

INSPECTION REPORT

Northern College for Residential Adult Education

17 November 2006



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was established under the provisions of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based learning within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- work-based learning for all people aged over 16
- provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- **learnirect** provision
- Adult and Community Learning
- training funded by Jobcentre Plus
- education and training in prisons, at the invitation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons
- adult information, advice and guidance services (**nextstep**).

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the Common Inspection Framework by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

Pre-inspection analysis

The resources allocated to a cycle 2 inspection are primarily determined by the findings from the previous inspection. Account is also taken of information about achievement and retention obtained from the funding body, and any significant changes in the size or scope of the provision.

Where a provider has received good grades in cycle 1, the cycle 2 inspection is relatively light. If the provider offers a number of areas of learning, a restricted sample is inspected.

Where a provider has received satisfactory grades in cycle 1, the cycle 2 inspection is less intensive and it is possible that not all areas of learning are included.

Where there are significant unsatisfactory grades from cycle 1, the intensity of the cycle 2 inspection is broadly the same as cycle 1, and all significant areas of learning are inspected.

Providers that have not previously been inspected will receive a full inspection.

Overall effectiveness

The grades given for areas of learning and leadership and management will be used to arrive at a judgement about the overall effectiveness of the provider.

An **outstanding** provider should typically have leadership and management and at least half of the areas of learning judged to be a grade 1. All area of learning grades will be graded 1 or 2.

A **good** provider should have leadership and management and at least half of the area of learning grades judged to be a grade 2 or better. A good training provider should not have any grade 4s, and few grade 3s in the areas of learning.

A **satisfactory** provider should have adequate or better grades in leadership and management and in at least two thirds of the area of learning grades. An adequate provider might have a range of grades across areas of learning, some of which might be graded 4.

Provision will normally be deemed to be **inadequate** where more than one third of the area of learning grades and/or leadership and management are judged to be inadequate.

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning.

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision in occupational/curriculum areas and Jobcentre Plus programmes, as well as to summarise their judgements about the quality of learning sessions. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes equality of opportunity and quality assurance. The descriptors for the four grades are:

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

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Northern College for Residential Adult Education

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INSPECTION REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. The Northern College for Residential Adult Education (NC) was established in 1978 near Barnsley in South Yorkshire. Its continuing mission is to provide high-quality learning opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and groups. NC is sited in a grade 1 listed building and is currently in the midst of a major building programme as part of a successful Heritage Lottery bid, further supported by funding from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Yorkshire Forward and the European Social Fund (ESF), which involves restoration work and improvement across the estate. NC was awarded Beacon status by the LSC in 2004.

2. The courses offered range from entry to advanced level, with the diploma programme providing access to higher education. During 2005-06, there were 66 full-time and 16 part-time learners on the diploma programme. NC also runs a substantial programme of part-time courses of various lengths, most of which are residential. In 2005-06 3,427 enrolments on part-time residential courses were funded directly through the LSC, and 765 were funded through the local authorities of Leeds, Barnsley, Rotherham, Sheffield, Kirklees, Doncaster and Bradford. A further 2,108 enrolments came from outreach or non-residential provision.

3. NC receives around half its funding from South Yorkshire LSC, with a direct allocation of £3,037,882 for 2006-07. This is a reduction of approximately 2.7 per cent on the amount for 2005-06. In addition, the college's contracts from the local authorities have been severely cut in 2006-07 because of the reductions in LSC funding for adult and community learning. The college receives other funding through the ESF, Yorkshire Forward, trades unions and voluntary and community organisations. In 2005-06, 27 per cent of NC's funding came from external grant sources, 7 per cent from local authorities, and 16 per cent from catering and residence operations, and external bookings.

4. The reduction in funding has led to a restructure of staffing and of the way the curriculum is organised. The restructure involved some redundancies. The principal of the college reports to the board of governors, and manages a senior management team of five staff, including two academic directors who between them are responsible for the strategic management of the programme areas. Four programme managers are responsible for operational management of the curriculum. There is a team of 25 teaching staff, 17 full-time and eight part-time, most of whom teach on more than one programme. The principal, academic directors and programme managers also teach on various programmes.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

Grade 1

5. **The overall effectiveness of the provision is outstanding.** Leadership and management, including equality of opportunity and quality improvement, are outstanding. The quality of provision in social sciences and in preparation for life and work is also outstanding.

6. **Achievement and standards are very good overall.** Retention, achievement and success rates have been maintained at a consistently high level between 2003 and 2006. The diploma programme had high retention and achievement rates at the previous inspection and these have been maintained. Success rates on the programme are good and improving at 78 per cent for 2005-06. Retention and achievement have also remained high both for skills for life and the short-course programme. Skills for Life is the government's strategy on training in literacy, numeracy and the use of language. Success rates on the short-course programme have remained consistently over 90 per cent. The pass rate for national tests in literacy and numeracy is significantly above the national average at 82 per cent. On the community regeneration programme, the success rate for 2005-06 is good at 81 per cent, although this represents a slight drop on the 88 per cent for the preceding year. Success rates on the trade union programme have been consistently high since 2003, and in 2005-06 they were outstanding at 99 per cent. On the local authorities programme, the rates of retention and achievement of personal learning goals have remained very high at 98 per cent, and success rates are also very high at 96 per cent for 2005-06.

