Inspection of Hills Road Sixth Form College

Inspection dates: 1 to 4 April 2025

Overall effectiveness	**Outstanding**
The quality of education	**Outstanding**
Behaviour and attitudes	**Outstanding**
Personal development	**Outstanding**
Leadership and management	**Outstanding**
Education programmes for young people	**Outstanding**
Provision for learners with high needs	**Outstanding**
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

Information about this provider

Hills Road Sixth Form College is a very large sixth form college based on a single site in Cambridge. At the time of the inspection, there were 2,902 students aged 16 to 19 on level 3 courses, of whom 1,417 were in their second year of study. There were 21 students with high needs.

All students study a combination of A-level subjects alongside the extended project qualification (EPQ). The college offers 36 A-level subjects, the most popular of which are mathematics, chemistry and biology. The college also offers specialist A-level subjects, such as Latin, geology, music technology and history of art.

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

Students are extremely positive about the quality of teaching that they receive and the support that teachers give them in lessons. They take part in challenging and stimulating lessons with enthusiasm and pride. Students enjoy their studies greatly.

Students fully commit to their education. They are highly motivated to learn and achieve. Students are polite and courteous and routinely demonstrate high levels of mutual respect and tolerance. They share their thoughts, ideas and understanding with passion. In sociology, students are comfortable sharing their alternative views on feminism with the confidence of being in a safe space and with no fear of judgement.

Students attend well, arrive promptly to lessons and are eager to learn. They routinely go beyond what is expected of them. For example, in mathematics, students voluntarily attend extra lessons that support them to excel on their Sixth Term Examination Papers. Attendance to these additional sessions is high, and students value the extra support that they receive to move on to universities which have additional entry requirements.

Students feel safe at college and feel that the college is a harmonious and welcoming place. They have access to an extensive range of services to help support their well-being, such as internal and external counselling services and well-being drop-in sessions, and they can visit the college's therapy dog. College staff champion student wellbeing, they care deeply and place student support at the heart of their actions. Students recognise this and appreciate it greatly.

Students participate in a wide range of activities that enrich their learning and develop their interests and talents further. A very high proportion of students take part in activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, music competitions and chemistry Olympiads. Students routinely attend student-led societies, such as debating, medical and robotics societies. They value these activities and develop a wider range of useful skills, such as greater confidence, resilience, timekeeping and public speaking skills.

Students take part in a broad range of activities which help them to prepare well for life in modern Britain. Students, including those with high needs, learn how to keep themselves safe in their day-to-day lives. They learn to spot the signs of those with radical and extremist views and can take the actions to respond. They understand the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Students maturely approach topics such as mental health. They appreciate the importance of workload management and how to make sure that their mental health does not decline.

Students become active citizens and serve their local communities with enthusiasm. They take part in social action projects enthusiastically and recognise the importance of helping others. For example, students plan and host charity events, volunteer at local science festivals and take part in paired reading activities to support local primary schools.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders and governors have a good understanding of local and regional skills needs. They have put in place strategic targets to improve their contribution to meeting local skills, such as increasing the proportion of students studying in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. Leaders have developed positive relationships with strategic groups such as the Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority and the Chamber of Commerce. This ensures that their understanding of skills needs remains current. Leaders recognise that these relationships are in their relative infancy and have clear plans in place to develop them further.

Leaders have adapted the curriculum to meet local and national skills needs appropriately. They have introduced an environmental science A level linked to green skills and the sustainability agenda. Leaders have also begun to collaborate effectively with an awarding body to develop a qualification with a focus on sustainability in business. Leaders use local skills improvement funds appropriately to invest in industry-standard resources such as a teaching laboratory and virtual reality equipment. Students develop valuable skills and a clear understanding of future job roles available to them.

Teachers use their links with stakeholders very effectively in their teaching. They provide a broad range of valuable activities, such as guest speakers, field trips and workshops, to enhance students' learning and promote their understanding of future careers. However, in a few instances curriculum staff do not use a broad enough range of stakeholders to inform curriculum design.

