

Inspection of Education Partnership North East

Inspection dates: 10 to 13 May 2022

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Good
Education programmes for young people	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

Education Partnership North East (EPNE) is a large provider of further education and skills in the north east of England. It is made up of three colleges: Sunderland College, Hartlepool Sixth Form College and Northumberland College. Sunderland College merged with Hartlepool Sixth Form College in 2017 and then with Northumberland College in 2019. Sunderland College has three campuses, Hartlepool Sixth Form College has one campus and Northumberland College has two campuses.

The colleges provide academic and vocational programmes for young people, adult learning programmes, apprenticeships and provision for students with high needs. At the time of the inspection, there were 9,124 students, including apprentices, across the group, of whom just under a half were enrolled on education programmes for young people. Sunderland College is the largest of the three colleges, accounting for just over a half of all students and apprentices. EPNE works with nine subcontractors to deliver part of its provision.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Students benefit from a calm and focused environment in which they are encouraged to contribute their ideas and know that they will be listened to. For example, when students on A-level programmes at Sunderland College and Hartlepool Sixth Form College analyse complex data using advanced statistical techniques, they are confident to share and discuss their results with peers in class.

Students demonstrate positive attitudes to learning. They enjoy their lessons and take pride in their work. Students experience a culture of high expectations and are supported well to develop appropriate attitudes and behaviours that prepares them well for their next steps. They behave well and attend their lessons on time, and most students attend well. Managers have accurately identified curriculum areas where attendance is not high enough, such as in level 3 health and social care, GCSE mathematics and GCSE English, and have taken appropriate actions to improve it. However, it is too soon to see the full impact of these actions.

Students benefit from being taught in well-resourced and modern learning environments. Leaders have transformed the learning environments at Kirkley Hall at Northumberland College by building a new centre for students with high needs, new veterinary science laboratories and a new equine centre. They have created modern health, care and hospital hubs at Sunderland College and at Hartlepool Sixth Form College. The new City Campus in Sunderland provides industry-standard facilities for a range of vocational and technical programmes, including engineering.

Leaders and staff successfully support students to become respectful and responsible citizens. Most students have a good understanding of fundamental British values, such as mutual respect and tolerance, and display these well at college. They understand the importance of being active citizens and take part in a range of community activities. For example, students at Sunderland College participate in projects designed to improve the appearance of the city, including painting, litter-picking and collecting waste from local beaches. Students also benefit from staff entering many regional and national competitions, which enables them to demonstrate their extensive social enterprise skills.

Students feel safe at college and know to whom they should report concerns. They have a good understanding of local safeguarding risks, such as county lines and drink spiking, and know how to protect themselves from risk. For example, students discuss using specially made tops for their glasses to safeguard their drinks from being spiked when socialising.

Students appreciate the support that leaders and staff provide to protect their mental health and well-being. They are supported well by staff who provide pastoral and welfare support, and they have access to a free, online counselling service, which is available at all times. Leaders have ensured that a high number of staff have trained as mental health first aiders to provide effective support for students.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have a clear curriculum vision which they successfully realise. They provide programmes that respond effectively to national, regional and local priorities and that enable students to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours that they need for employment, further training and progression to higher education. Leaders are very knowledgeable about the needs and priorities of the localities of each of the colleges and provide programmes that contribute to meeting them. For example, they have developed courses in Hartlepool that respond to the key priorities there, including biologics, chemical, engineering, digital and health, and that enable students to gain the knowledge and skills that they need for careers in these areas.

Since the merger with Northumberland College in 2019, leaders have taken action to address successfully significant issues at the college relating to the curriculum, the quality of education, health and safety and finance. This has resulted in rapid improvements in the provision at the college.

Leaders have established very effective working partnerships with the local enterprise partnership, local authorities and combined mayoral authorities. They play key and prominent roles as leaders in driving forward the skills agendas of Sunderland, Hartlepool and Northumberland. They successfully use their partnerships to understand and identify the educational offer that they need to provide to current and future students. Senior leaders chair high-profile skills boards and lead the regional response to the need to develop green energy. Partners value the way that leaders identify and develop provision that is responsive to changes in industries such as automotive and housing.

Governance is highly effective. The board of corporation is comprised of members who have high levels of expertise and who successfully ensure that teaching and learning, support for students and safeguarding are always prioritised. Board members provide very effective support, scrutiny and challenge to leaders to ensure continuous improvement. They have supported senior leaders well to improve the quality of provision at Northumberland College since the merger in 2019.

Leaders and managers have rigorous oversight of the quality of the provision, including programmes delivered by subcontractors. They carry out a range of activities, such as observations of training, to review and improve the quality of the programmes that they provide. Leaders hold frequent meetings with managers and staff from each curriculum area to scrutinise and evaluate the quality of the provision. They carefully review key aspects such as attendance, feedback from students and stakeholders and the progress of students.

