

Excelsior Academy

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135423
Local Authority	Newcastle Upon Tyne
Inspection number	361302
Inspection dates	12–13 January 2011
Reporting inspector	Tom Grieveson HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Academy
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1200
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	140
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Peter Fair
Principal	Mrs Philomena Marshall
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors. In total, 45 lessons were observed involving 43 teachers. Meetings were held with senior leaders, the chair of the governing body, students, staff and by telephone with the School Improvement Partner. Inspectors observed the academy's work and considered a range of documentation including students' workbooks. Inspectors analysed 111 parental inspection questionnaires, 129 completed by students and 19 submitted by staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the academy's work. Inspectors looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The progress made by students given their capabilities and starting points.
- The academy's work in tackling high absence rates.
- Teachers' use of assessment and tracking information when planning learning.
- Whether the curriculum is meeting the needs and interests of the students and its contribution to raising achievement.
- How effectively academy leaders are holding staff to account for their performance and the degree to which this is leading to sustained improvements in teaching and learning, standards and achievement.

Information about the school

Excelsior Academy opened in September 2008 in new purpose-built accommodation. It is larger in size than most secondary schools. It operates a 'schools within a school' framework, with four autonomous 11 to 16 schools and a sixth form college. Each has its own management structure, school principal, staff, students, curriculum and timetable. They are directly accountable to the executive principal who leads the academy. The academy's specialism is business enterprise, although each school leads an academy-wide specialist area: Armstrong School – Business and Economics; Hadrian School – Environment, Technology and Design; Jefferson School – Creative and Performing Arts; Milburn School – Health Related Studies. The academy is sponsored by Irvine Laidlaw (Lord Laidlaw). The academy serves communities in the west end of Newcastle. The proportion of students across the Academy known to be eligible for free school meals is significantly in excess of the national average. A high proportion of students enter the academy during term time and many in this group are from overseas. Increasing numbers, currently 35%, come from minority ethnic communities with a third speaking English as an additional language. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is significantly above average and in some year groups represents over half of the cohort.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Excelsior provides its students with a satisfactory and rapidly improving education. It has clear strengths, most notably in its leadership, curriculum and the care, guidance and support it provides. The manner in which the academy promotes community cohesion is exemplary.

Much has been achieved since the academy opened. Although low, attainment is rising quickly and the proportion of students making satisfactory or better progress is increasing well. Self-evaluation is rigorous, providing a secure basis from which carefully crafted improvement planning occurs. There is good capacity for further improvement and the academy's specialism makes a positive contribution to students' development. The majority of teaching seen during the inspection was satisfactory; about 40% was good. Senior leaders have established an effective professional development programme for staff and a rigorous monitoring framework, both of which are successfully contributing to improving teaching and learning. In the best lessons this is evident in teachers' planning and lesson delivery, reflecting a keen awareness of students' capabilities. Activities engage students' interest, address their learning needs and promote learning well. In these lessons, teachers' good questioning skills are used consistently to challenge students' thinking and deepen their understanding. These factors are not yet commonplace, however. In too many lessons students of differing abilities undertake the same tasks. This hinders the progress of the most able. Those of lower ability and students at the early stages of learning English find the work too hard. Furthermore, opportunities for students to work independently and express their ideas and opinions in these lessons are limited.

Academy leaders and staff have worked assiduously to improve the curriculum. Their detailed understanding of students' needs and interests has shaped the curriculum so that its impact on outcomes is increasingly apparent. It is constantly added to as new opportunities are identified. Students' personal and learning needs are well catered for. Students say they feel safe, expressing confidence in staff support. Students demonstrate a strong commitment to the academy and their behaviour is good. They take responsibility for their actions while recognising the safety of others. Although improving well, absence and persistent absence rates remain high. There are good procedures in place for the safeguarding of students. The academy provides satisfactory value for money.

Up to 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- In order to raise attainment and accelerate students' learning and progress, the academy should:

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- build upon and extend current strategies to improve teaching and learning by:
 - developing teachers' questioning skills
 - promoting students' capacity to learn independently
 - broadening opportunities for classroom talk
- deploy and extend existing strategies to improve attendance and reduce persistent absence.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

3

The large majority of students demonstrate positive attitudes to learning and engage productively in lessons. The calm and orderly climate within the academy provides a secure platform from which students can learn. Their commitment to adopting healthy lifestyles is noteworthy and students commit in good numbers to the extensive health and sports programme. Attendance rates have increased sharply since the academy opened but remain low. Relatively high persistent absence rates are declining well. There have been no permanent exclusions. All aspects of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are strong.

Students' attainment on entry to the academy is exceptionally low. Their literacy and numeracy skills are particularly weak. Few enter with higher than average results at Key Stage 2. Key Stage 4 outcomes remain low but improved markedly in 2010 compared to the previous year with attainment now much higher than in the predecessor school. It is rising more quickly at Key Stage 3 and particularly amongst the youngest age groups. Robust and incisive assessment of students' progress is demonstrating that increasing numbers, at both key stages, are now making satisfactory or better progress. This equally applies to those with special educational needs and/or disabilities because well timed and effective intervention is supporting their learning increasingly well.

