

Varndean College

Sixth form college

Inspection dates		25–28 September 2012
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-Grade 2
	Previous inspection:	Good-Grade 2
Outcomes for learners		Good-Grade 2
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-Grade 2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-Grade 2

Summary of key findings for learners

This college is good because:

- Students make good progress and many achieve better than would be expected.
- Most students complete their course successfully and move on to higher level courses, with a large number going to higher education, including many to prestigious universities.
- Students develop good skills and knowledge and produce work of a high standard.
- Enthusiastic and skilled teachers plan and deliver lessons thoughtfully and imaginatively, enabling students to be successful.
- Students appreciate the strong support from staff, which promotes learning and enables them to develop positive working relationships with each other.
- Students benefit from the creative and vibrant classroom displays, interesting teaching materials and the comprehensive virtual learning environment (VLE).
- Teachers and tutors provide frequent, high-quality feedback on students' work, which helps to develop students' understanding and enables them to improve.
- Strong leadership, management and governance, in the best interests of students, successfully raise standards and help students to do their best in their studies.
- Courses are closely linked to the needs of the local community, and many young people and adults benefit from the opportunity to return successfully to education.
- Students study in a safe environment, where equality and diversity are promoted well.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- Too many students do not complete their course successfully, particularly adults on foundation level programmes.
- Not enough teaching and learning sessions are outstanding in the use of questioning to support, challenge and inspire all students.
- Success rates on functional skills courses are inadequate.
- Individual targets set for students are not always clearly expressed or sufficiently aspirational.
- Staff need to set clearer improvement targets to raise the quality of provision further.

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Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Increase the overall proportion of students completing their course successfully, particularly adults at foundation level, by ensuring individual students' targets are explicit, easy to understand and raise students' aspirations.
- Increase the amount of outstanding teaching and learning, particularly through more effective use of questioning to support, challenge and inspire all students.
- Improve results and the quality of functional skills provision by the timely use of initial assessment and more effective coordination and course management.
- Develop consistently high-quality self-assessment by improving the use of students' outcomes data to support judgements, and by sharpening the precision of actions for improvement.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students make good progress and the majority reach a higher level of attainment than might be expected from their starting points. This added value has been a consistent feature of the college since the last inspection, when it was highlighted as a key strength for A-level students. ▪ The overall proportion of students completing their course successfully is satisfactory. The proportion of successful students is broadly comparable to that in other sixth form colleges for students on intermediate and advanced level courses, but is too low for the smaller number of adult students taking foundation level programmes. ▪ The majority of students in the college take AS/A levels and the overall success rate is good. It is outstanding in A-level subjects such as English language, psychology, fine art and photography, with a high proportion of students achieving high-grade passes. It requires improvement for the much smaller number of adults taking AS-level subjects. ▪ The college has a very successful International Baccalaureate Diploma course. In 2011/12, all students completing the course passed and the average diploma score per student was very high compared to national and international averages. ▪ Staff analyse the results of different groups of students thoroughly. The numbers of students belonging to specific minority ethnic groups are too low to identify any significant underperformance by any group. ▪ Students are supported well in their progression to higher level courses. For example, a highly successful foundation level programme for young people disaffected with education, taught in an outreach centre located in a housing estate in a disadvantaged area, enables many of these students to progress to intermediate or higher level courses. ▪ A high proportion of students are successful in progressing to higher education, many joining prestigious universities. ▪ Students develop their English and mathematical skills well in lessons, for example in science and art. However, success rates for key skills and functional skills courses are very poor and, despite a large increase in 2011/12, they remain inadequate. The high-grade success rate for those taking GCSE English in 2011/12 was good, but requires improvement for mathematics. ▪ The overall standard of students' work is good and outstanding for a significant number of courses. Students develop good independent learning skills. The broad range of high-quality student work displayed on walls enlivens the learning environment and raises the ambition and expectation of students when they first join the college. ▪ Students enjoy coming to college and going to lessons and this is reflected in the high attendance rates. They work well with each other and as a team. The broad range of extra-curricular activities, often aligned to the curriculum, helps students to develop skills and knowledge and become more successful in their studies. Many students undertake voluntary 	