Leaders effectively use the EPQ to enable students to develop high-level skills, including digital skills such as the use of artificial intelligence. Through the curriculums that they study, students gain a range of skills that prepare them very well for higher education.

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

Leaders and teachers have developed curriculums that are of an exceptional quality and are highly ambitious. These curriculums reflect leaders' high expectations and vision for all students to reach their fullest potential. All students study the EPQ, which allows them the opportunity to showcase both their creative and academic potential. Through studying this qualification, students develop a wide range of skills that prepare them exceptionally well for university study.

Leaders and teachers plan and sequence their curriculums very effectively. Teachers give students numerous opportunities to revisit and reinforce foundational knowledge before moving on to more complex topics. In history, students initially study familiar topics, such as the Cold War. This allows them to develop essential

analytical skills. As they move on to more complex topics, they learn to apply higher-order skills, such as how to sustain arguments and how to synthesise information. Students build upon and broaden their existing knowledge very well as they move through their studies.

Teachers are subject experts. They share their knowledge and demonstrate their subject expertise with students very successfully. This helps students to understand important concepts thoroughly.

Teachers check students' understanding extremely well. Mathematics teachers routinely use a variety of assessment methods, including low-stakes tests, synoptic examinations and wipe board challenges. When students make mistakes, teachers intervene swiftly to ensure that they do not form misconceptions.

Teachers use questioning that is highly effective. Psychology teachers use probing questions to support students to improve their understanding of the theories of attraction. Students then use their improved understanding to explain the limitations of each of these theories fluently and with confidence.

Teachers make sure that students use teaching resources and materials that are of a very high quality. In biology, students routinely carry out practical activities with cutting-edge laboratory equipment, such as using electrophoresis equipment to separate DNA fragments. Students reinforce their existing knowledge well through these activities and develop useful investigative skills.

Teachers provide outstanding support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). They use highly inclusive teaching approaches in lessons. These include being mindful of cognitive overload, thought-through seating plans, additional time in examinations and specialist staff where needed. As a result, students with SEND thrive in the supportive environment that leaders and teachers create.

Students receive a wide range of impartial and useful careers education, information, advice and guidance. They use this guidance to help them to plan and move on to their ambitious next steps effectively. In environmental science, students benefit from a range of additional careers activities that support them to make informed choices about their futures, including careers talks from independent ecological consultants. Leaders and teachers ably support the few students who aspire to move on to study degree-level apprenticeships.

Governors hold leaders to account exceptionally well. They have a broad range of skills and expertise that they use to support and challenge leaders effectively. They are instrumental in supporting leaders to continue to improve the quality of education that students receive. For example, they help further develop safeguarding and well-being practices, scrutinise development plans and review the impact of staff well-being initiatives.

Leaders have in place highly effective quality assurance processes. Through these processes, they know the college's strengths and areas for further development very well. Leaders reflect on their current practice and quickly put into place actions to improve further. For example, they provide teachers with useful training and professional development opportunities to improve their use of digital technologies to enhance students' learning experience.

Students with high needs receive well-tailored support that enables them to become more independent. For example, staff support students with visual impairments effectively with adapted digital technologies and the use of captioning in lessons. Students with high needs take part actively in lessons, and they achieve the same high levels of attainment as their peers.

Students produce work of an exceptional quality. As a result of their studies, they develop a diverse range of new and highly valued skills. In photography, students use cyanotype production methods, gel plate printing and other camera-less techniques confidently.

Students achieve very well. A very high proportion achieve A* to B grades in their final examinations. Nearly all students progress to further or higher education or employment when they complete their course. A high proportion of students move on to universities that have very high entry requirements.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130615
Address	Hills Road Cambridge CB2 8PE
Contact number	01223 247251
Website	www.hillsroad.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Jo Trump
Provider type	Sixth form college
Date of previous inspection	1 to 4 February 2022
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the vice principal for staff and student learning, 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

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