7. Learners on many of the programmes overcome considerable barriers to learning, and gain the confidence and skills they need to improve their lives and their communities. Progression is very good. In 2006-07, 70 per cent of the learners on the diploma programme had progressed from short courses provided by the college. The proportion of learners progressing from the diploma course either to university courses or to employment has remained above 80 per cent for the past three years.

8. **The quality of provision is very good overall.** The 19 learning sessions observed during the inspection were all at least satisfactory and 74 per cent were good or better. Sixteen per cent were outstanding. In the best sessions, tutors are particularly encouraging and motivational, and make very good use of questioning techniques. Learners are very engaged and particularly enthusiastic about their learning, rapidly gaining awareness, understanding and skills. Learners on the diploma programme develop very good academic skills. Group learning is effective, with tasks that encourage learners to share ideas while discussing suitably challenging topics. However, in a few sessions there is insufficient differentiation to cater for the range of learners. Sessions are well planned, and learning is enhanced by good resources. The materials used in classes are clear and informative, and good information and communications technology (ICT) resources are used well to extend learners' skills. Teaching and learning resources to support learners with a disability are particularly good. Assessment procedures are effective. Recent improvements to the NC's systems for planning and monitoring individual learning are encouraging learners to take responsibility for target-setting, and are appropriate to NC's courses.

9. The range of programmes is coherent and effectively meets the needs of learners and their communities. The outreach provision enables the college to work with local communities to identify learning needs and to widen participation in adult learning. Short residential courses at the college are regularly arranged in response to the needs of particular groups. The short-course programme also offers a range of access provision designed to encourage participation and enthusiasm for learning, increase confidence and improve skills. The skills for life programme integrates and supports the development of literacy and numeracy across all programmes, while the humanities diploma provides a good progression route for learners through to higher education. Both the community

regeneration programme and the trade union provision further NC's commitment to social action and education.

10. Learning and personal support for learners is outstanding at NC. Learners who require additional in-class support for a sensory or learning difficulty receive discrete and sensitive assistance from learner support workers. There is assistive technology available in classrooms and the library to facilitate in-class and independent learning. Resources for independent study are outstanding. The library is particularly well resourced and is open and staffed for 70 hours a week. Learners can use the computer suites outside course time, and have 24-hour access to a study room which includes ICT facilities. Literacy, numeracy and ICT workshops are provided outside course times to give additional learning support. All learners have appropriate access to information, advice and guidance, through a qualified member of the college staff and through appropriately timed visits from external agencies. Learners also have good and timely access to the college's counselling service. Although constrained by its grade 1 listed building, NC has been particularly successful in providing for the needs of learners with a disability, and has been very active in ensuring that the learners themselves shape the improvements. Childcare arrangements are very good.

11. The inspection team had a high degree of confidence in the reliability of the self-assessment process. The self-assessment process is well established and inclusive, involving learners, staff and governors. Each programme area and support area produces both an annual report and a quality improvement plan, which are used in the self-assessment and strategic planning processes. The self-assessment report itself is accurate and analytical, and the improvements identified have been acted upon and monitored well through the action-planning process. Almost all the grades awarded in the self-assessment report matched those given by inspectors.

12. The provider has demonstrated that it is in a good position to maintain the high quality of provision. At the previous inspection, NC's leadership and management, including equality of opportunity and quality assurance, were judged good, as were foundation programmes, community action, and other adult and community learning. The humanities programme was judged to be outstanding. Since then, NC has maintained or improved upon its high performance. The provision in preparation for life and work has improved. Weaknesses identified by the previous inspection have been remedied, and improvements in equality of opportunity and quality improvement have been particularly successful. NC now provides leadership to other providers in the adult and community sector on quality improvement.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR NORTHERN COLLEGE FOR RESIDENTIAL ADULT EDUCATION:

- continue to maintain relevance and offer leadership to the communities it serves
- identify and secure major funding streams to support its purposes
- make better use of management information in the diploma programme to identify and monitor actions for improvement
- expedite the introduction of nationally recognised accreditation for the short-course programme

NORTHERN COLLEGE FOR RESIDENTIAL ADULT EDUCATION

- further develop networking arrangements

GRADES

grade 1 = outstanding, grade 2 = good, grade 3 = satisfactory, grade 4 = inadequate

Grades awarded at inspection

Leadership and management		1
Contributory grades:		
Equality of opportunity		1
Quality improvement		1

Social sciences			1
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
<i>Sociology and social policy</i> Adult and community learning	90	1	

Preparation for life and work			1
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
<i>Literacy and numeracy</i> Adult and community learning	31	1	
<i>Access programmes</i> Adult and community learning	60	1	

ABOUT THE INSPECTION

13. NC was previously inspected by the ALI in February 2003, and was judged to be a good provider. Three inspectors visited NC over five days in November 2006 on a light-touch inspection. One inspector carried out a one-day visit before the main inspection week to sample the weekend provision. The humanities diploma provision was inspected and graded, as was preparation for life and work. Classes in community development, and business administration and law were sampled to gain an overview of the full range of provision, but were not graded or reported on separately. Because of the uncertainty about the status of the outreach provision, it was not inspected.

