

Hertford Regional College

General further education college

Inspection dates

24–27 May 2016

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement
Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Adult learning programmes	Requires improvement
Apprenticeships	Require improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- Governors, leaders and managers have not addressed the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection and the quality of provision varies too much.
- Not enough teachers and assessors set high expectations or plan learning that challenges their learners to accelerate their knowledge and skills and make the swift progress of which many are capable.
- The teaching of English and mathematics requires improvement.
- Teachers' and assessors' use of target-setting requires improvement. Not enough set and monitor targets that challenge their learners to make rapid progress in excess of minimum requirements.
- Attendance and punctuality are too low and vary considerably across subject areas.
- Too few learners on classroom-based programmes achieve their qualifications, especially in English and mathematics.

The provider has the following strengths

- The new principal and senior leaders have set a clear strategic direction for the college.
- Learners with high needs make good progress towards independence.
- Leaders' strong focus on performance management is beginning to lead to improved teaching and learning.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Hertford Regional College is a medium-sized, general further education college with campuses in Broxbourne and Ware. The college provides a wide range of post-16 education and training including study programmes for 16- to 19-year-old learners, adult learning programmes, apprenticeships and provision for learners with high needs. The large majority of learners are recruited from the Hertfordshire local authority and surrounding areas. The college works with eight subcontractors.
- The proportion of Hertfordshire pupils who achieve five GCSEs at grades A* to C is above the national average. However, this varies considerably across the county ranging from 54% in the south to 65% in East Hertfordshire. At the time of the inspection, around 4,560 learners were enrolled at the college on full- or part-time courses. Of these, 2,100 were aged 16 to 19, 1,950 were adults, and 550 were apprentices. Approximately 60 learners were in receipt of high needs funding, many of whom were integrated into full-time study programmes.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Urgently improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the proportion of learners who achieve their qualifications by ensuring that:
 - teachers and assessors set high expectations for attendance, punctuality and what learners can achieve
 - teachers set, monitor and review rigorous targets with learners that challenge them to make rapid progress
 - teachers receive appropriate training so that they are able to plan theory lessons that enable learners to develop their higher-level thinking skills
 - teachers ensure that all learners undertake frequent and high-quality independent study for their courses
 - teachers provide purposeful feedback on learners' work that helps learners to improve
 - teachers improve their skills and teaching so that learners in GCSE, functional skills and vocational lessons are motivated to improve their English and mathematical skills and master these skills thoroughly so that they make good progress.
- Significantly reduce the variability in achievement rates between different groups of learners by monitoring the performance of these learners carefully, examining any underlying reasons for non-achievement and taking action to support learners.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- Previous leaders, managers and governors did not address the weaknesses identified at the last inspection, leading to a decline in the college's performance. Managers currently identify the same weaknesses in the college's most recent self-assessment report.
- The new principal and senior leadership team, many of whom only joined the college recently, have set a clear strategic direction for the college. Leaders and managers have embarked on an ambitious programme of changing the culture of the college designed to improve the quality of provision and ensure that all learners achieve their career and educational aspirations. While new managers bring a fresh approach and enthusiasm to their role, in many instances it is too early to gauge the impact of their actions. However, there remains a shortage of full-time staff in a small number of curriculum areas, which is affecting the progress learners are making.
- Senior leaders and managers have a strong focus on performance management. Recent changes to the arrangements for observing teachers' practice, combined with this focus, have led to underperforming teachers leaving the college and intensive support to improve performance for those who remain. As a result, teachers are more aware of what they need to do to improve. Although too early to determine the full impact of the changes made, the proportion of learners remaining on courses is higher than in previous years.
- Managers have made self-assessment more rigorous and they are now accurate in their evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. However, the quality improvement plan lacks detail in measuring impact and omits some key success criteria, such as the closing of the performance gaps of different groups of learners and the progress learners make in-year.
- Alongside regular progress reviews to monitor the quality of provision in each curriculum area, senior leaders also provide significant support and additional resource for some of the lowest-performing areas of the college. For example, in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), the recently appointed director has mentored managers and coached staff, which is beginning to have a positive impact on the number of learners retained on these programmes. Managers are aware of the need to increase the range and frequency of these interventions with underperforming courses to support rapid improvement across the college.
- Managers have been slow to implement an effective English and mathematics strategy. They do not yet ensure that most learners develop the required skills to complete their full qualification. In the last year, managers have given a lot of attention to this area, but continued low attendance, and the slow progress learners make, remain areas for improvement.
- Curriculum managers now have access to reliable and accurate data but they do not yet have the information that gives them an overview of how well learners are performing on their study programmes, such as the English and mathematics components and work experience. Managers monitor learners' progress based on their minimum target grade, which is not sufficiently challenging for most learners, and does not challenge them to achieve their best.
- Managers have improved the management of subcontracted provision, which is now effective. They have frequent review meetings, including spot checks, and carry out regular observations of teaching and learning to check the quality of provision.
- Leaders and managers promote equality well across the organisation resulting in an environment that is tolerant and inclusive. While managers monitor the performance of different groups across the college, they do not yet focus on closing the gaps sufficiently. Teachers and assessors do not promote diversity in lessons or during assessments of apprentices consistently. As a result, apprentices do not have sufficient opportunities to explore different customers' cultures.
- Senior leaders and managers have effective partnerships with local employers and the local enterprise partnership to develop provision that meets local and regional priorities. For example, they have increased the number of apprentices in engineering and construction. Managers have developed strong partnerships with subcontractors to provide learning that complements the college's provision, including team-leading qualifications for healthcare professionals. However, managers are aware that they have not revised the curriculum significantly since the previous inspection, particularly in adult provision where the needs of unemployed residents are not being met.

