

Somerset College of Arts and Technology

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 107538

Name of lead inspector: Wilf Hudson HMI

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Type of provider: General further education college

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Information about the provider

1. Somerset College of Arts and Technology (Somerset College) is a medium-sized general further education college situated in Taunton. The college offers largely vocational provision in nearly all subject areas and at all levels. It has played an important role in the introduction and development of the new 14-19 Diploma qualifications. It has a sizeable cohort of learners aged 14 to 16 from local schools. There is substantial higher education provision in partnership with University of Plymouth. Nearly all the college's provision is based on one site close to the town centre.
2. Most of Somerset is served by tertiary colleges based in Bridgwater, Street and Yeovil. Taunton, the county town, has Somerset College offering vocational provision and a sixth form college providing mainly GCE A- and AS-level work. Somerset College serves both the town and the neighbouring districts of east and mid Devon, so some students can have long journeys to and from college each day. Somerset has a small population of people from minority ethnic heritages and they are well represented in the student population of the college. There are roughly equal numbers of males and females in the college.
3. The college is seen as one of the further education sector leaders in sustainable development. It has a sustainability centre, the Genesis Centre, and has recently been named as a founder member of the National Skills Academy for Environmental Technologies.
4. The inspection took account of all the provision at the college. Health and social care, engineering, hairdressing and beauty therapy and business and management were inspected in depth.
5. The college provides training on behalf of the following providers:
 - JTL (Engineering)
 - CSKILLS (Construction).
6. The following organisations provide training on behalf of the college:
 - Connexions Somerset (Business and management)
 - Langley House (Literacy and numeracy)
 - Learning Curve (Health and care)
 - South West Medicines Information and Training (Pharmacy)
 - Silver Track Training Ltd (Railway engineering)
 - TADCO Leisure Ltd (Gamekeeping)
 - We Teach You Ltd (Business and management).

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
<p>Provision for young learners: 14 to16</p> <p>Further education (16 to18)</p> <p>Foundation learning tier only learners</p>	<p>185 part-time learners</p> <p>131 part-time learners 1,277 full-time learners</p> <p>173 full time learners 9 part-time learners</p>
<p>Provision for adult learners: Further education (19+)</p>	<p>296 full-time learners 2,604 part-time learners</p>
<p>Employer provision: Train to Gain Apprenticeships</p>	<p>1,189 learners 197 apprentices</p>
<p>Adult and community learning</p>	<p>385 learners</p>

Summary report

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

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

Subject Areas	
Health and social care	1
Engineering	2
Hairdressing and beauty therapy	2
Business and management	3

Overall effectiveness

- The college has successfully realigned its subject offering over the last four years. It now focuses on offering a very wide range of vocational courses to enable local people to start at foundation level and study up to, and including, higher education. The improvements it has made to its work-based learning provision have been very significant and are a real success story. Good improvements in many areas of the college have been secured and students are well supported and successful on most courses. In a few areas, too many students leave their courses before they have completed them. While the provision for literacy and numeracy has improved, the college needs to continue to develop effective approaches to helping students to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. Teaching and learning are good; but some aspects, such as using questions well and ensuring a varied range of activities for students, could be improved. The college is a good partner and is well regarded by the schools, employers and community groups with whom it works. Through effective self assessment the college has a clear and accurate overview of its work and is adept at finding solutions that lead to improvements. Leaders and

managers have created a culture that leads to high expectations of both students and staff. They are well placed to generate further improvements in the future.

