

Royal National College for the Blind

Inspection report

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| Provider reference | 133108 |
| Published date | June 2008 |

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| Audience | Post-sixteen |
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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. The Royal National College for the Blind (RNCB) is an independent specialist residential college with charitable status, and is a company limited by guarantee. Its mission is to 'lead, innovate, develop, promote and deliver world class learning, products and services, driving standards of excellence'. The college provides education and training primarily for learners who are blind and visually impaired. Some learners have additional needs which include medical and mental health needs. Some 6% of learners have autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). The college is located in Hereford in 25 acres of grounds and is in easy reach of the city. There are 152 residential and 44 day learners, 43 of whom are funded by the LSC in partnership with other local further education providers; 74 are aged 16 to 18 and 122 are aged 19 years and over. Of those, 48 adult learners are funded by the Department of Work and Pensions' residential training unit (RTU), 11 learners are funded by the Welsh Assembly government, three are privately funded and the remainder by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). There are 19 learners from minority ethnic backgrounds.
2. Changes to the RTU contract in March 2007 have resulted in programmes for adult learners undertaking courses lasting 12 months. Programmes for RTU adult learners are focused on them gaining employment by the end of the course. All learners have individualised programmes which can include independent learning skills, mobility, pre-vocational, vocational, academic subjects and careers and employment advice.

Summary of grades awarded

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|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Effectiveness of provision | Good: Grade 2 |
| Capacity to improve | Good: Grade 2 |
| Achievement and standards | Good: Grade 2 |
| Quality of provision | Outstanding: Grade 1 |
| Leadership and management | Good: Grade 2 |
| <i>Equality of opportunity</i> | <i>Good: contributory grade 2</i> |

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

3. The effectiveness of provision is good overall with some outstanding features. The grade agrees with the college's own self-assessment. Learners achieve well, especially in relation to gains made in their personal development and independence skills. Learners' development of work-related skills is good. Pass rates on courses leading to qualifications are good and rates of progression into higher education and employment are high. Retention rates are satisfactory. However, attendance rates of learners are low in comparison to other independent specialist colleges.
4. Teaching and learning are judged to be good which disagrees with the college's self-assessment that this aspect of provision is outstanding. Planning for learning is effective and planned well based on rigorous initial assessment. There is very good attention paid in lessons to health and safety and good use made of realistic environments to enhance learning. In the less effective lessons learning is directed too often by teachers and not sufficiently planned to ensure all learners are fully engaged. Learners' general progress is effectively monitored, although specific targets set for learners to achieve are not always sufficiently measurable.
5. The extent to which the college provides programmes matched to learners' aspirations and potential is outstanding. This agrees with the college's own self-assessment. Learners follow highly personalised programmes to meet their individual requirements and are closely linked with their long term goals. Learners benefit from the extensive range of courses and activities on offer which enables them to make good progress. The wide variety of enrichment activities provide enhanced opportunities for learners' personal and skill development. Links between residential and day provision are improving as individual learner targets across all areas of provision are being implemented more effectively and provide more coherent programmes for learners to follow. Work experience opportunities have increased and there is a greater focus given in the curriculum to develop relevant and appropriate work-related and job-seeking skills. The promotion of social and educational inclusion is outstanding.
6. The outstanding grade awarded to guidance and support for learners agrees with the college's own self-assessment. The college has an excellent range of support services through highly effective multi-disciplinary staff teams. Specialist support is of a high quality as is careers advice and guidance which enables learners to progress into higher education and employment. Personal support and transition planning are very effective.
7. Leadership and management are good which disagrees with the college's own self-assessment that they are outstanding. Strategic leadership is strong and has had a beneficial effect on the quality and extent of the curriculum offer.

Excellent partnerships at a local, national and international level greatly assist in raising the profile of the college and in supporting the college's mission. Quality assurance of provision is effective in relation to health and safety and the regular audits of all aspects of the college's work which take place. However, the monitoring of teaching and learning is underdeveloped. Self-assessment is broadly accurate and highly inclusive but does not identify all areas for improvement sufficiently. The college meets the requirements of equalities legislation, although actions taken to improve this aspect of provision are not sufficiently monitored or analysed. Governance is highly effective. Financial management is sound and the college provides good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

8. The college's capacity to improve is good. There are comprehensive quality assurance arrangements in place and many thorough and robust procedures which are effectively improving provision for learners. Although identified within quality improvement planning, the quality of analysis, monitoring and evaluation of provision are still insufficiently robust, such as in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning and the performance of different groups of learners. The self-assessment process is highly inclusive. The self-assessment report is broadly accurate and identifies many of the key strengths of the college, although is too generous in some evaluations and does not sufficiently identify all key areas for improvement. Staff are very motivated and committed to improving the experience of all learners. Staff confidence in senior managers' ability to secure improvement is strong. The college is held in high regard by all stakeholders.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

9. The steps taken to improve provision since the last inspection are good. On the whole, standards have been maintained, especially in relation to assessment procedures, individual learner programmes, outstanding support for learners, and leadership and strategic management. General improvements have been made to overall accommodation and this is now of a particularly high standard in both independence skills and art and design. Access to external work experience placements for most learners has improved significantly. However, the use of additional resources in some teaching lessons remains an area for improvement. In some cases teachers still over direct and make insufficient use of a variety of resources to maintain learners' interest.