Number of inspectors	3
Number of inspection days	16
Number of learners interviewed	38
Number of staff interviewed	47
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	1
Number of partners/external agencies interviewed	3

Leadership and management

Strengths

- very effective strategic and operational management
- good staff development
- extensive and very effective networking
- successful strategy for the provision of skills for life
- outstanding equality and diversity practices
- particularly effective quality improvement measures

Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses

Social sciences

Sociology and social policy

Strengths

- good success rates
- good progression
- good teaching and learning
- very good development of academic skills by learners
- outstanding support for learners

Weaknesses

- insufficient analysis and use of management information data in the diploma programme

Preparation for life and work

Strengths

- good achievement
- very good progression
- very good teaching and learning
- particularly good support for learners
- successful targeting of provision at those experiencing disadvantage

Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses

WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT NORTHERN COLLEGE FOR RESIDENTIAL ADULT EDUCATION:

- 'it's broadened my horizons'
- the good mix of learners
- being treated like an adult
- the structured, calm and encouraging teaching style
- the enthusiasm of teaching staff
- the way learners help each other
- 'the tremendous support'
- being encouraged to look at things from different angles
- learning time management and study skills
- the very good access to the library and to the computers outside class time
- 'you feel at home straight away'
- 'a smaller college helps you gain confidence'
- 'the residential - you're not distracted'

WHAT LEARNERS THINK NORTHERN COLLEGE FOR RESIDENTIAL ADULT EDUCATION COULD IMPROVE:

- the car parking
- the number of courses - some are over-subscribed
- the number of nursery places - there are too few
- the access to security outside normal college hours
- 'I'd like an on-site shop for essentials'
- 'not a great place to be at the weekends if you're residential with small children and don't drive'
- the size of classes - large diploma classes result in pressure on resource books in the library

DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 1

Strengths

- very effective strategic and operational management
- good staff development
- extensive and very effective networking
- successful strategy for the provision of skills for life
- outstanding equality and diversity practices
- particularly effective quality improvement measures

Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses

14. The leadership and management of the college are very effective, and support the maintenance and improvement of achievement and standards, and of the learners' experience. As at the previous inspection, the board of governors and senior management team provide very clear strategic direction, and are succeeding in maintaining and furthering the college's mission and purpose. For example, in response to recent funding changes for adult and community learning, the college restructured its staffing and curriculum. This necessitated a difficult but well-managed programme of staff redundancies, but maintained NC's focus on providing good-quality educational opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and groups. NC derives its funding from more diverse sources than the sector as a whole, but the governors and managers are aware of the need to diversify further if they are to continue to maintain that focus. The college is small, and has evolved an organic model of management, with open lines of communication throughout the organisation and across programmes. Governors have a wide variety of skills and experience, which they use in close co-operation with the senior management team and through their involvement in a variety of committees. Individual governors have regular direct contact with college teams and individual staff members. Members of the senior management team are directly involved in the operational management of the programmes and in teaching classes. Management style is open and approachable, a strength noted at the previous inspection. Middle managers meet the senior management team once a month to review performance and discuss management issues. The latest three-year strategic plan is well written and clearly lays out NC's medium-term aims and objectives. These are further amplified in the annual business plan. Actions to meet the aims and objectives are regularly monitored. The college has introduced 'slice meetings' to complement communication with staff through line management. These are termly meetings for cross sections of the staff, timed so that all can attend.

15. NC provides good staff training and development. This was a strength at the previous inspection. Staff attend a wide variety of internal and external courses to fulfil their continuous professional development needs and the college's business needs. Much training for academic staff takes place during the annual staff development week in the

summer, and there is a training event for support services staff earlier in the year. Staff development needs are discussed at annual appraisal. They are identified through observation of teaching and learning, and by peer observation for both teaching and support services staff. NC has a separate fund to support any other training that staff may wish to pursue for their wider personal development. NC provides good routes for learners' progression and development, and staff are good role models for current learners. Thirteen current members of staff were formerly learners at the college, and four of these hold management positions.

16. NC engages in extensive and very effective networking. It has strong historic links with local authorities and trades unions that continue through formal contracts and service level agreements and through less formal networking. NC works with local authorities to identify the areas of highest deprivation and to encourage groups in those areas to participate in education. Some learners attend short courses at NC and then progress either to other courses at the college or to other local authority provision. In 2005, in its role as a Beacon College, NC ran a series of seminars and workshops for adult and community learning providers in the region on topics such as quality improvement, support for literacy and numeracy, recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning, and observation of teaching and learning. The college continues to be involved with this network of providers in a number of areas including the exchange of staff to carry out observations of teaching and learning. NC works in partnership with four trades unions, UNISON, GFTU, Amicus and the GMB, and also with the regional Trades Union Congress. In addition to courses for trades union activists held at the college, NC also supports the unions' own courses through course development work, the provision of tutors and material, and through involvement in the moderation of each others' courses.