Main findings

- Overall success rates are good. For younger students, success rates have risen quite consistently across the college and are good. For adult students, improvements have been slower and more uneven. For all ages, they have outpaced national improvements. A high proportion of students who complete their courses gain their qualifications. However, while retention rates have improved over the last three years and are now at the latest national average, they are the main detractor from higher success rates.
- Success rates on work-based learning programmes are very high and are a real success story. At the last inspection, success rates in this area of work were inadequate. They have now risen significantly and are outstanding. Conversely, success rates on key skills qualifications have declined since the last inspection. Supporting the development of literacy and numeracy skills remains an area for improvement in the college.
- Students' written work is generally good and they make good progress in developing their vocational skills. Their progress when compared to their starting point varies across courses, but is satisfactory overall. In two subject areas, engineering and information and communication technology (ICT), value added is outstanding. A small number of courses has less-than-satisfactory value added, and students are not making as much progress as they should.
- Teaching and learning are good, although there is some variation across the college. A few lessons are outstanding. Experienced and well-qualified teachers share their professional knowledge with their learners very effectively. Staff have good access to professional development, but good teaching practice needs to be spread more effectively across the college.
- Technology is used very effectively in many areas to bring subjects to life and develop students' understanding. However, a minority of teachers do not plan lessons well enough to inspire and keep students interested, and questioning techniques are not always used effectively to check learning and deepen understanding.
- The college offers an outstanding range of well-planned provision. In many curriculum areas students can progress from foundation to advanced level. Higher education courses are available at the college and at a partner university. Young people aged 14 to 16 at local schools can choose from a variety of vocational options. Many students make good progress and move to a higher level qualification. There are a few small gaps in provision, especially at foundation level, but many of these are offered by other providers locally.
- Partnership working is outstanding. The college makes an excellent contribution at a strategic level to county-wide developments. As part of a national programme it is designated as a skills academy in environmental technology. The college makes effective use of its very strong links with schools, employers

and higher education to develop responsive, flexible and innovative provision to suit students' and partners' needs.

- Care, guidance and support for learners are good. Effective additional learning support is provided promptly for students with a range of needs. This helps them achieve, although in 2009/10 success rates for students receiving support were five percentage points below the figure for those not receiving support. The college has allocated additional resources to provide better support in the classroom. Retention rates to date this year for students receiving this support are very high.
- Leaders and managers have established a culture of high expectations for staff and students. They set high targets for the college and meet them. Governance is outstanding. Governors play a pivotal role in shaping the identity and educational character of the college. They are very well informed and demand high standards of the college; they fulfil their roles as critical friends exceptionally well.
- Self-assessment is accurate and reliable. Action plans are precise and are monitored rigorously. Managers' use and understanding of the college's performance data have improved and managers use these data well to drive improvement in outcomes for learners.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The college provides a safe, harmonious and respectful environment for learners and staff. Inspectors found numerous good examples of the promotion of equality and diversity through tutorials and project work in subject areas. However, teachers do not always take up opportunities to promote equality and diversity in lessons, and equality and diversity are not always well covered in work-based learning students' progress reviews.
- Lesson observation is effective in enabling teachers to reflect on their professional practice. However, observers are not consistent in making and articulating accurate judgements on the strengths and areas for development in lessons, or in their emphasis on students' learning and progress.

What does Somerset College of Arts and Technology need to do to improve further?

- Implement effective strategies to further raise retention rates including maintaining a strong focus on attendance.
- Raise the standard of teaching and learning by spreading the good practice observed to improve learners' progress and help them to fulfil their potential.
- Ensure that internal lesson observations focus more effectively on how well students learn and make progress.
- Improve the consistency of teachers' planning for equality and diversity in lessons; ensure progressive development and reinforcement of learners' understanding of equality and diversity issues in work-based learning reviews.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the friendly and approachable staff
- feeling safe and secure in college
- the support and help they receive during induction and their time at college
- courses that meet their ambitions and help them to want to do their best
- the friendly and helpful responses from the college prior to their enrolment
- the help they get to improve their social skills and confidence.

What learners would like to see improved:

- some of the accommodation, especially in art and design
- the organisation and timetabling of a small number of courses.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- helpful staff who communicate well
- the flexibility of the provision to fit in with their requirements
- the effective and efficient way that assessors work in partnership with them
- the college's ability and willingness to act quickly to solve any problems that arise
- being able to meet enthusiastic young people when they are trying to fill vacancies in their business.

