

Suite 22 West Lancs  
Investment Centre  
Maple View  
Skelmersdale  
WN8 9TG

**T** 0300 123 1231

Text Phone: 0161 6188524  
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

**Direct T** 01695 566930

**Direct F** 01695 729320

**Direct email:** [lcarruthers@cftb.com](mailto:lcarruthers@cftb.com)

8 November 2010

Mr Kevin McDermott  
Principal  
University of Chester CE Academy  
Woodchurch Lane  
Ellesmere Port  
Cheshire  
CH66 3NG

Dear Mr McDermott

## **Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of University of Chester CE Academy**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with Paul Chambers HMI to your academy on the 3 and 4 November 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents. They met with the Principal, staff and groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body, and a co-opted governor, who both represent one of the sponsors. There was also a telephone discussion with the School Improvement Partner.

### **Context**

The University of Chester Church of England Academy opened in September 2009. It is sponsored by the University of Chester, Cheshire West and Chester Council and the Diocese of Chester. The academy is currently on the sites of the two predecessor schools. In August 2010, it gained government approval for a new building to open on one site in September 2012. The academy has two specialisms: mathematics

and sports with performance. It has a sixth form with 137 students. It is larger than average schools with fewer than average ethnic minority students. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is well above average. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above average.

The decision to open the academy was taken in the summer term 2009, which was too late to make significant alterations to the curriculum or staffing before the academy opened for the autumn term. The appointment process and a staff re-structure took place during the first year of the academy. The members of staff appointed were almost all from the two predecessor schools. A new senior leadership team was appointed for September 2009. Subject leaders were appointed in January 2010. The interim principal was appointed to the substantive post in April 2010. Support staff were appointed by the summer 2010. Due to over-staffing and in order to reduce costs, seventeen teaching staff left the academy at the end of the summer term 2010. Most had been on temporary contracts although there were a few compulsory and voluntary redundancies. For the first year, staff and students of the two predecessor schools remained based at their existing sites and followed their own curriculum. In September 2010, staff and students, apart from Year 11, were integrated. The re-location across the two sites has been a major change for all staff, the students and their parents and carers. The curriculum has now been unified and all students are following common courses from this term.

### **Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning**

In 2010, attainment rose significantly in comparison with the predecessor schools. A higher proportion gained five GCSEs at grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics. For the first time, the results were above the national minimum standard and they exceeded the academy's ambitious targets. Attainment improved significantly in both English and mathematics. Year 11 students made greater progress than previously, especially the girls. This was due to higher expectations of students, the deployment of strong teachers in Year 11, well focused support for underachieving students and rigorous accountability of staff to senior leaders. Students did not make as much progress in gaining five GCSEs at grades A\*-G. This was due to persistent absence by a few students and a lack of focus on ensuring that all students gain a pass on all courses. The academy has identified this as a priority for improvement in the current year. Attainment in English, mathematics and science remains low at Key Stage 3 and some have low basic skills. The academy has introduced a new curriculum in September 2010 designed to improve learning and progress in Years 7 and 8. Early evidence indicates that students are enjoying the learning and are beginning to make improved progress. There are more opportunities at Key Stage 3 for students to learn independently, to make their own choices and to develop their skills in literacy. Students are enjoying learning more as activities in lessons are becoming more varied, interesting and challenging. The introduction of a new rewards system for good behaviour in September 2010 has

improved the climate for learning in lessons. There are fewer occasions when learning is disrupted although this persists in a few lessons.

In 2010, sixth form students gained better A-level results in the subjects they entered than in the predecessor schools. The academy is in the process of adopting a system for setting targets and measuring the progress of students in the sixth form but it does not at present have the evidence to clearly show the progress made by students.

### **Other relevant pupil outcomes**

Attendance remains low and the proportion of students who are persistent absentees remains higher than for most schools. Leaders and managers have put in place a range of strategies, including a newly-appointed home-academy liaison team to focus specifically on raising attendance, but these efforts are yet to have an impact. Most students behave well, both in lessons and around the school. However, a small number of students, mostly boys in the lower-ability sets, have poor attitudes to work and their behaviour slows learning in some lessons. There are some signs that behaviour is improving, for example, the number of students excluded from the academy has dropped and current students believe that measures to improve behaviour are having a positive impact.