Key strengths

- good achievement
- good progression onto higher education and employment
- good development of work-related skills
- very good attention paid to health and safety
- good teaching and learning
- an extensive range of courses
- highly personalised individual learning programmes

- highly successful promotion of social and educational inclusion
- outstanding specialist support for learners
- very good transition arrangements
- strong strategic leadership
- extensive and beneficial partnerships at local, national and international level
- highly effective governance.

Areas for improvement

- attendance rates
- the planning of learning matched to learners' levels of attainment and learning styles
- the consistent quality of target setting
- increased rigour in the monitoring and analysis of information to inform self-assessment and quality improvement
- the quality assurance of teaching and learning.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

10. Learners' achievement is good and standards of work are of a high quality. This agrees with the college's own self-assessment. Learners produce very good works of art and there are many high quality displays of this around the college. Assignments completed on vocational courses towards unit qualifications meet course requirements well. Learners are highly recognised for their achievements in regional and national sports awards and produce high quality performances in performing arts. Learners make very good progress in relation to their independence and personal skills. They learn to travel independently, to cook for themselves and others, and manage their money effectively. This increased independence has a major impact on the quality of their lives and their confidence and self-esteem grows significantly. Learners adopt more healthy lifestyles and their spiritual, moral and social development is enhanced through the citizenship programme and community events organised to raise funds for charities. Their knowledge of issues affecting the wider community grows through the college's many links with external agencies and local groups.
11. There has been an increased focus on learners' development of work-related and job-seeking skills, and twice as many RTU learners gain employment than in previous years. Learners develop good business and enterprise skills through their involvement in supported employment projects. The use of work placements provides learners with valuable up-to-date experience of the skills needed to be successful in their chosen careers. All learners demonstrate high levels of health and safety awareness.
12. Learners achieve well on courses leading to qualifications. Learners' pass rates are good and learners develop the underpinning skills of literacy, numeracy, communication, Braille and ICT to enable them to effectively achieve on all courses. Learners make good progress in relation to their literacy and numeracy with a high proportion progressing from entry level to levels 1 and 2. This provides them with the basic skills to make progress across curriculum activities and onto higher level courses. Too few learners achieve grades above D on a few A and AS level courses, although a significant number progress into higher education. Overall attendance rates, including authorised absences for 2006/07, were only 85% and rates vary greatly between different courses. Retention rates have improved significantly on RTU programmes during this academic year but overall rates were only satisfactory and in line with other similar providers at 90% in 2006/07. These issues relating to attendance and retention were not sufficiently identified as areas for improvement within the college's self-assessment.

Quality of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

13. Teaching and learning are good. This disagrees with college's own self-assessment report in which the college awarded an outstanding grade. Each learner has a thorough baseline and initial assessment and planning of teaching

is generally good. In the most effective lessons planning is closely linked to individual learning plans and the weekly targets set for learners to achieve. Skilful use is made of open-ended questioning which encourages learners to participate and develop their own learning. Imaginative use is made of issues that relate well to learners' positive contribution to the community and their interest is maintained by a variety of teaching methods. Good relationships exist between the teachers and learners and support in lessons, where it is used, is unobtrusive, supportive and timely. In less well planned lessons, the learners' individual learning styles are not fully considered and the activities are based on the group as a whole. This often entails teachers in over-directing learners in their work and an over-reliance on question and answer techniques which fail to engage learners fully in learning. There is very good attention to health and safety issues in lessons which reflects the high importance the college gives to the learners' welfare and well-being.