What employers would like to see improved:

- a small number of employers would like to be more involved in planning their trainees' work programme and reviewing their progress.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

8. The college demonstrates good capacity to improve. Success rates have improved well since the last inspection, particularly in work-based learning provision. Targets to improve the provision further are demanding, and managers at all levels use data well to drive up the quality of provision. The restructuring of the college has improved communication, contributed to the improvement of the college's financial health and improved the coherence of the curriculum offer to meet the needs and interests of students and employers. The college's self-assessment is accurate and a reliable reflection of key strengths and areas for improvement, both overall and in subject areas; actions to improve are appropriately precise. The monitoring of progress against action plans is frequent and rigorous, an area for improvement from the last inspection.
9. The college has developed a strong identity in its local and regional context and a clear vision has been successfully shared throughout the college. Governors are very well informed, fulfil their roles exceptionally well in supporting and challenging senior managers, and in helping to shape the educational character of the college. Value for money is good.
10. Progress in rectifying areas for improvement since the last inspection has been good, although raising the proportion of good and outstanding lessons and the quality of feedback on lesson observations remain areas for further development.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

11. Students' achievements are good. Overall success rates for the college have improved well over the last three years from 78% to 85%, which is six percentage points above the latest national average. Success rates generally have improved faster than the national picture.
12. Underlying these overall improvements in success rates is a more mixed picture. There are several areas of the college's work that have improved significantly since the last inspection. Foremost among these are the improvements made to success rates and standards in work-based learning and Train to Gain. At the last inspection, success rates in these were judged to be inadequate. They are now outstanding and never less than good in any subject area. Overall apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship success rates are now five percentage points above the national average. Timely success rates are now eleven percentage points above the national average.
13. Success rates on long courses are good. They are better for younger students than for adults, where there are more variations and lower success rates in some areas. However, they have improved faster than the national picture at all ages. Overall, students who complete their courses achieve well. While

retention rates have improved since the last inspection, they are now at the national average and remain an area for improvement.

14. There is not a consistent improvement in success rates across different subject areas. ICT has improved significantly since the last inspection. However, business and management, for example, have not improved well enough and remain an area on which the college needs to focus. Students aged 14 to 16, many of whom study on the new Diploma programmes, make good progress and succeed well.
15. Success rates for male and female students and for students from different ethnic heritages show few patterns that suggest any significant achievement gaps. Where there are some differences, such as those for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, the college has identified these in their self-assessment report and is taking effective action to address them. Success rates for key skills qualifications have declined over the last three years, especially at level 3, but they remain above the national average.
16. Students' written work is generally of a good standard and many of them make good progress in developing the essential skills for their chosen vocation. Where value added can be measured, students are making at least satisfactory progress in comparison to their starting point, although there are differences between subject areas. Students studying in engineering and ICT make very good progress: in business and in some public services and sports courses progress is less than satisfactory.
17. The college provides an harmonious environment and students mix together well in social and communal areas. Students report that they feel safe in the college and inspectors observed safe working practices in the lessons they observed. They enjoy their time in college and in most of their lessons. Many of them make a good contribution to the community through, for example, volunteering activities which the college organises. Through their course representatives and the learner voice students play an important part in how the college is run.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

18. Teaching and learning are good. However, the quality of both varies across the college. While most of the teaching is good this variation is an important issue that the college's quality assurance process has yet to tackle fully.
19. A significant minority of lessons are outstanding. Teachers with good professional experience use well-planned activities that help students to improve their skills very effectively. These lessons can be found across the college and examples observed show well-qualified teachers sharing their expertise and deftly providing excellent insight into professional practice. For example, engineering students are encouraged to think creatively using their imagination to solve problems and understand complex concepts. In care,

students are helped very effectively to understand the values underpinning their work.

20. In contrast to this outstanding work, inspectors also observed a smaller number of less effective lessons. In these lessons, teachers did not use enough interesting activities or generate enough discussion by using questions well to stimulate students to think for themselves. In a few lessons, students were bored and not inspired or challenged sufficiently. Some teachers do not do enough to check that all students have a good understanding of the topic of the lesson. Equality and diversity were promoted well in lessons in the health and care area, but opportunities to do this were missed in some other subjects.
21. Teachers use technology very effectively in many areas to enliven learning. For example, video clips were used very well in beauty therapy lessons to help learners to understand particular techniques. However, in a few areas, teachers are not using whiteboard technology to add anything to the learning experience. Students use the virtual learning environment to good effect where teachers have placed good learning materials and assessment information to help students to work on their own effectively.
22. Assessment is good. External verification reports mostly confirm that appropriate assessment methods are used. Work-based learning assessment is very good with regular and frequent assessment contributing to the high success rates. However, equality and diversity are not always reinforced effectively during reviews.
23. Arrangements to help students develop literacy and numeracy skills have improved. There is effective intervention from learning support staff in lessons and in one-to-one meetings with individual students. This has been particularly effective for the large number of students who have dyslexia where success rates have improved well and compare favourably with overall success rates across the college.
24. Teachers have good access to professional updating but more work needs to be done to ensure that the good practice in teaching and learning in the college is spread more rapidly across the whole college. Most of the accommodation supports learning well. There are well-equipped subject-specific study areas that provide good access for staff and students to information technology and well-designed paper-based learning materials.
25. The college meets the needs and interests of students well and offers an outstanding range of provision. The curriculum is planned well and in many areas students can progress from foundation to advanced level. Higher education courses are available at the college and at a partner university. Young people aged 14 to 16 at local schools and attending the on-site pupil referral unit can choose from a variety of vocational options. Progression from schools, between levels and to higher education is good. Some students move to higher education having started their studies at foundation level. The college