17. NC has a successful skills for life strategy. Skills for life is the government's strategy on training in literacy, numeracy and the use of language. NC has recognised that literacy and numeracy levels in the area are lower than they are nationally, and form a barrier to learning and progression for many potential learners. Therefore, in addition to discrete provision, training in literacy and numeracy is integrated with all other programmes, and where appropriate dual accreditation is offered. Specialist skills for life staff provide the necessary expertise to support literacy and numeracy development. NC has a member of staff qualified to provide language support, and in the event of additional need it buys in external support. NC's success in integrating skills for life with all its programmes is recognised nationally, and staff share their expertise with other local providers.

18. As a residential establishment which also caters for vulnerable adult learners, NC has actively applied Every Child Matters criteria to its provision. As part of its self-assessment process it systematically monitors its success in meeting the five outcomes. Judgements under each outcome appear in the self-assessment report.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 1

19. The NC's equality and diversity practices are outstanding and pervade its work and organisation. The college celebrates diversity. During this year's Black History Month, it successfully hosted a celebration of black history and culture, attended by a wide variety of groups from the region as well as its own learners. The event was particularly successful in raising awareness of equality and diversity, and forms part of NC's strategy to further increase recruitment of learners from minority ethnic groups, an area identified as a

weakness at the previous inspection.

20. The board of governors actively promotes equality and diversity. One member of the board is nominated by a local black or minority ethnic community. Two board members are members of the equality and diversity committee. NC has established two forums to advise the committee, a disabled equality forum and a black and minority ethnic equality forum. Both forums include staff and learner representatives, as well as learners with a disability and learners from black and minority ethnic groups respectively. The forums provide an excellent way to consult learners and gain first-hand advice and information about their needs and expectations that can be used to make improvements to the provision. For example, in response to the black and minority ethnic equality forum, NC has provided a suitable prayer room and cleansing arrangements for learners. Representatives on the disability equality forum pointed out the importance of automating the large, heavy doors in the college buildings as well as installing a lift to facilitate access for wheelchair users, and this work was carried out.

21. NC is committed to ensuring that people with a disability and those with learning difficulties are treated fairly and are welcomed to the college, and it is particularly successful in attracting these learners and meeting their needs. In addition to lifts and automated doors, NC has provided scooters to help learners with restricted mobility get around the premises. Staff are trained in the evacuation of wheelchair users in an emergency. The building has hearing loops, and signage with raised symbols and Braille text, and adaptive software is available on computers for those who need it. A wide variety of additional learning support is available including note takers, support workers, and signers. In the current year, 24 per cent of learners declared a disability or learning difficulty.

22. NC is also particularly successful in minimising other barriers to learning. Arrangements for childcare are good, with on-site provision at a well-run children's centre that is free to the parent or carer. NC continues to work hard to minimise the effect of fees on its learners, and uses its access fund to reduce financial hardship. If it is not possible to waive fees, staff explain clearly the reasons for this. Learners have good access to counselling support.

23. NC, in partnership with local authorities, deliberately and successfully targets the most deprived areas in the region and successfully attracts learners who have few or no previous qualifications. Many go on to higher education or employment having progressed through the college's diploma courses. Local authorities also help NC to recruit learners from areas with relatively high numbers of people from black and minority ethnic groups. In the current year, 12 per cent of learners are from black and minority ethnic groups, which is considerably more than the proportion in the regional population, and than the proportion at the previous inspection. NC also runs bespoke courses for particular groups, for example a 'women only' course held in a black and minority ethnic community centre in Sheffield, and a residential short course at the college for learners recovering from alcohol or drug misuse.

24. Thorough equality and diversity training is a feature of NC's staff development and is included in the annual staff training week and in staff induction. All staff have undergone disability awareness training. In the past year, 10 members of staff have successfully completed the level 2 certificate in equality and diversity. This training was also extended

to staff from NC's catering contractor.

25. NC's strong commitment to equality of opportunity complements its mission statement and vision. The equality and diversity policy and strategy was revised in August 2006. It is reviewed annually by the equality and diversity committee, which also produces an annual equality and diversity report. In addition to overall aims and rationale, the comprehensive document also contains four separate policies covering disability equality, race equality, gender equality, and culture, religion and belief. One of the appendices details the legislative framework. The policy is published on NC's website and all staff and learners receive a summary. In addition the equality of opportunity statement is on noticeboards throughout the college. NC has produced both race equality and disability equality schemes in response to legislation.

26. The proportion of staff from minority ethnic groups was identified as a weakness at the previous inspection. Since then, NC has been actively seeking ways to redress the staffing balance through targeted recruitment drives. A full review of the recruitment procedures has led to the use of new methods and locations for advertisements. However, NC has been less successful in this respect than in increasing the proportion of learners from minority ethnic backgrounds, with 8.5 per cent of academic staff and 3 per cent of all college staff now being from minority ethnic groups.

27. NC has appropriate arrangements for the countering and reporting of harassment or discrimination. Duty managers are on call to cover incidents which may occur outside normal college hours.

Quality improvement

Contributory grade 1

28. NC employs particularly effective measures to assure and improve the quality of provision. Its quality assurance procedures are recognised as outstanding and are disseminated to other adult and community learning providers in the region through its Beacon dissemination programme.

29. NC is actively committed to quality improvement. The quality committee includes members of the board of governors, invited members from partner organisations and members of college staff. The committee monitors and reviews all aspects of the provision, and produces a six-monthly report which indicates progress against the quality improvement plan and discusses the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.