14. Key and basic skills are effectively embedded in all lessons and achievements routinely reviewed during the regular tutorials. The college's regular Formative Progress and Achievement Report (FPAR) provides a timely and carefully structured system for reviewing progress against objectives with the learner across all elements of their programme. However, the college recognises that targets set for learners to achieve are not always sufficiently specific or measurable to monitor progress effectively.
15. The curriculum provides an extensive range of courses from entry level to level 3 and for a few learners onto level 4. There are clear progression routes and learners have very good opportunities to gain vocational and academic qualifications in line with their aspirations and future employment prospects. Learners benefit highly from the excellent and very productive links with local employers, external agencies and other providers. Work experience opportunities have significantly increased and there is an appropriate emphasis on learners gaining work-related and job-seeking skills within curriculum activities. This has resulted in significantly improved progression rates into employment by RTU learners. Social enterprise activities are increasing, providing relevant supported learning opportunities for learners in realistic working environments. Programmes that involve RTU learners in obtaining six month transitional posts are very successful in enabling learners to gain employment.
16. The college's response to educational and social inclusion is outstanding. Learners' programmes are suitably personalised and are arranged to ensure they successfully develop social and personal skills and increased independence. All learners have a core entitlement which includes literacy, numeracy, communication, Braille, information and communication technology (ICT) and mobility. These are either successfully integrated into curriculum activities or arranged to meet individual learners' requirements. Enrichment activities include a good variety of opportunities to widen learners' college experience. These have further developed recently to provide an improved link and more coherent programmes for learners across residential and day

provision. There is good promotion of equality and diversity across the curriculum activities with a clear emphasis on raising learners' awareness and appreciation of the different religious and cultural groups within the wider community.

17. Support and guidance for learners are outstanding. This agrees with the college's own self-assessment. The specialist multi-disciplinary teams are organised in a highly effective way to enable learners to develop greater levels of self-awareness and techniques to become emotionally more self-sufficient. Support is provided and is particularly good at helping learners to come to terms with the implications of sight loss. Similarly there is a highly effective team of specialist support staff who train and encourage the learners to become less dependent on others for medical support. The college has already recognised the need to develop greater expertise in addressing specific disability issues, such as those relating to autistic spectrum disorders, and have created an intervention response group to address these concerns. Staff develop techniques to manage behaviour effectively and this is backed up by a readily available on-call support system.
18. Personal tutorials, including meetings held with Primary Learning Teams, provide very good, regular and formalised support to learners. This support is effectively reinforced by key workers who support the learners in their enrichment and residential activities. There is very good support for learners in developing and implementing their plans for transition supported by excellent careers advice and guidance. This enables high levels of learners' progression into further education, higher education and employment.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Good: grade 2

19. Leadership and management are good. The principal provides strong leadership and, along with the governing body, effectively steers an exciting strategic vision for the college. Excellent and extensive partnership arrangements exist with a wide range of local, national and international organisations which are contributing positively to the development of the curriculum and further supporting the college's mission. Communication across the college is very good.
20. Management information systems provide extensive data about learner performance but these are insufficiently analysed to inform improvement planning. Quality assurance arrangements are in place for all college operations and are particularly good in relation to the management and monitoring of health and safety. Links to share best practice with other similar providers are well established. Regular quality audits of the provision are undertaken and improvements have been made in expanding the learner voice and broadening the range of enrichment. Aspects of quality assurance, such as the monitoring of teaching and learning, are less robust. The college has recently improved the extent to which lesson observations are being undertaken across all curriculum areas but there is insufficient internal or external moderation of evaluations.

The college recognises the need for further training to enable observers to more sharply focus on areas for improvement in order to effectively enhance learning. The self-assessment process is highly inclusive, involving the views of all staff and students. The self-assessment report, however, does not clearly identify all the college's key areas for improvement, such as those required to improve teaching and learning and low attendance rates on different courses. Judgements contained within the self-assessment report are not always supported by robust evidence.

21. The promotion of equality of opportunity is good. The curriculum is regularly adapted to meet the needs of learners and equality and diversity themes are planned more systematically into lessons. The college's response to the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 is good. Policies are in place and relevant impact assessments have been undertaken, although the quality of subsequent implementation plans are too variable and insufficiently monitored. The college analyse staff and students cohorts by gender, age and ethnicity, although there is limited analysis and monitoring of different groups by performance. Procedures for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults meet current government requirements. Appropriate and comprehensive checks are in place and are monitored rigorously. Issues related to Every Child Matters have been effectively mapped across the curriculum.
22. Performance management systems have greatly improved and successfully identify staff development needs. A comprehensive staff development programme covers all aspects of training to cover legislative requirements and issues identified through staff reviews and appraisals. Staff are highly qualified and demonstrate a wide range of specialist knowledge and expertise in the performance of their roles.
23. Governors are very experienced and highly supportive. They link effectively with all areas of the college's work and provide a good level of critical challenge. All governors are fully involved in the self-assessment process and produce a detailed annual plan to improve their own performance as a governing body.
24. Standards of accommodation and facilities are good, particularly in the range and quality of specialist resources. Financial management is sound. The management of the college's new build is impressive. The college provides good value for money.