- responds well to meet employers' needs offering high-quality, flexible programmes.
26. Students take part in a wide variety of enrichment activities. The improved tutorial programme is well planned. It offers a good range of learning activities explored during group sessions and well-attended themed weeks. Many students work towards the personal enrichment qualification; success rates for the first cohort are high. Sustainability is well established as part of the curriculum. It forms part of the tutorial programme and students take part in innovative work in their vocational studies. Participation by students in the growing cross-college enrichment programme is good, in particular in physical activities such as sports and street dance. Work placements, visiting speakers, trips and community-based projects enhance students' vocational experience.
27. Partnership working is outstanding. The college makes an excellent contribution at a strategic level to county-wide developments. As part of a national programme, the college is designated as a skills academy in environmental technology, a green hub for the south west. The college makes effective use of its very strong links with schools, employers, public services, such as the army and the local hospital, and higher education to develop responsive, flexible and innovative provision to suit students' and partners' needs.
28. Care, guidance and support for students are good. Potential students have good opportunities to find out about the college through taster days and visits by college staff to local schools. Impartial information and advice are readily available to help them make their choices at all stages of their studies. Students receive good support to resolve personal or welfare difficulties. Effective additional learning support is provided promptly for students with a range of needs. This helps them to achieve. This year, the college has reorganised its learning support approaches to extend support for learners in the classroom by learning facilitators. Student support officers monitor attendance daily and help students who are at risk of dropping out of their courses. College data suggest that current retention rates for students receiving support are very high, but attendance remains in line with the figure for 2009/10. Students' progress in meeting their targets is monitored closely during one-to-one tutorial sessions. Tutors and students make good use of the new electronic e-tracker to monitor and chart their progress.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

29. Leadership and management are good. Managers are successful in promoting ambition to raise standards and improve provision. Targets to improve performance are demanding, and managers at all levels make good use of performance data to drive improvement. The principal, senior management team and governors have set a very clear identity and direction for the college as a provider of vocational programmes, and this is matched by a very strong curriculum offer that fits well into the college's local and regional context.

30. Governance is outstanding. Governors are very well informed and fulfil their roles exceptionally well in supporting and challenging senior managers and in helping to shape the educational character of the college.
31. Arrangements to promote the safeguarding of students are good and safeguarding has an appropriate emphasis throughout the college. A comprehensive central record contains appropriate details relating to staff and managers use this well to ensure that staff and governors' training is kept up to date. Safeguarding and anti-bullying policies are clear and well considered. Students know how to obtain help if needed, and the college has created a culture where students and college staff are strongly safety aware. Close working between the college and external agencies helps to ensure student safety and risk assessments are good.
32. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The college monitors students' performance data to good effect and routinely investigates any potential underperformance by any group of students. The college has been successful in narrowing gaps in achievement between different groups of students. The college provides an harmonious and respectful environment for students and staff. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is higher than the regional demographic. Inspectors found numerous good examples of the promotion of equality and diversity through tutorials and via project work in subject areas. However, teachers do not always take up opportunities to promote equality and diversity in lessons, and the coverage of equality and diversity during work-based learning reviews is inconsistent.
33. Students rightly value the importance the college attaches to their views on their experience at the college and the college's responsiveness in acting on them. Strong engagement with employers is supported by very effective arrangements to collect and act on their views, as confirmed by the college's achievement of the Training Quality Standard. This positive picture was also confirmed by the employers' views collected during the inspection.
34. The college's self-assessment is accurate and a reliable reflection of key strengths and areas for improvement both overall and in subject areas; actions to ensure improvements are appropriately precise. The monitoring of progress against action plans is frequent and rigorous, an area for improvement from the last inspection. Success rates have improved considerably since the last inspection. The quality assurance system is well considered, secures improvements and takes appropriate account of a range of evidence sources. The quality assurance of subcontracted provision is very effective. Lesson observation is effective in enabling teachers to reflect on their professional practice. However, as the college recognises, observers are not consistent in making and articulating accurate judgements on the strengths and areas for development in lessons, or in their emphasis on students' learning and progress. As a result, areas for improvement from the last inspection around raising the proportion of good and outstanding lessons and the quality of feedback on lesson observations remain an area for further improvement.

