

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Professor Andrew Brewerton
Principal and Chief Executive Officer
Plymouth College of Art
Tavistock Place
Plymouth
PL4 8AT

Dear Professor Brewerton

Short inspection of Plymouth College of Art

Following the short inspection on 23 and 24 May 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in May 2013.

This provider continues to be good.

Since the previous inspection, senior leaders have maintained a very high proportion of the strengths and made good progress to tackle the small number of recommendations identified by inspectors. Teaching, learning and assessment are of a high quality and teachers increasingly take part in a range of carefully considered activities to improve their teaching and to share their skills and ideas. Learners place a high value on their teachers' knowledge and skills as well as the feedback they receive on their work. These are pivotal to a high proportion of learners achieving high grades at the end of their course.

Learners develop their English and mathematical skills well and senior leaders have reviewed and developed the English and mathematics curriculum. This has led to an improvement in learners' satisfaction with their English and mathematics lessons and most improve their skills in these subjects. However, too many do not attend lessons regularly.

Learners enjoy their courses and gain the skills they need to progress to higher education. Staff mostly provide them with the experiences and support they need to make well-informed decisions about their next steps.

Senior leaders carefully consider changes to the curriculum and implement these well. A newly introduced programme to improve learners' personal skills adds breadth to the study programmes and contributes well to learners developing attributes such as resilience and determination, and skills such as confidence and communication.

Opportunities to work with local community groups and businesses continue to develop and enhance learners' knowledge of the demands of working in the creative industries.

Senior leaders have developed an apprenticeship programme that effectively meets employers' needs, and a high proportion of apprentices progress into permanent employment or gain promotion following their apprenticeship. A small number in 2015/16 did not complete within the time allocated, but your staff have taken effective action to tackle the causes and current apprentices are making good progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are carefully designed to keep learners safe. Leaders and staff manage safeguarding incidents well and make swift and appropriate responses to concerns raised by learners. Staff work closely with the local safeguarding board and other agencies, such as charities, doctors and the police, to ensure that they refer learners to the most appropriate agency and share information as necessary.

College leaders provide effective and regular training for staff on safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. Managers have carefully planned how to develop learners' awareness of the risks they face online and in person. Teachers plan their courses well to incorporate important lessons about keeping safe and to allow learners to express, through their art work, their responses to the risks facing them. For example, the day after a terrorist event, teachers agreed a common approach to discussing the event and encouraged learners to express their responses to it. A group of learners, inspired by the work of a contemporary artist, produced a piece of art work that articulated thoughtfully their reaction to the event.

Inspection findings

- College leaders have a good understanding of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the college and take effective, swift action to make further improvements. For example, recent changes to schedules for assessments have enabled teachers to work together to improve the consistency of their assessment decisions and to share their practice.
- College leaders use a wide range of information to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning, with a particularly strong consideration of learners' views. They have introduced opportunities for teachers to take a more active part in identifying how to improve their teaching and provide a wide range of professional development, peer support and feedback that help teachers improve their teaching. While these are effective, leaders' reflections on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are focused too much on checking on the quality of lessons rather than recognising a broader range of indicators of the improvements taking place in teaching and learning.

