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Short inspection of North East Surrey College of Technology (Nescot)

Following the short inspection on 13 and 14 January 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the college was judged to be good in October 2010.

This college continues to be good.

Since the previous inspection, governors and senior leaders have ensured that Nescot continues to provide education and training of a consistently good quality. You have sustained, and built upon, an ambitious culture in which both staff and learners are expected to do their best. High expectations are fostered by the united approach of your senior leadership team, who demonstrate a good range of complementary skills. During your absence on secondment in Saudi Arabia, overseeing the 'College of Excellence' project that Nescot is leading on, you have ensured that the day-to-day leadership of Nescot is in safe hands. Able and diligent governors have ensured that your absence has not had any negative impact. Your frequent contact with leaders and governors has enabled you to maintain your strategic leadership and keep up to date with developments.

With governors and staff you have formulated a coherent and ambitious strategic plan for 2015–20 that sets a clear path to improve the college further, while at the same time responding to government initiatives and sustaining financial stability. One of the college's many strengths is leaders' responsiveness to external changes; for example, in national and regional policy initiatives, and in labour market demand. Leaders continue to develop the curriculum well, and provide an increasing range of

apprenticeships. The college's financial position is impressive in the context of current economic constraints, and has enabled you to invest in a significant building project, which is nearing completion.

Learners enjoy being at the college, and apprentices enjoy their training. The large majority achieve their main qualification and fulfil their aim of progressing to further training, education or employment. Leaders, managers and teachers have responded well to the introduction of study programmes for learners aged 16 to 18, although, as you recognise, much work is needed to improve provision in English and mathematics. Through a subcontractor, you have also introduced traineeships, and early indications are that learners are making good progress in moving from these into employment. You intend to build upon this initiative by introducing college-based traineeships. Leaders have also responded well to recent expectations around the Prevent agenda and the promotion of British values.

Governors, leaders and managers are ambitious for Nescot to be an outstanding college, and had hoped to have achieved this by now. In pursuance of this ambition, you have tackled successfully the few areas for improvement reported at the 2010 inspection. High standards are evident in most aspects of the college's, and teachers', work. As you recognise, however, external expectations have risen over the last six years. Although teaching, learning and assessment are consistently good, they are still some way short of outstanding. Inspection evidence also revealed lower standards in some pockets of the college. For example, inspectors encountered occasional instances of poor punctuality, low attendance, learners not being ready to learn, and unattractive learning environments that lacked any clear identity. These factors, combined with weaknesses in learners' results in English and mathematics, mean that the 'journey to outstanding', as depicted by the college, has some way to go to reach its destination. However, demonstrable evidence of strong capacity to improve among leaders and governors provides optimism for the future.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are effective and that much is done to promote learners' safety, both at the college and in subcontracted provision. The safeguarding group ensures that information about safeguarding and the Prevent agenda is disseminated to all levels of the college, from learners to the governing body. Appropriate risk assessments and action plans are in place for all aspects of safeguarding, although evaluation of the impact of the initiatives that have been introduced is underdeveloped.

Leaders and managers place a high priority on ensuring that learners are well informed about a broad range of aspects of life in contemporary Britain. They also ensure that learners are aware of the risks associated with the use of social media, and the threat posed by those who promote violence in pursuit of extremist ideologies. Successful interventions have been made where learners have been assessed as being at risk of radicalisation. New staff at the college complete a

thorough package of online training and document scrutiny to ensure that they start their role with a good understanding of their responsibilities in relation to safeguarding.

Inspection findings

- Leaders' and managers' evaluation of the quality of all aspects of the college's provision is broadly accurate, although self-assessment at all levels would benefit from being shorter, sharper and less descriptive. Identification of areas for improvement leads to concerted, and usually effective, action. For example, the causes of poor success rates for older apprentices in 2013/14 were identified quickly and outcomes improved very significantly in 2014/15. A weakness at the 2010 inspection, the low proportion of level 3 learners achieving high grades, is now a strength. Although the difficulty of ensuring good GCSE results in English and mathematics is proving harder to resolve, progress is being made.
- Leaders have, however, not recognised that the high standards promoted by the college culture are let down in a few areas by learning environments that fail to stimulate or capture learners' interest, instances of casual attitudes to learning, and some poor housekeeping, resulting in untidy or scruffy corners of the college.
- The large majority of the key strengths identified through self-evaluation are supported by inspection evidence, and these strengths outweigh significantly the areas for improvement. However, a minority of significant strengths are exaggerated. For example, although teaching, learning and assessment are good, evidence from inspectors' own observations and from the college's records suggest that teaching and learning are not yet 'very good with outstanding features', as suggested in the self-assessment report. The judgement that personal development, behaviour and welfare are outstanding does not sit comfortably with inspection evidence, which revealed pockets of low attendance and poor punctuality, and instances of learners attending classes but not being fully ready to learn.
- The vast majority of learners and apprentices achieve their qualifications successfully, and where there is any slippage in results on particular courses, managers are adept at intervening swiftly and successfully. Adult learners achieve particularly well, and those on study programmes make very good progress on their main qualifications. However, not enough younger learners achieve their qualifications in English and mathematics, especially at Level 2, and therefore do not complete all aspects of their study programmes successfully. Results in mathematics are particularly weak.
- Managers make every effort to find out what happens to learners after they finish their courses, and the vast majority progress to a destination in line with their original intention. However, managers have been unable to find out the destination of around 30% of full-time learners. Internal progression between different course levels is good.