30. NC's well-established and highly effective self-assessment process is central to its quality improvement system. Each year the draft report is compiled using the key questions in the Common Inspection Framework. The report draws on the annual reports from programme areas and the non-academic support area, after they have been considered by the academic standards and support standards committees. It is then refined by the senior management team, a self-assessment group, the standards committees and the quality committee, and is seen by the student body before approval by the board of governors and final publication. Managers of activity areas also produce their own quality improvement plans which are used with the self-assessment report and NC's strategic plan to produce the whole college quality improvement plan. This plan is clearly presented in the form of a database, which contains both the expected outcomes and the effect of the planned actions. The actions are designed both to overcome identified weaknesses and to maintain strengths. Senior managers regularly monitor the

plan and managers receive reports on their progress. In 2005-06, NC set itself a target to complete 70 per cent of the actions in the plan. It completed 80.5 per cent of them.

31. The use of external consultants adds further objectivity to NC's quality improvement arrangements. NC commissions external quality audits as well as carrying out its own. In 2005, external consultants and the senior management team conducted a detailed review of NC's performance and made recommendations for improvement. The review included observations of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning sessions have been observed by outside consultants and complement the observations carried out by NC's senior managers. NC is establishing a network of local providers who will carry out observations of each other's teaching and learning as a form of moderation.

32. The system for the internal observation of teaching and learning is effective. Tutors are observed annually and receive detailed and constructive oral and written feedback which includes areas for development. Their progress is reviewed at the following observation. Each aspect of the session is graded on a four-point scale against clear performance criteria, and also given an overall grade. The observations are used to improve particular sessions and tutors' performance, in staff appraisals and in quality improvement reviews. Tutors are informed a week in advance which of their sessions will be observed. NC has also introduced a system of non-graded peer observation to encourage the sharing of good practice. New teaching staff are guided and supported by an experienced staff member who acts as mentor.

33. The provider makes good use of feedback in self-assessment and quality improvement. In addition to learner and staff satisfaction surveys there are also course evaluations, and feedback on the knowledge and confidence gained by learners in individual learning sessions.

34. NC benchmarks its performance against that of similar institutions. At college and short-course level the use of data to monitor performance, identify trends, and make management decisions is good overall, and has improved since the previous inspection. The management information systems are effective and are used to monitor performance against targets and performance indicators. The system has not, however, been used sufficiently to monitor the performance of learners on the diploma course by ethnicity, gender or disability, although this level of analysis is carried out on the short course and skills for life programmes.

35. All quality improvement documents, including policies and procedures, are kept on a quality improvement site on the college's internal computer network, so that only the latest version can be accessed or used. The thorough annual quality and planning cycle is presented clearly in a diagrammatic form, showing activity taking place each term.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Social sciences

Grade 1

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
<i>Sociology and social policy</i> Adult and community learning	90	1

36. NC offers a modular diploma programme designed for adults returning to formal study. The programme runs from September to May each year, and is open to both full-time and part-time learners. Full-time learners complete the programme in nine months whereas part-time learners study for between one and three years. Most learners are full time and reside at the college.

37. The curriculum comprises optional modules including humanities, social sciences, computer studies, trade union studies and community regeneration alongside compulsory modules in key skills. Most learners aim to achieve the Northern College Diploma, which includes an access certificate comprising a mixture of Open College Network level 2 and level 3 qualifications. Learners can also achieve a higher education certificate, validated by Sheffield Hallam University, which provides direct entry to the second year of a degree course.

38. There are 90 learners, of whom 39 are full-time residents at the college, 37 are full-time non-residents and 14 are studying part time. Sixty-eight per cent of learners are women and 10 per cent are from minority ethnic communities. Nineteen per cent have a declared learning difficulty or disability. Fifty-six per cent are from groups which attract widening participation uplift funding, and 63 per cent have no qualification above literacy or numeracy at level 1 on entry to the programme.

39. There are 16 full-time and six part-time tutors for the diploma programme, supported by a full-time programme manager. The tutors on the diploma programme also teach on short courses, skills for life and other college programmes.

Sociology and social policy

Strengths

- good success rates
- good progression
- good teaching and learning
- very good development of academic skills by learners
- outstanding support for learners

Weaknesses

- insufficient analysis and use of management information data in the diploma programme

Achievement and standards

40. Retention and achievement rates on the diploma programme were good at the previous inspection and success rates have steadily improved since then, reaching 78 per cent in 2005-06. Achievement was particularly high at 95 per cent in 2005-06. Success rates for black and minority ethnic learners are better than the average, but success rates for men are below those for women. Success rates were better than those for similar residential colleges in 2003-04 and 2004-05. Learners make very good progress during their time on the programme. For instance in 2005-06, 61 per cent of learners entered the programme with no qualifications above level 1, and they achieved as well as other learners.

41. Learners' attendance at lessons is generally good. Tutors manage any latecomers appropriately. In 2005-06, the average attendance rate on the diploma course was 79 per cent.

