

April 1996 • Grey Friars receives an excellent Ofsted report for quality of learning

Extracts and Principal's response from Staff Bulletin

The logo for Ofsted, featuring the word "Ofsted" in a stylized, handwritten font inside a black square.

OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

THE ADULT COMMUNITY COLLEGE COLCHESTER

Reference: 4/96/FE

A report from the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools

The Adult Community College

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Courses in the Colchester, Stanway, Tiptree, Mersea, Wivenhoe & Brightlingsea areas

A Curriculum for the Adult Community

STAFF BULLETIN

APRIL 1996

EXTRACTS from the HMI / Ofsted report published 21st March 1996

Main findings

13. Students who attend the college are well catered for and overall standards of achievement across the college are good. In 30 per cent of the classes seen achievement was satisfactory, in 55 per cent good and in 15 per cent very good. Students are confident, serious learners and make good progress. In some areas of the curriculum, such as art and craft, students achieve high standards and produce excellent work.
14. Students participate fully in the classes and learn with enthusiasm; they support each other and benefit from well organised and carefully planned sessions. The quality of learning was satisfactory in 21 per cent of classes, good in 66 per cent and very good in 13 per cent.
15. The experienced teaching staff ensure that the work is challenging and demanding. Staff are skilled, know their subject well and communicate effectively with students. Ninety-seven per cent of the teaching seen was satisfactory or better: 76 per cent was good or very good.
16. Staff support students in a positive manner and encourage them to extend themselves. Consequently, the college has a committed and loyal student body.
17. Enrolment rates are high and student retention rates are generally good.
18. This is a cost effective service but there are some limitations in the low full-time staffing level.
19. The amount of external funding, other than that from the FEFC, is low.
20. The budget, although efficiently monitored, both at LEA and college levels, is not yet strategically managed.
21. The LEA has recently issued guidance to college managers on such areas as monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance, but the college currently lacks a coherent strategy for ascertaining its success or otherwise in meeting its objectives.
22. Following the college's reorganisation, the management team has provided a strategic plan which provides a good basis for the college's future development. However, as yet, the college has not targeted specific groups identified in the plan; nor has it sought sufficiently to match curriculum with the needs of the diverse community it serves.

STANDARDS AND QUALITY

Standards of achievement

24. Standards of achievement are good overall with some areas of excellence. In 30 per cent of the classes seen achievement was satisfactory, in 55 per cent good and in 15 per cent very good. Nothing less than satisfactory was seen during the inspection. Achievement was particularly good in the development of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), in art and creative crafts, in some parts of the physical education programme and in advanced French courses as well as in areas as disparate as Chinese cookery, assertiveness training, history of art, decoupage, pottery, bridge, Scottish country dancing, swimming and boat-building.
25. Across the curriculum, a wide range of students demonstrably gained new skills, knowledge, understanding and competence. Modern language students attained linguistic fluency allied with substantial cultural knowledge and understanding, whilst physical education students developed coordination, poise and control. Non-swimmers of all ages became swimmers. Business and

computing students developed the practical business skills and knowledge that helped to make them employable or promotable. Art and craft students created artefacts of high quality. In some cases they had been commissioned to produce work. Others have sought to develop their skills further and several have moved on to degree courses.

26. In arts and crafts progress was apparent where students' early and current work could be seen. Students were making better pots, drawings, photographs, and other pieces. They were confident in their handling of materials, tools and equipment; they had a good understanding of processes, techniques and concepts; and they were able to apply the knowledge and skills they had acquired. Students had developed critical skills and appreciation and could assess their own strengths and weaknesses. In many classes the students had a wide range of experience and ability, and all were achieving at their own level. For instance, in decoupage classes students who were experienced and knowledgeable about the history of the craft (creating three-dimensional pictures using layers of paper or card imagery) and beginner students supported each other in the production of accurate, careful work. Students in a ceramics group were also seen to share expertise and feed in their own suggestions. In advanced classes, such as the art link higher education (HE) Foundation course, workbooks and sketch books testified to high standards of watercolour, charcoal and other work, whilst, A-level history of art students debated with critical rigour.

27. An area of excellence is ESOL, where careful thought, meticulous planning and dedicated teaching have created a system that caters for individual students' needs to an unusually high degree. Following detailed individual assessment interviews by a specialist, customised programmes are negotiated to fit students' needs. This enables students to progress rapidly. As well as ESOL, the Foundation Department covers adult basic education and special needs. In basic mathematics, many students arrive with anxiety and a sense of confronting a weakness or blank spot. They quickly prove to themselves that they can understand mathematics. With this new-found confidence they begin to make good progress. Within the Foundation programme, a range of activities for students with special needs enables them to achieve the goals they have set for themselves.

28. In dance, students achieved high standards of practical skills and knowledge. Scottish country dancing students, working to the standards of the Royal Scottish Country Dancing Society, successfully tackled new learning, gaining social and personal skills in the process. Modern dance students rehearse rigorously and reach standards good enough for public performance on behalf of charities. The college runs a large and very successful swimming teaching programme and has won awards for the highest number of adult beginners taught to swim. Able bodied and disabled, parents and children, beginners and aspiring swimming teachers alike achieve success on these courses.

29. In some classes, students' achievements had a particular relevance to local circumstances. Much of the college's catchment area is coastal and two outreach classes at Mersea and on Mersea Island particularly reflected local life. At a fish preparation and cookery class on Mersea Island, held in a former oyster purifying plant on the seashore, students learned to prepare and cook locally caught, often unfamiliar, fish. They gained confidence in trying out new dishes. In another historic building linked to the oyster business, students learned boat-building. Experienced and new students together, working on an apprenticeship model, were restoring a former oyster smack dating from 1892. Meticulous craftsmanship, under the experienced boat-builder who tutors, was seen. Anything less than satisfactory was discarded and the work redone. Students were acquiring specialist skills of a very high order as well as some understanding of local history.