■ Governance

- Governors, and previous managers, presided over a period of declining performance since the previous inspection. They acknowledge that they did not focus sufficiently on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and outcomes for learners. They have recently recruited new governors who bring financial and educational expertise to the board.
- Governors now have access to accurate information that allows them to compare the college with similar providers. This enables them to better challenge and scrutinise senior managers. They now have a good understanding of the college and a good grasp of the quality of teaching and learning and the challenges of English and mathematics. Governors support strongly the focus on performance management.

■ Safeguarding arrangements are effective

- All staff, including those of subcontractors, receive training in safeguarding, which is updated at regular intervals. Governors receive regular training on safeguarding. Leaders and managers keep detailed records of safeguarding incidents and monitor these thoroughly. Leaders and managers have recently provided training for staff in tackling extremism and radicalisation. As a result, staff ensure that learners have a good awareness of British values.
- Managers have developed productive links with external agencies such as the Local Safeguarding Children Board and with the local 'Prevent' police officer, which they use effectively to support learners at risk of harm or neglect. Managers record incidents accurately, act swiftly in response to concerns and, where necessary, work with local agencies to ensure that issues are resolved.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- Not enough teachers and assessors set high expectations that challenge learners to accelerate their knowledge and skills, and make swift progress. Teachers' planning for learning across all types of provision does not consider learners' starting points sufficiently and, consequently, not enough learners produce work above minimum expectations and too few excel.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are more effective in adult learning programmes and learners studying level 3 programmes. Here, teachers inspire and challenge learners to think through and apply new knowledge and understanding, and produce work, both theoretical and practical, of a good standard. For example, learners studying media make-up use their theoretical knowledge and good practical skills when preparing make-up for prosthetics, such as for characters in performing arts productions.
- Not enough teachers plan to ensure that their learners are sufficiently adept at analysing critically the links between relevant theory and industry practice. For example, advanced apprentices on childcare programmes do not use relevant cognitive behaviour theories when studying the development of children over time. Too few teachers encourage their learners to develop their higher-level thinking skills. As a result, too few learners are prepared well for further learning at a higher level or meaningful employment.
- Not enough teachers use questioning techniques to probe their learners' understanding thoroughly and ensure that learners can apply theoretical principles, constructs and concepts before moving on to the next topic. A minority of teachers answer their own questions too quickly and do not provide learners with sufficient time to think through answers and solutions. Consequently, learners do not make good progress.
- The majority of teachers ensure that learners develop a good level of practical, industry-specific skills that enhance their career aspirations. Learners have access to a wide range of high-quality resources to support their learning: for example, industry-standard salons, kitchens and production environments with the latest software, and visits by entrepreneurs from television. However, teachers do not use these resources to full effect to set high professional standards, for example on construction courses and hairdressing for adult learners.
- Teachers' and assessors' use of assessment requires improvement. In theory lessons, not enough teachers plan assessment tasks and activities that inspire learners to take responsibility for their learning and make rapid progress. Too many teachers use mundane worksheet tasks that are too easy for the most able learners, or too hard for others. Consequently, too many learners do not apply themselves as fully as they should and make the gains in knowledge and understanding of which they are capable.
- Too much of teachers' and assessors' written feedback is cursory and insufficiently developmental. As a result, too few learners reflect on their work and strive to improve.