35. Accommodation and resources for learning are of good quality. The college's strategy for sustainability is an integral and high-profile part of its identity and vision for the future. The college strives very successfully to conserve energy and recycle, and has significantly reduced its volume of waste. Value for money is good, demonstrated in particular by students' good outcomes, the good standard of teaching and learning and the college's good financial health.

Subject areas

Health and social care

Grade 1

Context

36. The college offers full- and part-time courses from foundation level to higher education in health, social care and child care for over 800 students. A further 817 are on distance learning courses in dementia awareness and care, infection control and health and safety. Provision is offered on the main campus. Work-based provision includes over 500 learners who are enrolled on Train to Gain programmes at levels 1 and 2. Approximately 10% of students are from minority ethnic groups.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are outstanding on level 3 full-time programmes. Success rates on Train to Gain and social care programmes at levels 2 and 3 are very good. Success rates on a small number of level 1 and 2 programmes have declined in the last two years. However, current students on these courses are making very good progress. College data suggest that retention is very high and attendance is good.
- The standard of students' written work is consistently very good, often outstanding and students take pride in their achievements. Vocational practice is of a very high standard. Students devise excellent activities to use with children. Vocational displays provide a stimulating environment, although they are not always presented to a sufficiently high standard.
- Students enjoy their training, participate and communicate well. They express ideas and opinions with confidence and maturity. Many achieve employment or promotion. Students gain excellent skills, underpinned by strong care values that include good communication, management of challenging behaviour, person-centred care and reflective skills. They gain an excellent understanding of child development and techniques to promote children's learning.
- Students feel safe and their understanding of healthy living and their ability to promote safe and healthy working practices are well developed. Health education is integral to their curriculum and very well promoted on all courses. They are involved in work placement activities in the community and all full-time students contribute to fundraising activities for a very wide range of charitable causes.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are good and a significant minority of lessons are outstanding. Staff have excellent subject knowledge. Students benefit from a lively learning environment and very effective linking of theory to vocational practice. However, when teaching complex theoretical information, teachers sometimes fail to check that all students have understood. Staff and students use computers well to support their learning.
- Assessment in the workplace is very good. It is flexible and builds well upon work-related activities and meets the individual needs of the students. Students

are encouraged well and produce creative solutions to improve practice in their work. Assessors work closely with employers. However, employers do not always receive information about the content of workshops to help them to support their trainees' learning in college.

- Feedback on written work is comprehensive, detailed and constructive. Staff are very supportive and students are given good guidance for improvement. Excellent use is made of electronic systems to monitor students' progress. Twice-termly review boards report on individual progress to students and the parents and carers of those under 18. Clear targets are set and monitored as appropriate.
- There is an excellent range of provision. Students' needs and interests are very well met by the range and content of the programmes that are available from entry level to higher education. Many students return to undertake further qualifications. They enjoy a very wide range of enrichment opportunities.
- Students and users benefit from a wide range of partnerships and excellent relationships with employers. Employers appreciate the respect shown by the college for the needs of the care establishments and the way the training is planned sensitively.
- Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Pre-course information and guidance for students are good. Tutorial, careers guidance and welfare support are extensive and are valued highly by students. Good support is provided for students who have complex needs. Additional learning support is carefully managed and delivered effectively in most lessons.
- Leadership and management are outstanding. Course teams share a strong care value base and a passion for improving the quality of care in the community through excellent training. Staff are continually improving their practice and share ideas at regular meetings. The performance of each course and programme is closely and regularly monitored and evaluated.
- Personal and professional safeguarding practices are very well promoted and students demonstrate a strong ability to safeguard both themselves and others. Equality and diversity are integral to the curriculum and promoted throughout the provision. The numbers of male students on early years and care programmes are low, but increasing, and there is a clear and robust strategy to further increase numbers.
- The emphasis on quality improvement is strong. However, the college's assessment of teaching is slightly more generous than found by inspectors. Frequent team meetings focus on detailed monitoring of learners' progress and result in swift interventions where necessary. Staff are fully involved in the self-assessment process which is evaluative and accurate. Robust evidence supports the judgements made.