- Teaching, learning and assessment as a whole are consistently good across the college. A combination of solidly good teaching and accurate and frequent monitoring of progress ensures that learners are prepared well for examinations and formal assessments. In respect of lessons, both first-hand inspection evidence and scrutiny of the college's own records show that managers overestimate the proportion of lessons which make an outstanding impact on learning.
- Particularly good lessons are characterised by activities which involve students in their learning, have clear and frequent links to the world of work, and a range of effective checks on learning. Learners in several subjects, for example animal care, visual and performing arts, and public services, benefit from particularly good lessons, where learners of all abilities are challenged to achieve their best. In a small minority of lessons, learning is slower and less effective because the tasks that teachers set are not sufficiently interesting and some learners do not focus well on the work that they have been set.
- Following poor examination results in 2014/15 for learners aged 16 to 18 in mathematics and English, particularly the former, managers have taken decisive action to improve provision in these subjects, and this is beginning to have a positive impact. Learners' progress towards achieving functional skills and GCSE qualifications is monitored carefully, and interventions are swift when learners are at risk of not achieving. Much has been done to persuade learners of the importance of these subjects, and attendance at lessons is improving. Current learners are developing good skills. For example, in English GCSE, learners understand concepts such as genre, hyperbole and metaphor, and, in mathematics GCSE, most learners can use substitution in algebraic calculations. Most lessons now support learning well. However, it is too early to assess the impact of these improvements on examination results.
- Improving full-time learners' opportunities to participate in work-related activity was a key recommendation from the previous inspection, and the introduction of study programmes has strengthened the need to ensure that learners undergo work experience. Good progress has been made, with the large majority of learners now benefiting from good-quality work experience or work-related activities. Learners often adapt or expand their ambitions following their work experience. For example, in animal care, learners become keen advocates for animal welfare and wish to improve conditions in zoos; in business, learners refine their aspirations so that they focus on specific careers such as visual merchandising or accounting. Comprehensive systems are used to record and monitor learners' participation in work experience, and learners often complete additional qualifications in, for example, health and safety or computing that improve their prospects of gaining employment.
- Leaders and managers have implemented effective strategies to improve the quality of provision for apprentices, and success rates for apprentices aged over 24 improved significantly in 2014/15. Careful analysis of each apprentice's progress by staff has resulted in a rapid increase in the proportion who are on track to succeed. Quality assurance of the work of subcontractors is both

frequent and rigorous. Most training is good, although, in some instances, apprentices who are more able are not given sufficiently challenging work.

Next steps for the college

In pursuit of their mission for Nescot to be an outstanding college, leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the proportion of younger learners who achieve English and mathematics qualifications rises substantially, and a much higher proportion of those who start college with a grade D at GCSE improve to a grade C or higher
- leaders' and managers' evaluation of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and of individual lessons, is more rigorous and demanding, with a higher bar set for the achievement of 'outstanding' judgements
- all leaders, managers and staff promote high standards by requiring every learner to exhibit appropriate attitudes to attendance, punctuality and preparedness to learn
- all staff and learners take pride in the learning environment, including classrooms, corridors and offices, by identifying and improving those areas that are currently unattractive and indicate lower professional standards.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alan Hinchliffe
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors were assisted by the deputy principal as nominee. We met with you, the head of college covering your operational role during your absence, the chair of the governing body, your senior and middle managers, and informally with a range of teachers and learners. Inspectors observed teaching, learning and assessment, and reviewed learners' written work. We reviewed key college policies and documents, including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We also considered the views of learners.