomes. It covers a good variety of topics on personal, social, and academic themes and prepares students well for progression beyond college. Communication between subject teachers and tutors is effective in sharing information on students and their progress.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Contributory grades:

Equality of opportunity

Outstanding: Grade 1

19. Leadership and management are good. Leadership by the principal, governors and senior managers is outstanding. They use their wide ranging expertise to provide a clear strategic direction and vision for the college. The principal and senior managers have developed a strong ethos of openness and trust where staff are valued. There is a strong focus on achievement and staff clearly share in the values of the college mission. Relations between governors and college

managers are good and governors are highly supportive. Governors are very well informed about curriculum issues and have a good understanding of the key challenges faced by the college. They play an important role in monitoring student performance. Internal and external communications are good and the college responds particularly well to local and National initiatives. Curriculum managers are new in post and the full impact of these recent appointments is yet to be seen.

20. Quality improvement procedures are generally comprehensive. Feedback from students, parents and employers is well used to make improvements and inform the provision. There are good procedures in place for monitoring students' progress. Most weaknesses identified at the previous inspection have been fully addressed although key skills success rates remain low. Self-assessment is thorough and has accurately identified the key areas for improvement. The report is well linked to the development plan and targets for achievement. Observations of teaching and learning are thorough although in some cases the recording of these does not match up with the grades given. Insufficient use is made of the results of lesson observations in staff development or in sharing of best practices. Tutorials are included in the college's observation programme. However, records of these observations do not include sufficient information on what learners have gained from the session. The college has good arrangements for child protection.
21. Accommodation in some areas of the college is tired and cramped. The college strives to make best use of its accommodation but it recognises the need to make significant improvements. The college is at the early stages of planning to rebuild much of its facility. Despite having some poor accommodation very good efforts have been made to meet the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 (SENDA). Value for money is good.
22. Equality and diversity are outstanding. Equality of opportunities is well promoted. Although few, prompt actions are taken to deal with complaints, bullying and harassment. Staff are well trained to be able to give effective support to students with disabilities, including those from the Link College. Staff have a good understanding of equality and diversity which is well embedded across the curriculum. Equality of opportunities is well referenced in tutorials and lessons to ensure the development of students' knowledge and understanding. Overall, the college's response to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 is outstanding.

Learners' achievement

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	Under 19				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
1 Long	04-05	193	50	64	-14	442	33	56	-23
	05-06	229	71	71	0	211	54	56	-2
	06-07	110	66			176	61		
GNVQs	04-05	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	05-06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06-07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
NVQs	04-05	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	05-06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06-07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Other	04-05	193	50	63	-13	442	33	56	-23
	05-06	229	71	71	0	211	54	56	-2
	06-07	110	66			74	51		

* gaps in the table denote no courses running

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	Under 19				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
2 Long	04-05	453	73	73	0	294	49	56	-7
	05-06	442	74	78	-4	180	68	64	4
	06-07	578	71			183	63		
GCSEs	04-05	295	74	78	-4	73	68	65	3
	05-06	297	78	82	-4	88	69	66	3
	06-07	379	78			95	59		
GNVQs	04-05	59	75	74	1	...	...	...	...
	05-06	35	57	77	-20	1	0	...	...
	06-07	48	73						
NVQs	04-05	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	05-06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06-07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Other	04-05	99	68	62	6	221	43	52	-9
	05-06	110	70	70	0	91	68	61	7
	06-07	151	66			88	67		

* gaps in the table denote no courses running

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	Under 19				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
3 Long	04-05	3393	79	82	-3	101	76	59	17
	05-06	3417	80	83	-3	174	74	65	9
	06-07	3218	82			104	77		
A/A2 Levels	04-05	1071	87	92	-5	14	93	76	17
	05-06	1186	92	93	-1	36	86	78	8
	06-07	1114	93			41	85		
AS Levels	04-05	2150	77	78	-1	40	70	54	16
	05-06	1999	75	79	-4	71	63	58	5
	06-07	1886	75			49	69		
GNVQs	04-05	123	67	74	-7	2	50		
	05-06	57	74	74	0	2	50	...	...
	06-07	42	64					...	...
NVQs	04-05	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	05-06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06-07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Other	04-05	49	59	72	-13	45	78	56	22
	05-06	175	63	75	-12	65	78	62	16
	06-07	176	78			14	79		

* gaps in the table denote no courses running