activities that help to build their self-esteem. A highly effective scheme through which students mentor other students is successful at developing the self-confidence of mentors and mentees alike.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good and a significant amount is outstanding. This reflects the college's ethos of maintaining a strong focus on learning for all students and staff. Teachers are knowledgeable about their subjects. Managers are keen to enable teachers to improve their skills and teachers participate enthusiastically with college initiatives such as 'research lessons' which improve teaching practice and lead to a high-quality experience for students.
- Teachers plan and deliver a thoughtful range of activities to promote learning. They question students skilfully to promote deeper learning and provide challenge to the more able. However, in a small minority of lessons, questioning does not stretch and probe sufficiently to ensure all students progress well. Teachers and other staff demonstrate their high expectations and levels of care for their students through their strong support.
- Teachers share a commitment to developing strong independent study skills in students. Students make good progress in lessons and are attentive, confident and work well together. Teachers and students appreciate the college's VLE and it is used well, ensuring easy access to learning and assessment materials.
- Abundant teaching and learning resources are used well and include playing cards, mini-whiteboards and excellent study booklets which are devised and used by teachers to extend and consolidate learning. Classroom walls are packed with thoughtfully-chosen visual resources, imaginative displays of students' work and interesting subject-specific material.
- The initial assessment of students to determine if they have any additional learning needs requiring learning support is effective. Information gleaned from these assessments is used well to provide general or subject-specific support for students.
- Teachers develop students' English and mathematics skills within their subject-specific lessons. However, the literacy and numeracy levels of students are not formally assessed when they join the college and functional skills programmes are not coordinated effectively, leading to poor results.
- Feedback from teachers to improve students' work is good. Most students know what they need to do to improve. The creative use of peer support and assessment between students encourage active discussion in lessons. Thorough checking of learning, often in individual meetings with teachers, ensures students develop a good understanding of their subjects. Students value the close monitoring of their progress by tutors and teachers.
- Individual tutorials help students to make progress and improve. However, students are set targets to raise their achievement, but many are unclear about their target grades. Targets are linked to the students' current or past performance and so are insufficiently aspirational. Group tutorial sessions support students effectively in preparing for further study, but they are too often focused on the completion of booklets. Parents and carers are very appreciative of the way the college keeps them informed of the progress of their sons and daughters.
- College open days and evenings, initial advice and guidance and a useful 'settling in' session for vulnerable students help all students to prepare for the rigours of study in an adult environment. Enrichment and trips are linked where appropriate to class activity. Students from a variety of courses attend events outside their study area, for example the vibrant politics society and life drawing classes.
- Opportunities to promote understanding of equality and diversity are exploited fully by teachers and appreciated by students, with relevant materials displayed widely. The college provides a tolerant and safe environment where students are comfortable discussing issues such as sexuality and diversity.

Science

Learning programmes for 16-18

Learning programmes for 19+

Good

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good, leading to good outcomes overall in most A/AS-level science courses, GCSE science and the science component of the International Baccalaureate Diploma. However, success rates in AS Physics require improvement.
- Teachers successfully encourage students to develop independent learning skills, utilising high-quality learning materials. For example, students in a biology lesson produced good work on different types of cells using a variety of different methods and learning resources. The VLE for chemistry and physics provides a wide range of high-quality resources that students use well for independent study.
- In the best lessons, teachers employ effective planning, organising both activities that are relatively straightforward and some that are more difficult to complete. This ensures that less able students are supported well, while the more able are stretched fully, facilitating excellent progress for all students. In less effective lessons, teachers provide few extension activities to challenge more able students and too little support for students who find the work difficult.
- Support for students outside of science lessons is good and students appreciate the additional sessions that help them with science topics which they are struggling to understand. Science teachers also regularly spend much time helping students individually.
- Teachers monitor learning effectively in the majority of science lessons through a wide range of methods, including direct questioning, the use of mini-whiteboards and the setting of examination questions. This allows teachers to gauge accurately the progress made by each student.
- Teaching and learning in science lessons are highly effective in developing students' English and mathematical skills. For example, students in a GCSE science lesson extended their use of scientific terminology, and the precision of their use of mathematics, when planning and carrying out a practical laboratory exercise investigating the effect of the stimulant caffeine on their reaction times.
- A recently introduced BTEC advanced level science course provides an appropriate alternative progression route to A/AS-level science courses for students who want a career in science. International Baccalaureate students also value the opportunity of taking at least one science option as part of their course. Teachers have adapted quickly to these new courses and teach them well.
- Equality and diversity are promoted imaginatively in science in a variety of ways. For example, teachers review the historical reasons why women had fewer opportunities than men to become scientists. The college has a high proportion of female science teachers who act as role models for female students. Any use of homophobic language is always challenged and students feel comfortable discussing sexuality with their teachers and other students in science lessons.