What does Somerset College of Arts and Technology need to do to improve further?

- Ensure strategies to improve success rates at level 1 and level 2 are fully embedded and implemented.

- Ensure that when teaching theoretical material, individual learning is carefully checked throughout the lesson.
- Ensure all employers have information about taught sessions to enable better planning of learning opportunities in the workplace on National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programmes.

Engineering

Grade 2

Context

37. The college offers full and part-time courses, apprenticeships and Train to Gain programmes from foundation level to higher education. There are 233 students aged 16 and 18 and 126 adult students studying mechanical, electrical/electronic and motor vehicle engineering. There are 84 apprentices in motor vehicle or engineering and 85 students taking engineering qualifications through Train to Gain programmes. Some 89 students aged 14 to 16 study the engineering diploma, a school link programme or as young apprentices in automotive engineering.

Key findings

- Success rates are very high for 16- to 18-year-old students. Success rates have improved and are now also high in the employer responsive provision, with both timely and overall rates the same and significantly above the national average. Success rates for some adult students are low, particularly in electrotechnical technology programmes at level 2, although there is some improvement at level 3. Actions are in place to remedy these weaknesses and the early signs are that these are working.
- Many students make good progress in developing their knowledge and understanding of engineering topics. Value added scores for the BTEC diplomas are high. Significant numbers of students join the college from school link programmes and make good progress to employment or higher education.
- Standards of students' work are generally good. Students produce work pieces to industrial standards. Portfolio and assignment work is generally well presented and of good standard. There is a high regard for the development of basic hand skills and students demonstrate increased levels of confidence in workshop activities.
- Students feel safe. Health and safety awareness and compliance are given a high priority in all engineering activities. Many students contribute enthusiastically to community and national fundraising projects, together with a local scheme to refurbish bicycles that are sent to Africa to enable young people there to travel to school.
- Teaching and learning are good. In the better sessions teachers plan activities well and develop a variety of activities that interest individuals and small groups very well. Equality and diversity are promoted during induction in full-time programmes and in some lessons, but less so in work-based reviews. However, a significant minority of lessons are satisfactory rather than good. These are characterised by focusing on whole group tasks with little opportunity to support the less able or extension tasks to extend and challenge the more able. Consequently, a few students become bored.
- Assessment is very good. Very effective use is made of a recently introduced electronic tracking system, available to both tutors and students, for recording progress towards completion of programmes of study. In work-based learning,

assessment is well planned with frequent and regular visits by assessors to the workplace and a significant proportion completed by direct observation. Target setting is good and students and employers are clear on the tasks for the next visit.

- Programmes meet the needs of users very well. There is a wide range of programmes and levels that enable students to progress from school link programmes and foundation level to higher education. Employers are very positive about the college and the levels of communication they receive. They are closely involved in assessment planning and speak highly of the contacts they have with the college. They greatly value the positive impact that training has on their staff.
- There are very effective partnerships that improve students' experiences. The college has formed good partnerships with 11 local schools and the pupil referral unit on site to provide an engineering curriculum.
- Guidance and support are good. Initial assessment is used well to provide individual support via learning assistants. Technical staff also provide valuable support for many students. Monitoring of attendance is well organised. This close attention also enables the student support officer to identify students who are at risk of leaving the course and make an early intervention.
- Leadership and management are outstanding. New management responsibilities have provided a focus on improving student outcomes and, using accessible data, are enabling the area to meet its performance targets. Staff training needs are identified clearly in personal development reviews that also set targets related to course performance.
- Self-assessment is rigorous and accurate and informed by detailed analysis of data, course information and students' progress. However, lesson observations are less analytical and do not provide sufficiently clear actions to ensure that teachers improve the standard of learning further.