- Teachers' and assessors' target-setting requires improvement. Too many targets are insufficiently challenging and do not challenge learners to make rapid progress above the minimum requirements. In addition, too few teachers promote the importance of homework and independent working outside lessons.
- The teaching of English requires improvement. A minority of teachers plan activities that inspire and motivate learners to develop good verbal skills and produce creative written work, which enables them to express their thinking. However, too many teachers provide repetitive tasks that do not enable learners to understand key language features that would develop their writing further. Too few teachers pay sufficient attention to correcting learners' errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- The teaching of mathematics requires improvement. Too few teachers ensure that learners make sufficient progress in developing their skills, and learners studying functional skills do not develop their numeracy skills swiftly enough. Teachers do not challenge the most able learners to develop their skills through more challenging tasks. Very few of these learners have the opportunity to study the higher mathematics GCSE course. Teachers do not ensure that revision workshops for learners taking mathematics GCSE are tailored to learners' precise requirements.
- Not enough teachers promote the relevance of English and mathematics in vocational subjects and, as a result, learners do not see the benefits of developing these skills for their future careers and employment. For example, too few teachers place sufficient emphasis on learners improving their technical vocabulary or standard of written work.
- Specialist support for learners with high needs is very good. However, not enough teachers plan the use of learning support practitioners effectively enough to ensure that all learners who require additional help with their studies make good progress.
- Most teachers promote the importance of British values well in lessons. However, not enough teachers and assessors plan or seize naturally occurring opportunities to ensure that learners develop a good understanding of the diversity of customers and colleagues.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare requires improvement

- Learners' attendance at lessons is too low. Too few teachers set high expectations for attendance and punctuality. Consequently, too many lessons are disrupted frequently, which affects the learning of others. While managers have been effective in raising the level of attendance since the previous year, it remains below the college target and requires further improvement. In the minority of programmes where attendance is good, such as arts, media and publishing, retention is higher and learners make better progress. Attendance rates vary considerably across subjects and are particularly poor in English and mathematics.
- Behaviour is good in most lessons and very good in public places. Learners show good levels of respect and are polite and courteous.
- Staff do not yet capture learners' personal, social and development needs sufficiently well or identify the progress learners make to overcome barriers to learning and social development. As a result, planning for learners' individual development beyond the requirements of the qualification is too limited.
- The development of learners' English and mathematical skills in vocational lessons is not good enough. Too many fail to develop essential skills in English or mathematics related to their programmes of study, thereby limiting their opportunity to develop the workplace skills demanded by employers.
- While the majority of apprentices and classroom-based learners develop good practical skills and skills to improve their prospects of progression and employment, too few learners are sufficiently critical of their own work and do not strive for high standards routinely. For example, learners in childcare are happy to accept pass grades and those in art accept merit grades when they could be aiming for distinction.
- Learners on study programmes develop their personal, social and wider work-related skills effectively through a wide range of meaningful work experience placements and well-conceived projects. For example, learners on beauty therapy courses treat patients in their local hospital and, as a result, they have developed an awareness of depression and the positive impact of treatments such as massage on patients' well-being.
- Similarly, adult learners who complete short, distance-learning courses in subjects such as autism awareness, health conditions and team leading have acquired additional knowledge and skills to help them in their workplace, and increased their confidence as a result.