- College leaders have developed a well-considered approach to improving the teaching of mathematics and English. They have increased the number of specialist teachers and provided extensive staff development. Teachers now identify effectively the improvements their learners need to make and track closely their progress through frequent assessments. As a result, learners are more positive about their English and mathematics lessons than in previous years and an increasing proportion complete in-year assessments at the standard necessary to gain a grade C or above. However, learners' attendance at English and mathematics lessons continues to require improvement and some learners pay too little attention to accurate spelling and grammar in their sketchbooks.
- Learners produce work that is of a high standard in all subjects and a high proportion pass assignments with a high grade. In most subjects, a high proportion of learners complete and achieve their qualification; however, in a small number of subjects, a minority leave their course early. Most learners attend their lessons regularly but, in the second year of extended diplomas, a significant minority of learners miss too many lessons.
- Teachers are highly skilled at helping learners identify what they need to do to improve the quality of their work and, particularly in the foundation art and design course, to experiment, critique and evaluate their work. Learners use assessment by their peers very well to improve their work.
- Leaders and teachers have developed a very thoughtful, innovative and effective programme to help learners develop the personal skills and attributes they will need in their future lives. Learners use this programme, 'The Character Project', to assess themselves in well-defined categories; for example, their levels of confidence, concentration or ability to take criticism. Activities to improve these are integrated into their coursework and teachers regularly review their progress. Learners explain clearly how they have developed as a result of this aspect of their course.
- The 16 to 19 study programmes incorporate a wide range of assignments that allow learners to gain the experience of working with external clients. These include film-makers, managers at local heritage sites and practising artists. Teachers introduce themes that effectively develop learners' awareness of the world around them, such as a sustainability project for all first years and a project for photography learners about animal welfare with the Devon Wildlife Trust. Learners on the fashion course benefit from external work placements, and the college has plans to increase the number of work placements for learners in other subjects.
- A high majority of learners progress to higher education (HE) and specialist art, design and media degree programmes which best meet their aspirations. Learners gain a good understanding of the opportunities available to them for progression to HE through research. Learners can explain how careers events and talks by learners studying on the college's degree programmes have given them an understanding of HE. However, college events are not as successful at providing the same insight into degrees offered at other HE institutions.
- While a majority of learners move on to HE, a significant minority progress directly into employment, many of these into jobs that are not related to their

studies. Too little of the college's careers advice and guidance, and too few opportunities for work experience, are targeted at learners who aspire to gaining employment at the end of their course.

- Learners develop a good understanding of how to manage their finances in HE through teachers carefully integrating lessons on the practical application of mathematics into their courses.
- A large majority of apprentices successfully complete their apprenticeship, mostly within the time allocated. Apprentices are motivated and progress well into sustained employment with their employer or to higher education as a result of effective teaching, high-quality support and well-developed partnerships with employers. For example, two learners on an apprenticeship in fashion and textiles have progressed into junior management roles.
- Senior leaders and managers have successfully developed apprenticeships that meet the needs of local and regional employers. The college's senior leaders have plans to continue providing apprenticeships in future years. However, in the short-term, the decision by leaders to reduce the number of apprentices they train has reduced the options for employers to offer an apprenticeship in the creative arts.
- Managers have resolved the causes of a small number of apprentices who took too long to complete their apprenticeship in 2015/16; current apprentices make rapid progress on completing tasks and assignments. Staff monitor their apprentices' progress closely and a high proportion of apprentices are on track to complete their apprenticeship on time.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they place a greater emphasis on recognising, reporting and sharing the distinctive characteristics of teaching in the college to enable managers to produce a richer expression of the quality of teaching
- the college's teaching and learning strategy contains a greater emphasis on achieving high-quality teaching and leaders use their processes for quality improvement to recognise fully the improvements to teaching that are taking place through peer work, professional development and feedback from managers to teachers
- they take steps to improve the consistency of retention on extended diploma courses and improve attendance, particularly for second-year learners, through setting clear expectations to learners and parents before learners start their course and throughout their course
- learners develop fully their written communication skills by using grammar and spelling in their written work that takes full account of the purpose of the piece of writing and the intended reader
- learners who do not intend to progress to higher education have greater access to external work placements and advice about employment in order to enable

these learners to further develop the skills required to succeed in, and to progress into, meaningful and sustained employment.

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

Yours sincerely

Steven Tucker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we were assisted by the quality and examinations manager (pre-degree) as nominee. We met you and your senior leaders, teachers and other members of staff. We visited lessons to collect information about learners' progress and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. We spoke to learners during lessons and in a meeting that you arranged. We reviewed key documents, including those in which Plymouth College of Art's leaders evaluate the quality of provision and standards achieved, the provider's evidence of safeguarding and reports on learners' satisfaction with their course.