42. Progression both into and out of the diploma is good. NC has maintained this strength since the previous inspection. The number of learners progressing from short courses to the diploma programme has increased from 56 per cent in 2005-06 to a very high 70 per cent in 2006-07. Learners gain university places on a very wide variety of courses from fine arts, podiatry, ecology and conservation, to social sciences such as psychology, sociology and social work. The proportion of learners progressing either to university or employment has remained constant over the past three years at above 80 per cent. The percentage going into employment has increased from 21 per cent in 2003-04 to 35 per cent in 2005-06, while the percentage going directly to university fell from 63 per cent in 2003-04 to 49 per cent in 2005-06.

The quality of provision

43. Teaching and learning are good. Most lessons are good, and among those observed there were no unsatisfactory grades. Teachers plan lessons well. The best classes lead to effective group learning through tasks that encourage learners to share ideas on suitably challenging topics. Teachers use a variety of resources and methods, ranging from electronic resources to traditional lectures. Good use is made of questions to stimulate thought and debate. For example, in a women's studies course, careful and probing questions were used to analyse an advertising image. In most lessons teachers gave careful attention to individual learners' needs. Classes that were no more than satisfactory did not differentiate as well between learners, or take sufficient account of the range of their abilities. These classes also tended to be less well paced, leaving some learners disengaged.

44. Learners develop very good academic skills during the programme. Most begin the programme without having taken part in any academic study. There is a very strong focus on the development of academic skills in the foundation programme, and this is consistently reinforced throughout the rest of the programme. Learners are introduced to note-taking, essay planning, and reading for study, early in the programme. These are reinforced in the early part of subject modules. Learners are also encouraged to familiarise themselves with, and use, new subject-specific terminology. For example, in two classes, learners were encouraged to use the language of semiotics to make sense of everyday images. In academic tutorials, learners identify specific study skills which they want to develop, after a detailed discussion of their current skills. At the end of tutorials,

learners complete a form which identifies what they do well, and four areas they will work on with specific action plans attached. Learners' assignments are marked well, and they are given good pointers for the development of skills and knowledge.

45. Support for learners is outstanding. Learners either self-declare a disability or difficulty or may be identified during the early stage of the programme. Once identified, they have a confidential interview with a member of the support services team, who arranges an appropriate support package. Seventeen of the current learners have declared a disability or learning difficulty, and 13 learners are receiving additional learning support. Of these, seven have a classroom support worker whose role might include taking notes for them in class. All learners with an identified support need have access to specialist equipment including laptop computers, audio cassette recorders and adapted keyboards. There is a very good pool of specialist resources to support learners with additional learning needs. Learners in receipt of additional learning support achieve well, and significantly better than the average. In 2005-06, the success rate of learners receiving additional support was 87 per cent compared with 74 per cent for those not receiving such support.

46. The personal tutorial system also contributes very effectively to learning support. Each learner meets their personal tutor weekly in the initial stage of the course and then at fixed, diminishing intervals as their independence grows. Tutors monitor learners closely and record their progress and tutorial decisions online, where learners, tutors and the manager can access the information. Learners are supported by the college's pastoral support system, which offers a good counselling service, and there is further specialist external counselling available for those who need it. Further personal support to help learners overcome their barriers to learning includes good childcare provision and financial support in terms of fee remission and access funding. Appropriate information, advice and guidance is available to help learners choose the most suitable course and progression routes.

47. The diploma programme is sufficiently responsive to meet the needs and interests of most learners. It allows learners to mix and match between a good range of modules so that they can tailor the course around their domestic commitments if necessary. Learners can pursue areas of particular interest in the latter part of the programme by following an independent learning module. In 2005-06, eight learners carried out an independent studies project. The college has added a science module to the programme to meet the needs of the increasing number of learners who want to focus on health-related learning. Learners also make good use of work placements. In 2005-06, 21 learners took part in work placements. A few learners, however, feel that the range of courses is a little narrow. Enrichment activities are satisfactory. Most evenings there are extra workshops and activities, some initiated and run by learners.

48. Classrooms are adequately equipped with learning resources. Most have a computer, a data projector, a television, a whiteboard and a flipchart. The wider learning resources available to diploma learners are good. The library is very well equipped with electronic resources, books and magazines. It is open and staffed until 2000 every night. Learners have good access to computers including two computers which are accessible 24 hours per day.

49. Skills for life are successfully integrated with the diploma programme. Most lesson plans identify how communications, numeracy or information technology skills will be

developed in the class. For example, a politics class identified that learners' numeracy could be developed in working out timelines from a chart.

Leadership and management

50. Most of NC's staff, including senior managers, teach on the diploma programme. The programme is well co-ordinated and founded on good teamwork between staff. Staff are well qualified and all the tutors on the diploma programme have a teaching qualification. There is extensive staff development across NC and it directly affects the diploma course. For instance, the staff development week in July 2006 focused on the use of e-learning and blended learning. All staff have had training in the core curriculum and skills for life, as well as in working sensitively with learners who have a learning difficulty or disability.

51. Equality of opportunity is very good, with many successful learners overcoming significant barriers. The programme has challenging targets for the participation of various groups, including men, members of minority ethnic groups, learners with disabilities, learners from deprived areas, and unemployed people. NC met most of these targets in 2005-06. Equality and diversity are introduced and explored in some depth in the foundation programme, and learners' assumptions and prejudices are challenged firmly yet sensitively. Course modules, such as 'race and ethnicity in modern societies' and 'women's studies' reinforce some of the themes, but equality is not always reinforced in other lessons. Support arrangements to facilitate equality of access to the programme are outstanding.