- Learners have good access to a wide range of enrichment activities, ranging from sport to first aid training. Participation levels across different age groups and provision types are good. Activities are frequent and appropriately focused on the health and well-being of learners, as well as the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Around a third of learners on study programmes gain additional units of qualifications to help improve their chances of securing full-time employment. Teachers ensure that a broad range of guest speakers enhance learners' understanding of vocational subjects.
- Learners on study programmes receive appropriate advice and guidance to help them make informed decisions about their progression to work, or further studies. However, adult learners on part-time courses and apprentices do not receive sufficient guidance on the options available to them when they have completed their course.
- Learners feel safe in college and know how to report any incidents or concerns they may have. Learners have a good understanding of British values and the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism, and are able to discuss sensitive issues respectfully and confidently.

Outcomes for learners

require improvement

- Outcomes for learners have not improved since the previous inspection and while apprenticeship success rates are higher than for other providers nationally, success rates for classroom-based learners are below those of other providers nationally. The proportion of learners on classroom-based learning programmes who achieve their qualifications varies too much, depending on which subject and level they are taking. Learners studying at levels 1 and 2 achieve at a much lower rate than those studying at level 3. While the proportion of apprentices studying at intermediate level who achieve their qualifications within the agreed timescales is high, and in excess of other providers nationally, too many advanced-level apprentices fail to complete, or to do so within agreed time frames.
- In 2014/15, too few learners aged 16 to 18 on study programmes stayed at the college to complete their training and too few of those achieved their qualifications. While the proportion of adult learners who remained on their courses was low when compared with other providers, of those who did stay most achieved. Learners enrolled with subcontractors have higher levels of success than those studying at the college.
- Managers have improved their monitoring of learners' progress. As a result, more learners are staying on their courses and the achievement gaps between different groups of learners are closing, including for young people who are looked after or have left care.
- A greater proportion of learners are set to complete their qualifications than in previous years. However, too many are not making the progress of which they are capable. For example, despite the very large majority of learners at level 3 achieving their qualifications, too few achieve high grades. Better achievement exists in areas such as art and design, and music, but this is in stark contrast to underperforming areas such as construction and engineering.
- Too many learners do not improve their English and mathematical skills sufficiently well and, as a result, the number who achieve their qualifications in these subjects is too low.
- The standard of learners' work meets the necessary requirements to achieve certification. However, standards vary considerably between different programmes and groups of learners. For example, the professional standards of learners' work in hair and beauty for learners aged 16 to 18 are far higher than for adult learners studying the same qualification. Learners studying visual merchandising develop good industry-related skills that help them display their work in a professional manner.
- Additional learning support is effective in ensuring that learners have an equal chance of achieving their qualifications. However, further work is needed to ensure that learners develop the skills they need to become independent and autonomous. Most learners with high needs achieve their qualifications and progress to higher levels of study. Apprentices receive good levels of support from their tutors and assessors and, for those who require further support, tutors have arranged additional workshop sessions during the evenings and at weekends.

Types of provision

16 to 19 study programmes

require improvement

- The college provides study programmes for 2,100 learners across the majority of subject areas. Leaders have implemented the requirements of study programmes.