What does Somerset College of Arts and Technology need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that the actions to raise retention and pass rates for adult learners on electrotechnical technology programmes are implemented fully and consistently.
- Improve the planning of activities in lessons to focus more effectively on the learning of individuals and small groups to provide opportunities for all learners to reach their full potential.
- Further reinforce equality and diversity in teaching and learning and within workplace reviews.

Hairdressing and beauty therapy

Grade 2

Context

38. Some 239 students attend a range of full- and part-time courses in hairdressing and beauty therapy. Courses range from foundation to advanced level and are largely based around NVQs. Approximately 70% of the students are aged 16 to 18. There are also 42 students who are aged 14 to 16 on a range of courses in hairdressing and beauty therapy, including 11 studying on the 14-19 Diploma in hairdressing and beauty therapy.

Key findings

- Success rates on beauty courses and the Diploma course are good. The BTEC certificate in hairdressing for adult students has satisfactory success rates. However, success rates for the smaller number of students on NVQ levels 1 and 3 in hairdressing are well below the national averages and are declining. Students complete a module on health and safety which gives them a valuable further qualification. Students make good progress onto the next level of study across both hairdressing and beauty therapy.
- Students' practical skills development in beauty therapy is good. Foundation students in beauty have developed good knowledge and skills. They are able to carry out a variety of beauty treatments to high standards. Students' progress on beauty therapy courses is good and students are challenged well to learn how to work independently. This is not always the case in hairdressing. Hairdressing students at advanced level are not developing the skills expected of them in the hairdressing industry. There are not enough clients for these students to practise their skills on and raise their standards. At intermediate level, hairdressing students do not have enough of the required chemicals to ensure that they can develop and practise their skills in using such materials.
- Students have good information technology skills which have helped them to improve their confidence and research skills. For example, in beauty therapy lessons, students often use laptops when no clients are available to complete their assignment and research work.
- Teaching and learning are good. Practical lessons in beauty therapy are especially well planned. Lessons are stimulating and students are focused on improving their skills. However, this is not always the case in hairdressing lessons where sometime students are not stretched enough by the work set for them. In some theory lessons, teachers do not ensure that students have a good range of stimulating activities that keep them working hard and learning well. Students' attendance at lessons varied markedly and overall was around 78% during inspection.
- Assessment is good. Students are assessed fairly and assessment is well managed. Students are briefed well by the assessors at the start of the process and receive good written and verbal feedback on the quality of their work. Tutors use formative assessment to support students' progress well. There is also a dedicated assessor in the commercial salon to support all students.

- Pastoral support is good. Students receive good support in tutorials. These are well planned and tutors follow college guidelines. Students are well informed on many topics regarding health and safety, healthy eating, sustainability and banking and finance. They appreciate the opportunity to develop their understanding of these topics and gain additional qualifications. Students identified as requiring learning support are supplied with it quickly and effectively.
- Curriculum management is good. Recently appointed managers have improved the day-to-day operation of both the hairdressing and beauty therapy provision. They are well focused on quality improvement. This has had a positive effect of raising teachers' expectations of their students. However, the hairdressing provision still needs further effective interventions to improve the practical and professional standards of students. This was not recognised in the self-assessment report. Management of the curriculum for 14- to 16-year-olds is good.
- Approaches to developing students' understanding of equality and diversity are satisfactory. In some lessons in beauty therapy they have developed a series of videos that support learners in understanding the different products which can be used on Black and Asian skin. However, this is not the case in most lessons observed where teachers failed to take naturally occurring opportunities to promote equality and diversity.

What does Somerset College of Arts and Technology need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that high standards are required of students regarding their professional image in the advanced hairdressing provision to ensure that these students develop skills appropriate to the level expected of them in industry.
- Ensure that the strategies in place to raise success rates in hairdressing at foundation and advanced level are implemented fully and effectively.
- Raise the standard of theory teaching by providing training that helps teachers to improve students' experiences and offer a better range of more challenging learning activities.

Business and management

Grade 3

Context

39. The college offers a range of vocational courses in business, customer service and accountancy from foundation to advanced level. At the time of inspection, 76 students were enrolled on long courses in accountancy and business. A further 68 students were on work-based learning programmes, including Train to Gain and apprenticeships. Just over half of the students are over 19 years of age.