Visual arts

Learning programmes for 16-18

Learning programmes for 19+

Outstanding

- Outcomes for students are outstanding. Nearly all students complete their courses successfully in fine art and photography A levels and a high number overall in visual arts programmes. Many students attain high-grade passes in A-level textiles, three-dimensional (3D) design and photography, and in AS-level fine art, critical studies and photography courses. Success rates have increased significantly in the last year for intermediate level art courses. These results are reflected in the outstanding quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Teachers are well qualified and have very high expectations for their students. The standard of students' work is very high. Drawing and experimental work in AS-level lessons encourage students to explore materials and discover their possibilities. A-level students develop a personal visual language and produce very good work. Students attend punctually and make good progress, particularly in A-level lessons.
- Students in textile lessons use layers of colour and texture to produce richly-decorated fabrics. In 3D-design lessons, students develop innovative responses to design problems. Graphic design students draw well and apply this skill to their digital work. Fine art students use mixed media successfully and photography students produce inventive images using both traditional and digital methods.
- Good teaching in lessons promotes independent learning. Students learn to use a wide range of increasingly technical skills using both old and new technologies. Teachers are most effective when carrying out short demonstrations and then arranging for students to undertake a broad range of tasks which are often evaluated by their peers. Lessons move at a swift pace. However, in some AS-level lessons teachers do not pose sufficient questions to prompt student debate or to engage the entire group.
- Teachers provide exemplary individual support to students. Students value individual tutorials where dialogue often links theory and practice. Students analyse their work with increasing confidence and extend their specialist vocabulary. For example, graphic design students analyse contemporary graphics and fine art practice and successfully relate the themes to their own work.
- Assessment of classwork and homework is thorough, with clear written guidance for improvement. Feedback sheets record progress well and are kept in sketchbooks and workbooks which reinforce learning. Regular opportunities for peer and self-assessment sustain a critical and analytical approach to assessing students' work. A large number of students progress to higher education. The few students who wish to work directly when leaving the college often find employment in the creative industries.
- Highly-effective planning by staff ensures that the large number of course groups have equal access to resources. Course handbooks offer helpful advice for design development and research. The VLE for visual arts is satisfactory overall and helps students to become more confident in their research and private study. It is used particularly well by photography students who value the additional technical and creative resources available.
- Specialist resources are good. Space is rather cramped for some groups, but teachers make efficient use of space and storage areas. High-quality student work is displayed on the walls of studios and workshops and raises the aspirations of current students. Technicians work effectively to support advanced skills development and to promote safe working practices. Many students use the studios for private study, working alongside taught groups when space permits.
- Enrichment activities in art extend learning for students from all subject areas of the college. Life drawing, photography, digital imaging and textiles sessions are well attended. Students benefit from visits to major exhibitions and museums for primary research. Various external projects reflect professional arts practice. A well-considered range of cultural influences successfully embeds the promotion of diversity throughout the curriculum.

Social sciences

Learning programmes for 16-18

Learning programmes for 19+

Good

- Students benefit from good teaching, learning and assessment and success rates are high in almost all subjects, including the psychology element of the International Baccalaureate Diploma course. However, success rates for AS sociology are below national rates. Students make at least good progress relative to their starting points and very good progress on psychology courses.
- Almost all teaching is at least good and a high proportion is outstanding. Lessons are well planned, with students moving through a sequence of activities that require increasingly complex levels of engagement. Tasks set are imaginative, engaging and demanding and students respond well to almost all that they are required to do. Inspectors observed highly creative approaches to teaching abstract concepts in sociology lessons.
- Teachers often pose skilful questions that explore and challenge the understanding of students. Less successful aspects of teaching are when questioning lacks penetration and students do not have to think hard or are reluctant to contribute individually, and when they do it reveals gaps in their background knowledge.
- Appropriate emphasis on the development of examination techniques is evident in lessons and in learning support materials. In psychology particularly, teachers pay close attention to the higher-order thinking, evaluative and analytical skills of students, the use of technical vocabulary and the skills needed to achieve target grades. Students receive good support from teachers and a high proportion progress to university.
- Teachers provide a highly effective initial induction to the course. This helps students to adjust to the demands of advanced level work whilst introducing the rudiments of the subject in an approachable way. Students complete 'flying start' tasks which form the basis of initial subject work and give teachers an immediate insight into the current level of performance for each individual.
- Students make good use of high-quality study booklets which blend core reading, activities and extension work. Sociology and psychology students greatly value these booklets and they are at the heart of teaching activities and strategies to check understanding and apply learning to new contexts.
- Teachers attend diligently to the learning needs of individual students. Psychology teachers in particular use time well when students are working on tasks to check the progress of other individuals, clarifying understanding, re-focusing and challenging them as appropriate. Workshop support and revision support sessions are effective and valued by students.
- Teachers check the progress of students frequently with a variety of techniques, and use the outcomes of these checks to shape subsequent learning. In most lessons, students use mini-whiteboards to demonstrate their understanding of key terms and ideas, enabling teachers to share successful answers with the rest of the class, and also to identify and correct mistakes. Teachers set and assess homework regularly.
- Psychology and sociology lessons promote equality and diversity effectively. Classroom displays and lesson content celebrate diversity and teachers are careful to ensure that sensitive issues are handled carefully.

