15 March 2013

Ms J Strang
Principal
Thomas Ferens Academy
540 Hall Road
Hull
HU6 9BP

Dear Ms Strang

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Thomas Ferens Academy

Following my visit with Gina White, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 13 and 14 March 2013, 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 monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the academy's predecessor school was judged to be a school causing concern.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, other senior leaders and staff with a leadership responsibility, members of the governing body, a group of newly qualified and Teach First teachers and groups of students from Years 7, 9 and 11.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The academy is making reasonable progress in raising standards for all students.

Context

The academy opened in September 2012 in a new building. The four sponsor organisations are the University of Hull, Wyke Sixth Form College, Wilberforce College and Hull City Council. There are currently 516 students on roll: the number in each year group varies considerably. The proportion of students for whom the

academy receives pupil premium funding is high. (The pupil premium is additional government funding for children in the care of the local authority, children of parents serving in the armed forces and for students known to be entitled to free school meals). The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups in the academy is low. The percentage of students supported through school action is above the national average but the number supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is broadly in line with the national average. When the academy opened some senior and middle leadership posts remained unfilled. Just over one quarter of the teachers are newly qualified or Teach First staff. Two new senior leaders have joined the academy since it opened and one senior leader will leave the academy at the end of term.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The prior attainment of students in the academy is significantly below the national average, particularly in English. The academy has assessed students' skills in reading, and their wider ability, to get a clear picture of the capabilities of each student. These data are beginning to be used to target additional teaching to help students improve their basic skills and ensure that students are correctly grouped according to their ability in core-subject classes. Intensive work to accelerate the progress in Year 11 is already having a positive impact on raising attainment. Teachers' assessments and results for 2013 already gained, for example, from early entry to GCSE mathematics examinations and outcomes of controlled assessments in English, indicate that the percentage of students gaining at least five A* to C grades at GCSE will meet the government's floor standard, which sets the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress. This would be a significant improvement on standards achieved in past years in the predecessor school. In other year groups, improving progress and rising attainment are less evident, including for those students known to be eligible for the pupil premium. In part, this is because many students have weak reading and writing skills which create a significant barrier to better achievement in all subjects and some struggle to sustain concentration or work well independently in lessons.

The quality of teaching

Teaching is beginning to improve as a result of effective team working between staff from the predecessor school and those recently appointed, extensive whole academy training and structured opportunities for teachers to plan collaboratively between subjects. In the best lessons observed by inspectors, teachers embraced the opportunities offered by new technologies and incorporated innovative and creative approaches to promote students' learning. Work set provided a good degree of challenge and was carefully structured throughout the lesson to promote sustained students' engagement and good progress. However, many lessons are still typified by teaching that is less than good, so students' progress is too slow over time to ensure low prior attainment and past underperformance are addressed quickly.

Teachers understand the importance of planning carefully to meet the needs of students of different abilities in each class but their effectiveness in achieving this is very variable. Similarly, staff recognise they all have a role to play in developing students' literacy skills through their subject teaching but this was not often reflected in teaching observed. A significant number of teachers are struggling to plan and deliver lessons that maintain a good pace, students' motivation and progression throughout each two-hour session. As a result, students become disengaged and low-level disruption ensues. Not all staff, particularly, but not exclusively, those newer to teaching, are successful in managing students' behaviour and this becomes a barrier to learning in lessons. Some staff expressed concerns that they did not feel sufficiently well supported in securing good behaviour. The availability of additional adults to support learning in the classroom is limited as often these staff are required to undertake different roles in the academy.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Following a difficult start when the academy opened, behaviour during change of lessons and social times is mostly orderly. Levels of supervision are high and students are increasingly following the rules and expectations of the academy. As a result students, staff and academy data confirm that behaviour is steadily improving and the occurrence of more serious incidents is declining. In a number of lessons observed students demonstrated good attitudes to learning, a willingness to contribute and the ability to work well with their peers over a sustained period of time. However, overall, too much low-level disruption remains in lessons. Inspectors observed students being inattentive, not following teachers' instructions and interfering with the learning of others.

Too many students chose to ignore clear guidelines for the use of their tablet computers during lessons and consequently they were not focused on their learning. Students say they feel safe in the academy and that incidents of bullying are typically tackled well. A strong focus on e-safety has ensured that students understand issues such as cyber-bullying and know how to keep themselves safe when using the internet. Attendance is improving and, although below average, is markedly better than in the predecessor school. Strategies to promote good attendance, including the use of rewards and the deployment of staff to work with targeted students and their families to reduce persistent absenteeism, are having a positive impact.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

Leaders and governors have an ambitious vision for the academy. Aspirations for students' achievement and their social, moral, spiritual and cultural development are high. Staff display a strong commitment to realising the academy's vision and creating an ethos where students can thrive. Leaders, including governors, recognise that they are at an early stage on this journey. The capacity of leaders to drive rapid improvement is steadily developing as systems become more embedded and staff

gain confidence in their roles. Leaders rightly recognise that review and refinement of the improvement plan is needed as monitoring and evaluation have provided a fuller picture of the issues to be addressed. Data to track students' progress are more secure and the academy is better placed to identify those students who need additional, targeted support.

The academy has been quick to develop provision to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and challenging students and support for these learners is increasingly effective. On-going review and reshaping of teaching groups is helping to ensure that teaching matches students' needs more closely and behaviour is easier to manage. The academy has not monitored the outcomes and quality of provision for those students attending courses off-site closely enough. Observations of teaching have provided a broad overview of quality and this is beginning to be used more sharply to identify staff development needs. An intensive programme of training is beginning to improve teachers' practice and increase their confidence and competence in delivering the project-based curriculum. However, for some, especially those newer to teaching, individual professional development needs have not been systematically addressed.

The curriculum is designed to promote students' engagement, meet their individual needs and raise aspirations. Broader option choices at Key Stage 4 and projects linking different subjects in the curriculum in Years 7 and 8 are helping to increase students' motivation and determination to succeed. However, despite some advantages and early signs of a positive impact, the project-based curriculum model at Key Stage 3 and the overall structure of the academy day remain a challenge for many staff and students. This is because the quality of teaching and the learning behaviours of a significant proportion of students are some distance from where they need to be for the curriculum to be delivered effectively. Students are not sufficiently involved in shaping academy developments.

Members of the governing body have been carefully selected to ensure they have the necessary skills and knowledge to support and challenge academy leaders. Committees have been established to monitor closely the different aspects of the academy's work and governors clearly understand the challenges ahead. They are beginning to interrogate information more incisively to make informed strategic decisions.

External support

Strategic partners are fully committed to the academy's vision and are actively contributing to improving provision and raising standards. The university is supporting the drive to raise students' aspirations by working on a project with Year 9 to explore future learning and career opportunities. Colleges linked with the academy have worked with Year 11 students to develop their understanding of post-16 education choices. The local authority is making a useful contribution to developing teachers' skills and helping to secure the rigour of monitoring and evaluation.

Priorities for further improvement

- Bridge the gaps between students' basic skills and learning behaviours, the overall quality of teaching and the academy's model for curriculum delivery.
- Ensure expectations for behaviour are high and policies for managing behaviour are effective in securing a positive climate for learning in all classrooms.
- Ensure all teachers receive training and development that meets their individual needs well and that its impact is carefully monitored by senior leaders and governors.
- Include students' views when evaluating the academy's effectiveness and in making decisions about future developments.
- Rigorously monitor the provision for, and achievement of, students attending off-site courses.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, Colin Diamond at the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education and the Chair of the Governing Body. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Katrina Gueli
Her Majesty's Inspector