- While the majority of learners make adequate progress on their study programmes, they do not demonstrate sufficiently their theoretical understanding in written work beyond minimum requirements. Teachers do not encourage learners to have high expectations of themselves and, consequently, this limits their progress as they work towards minimum grades.
- Teachers ensure that the majority of learners develop the essential practical skills that prepare them well for their future career aspirations. However, a minority of teachers do not promote work-related skills effectively and, as a result, learners are not prepared fully for work. For example, teachers do not reinforce time-keeping and organisational skills routinely in construction lessons.
- The large majority of learners benefit from good work-related learning including placements with employers or voluntary settings, enrichment activities and educational visits as part of their study programmes to develop relevant industry skills. For example, engineering learners gain first aid at work certificates.
- In the majority of sessions, teachers make effective use of high-quality resources and positive role models to inspire learners. For example, visiting employers broaden learners' knowledge and understanding of the world of work.
- Learners support each other well. For example, learners in carpentry work well together on large joinery projects.
- The majority of learners are supported well through regular individual and group tutorials that develop their wider social and personal skills, and receive appropriate careers advice and guidance. They are clear about their future destinations and receive good support from their personal tutors. However, teachers do not use learning support assistants in lessons effectively to accelerate learning for those who need additional help.
- Learners with complex needs on discrete study programmes make good progress and are prepared well for independent living and work. Learners benefit from good volunteering opportunities in a variety of local organisations such as care homes and horticultural businesses that provide pathways into employment and long-term volunteering.
- The very large majority of learners who complete their training progress into employment or further study at a higher level in further or higher education.

Adult learning programmes

require improvement

- At the time of the inspection, there were 1,950 adult learners on programmes, studying both full- and part-time programmes in subjects such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), accounting, hairdressing, beauty therapy, electrical installation and hospitality. Around a quarter enrol through subcontractors, who offer distance-learning programmes in topics such as autism awareness, diabetes care and team leading.
- The quality of teaching is not consistently good enough. In a minority of lessons, teachers do not promote or reinforce high standards routinely in classrooms and practical areas. For example, too many lessons start late, staff and learners consume hot drinks and snacks during lessons, and in hospitality and catering learners' practical skills are not sufficiently well developed and do not reflect industry standards.
- The majority of teachers use their knowledge very well to challenge learners and they have high aspirations and ambitions for their learners. For example, in ESOL classes, teachers encourage learners to construct complex sentences using unfamiliar vocabulary, such as promoting discussion about drug taking in the Olympic Games. In accountancy, learners develop a good understanding of indirect taxation and are able to identify the value-added tax scheme most suitable for different businesses. In these lessons, teachers' effective questioning skills ensure that learners have a good understanding of the topic before moving on.
- The range of courses for adult learners requires improvement. Leaders have not ensured that the adult learning provision is sufficiently broad to meet the needs of local residents and employers. The college no longer offers programmes for unemployed adults to gain qualifications and improve job search skills to help them gain employment. However, leaders work well with community partnerships to support families in crisis, such as those experiencing domestic abuse. In addition, learners on community learning programmes in areas of high deprivation develop their English language skills well, helping them to overcome personal and isolating issues relating to community support and employment.
- The development of learners' personal, social and work-related skills requires improvement. Although teachers have detailed information on learners' starting points, these are not used routinely to plan activities. For example, in electrical installation, all learners are currently working in industry but the teacher failed to identify and build on their existing skills and knowledge and accelerate learning.

- Not enough learners receive sufficient careers advice and guidance to help them make an informed decision about the programme most suitable for them to develop their knowledge and skills. Too many learners were unable to identify suitable progression routes or career opportunities. For example, in hair and beauty, the majority of learners were unable to describe a progression plan other than working on family and friends.
- Teachers of learners with complex needs are aspirational for learners to do well. Learners' support needs are identified early and good communication between the learner, teacher and learning support assistant ensures that learners receive the support they need to make good progress. Tutors and support workers use prompting questions well to support learners to achieve rather than doing the work for them.
- The majority of teachers monitor closely the progress learners are making towards the achievement of their qualifications. For example, in hospitality and catering, accounting and access to higher education, teachers accurately record and monitor the achievement of internal and external assessments so learners understand the progress they are making.