English

Learning programmes for 16-18

Learning programmes for 19+

Good

- Overall students' outcomes are good, and for some courses outstanding, owing to good teaching, learning and assessment. Most courses have improved their success rates and they

are at, or above, national averages. Students make excellent progress, in comparison to their prior attainment, for AS and A-level English language courses, and they make the expected progress on AS and A-level English literature courses. Progression rates to university are high.

- Lessons include a broad range of activities which build logically on the prior learning of students. Students appreciate the enthusiasm and excellent subject knowledge of their teachers. They usually work collaboratively and are able to describe and discuss with confidence difficult linguistic and literary concepts. Video clips engage students and stimulate discussion. For example, a video of a national politician’s speech was used to good effect to introduce ideas about government in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*.
- High expectations and challenge feature strongly in the large majority of lessons. Teachers use questions effectively to extend students’ understanding. In the small amount of less effective teaching, teachers used too few specific tasks to stretch and challenge all students.
- Independent learning skills are developed well, enabling students to make good progress. Students are encouraged to use the rich variety of resources on the VLE and they benefit from an extra-curricular reading group and creative writing class to develop their skills further.
- Teachers promote equality and diversity well, and students discuss related topics enthusiastically. For example, when discussing Pinter’s *Homecoming*, students had a lively discussion about male sexuality and modern views of masculinity.
- The standard of students’ work is good and shows the clear development of skills over time, particularly for the more able students. For example, students improve their ability to interpret critical readings of literary texts. Students demonstrate excellent analytical skills and are encouraged to build on each other’s points of view when exploring the effect of rhetorical devices. In a minority of literature sessions, students are not sufficiently interested to make good progress.
- Support for students is outstanding. Teachers demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the needs of their students and they give excellent support during and outside of lessons. Students may also receive help from English teachers during supervised additional sessions. Good advice and guidance are provided to ensure students enrol on the right course and for those wishing to progress to higher education.
- The pre-course induction materials given to students create a good homework ethos. Teachers assess students’ work regularly, particularly on the English element of the International Baccalaureate course. Students value the feedback from teachers and know what to do to improve, except for a few lower ability students where feedback is not always sufficiently detailed to help them improve.
- Teachers check learning frequently during lessons and there is effective use of peer assessment to assess and reinforce learning. However, a significant number of students lack clarity about their progress against the individual target grade they are set.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Highly effective and inclusive leadership puts students first in the management of the college. The Principal, senior managers and governors provide clarity of vision and strategic direction for the college, seeking to consistently raise aspirations. Managers and staff are determined in their efforts to raise standards and support students to achieve their full potential. A well-established culture of openness and consultation promotes improvement. Staff feel well supported by their line managers.
- Good leadership and management, with determined ambition to improve, have enhanced the quality of the college’s provision since the previous inspection. Outcomes for students, and teaching, learning and assessment are good. Of particular note, in this very inclusive college, is the significant extent to which students make better than expected progress, given their starting points.
- Governance of the college is strong. Governors provide good challenge and support to managers and are very knowledgeable about the work of the college and of their local

communities. They bring a good range of skills and experience to their work as governors. Their work to improve students' performance and to achieve very good financial management is particularly strong. Managers have improved significantly the quality of accommodation since the previous inspection and are proactive in seeking funding to make further improvements to the campus.