Key findings

- Students' outcomes are satisfactory and improving, but vary between courses. Success rates for work-based learning are particularly good and the gap between overall and timely achievement has narrowed over the last three years. BTEC National success rates in business are also good and improving. However, success rates have been consistently well below national benchmarks on all levels of accounting for the last three years. The proportion of students achieving high grades has been generally below average.
- Current students are making good progress towards qualifications as a result of closer monitoring and support this year. Attendance is improving, although it was low at 70% during inspection. More students on BTEC National courses are now achieving high grades, and pass rates on accounting are beginning to improve. The standard of written and oral work is generally good. Progression to higher education or jobs is good.
- Students enjoy their learning and are developing good social, personal and employability skills. They develop their research and analytical skills significantly through well-designed assignments in market research and business enterprise. Many of them improve their literacy and numeracy skills and gain useful additional qualifications. They join in fundraising events and are encouraged to participate in volunteering. Behaviour is good, and students treat each other with respect. They feel safe and work safely in college.
- Teaching and learning are good. In the best lessons, teachers use a variety of interesting methods to stimulate learning and maintain students' interest. Staff use their commercial experience well. In a minority of less effective lessons, questioning is often ineffective and does not provide a check on individual understanding. Lesson plans mention equality and diversity, but this is often not followed through in the lesson.
- Accommodation and resources are good. Full-time students make good use of the virtual learning environment to access a wide range of business learning materials. Paper-based materials are professionally produced, but are not always adapted sufficiently for students with weaker reading skills. Work-based learners are provided with well-designed study booklets, but have little access to on-line materials. Staff and students make effective use of technology in most lessons, apart from accounting.

- Assessment is good. Assessment is fair and staff provide timely feedback to students on how to improve. Assessment planning is good, and staff set realistic and relevant targets for students. Initial assessment is now good overall. Students are on the right level courses and receive appropriate support for numeracy and literacy from specialist staff if necessary.
- The provision meets the needs of users satisfactorily, although the range of courses is narrow. Many students benefit from the wide range of enrichment activities offered by the college, including visits, business speakers and the chance to take part in prestigious competitions. In work-based learning, NVQs are matched well to students' job roles, and employers provide a good variety of training opportunities.
- The college works very effectively with an excellent range of community partners, including employers, local authorities, and the careers service. Strong links with schools and higher education provide good progression routes. Employers are routinely involved in sponsoring award ceremonies and providing a wide range of speakers and business visits. NVQ assessors also work well with employers.
- Overall support is very effective, with some good support to accelerate completion targets for those students falling behind. Staff are readily available to give one-to-one help outside normal contact times and there are good links with support agencies. Students receive financial support for such things as transport. Students with additional learning needs are particularly well supported and achieve well.
- Advice and guidance are effective and improving. Staff give good advice and guidance for option units and careers. Full-time students benefit from being able to use the e-tracking system, which records their grades and targets, and motivates them to achieve higher grades and complete work faster. Induction is satisfactory and particularly effective for work-based learners.
- Management is good. Structural change has been managed well. Internal communications are generally good. Staff are experienced and well qualified. Staff development is good. Internal verification systems are robust and good feedback is given to assessors. Recent improvements are driving up success rates, but action to remedy under-performing accounting courses has been slow.

What does Somerset College of Arts and Technology need to do to improve further?

- Continue to raise success rates and attendance rates through closer monitoring and interventions, particularly in the accounting provision.
- Continue to develop strategies for promoting equality and diversity and share good practice from across the college.
- Develop more effective questioning techniques in lessons to check individual understanding and stretch more able learners.
- Further develop on-line learning resources and electronic tracking for part-time learners.

Information about the inspection

40. Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and seven additional inspectors, assisted by the college's quality manager, 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 funding body, the previous inspection report, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
41. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They 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)
Somerset College of Arts and Technology
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	1,546	-	1,285	261	-
Part-time learners	1,613	192	69	678	674
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2	2	1
Capacity to improve	2				
Outcomes for learners	2	2	2	2	1
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?	2				
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	2	1
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2				
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1				
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?	2				
Leadership and management	2	2	2	2	1
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?	1				
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?	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				

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