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Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	4
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	3
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	4
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

The most effective teachers have good knowledge and an enthusiasm for their subject. Planning is incisive, reflecting a thorough understanding of students' prior learning and their capabilities. Expectations are high, the pace of lessons is brisk and challenging questioning ensures that students are kept interested and engaged. They have ample opportunities to work independently. Too often though, while teachers strive to make learning relevant, activities do not cater sufficiently well for the needs of all. Progress tends to be satisfactory rather than good. Learning in these lessons lacks pace, students become passive, often because teacher-talk dominates proceedings and opportunities to collaborate or work independently are missing. In some lessons, teachers' questioning skills are limited and tend to confine rather than extend students' opportunities to be challenged, share their ideas or express opinions.

The good curriculum is increasingly finely tuned to students' requirements and interests. Pathways at Key Stage 4 build successfully on Key Stage 3 strategies which are effectively tackling long-standing weaknesses in students' basic skills. Students are offered a well-defined mix of academic and vocational options which are proving relevant and motivational in promoting learning and sustaining engagement. Their impact is evident in the increasing numbers staying on into post-16 provision. Enrichment activities are well attended and are highly valued including recent ventures to Poland and South Africa.

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The quality of care, guidance and support is a strength. It contributes substantially to students' confidence in the academy and in the staff to support them. It effectively underpins the academy's intensive drive to improve students' academic achievement.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

The strength of purpose in tackling historic levels of under-achievement and raising students' aspirations is fully reflected in the work of senior leaders, governors and all those who work at the academy. The resolute focus on raising attainment lies at the heart of the academy's vision and is reflected fully in its core priorities. The work which underpins this strategy is evident in rising levels of attainment and improving rates of student progress. The executive principal and chair of governors demonstrate a sharp and incisive understanding of the academy's performance and offer a clear perspective on areas which require most improvement. Governance is good and while supportive of academy leaders, governors are highly expectant about individual and collective performance.

Partnership arrangements are effective and wide ranging, including with Merchiston School in Edinburgh. Students' learning benefits greatly from broad ranging initiatives such as the enterprise day. A community police officer, based in the academy, works effectively to support individual students, and engagement with parents and carers is good. The large majority of parents and carers who replied to the inspection questionnaire were unequivocal in their support of the academy and its work. Innovative strategies to connect with harder to reach families are effective. Strident efforts to develop all aspects of community cohesion ensure that this aspect of the academy's work is outstanding. Staff demonstrate an incisive understanding of the academy community, its make-up and its needs. Substantial progress has been made since the academy opened in shaping a cohesive community and in reaching out in numerous ways into the area it serves. Effective quality assurance and risk assessment systems ensure that safeguarding arrangements are good.

The sponsor provides extensive financial support for students to directly promote their personal and academic progress. These monies are used prudently by the leadership to extend students' experiences in a significant number of areas.

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These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	3

Sixth form

Post-16 provision is satisfactory and quickly improving. Almost all students are making satisfactory and often good progress. The proportion of students out-performing their targets has increased significantly in the last year. Teaching is at least satisfactory and an increasing proportion is good. Teachers know students well, have good subject knowledge and successfully engage students in learning. The college works closely with students to make sure they accept responsibility for their own progress and show independence in learning. Individual needs and interests are particularly well met and the curriculum meets students' aspirations successfully by providing a suitable range of academic and vocational subjects. Students highly value the individual care, guidance and support they receive. The college provides a wide range of successful strategies to overcome any barriers to learning. High ambition is firmly embedded in all aspects of post-16 provision. Growth and development are central to the work of the college and is reflected in improving student outcomes. As a result, leadership and management are good.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account: Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Views of parents and carers

The large majority of parents and carers who responded to the inspection questionnaire expressed their appreciation and support for the work of the academy.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Excelsior Academy to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 111 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1200 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	28	25	70	63	9	8	3	3
The school keeps my child safe	33	30	72	65	5	5	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	45	41	62	56	2	2	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	33	30	69	62	6	5	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	38	34	66	59	4	4	2	2
The school helps me to support my child's learning	34	31	69	62	6	5	1	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	36	32	64	58	8	7	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	31	28	72	65	4	4	1	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	30	27	71	64	7	6	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	34	31	62	56	8	7	6	5
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	26	23	73	66	9	8	2	2
The school is led and managed effectively	25	23	75	68	8	7	2	2
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	39	35	65	59	5	5	1	1

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



14 January 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Excelsior Academy, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE15 6AF

Thank you for your participation during the recent inspection of your academy. Particular thanks go to those groups of students who met with us: you represented the academy extremely well and you should be justly proud.

We have judged the academy to be providing you with a satisfactory and rapidly improving education. It has a number of strengths, notably the quality of its leadership, curriculum and the care, guidance and support which it offers. The academy's work in promoting community cohesion is excellent. Although attainment remains low, we were pleased to see that standards are rising and that many more of you are making good progress. The details of our findings are contained in the report which I am sure you would like to read in full.

We have asked the governing body, the academy leaders and the staff to build on work which is already underway so that you can all make better progress in your learning and attain more highly. We have asked them to concentrate on the following two areas in particular.

- To continue with current strategies to improve teaching and learning by:
 - developing teachers' questioning skills
 - promoting students' capacity to learn independently
 - broadening opportunities for classroom talk.
- To continue to deploy and extend existing strategies to improve attendance and reduce persistent absence

We were particularly pleased to observe your good behaviour and your positive attitudes towards learning. Well done! You can support the staff to make these improvements by continuing to work hard and attend regularly.

Please accept the very best wishes of the inspection team for your future success.

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson

Her Majesty's Inspector

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