Apprenticeships

require improvement

- At the time of the inspection, there were around 550 apprentices studying on intermediate, advanced and higher-level apprenticeships. The majority of apprentices study engineering and construction that meets local and regional skills needs well. Approximately two thirds of apprentices are aged 16 to 18 at the start of their programme.
- Most assessors and teachers ensure that apprentices make sufficient progress to complete their programmes successfully, and this is reflected in the high overall success rates. However, too many teachers and assessors do not use their knowledge of apprentices' prior learning and starting points to set challenging targets.
- Too few teachers ensure that apprentices have a good grasp of the underpinning theory and how it links to practice in the workplace and industry. For example, childcare apprentices fail to grasp the impact that educational theorists have on their workplace practices and are unable to apply theory to practice.
- Teachers' and assessors' expectations of what learners can achieve are too low and often the pace of learning is too slow. Too few teachers and assessors ensure that apprentices are set challenging targets to improve their skills and knowledge, or enhance their contribution in the workplace. For example, during an electrical installation assessment, questions asked were basic and unimaginative and failed to develop fully higher-level thinking skills expected of an able, advanced apprentice who had a clear understanding of technical and work practices. Conversely, most apprentices on accounting courses make good progress and develop good accountancy and problem-solving skills. These apprentices produce high-quality written work, are organised and take responsibility for their own learning.
- Managers ensure that the tracking and monitoring of apprentices' progress is effective. Robust, monthly management meetings ensure that those apprentices who fall behind are identified quickly and actions are taken to help them to catch up. However, apprentices' attendance at off-the-job training is low and, as a consequence, too many apprentices do not make swift progress, resulting in a significant minority not achieving their qualification within the agreed time frame.
- Teachers and assessors do not ensure that all employers are informed sufficiently of the progress their apprentices make. Consequently, the valuable contribution employers make to apprentices' off-the-job training is too often missed. Few employers are fully aware of where their apprentice is on their programme or what they need to do to complete their programme successfully. A majority of employers rely on their apprentice to provide them with information on their progress and course content.
- Too few apprentices have the opportunity to extend their learning beyond the requirements of their apprenticeship. Most employers are unaware of the training and development opportunities for apprentices to extend their technical and workplace skills further.
- Too much teachers' and assessors' feedback does not enable apprentices to improve their practical and theoretical work sufficiently. Apprentices are not encouraged to reflect on the quality and standard of their work routinely to identify what they did well and what they need to improve, particularly in practical lessons. Individual targets both at reviews of progress and in classroom-based learning are too vague and focus on task completion rather than further skills development or learning. Teachers and assessors do not use questioning well enough to probe and extend apprentices' understanding.
- Staff do not provide sufficient information, advice and guidance to ensure that all apprentices have a good understanding of career opportunities and pathways in their chosen industry. Too many intermediate-level apprentices do not progress to advanced level, and leaders and managers do not yet capture the destination of apprentices sufficiently to inform future programme planning.

Provider details

Type of provider	General further education college
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	5,750
Principal/CEO	Tony Medhurst
Website address	www.hrc.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 and above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	421	423	587	1,307	1,110	222	0	0
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	190	81	127	132	4	22		
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Bedfordshire YMCA ■ Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue ■ CK Assessment & Training ■ EM Skills ■ Hertfordshire College of Music ■ SPS Training ■ Buttercups ■ Free2Learn 							

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Shane Langthorne, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Matt Vaughan	Her Majesty's Inspector
William Baidoe-Ansah	Her Majesty's Inspector
Mary Aslett	Ofsted Inspector
Catherine Richards	Ofsted Inspector
Lynda Pickering	Ofsted Inspector
Judith Mobbs	Ofsted Inspector
Penelope Fawcus	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the director of quality, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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Manchester
M1 2WD

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