30. In all the classes seen, students were achieving standards commensurate with personal goals and abilities. The good examination results attest to this, but they are only part of the story. Progression of students both within the college's programme and in some cases on to further and higher education is another, and the growth of all kinds of skills, understanding, knowledge and awareness is a third.

Quality of learning

31. The quality of learning was satisfactory in 21 per cent of classes, good in 66 per cent and very good in 13 per cent. Students were serious learners with high motivation and good sustained concentration. Many were enthusiasts who both immersed themselves in their learning and made rigorous demands on themselves, striving to improve and tackle more difficult things. They rose well to challenges presented by tutors.

32. The atmosphere in classes was calm and purposeful. Often, many different learning needs were being met in the same class: a chance to learn new skills, to have new challenges, to fulfil an ambition, do something properly, discuss with like-minded people, or exercise other faculties. In an atmosphere of mutual support, students felt able to seek help when needed, appreciate and learn from the work of others, learn from errors and take on a degree of responsibility. In class, students participated readily, offered suggestions, posed perceptive questions and supported one another's learning.

33. Progression was generally good, with students in examination classes learning how to prepare effectively without undue anxiety and others doing set homework, outside study and research or practice, to build up the skills and knowledge they need in order to progress. Many modern linguists advanced from beginner to higher levels. Business and ESOL students moved through appropriate levels of examination awards. In some skilfully managed courses, such as art link, students increased their knowledge, mastery and skills to a pre-HE level.

Quality of teaching

56. Ninety-seven per cent of the teaching seen was satisfactory or better; 76 per cent was good or very good. There were many experienced and skilled teachers who knew their subjects well and communicated effectively with the students. There was widespread evidence of good planning, preparation, organisation and presentation of suitable materials. The content was well matched to the students' needs, interests, range of abilities and experience. Relationships were good and the work was generally challenging and often differentiated effectively so that individual students could work at their own level to achieve realistic targets.

57. Teachers generally employed a good range of methods and sessions were well structured to include exposition to the whole class, group work, and a variety of practical activities, including work on individual assignments, and the use of computers in appropriate classes.

58. Some excellent teaching, which achieved high levels of performance by students, based on a stimulating blend of technical mastery and creativity, was seen in art, English, history and modern foreign languages and in a wide range of creative and technical subjects including boat-building, calligraphy, cookery, dance, photography, pottery and yoga.

59. For example, in an excellent class on Chinese cookery, students completed practical work to a high standard, cooking and evaluating their own dishes and then observing an expert demonstration by the teacher, linked to a commentary, and explanation of the difficulties associated with the commercial production of such dishes in fast food outlets.

60. Two GCE A-level classes provided further examples of particularly effective teaching. First, students in a class on the history of art were preparing for a forthcoming visit to a London Gallery, by giving individual presentations to the class on their own research and critiques of a range of work in the exhibition. The teacher struck a good balance between letting students talk to the class, guiding and stimulating group discussion through rigorous questioning of their evidence and judgements, and

insisting upon an appropriate level of depth and clarity of reason in the discussion. All students were drawn into the discussion, which was supported by an effective range of handouts and appropriate overhead projector slides. Secondly, students in a second year GCE A-level French class had been instructed to research and present accounts, in the target language, of recent terrorist events in France and Algeria. The teacher had set clear objectives and carefully planned the session to achieve an imaginative synthesis of content and language, using demanding, topical and challenging material. The students worked to an excellent standard, describing the recent events in the role of witnesses. The college should take steps to record and disseminate such examples of very successful teaching in order to raise teaching standards to the quality of the best.

From the Principal

The inspection process and its subsequent report have provided much food for thought and will have an effect on our planning and operation for some time to come.

For the Governors and the managerial staff (and not forgetting the LEA) there are some serious issues of philosophy, strategy and funding which will need to be addressed one way or another in the very near future.

But there is no doubt that the main theme of the moment is the inspectors' judgement of the quality of what we are all here to serve - the students' learning and achievement.

Who can ignore sentences such as
"In all the classes seen, students were achieving standards commensurate with personal goals and abilities." (para 30)

The scores awarded by HMI are the clearest statement of quality we could have.

This is no happy accident.

Such results can not be achieved unless there is a full partnership between tutors, students and the staff who support them.

Whether a student is driving their car into the car park, leaving their child in the creche, asking a caretaker for directions, enrolling at the office, telephoning for information, buying some welcome refreshment, or eventually attending a classroom session (in any one of a number of venues) - they are at all times experiencing the services of our college.

The philosophy must be shared, the ethos must be clear and the whole team must contribute in order to gain such results.

I hope that you enjoy reading the extracts in this bulletin and that whatever your role in the college, you can feel proud of the achievements and be assured that your own contribution has been valued.



It was good to see the inspectors visit a wide range of venues and that they acknowledged our commitment to preserve local provision and its particular relevance to local circumstances.

But, wherever they went, we appear to have been subject to the most rigorous measurement of classroom performance in adult education since the FHE Act and the artificial divide between so-called vocational and non-vocational adult learning.

Our academic excellence has been noted before, particularly in 1993 when the AEB declared us "top of the league" in their "A" level roll of excellence (for top students and medal winners). But, due to the lack of a system of impartial measurement of non-accredited courses there has not been an opportunity to test out quality within our theory of the 'seamless robe' of a comprehensive curriculum for adults.

I am gratified that the efforts, expertise and professionalism of staff working throughout the curriculum are now officially recognised.

Alan Skinner