### **The effectiveness of provision**

Where teaching is good, teachers use their expertise to plan appropriate work that interests and motivates all groups of students. They teach with energy and enthusiasm which engages and focuses students. They use a good variety of practical resources and structure lessons so that students work purposefully at a good pace. In the better lesson students are given opportunities to voice their own ideas, to work collaboratively and do their own independent work. There are good examples of students assessing their own and each other's work using clear criteria. In addition, there are good examples of teachers identifying which students lack confidence with a task and providing them with additional direction and support. Where teaching is less effective, lesson objectives focus on tasks rather than the learning of particular skills and understanding. As a result, students are not always sufficiently clear about what is expected of them and how to succeed. This contributes to poor behaviour in a few lessons. Occasionally, insufficient care is taken in lessons to ensure that all can see an experiment or read what is on the board. While most students have good attitudes to work, take an interest and are keen to do well, a few have poor attitudes and work well only when under close supervision. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities benefit from appropriate support but the school recognises that the progress of those pupils receiving 'school action plus' support is currently lower than that of other groups. In Years 7 and 8, support staff are deployed well to lead literacy and numeracy activities and reading for pleasure is promoted well. In some lessons, members of

support staff spend too much time managing behaviour rather than supporting learning.

The recently-introduced Key Stage 3 curriculum is innovative and well-planned promoting more extended work which encourages students' independent learning skills. The joint planning of teaching is helping to develop the consistency and coherence of students' learning. Students understand and appreciate the balance of shorter instructional lessons, the more extended theme-based work and the opportunity for specialist subject lessons. There is some evidence that aspects of the new provision are beginning to have an impact on raising levels of literacy. The teaching of writing skills for the lowest ability is at an early stage of development.

At Key Stage 4, partnerships with other providers enable students to take a wide range of vocational options. Appropriate plans are in place for developing extended opportunities to study three separate sciences. All students now take religious education to reflect the developing ethos of the new academy. In the sixth form, the curriculum meets students' needs, although collaboration with other providers that would provide access to a wider range of courses is underdeveloped. The school plans to introduce Level 2 courses which are not currently on offer. Sixth form students are beginning to make use of a recently-introduced web-based resource to support their learning out of school by accessing work and support materials, although the school recognises that its potential is not yet fully realised. The school's specialist subjects of sports and performing arts makes a strong contribution to students' curricular opportunities and achievement. All students at Key Stage 4 follow either a performing arts or sports course and Year 9 students have started a media studies course that leads to a GCSE at the end of Year 10. The specialism in mathematics is underdeveloped.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers**

The Principal provides strong leadership and a clear vision to raise attainment and aspirations. This has been communicated effectively to staff and students. Major organisational changes have been implemented effectively and a new academy identity and a common culture are developing. Systems for observing lessons have been used well by senior leaders to develop an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning across both sites. Plans are in place for subject leaders to take on responsibilities for evaluating and managing the quality of teaching. A system for coaching staff to improve aspects of teaching has begun to be implemented. The academy has established a common data management system and the tracking of student progress is developing. The academy is yet to decide on the system for assessing students in Year 9 to take account of the new approach to starting GCSE courses in Year 9. The quality of assessment in English at Key Stage 3 has been unreliable due to staff changes and a lack of moderation. The introduction of termly reviews of students' progress against their targets has led to improved engagement by parents and carers. The introduction of the new curriculum in Years 7 and 8 has

been well-planned and is at an early stage of implementation. It is being systematically monitored, reviewed and actions to adjust provision have been taken promptly. For example, the academy quickly identified the need to increase the amount of specialist teaching in mathematics and science.

The governing body has a high level of educational and other expertise and has played a significant role in challenging and supporting senior leaders and in supporting the implementation of the academy improvement plan. It has plans in place to engage with the work of middle leaders. The Christian ethos of the academy is at an early stage of development. Senior leaders and external supporters know the academy well and self evaluation is honest, accurate and self critical. Improvements are led and managed with drive, ambition and sensitivity; consequently the academy has a good capacity for sustained improvement.

### **External support**

The University of Chester has provided strong support through its active involvement in the governing body and its high level of practical investment in the development of the academy. It has provided extensive training and development for staff, and it has promoted higher student aspirations and access to higher education through taster days and mentoring. The Diocese of Chester has provided helpful support for the development of religious education and community links, and in promoting the values of the academy. The School Improvement Partner has provided constructive support for the Principal and the senior leadership team. The academy has received effective external support in developing the curriculum from other education providers, including the local authority.

### **Main Judgements**

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- Raise attainment and improve progress by:
  - increasing the proportion of students attaining five GCSEs at grades A\* to G
  - ensuring that more students meet their targets at Key Stage 3
  - improving the literacy and numeracy skills of those with low basic skills.
- Improve attendance and reduce persistent absence.

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by:
  - ensuring that a minority of students with poor attitudes are more positively engaged in lessons
  - increasing the proportion of good and outstanding teaching.
- Strengthen the reliability and accuracy of the methods to assess and monitor student progress in the sixth form, in Year 9 and in English at Key Stage 3.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Group at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Bernard Campbell  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**