Tutors plan and deliver the curriculum in a logical order to enable students to build their knowledge and skills towards increasingly complex tasks. Students on A-level psychology courses learn about ethics, safeguarding, social settings and culture. They then apply their new knowledge to write good-quality assignments which consider and challenge the

ethical issues raised by the design of a wristband that gives a mild electric shock to warn people when their bank account is about to become overdrawn.

Tutors are well qualified and experts in their field. They use their expertise to teach the curriculum well. They break down information into manageable units to help students to understand it. They return frequently to specific aspects of the content to help students understand and remember it. For example, on a level 2 light vehicle course, students can recall knowledge about the difference between hydraulic steering racks and mechanical racks that they learned at the start of the academic year. They can explain the difference between the racks and when to use them.

Most tutors use a range of assessment activities well to check the understanding of students before moving on to another topic. For example, tutors in A-level sociology use discussion and questioning skilfully to check students' ability to listen, understand the views of others and to express their own opinion effectively. However, a small number of tutors who teach students on programmes in English for speakers of other languages at Northumberland College and a few tutors who teach apprentices at Sunderland College do not check understanding well enough before moving on to more complex topics. For example, engineering apprentices studying complex mathematical formulas struggle to solve the equations, and tutors move on too quickly before all apprentices have a secure grasp of these concepts. Tutors provide useful and timely feedback to students to help them improve their work and develop the skills to improve their work further.

Tutors provide effective support to students to improve their English and mathematics skills further within their subjects. Students who have not achieved GCSE English and/or mathematics benefit from good teaching that enables them to develop their skills in these subjects.

Tutors provide students with effective careers advice and guidance about progression to higher education, training and employment. They organise visits to employers and universities and arrange for professionals and college alumni to provide students with helpful insight about how they progressed in their careers. Students who are first-generation university applicants are well prepared for progression to higher education. The vast majority of students on A-level programmes and access to higher education courses secure their first-choice place at university. However, a few students on these programmes are less well informed about apprenticeships, particularly higher-level apprenticeships, which limits their knowledge of future career opportunities.

Leaders recognise the need to improve the progression of students with high needs into employment. They have recently implemented actions to enhance the employment opportunities of these students. However, it is too early to see the impact.

Tutors know their students well and respond effectively to their individual needs. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and students with high needs receive personalised and targeted support for a range of difficulties that may impact on their learning, such as dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder. They are supported well in class by tutors and learning support mentors through a range of strategies such as one-to-one support and the use of

specialist resources and equipment. As a result, students with SEND and high needs make good progress on their courses.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The designated safeguarding leads complete high-quality training which enables them to be effective in their role and fully understand their responsibilities in safeguarding students.

Leaders implement comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures and have in place a clear reporting process. They implement appropriate safe recruitment practices to ensure that staff are suitable to work with students, particularly those aged 16 to 18 and those who are vulnerable adults.

Most students have a good understanding of radicalisation and extremism. For example, they can explain the range of ways in which someone can be radicalised, including through online activity and using social media.

Leaders take effective steps to keep students safe from sexual abuse and harassment. Students benefit from useful training which supports them to understand what is acceptable behaviour. They know how to report concerns and are confident that staff will take their concerns seriously and respond quickly.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Ensure that students in all curriculum areas have high attendance at college.
- Ensure that all tutors check the understanding of students before moving on to the next topic.
- Ensure that students with high needs have the opportunity to progress to employment where appropriate.
- Ensure that all students receive information on apprenticeships, including higher apprenticeships, when planning their next steps.

Provider details

Unique reference number	131347
Address	Bede Centre Durham Road Sunderland SR3 4AH
Contact number	01915 116000
Website	www.sunderlandcollege.ac.uk
CEO	Ellen Thinnesen
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	Zenith People Limited Foundation of Light Sora Services Limited Orangebox Training Solutions Limited Northern Rights Community Interest Company Unipres (UK) Limited LEAD Education Limited Sunderland Women's Centre Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the principal of Sunderland College and Hartlepool Sixth Form College, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

Jacque Brown, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Chloe Rendall	Her Majesty's Inspector
Glenise Burrell	Her Majesty's Inspector
Ian Frear	Her Majesty's Inspector
Hayley Lomas	Her Majesty's Inspector
Dawn Jamieson	Ofsted Inspector
Steve Hunnisett	Ofsted Inspector
Debra Forsythe-Conroy	Ofsted Inspector
Anne Tyrrell	Ofsted Inspector
Tracey Baron	Ofsted Inspector
Richard Swires	Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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