- The college's curriculum meets the needs of users well. The development of an inclusive curriculum is evident, with both academic and vocational routes. Managers review the curriculum systematically and update it in the light of local and national priorities. The quality of the International Baccalaureate Diploma programme is notable and visual arts is outstanding. More vocational qualifications have been developed since the previous inspection, especially at foundation and intermediate levels.
- In the successful pursuit of its vision, the college works extensively and highly effectively with its local communities. It is actively involved in, and helps to lead, local education and community partnerships. In helping to shape provision for young people and adults, it is a productive member of the well-established 'accord' between the three Brighton post-16 colleges. This provides a secure and respected mechanism for rational post-16 provision across the Brighton and Hove area.
- Wider partnerships are strong, including those with the local authority and with charities, to increase participation among hard-to-reach young people, with some good provision (including outreach courses) for those who are disadvantaged and disaffected.
- Management of the curriculum is good, especially in charting and improving performance. Capable middle managers welcome the key responsibilities they now have to further improve the quality of teaching and learning. They are well supported and encouraged by senior managers, within a clear management and performance framework. However, the management and coordination of functional skills are ineffective, leading to poor outcomes for students.
- Good arrangements for quality assurance, incomplete at the previous inspection, enable governors, managers and teachers to evaluate fully the quality of provision and take effective steps to improve. Leaders and managers have a realistic view of the college's strengths and necessary areas for improvement. The college's capacity to make further and sustainable improvement is good. All key aspects of quality improvement are exposed to external scrutiny, through partnership working with other colleges.
- A comprehensive and thorough system of lesson observations provides governors, managers and teachers with a clear view of the quality of teaching and learning and what needs to be done to improve further. In appropriate cases, the outcomes of lesson observations are used as part of rigorous, but supportive, procedures to tackle underperformance. Staff are well supported through training and development activities. The outcomes of the teaching observation scheme help shape these.
- Self-assessment of the college's strengths and weaknesses is robust. It makes good use of the views of students. Judgements at subject level are sometimes insufficiently supported by a thorough understanding of underlying students' outcomes data. Action plans for improvement are increasingly sharp and quantifiable, although their quality varies in subject self-assessment reports. The sharing of good practice between teachers is developing well.
- Equality and diversity, which are central to the college's work, are managed and promoted very well. The implementation of up-to-date policies and procedures, with good use of stakeholders' views, ensures that the college successfully meets its obligations. Active analysis of student data, with action taken, has narrowed significantly any achievement gaps. The promotion of equality and diversity in teaching and learning is good and teachers are careful to ensure that sensitive issues are handled carefully and tactfully.
- Equality of opportunity is also successfully promoted through the college's extensive profile within the local communities, through its offer of a wide range of courses and through its partnerships, significantly attracting students who would otherwise not have continued with their education.
- The college meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding students. Safeguarding

arrangements are comprehensive, thorough and rigorously applied. Detailed assessment of risk, both for different students and for different categories of students, allows for appropriate and sensible levels of safeguarding. As indicated in students' responses to college surveys and through discussions with inspectors, students feel very safe in the college.

Record of Main Findings (RMF 2012)

Varndean College

Learning types:

16-18 learning programmes leading to qualifications: FE full- and part-time courses;

19+ learning programmes leading to qualifications: FE full- and part-time courses

Community learning.

Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	16-18 Learning programmes	19+ Learning programmes	Community learning
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2	2
Outcomes for learners	2	2	2	2
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	2	2	2

Subject areas graded for quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Science	2
Visual arts	1
Social sciences	2
English	2

Provider details

Varndean College	
Inspection dates	25-28 September 2012
Lead inspector	Tony Noonan HMI
Type of provider	Sixth form college
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year 2011/12	2,286
Principal	Dr Phil Harland
Date of previous inspection	December 2007
Website address	www.varndean.ac.uk

Provider information at the time of the inspection				
Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Total number of full-time learners	11	99	1357	N/A
Age of full-time learners				
	14-16	16-18	19+	
Total by age	3	1416	48	
Number of part-time learners				
	589			
Number of main sites				
	1			
Funding received from				
	SFA and EFA			

Additional socio-economic information

Varndean College is located in the north of Brighton and Hove, within the Surrenden campus which it shares with four schools: one primary school, two high schools and Downs View Link College. Courses are also offered at outreach centres in the local community. The college recruits heavily from the immediate area and East and West Sussex. It is an inclusive sixth form college providing foundation, intermediate and advanced level courses for students aged 16 to 18 and adults. The college's mission statement states: 'Varndean College will, through the quality of its provision and support for a diverse community, encourage and inspire all its students to fulfil their potential'.

Information about this inspection

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and seven additional inspectors, assisted by the human resources and quality director as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors also used data on students' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews to gather the views of students. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. These views are reflected throughout the report. The inspection took into account all of the provision at the college. Subject inspectors looked in detail at a sample of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in science, visual arts, social sciences and English.

What inspection judgements mean

Provider		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding provider is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its learners' needs. This ensures that learners are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good provider is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its learners' needs. Learners are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A provider that requires improvement is performing less well than it might be reasonably expected in one or more of the key areas. This provider will receive a full inspection 12-18 months after the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	A provider that is inadequate is one where the provider is failing to give its learners an acceptable standard of education and/or training and the provider's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the provider. This provider will receive a re-inspection within 12-15 months after the date of this inspection.

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