52. NC's quality improvement measures are highly effective. The observation of teaching and learning contributes well to the good standards. An internal manager observes all tutors, and staff are also involved in paired peer observations for their personal development. Feedback is collected from learners at the end of the four main stages of the programme. Feedback at the end of the 2004-05 foundation stage was used to reshape the curriculum in 2005-06. Staff are appropriately involved in the self-assessment process. The programme co-ordinator develops the report in consultation with the course team using feedback, data and additional sources of information from other services in the college.

53. Management information is not analysed sufficiently at diploma level and not used sufficiently to make decisions. At a whole-college level, targets are set for participation by different groups, and data on achievement, retention and success rates is analysed. However, at diploma level, although targets are set for participation by different groups, staff do not produce or analyse data on achievement, retention and success rates. The diploma team are not fully aware of the underlying success rates of different groups and do not produce action plans to redress the imbalances. For instance in 2005-06, male learners achieved a 59 per cent success rate, significantly below the 87 per cent achieved by female learners. Similarly, learners aged 26 to 30 achieve significantly below the average for the course.

Preparation for life and work**Grade 1**

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
<i>Literacy and numeracy</i> Adult and community learning	31	1
<i>Access programmes</i> Adult and community learning	60	1

54. NC offers literacy and numeracy courses under its skills for life programme, and access provision through its short-course and outreach programmes. The future of the outreach provision is uncertain, but it is currently being reduced because of changes to funding arrangements for adult and community learning. The inspection therefore focused on the short-course programme and the skills for life provision.

55. NC offers a range of short courses for adults who are returning to learning or who wish to improve their skills in literacy or numeracy. All of the courses lead to accreditation. The courses are intensive, and usually last for two-and-a-half days, during which learners can stay at NC or attend daily. During 2005-06, 267 short courses were attended by 1,561 learners who accounted for 2,714 enrolments. At the time of the inspection, 91 learners were attending seven short courses, one of which was a skills for life programme, and one was designed to lead to dual ICT and skills for life accreditation. They included courses on black history, a range of computer skills, and writing skills to support study, as well as a bespoke healthy living course for learners recovering from alcohol or drugs misuse. Regular drop-in literacy and numeracy workshops are also offered outside the course times for learners who would like additional support. Two of these sessions were observed during the inspection.

56. The short course and skills for life programmes are strategically managed by one of the two academic directors at the college. Operational management of the programmes is the responsibility of the foundation manager and the skills for life manager. There are 19 short-course tutors, 11 of whom work full-time and eight part-time. There are five skills for life tutors, of whom four work full-time and one part-time. Skills for life provision is integrated with all college programmes.

Strengths

- good achievement
- very good progression
- very good teaching and learning
- particularly good support for learners
- successful targeting of provision at those experiencing disadvantage

Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses

Achievement and standards

57. Between 2003-04 and 2005-06, achievement of personal learning goals has remained high at over 90 per cent on both skills for life and short-course programmes. Success rates are high on both programmes, and on the short-course programme they have remained consistently above 90 per cent. Success rates are comparable between different groups of learners on both skills for life and short-course programmes. A large proportion of learners on both programmes have no qualifications above level 1. During 2005-06, 71 per cent of learners enrolling on skills for life provision and 67 per cent of those on the short-course programme did not have a level 1 qualification. The proportion of those learners who gain a qualification at level 1 or above at NC is high at 84 per cent on skills for life programmes and 93 per cent on short-course provision. This closely matches the achievement of other learners. The pass rate for the national tests in literacy and numeracy is significantly above the national average at 82 per cent. The retention rate has remained high at 97 per cent or above for both skills for life and the short-course programme since 2003-04. NC benchmarks its outcomes against those of comparable colleges. For the short course programme, NC matches the other residential colleges in terms of retention and achievement and out-performs them in terms of success rates.

58. The progression of learners on the short course programme is very good. In 2006-07, 70 per cent of those starting the diploma progressed from short courses. This is a significant increase over the previous year when the proportion was 56 per cent. Many learners progress into the short-course programmes from outreach provision, and once at NC they develop further skills within the range of short-course programmes. This progression between short courses is being increasingly effectively recorded through the new system of planning and monitoring of individual learning.

59. Learners overcome considerable personal barriers to learning and increase their confidence and skills to cope with study. One learner who was referred to the college by a voluntary organisation dealing with alcohol and drug dependency, has progressed from the short-course programme through the diploma and is now beginning a course at a local university having gained a national award for his achievements. A learner who arrived in Britain as an asylum seeker first came to the college with her community group on a short residential course. She progressed from that to the diploma programme and is now taking a degree at university. In 2006 she gained a national Learner of the Year award during adult learners' week.

The quality of provision

60. Teaching and learning on the skills for life and short-course programmes are very good. All sessions observed during the inspection were satisfactory or better and a significant proportion were outstanding. Teaching sessions are well planned, and delivery of level 1 courses is matched to the core curricula. In some sessions, learners have the opportunity for dual accreditation. In the best sessions, tutors are particularly encouraging and motivational and make very good use of questioning techniques. Learners in all sessions are very involved and rapidly gain awareness, understanding and skills. Many learners coming to the college lack confidence, and have had previous poor experiences of education or have not taken part in education for a considerable time. In addition to learning technical skills or acquiring subject knowledge, learners show a considerable gain in confidence and in enthusiasm for learning, leading most of them to pursue further

courses.

61. Learning and personal support for learners is particularly good. The well-used library provides a particularly good learning resource which supports and develops learners' independent study skills. It is open and staffed for 70 hours a week, and offers ICT as well as very plentiful and relevant paper resources. It also houses a good range of adaptive technology for learners with a physical or learning disability. Skills for life provision is integrated into all courses, and skills for life workshops take place in the library and are open to all learners. However, these are attended mainly by learners on the diploma course and seldom by those on the short-course programme. Learners have very good access to ICT suites and a study room.

62. Learning is facilitated and supported by good resources. The teaching staff are well qualified and their skills are updated through good access to staff development. Tutors produce very clear and straightforward course materials for learners, both for in-class work and independent study. There are good skills for life resources for staff and learners online, in a designated resource base, and in the library. The library also carries stock to support reading lists for the short-course programme. ICT teaching rooms are well equipped with interactive whiteboards and data projectors, and there is a three-year rolling programme for the replacement of computer suites. Of the three main ICT suites, two have been renewed within the past 18 months. The third is due for replacement during 2007, but in the meantime, the machines are insufficiently reliable for some of the programs they are required to run. There is a transportable suite of computers with internet access which can be used anywhere in the college. In-house technical support for ICT is good. The many learners with disabilities are supported with very good resources, including enabling technology in the library and teaching rooms, and access to learner support workers.

63. Learners are encouraged to set their own goals for learning, which are recorded alongside the course goals, and evaluated at the end of the programme. The planning, target-setting and monitoring of learning was identified as a weakness by the previous inspection, and the improved system is appropriate to the courses offered by the college. It provides ongoing feedback to learners and encourages critical self-reflection. The system was trialled on short-course programmes from April 2006 and extended to all provision in July 2006. This system is both paper-based and online. All learners can now have their own online area that encourages them to take responsibility for their learning journey over a succession of courses. The procedures for assessing and internally moderating learners' work both on skills for life and the short-course programme are effective.

64. There is in-class support for learners with a disability or learning difficulty, and learner support workers are provided when necessary. NC provides appropriate information, advice and guidance on learning and career opportunities, both in-house through a qualified member of staff and through an external careers adviser who attends NC. Learners have good access to counselling services to help them deal with personal problems. NC uses sessional counsellors and has links to external specialist agencies, to supplement its in-house counselling expertise. Good childcare is available at no cost to learners, and an access fund supports learners facing financial barriers to learning.

65. Skills for life provision and short-course programmes meet the needs of learners. The

integration of skills for life with all areas of the provision is a well-designed and delivered strategy which ensures that learners all have access to support for literacy and numeracy needs. In response to the LSC's increased targets for the number of learners taking national tests, NC offers them to all learners at an appropriate point in their development. The short-course programme is effectively designed as first-step provision. Much of the short-course programme consists of ICT provision, which incorporates progression routes and is integrated with other programme areas as a life skill. Some courses offer opportunities for accreditation in both ICT and skills for life. The short-course programme includes bespoke courses to meet needs identified by outreach workers or requested by external organizations. During the inspection, NC ran a successful healthy living programme designed to respond to the needs and preferences of a specific group of learners. Short-course programmes are also appropriately used to target particular groups that the college wishes to attract through open recruitment. A highly effective weekend course on black history was part of NC's drive to increase recruitment of learners from minority ethnic groups, as well as to promote understanding and awareness of equality and diversity. All skills for life and short-course programmes are accredited by the Open College, but the qualifications offered are not currently part of the nationally approved qualifications framework.

Leadership and management

66. NC is successful in targeting its provision to improve the prospects of disadvantaged people. The short-course programme provides good access to education for learners who lack confidence and are unsure of their capabilities and direction. NC attracts a large proportion of learners who have no level 1 qualification, and these learners achieve well on both programmes. NC's analysis of local demography indicates that adult literacy and numeracy levels are below the national average. Integration of skills for life ensures that learners' literacy and numeracy needs are recognised and met. In 2005-06, more than a third of learners on skills for life and short courses had a disability or learning difficulty. These learners are particularly well supported and NC has been very active in ensuring that the learners themselves shape improvements. At the previous inspection, recruitment of learners from minority ethnic groups was found to be low. NC has acted to deal with this, and there has been a significant improvement, particularly in skills for life programmes, where the proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups increased from 4 per cent in 2003-04 to 13 per cent in 2005-06. The college monitors the retention, achievement and success rates of different intakes to skills for life and short courses by gender, ethnicity and disability.

67. Formal communication within the small staff teams is satisfactory and there is continuous informal communication. Staff are well supported and have good development opportunities. Quality improvement arrangements are particularly good. There is a regular and very effective system for the observation of practice, and new teaching staff are supported initially by an experienced member of staff acting as co-tutor and mentor. Formal feedback from learners is effectively elicited at the end of each short course. The self-assessment process is particularly effective and inclusive, and the reports for skills for life and the short-course programmes are thorough, analytical and accurate.

