

Hartlepool Sixth Form College

Follow up re-inspection monitoring visit report

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Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the second follow up re-inspection monitoring visit to Hartlepool Sixth Form College following publication of the inspection report on 13 November 2014 which found the provider to be inadequate overall.

Themes

Improvement in outcomes for students on AS and A level courses

In year retention has improved significantly; especially at AS level where the proportion remaining on course is markedly higher than at the same point last year.

Mock examinations in January produced very mixed results, with many subjects and courses showing an improving picture but others showing little or no improvement. Managers have done a thorough analysis of the data, including a value added analysis, and performance directors are using this to target support where it is most needed. A one month concentrated intervention strategy is in place to boost the performance of underachievers. This includes compulsory attendance at academic support tutorials, additional homework and extension work, and increased directed use of the supervised study zone. A small number of students who are underachieving and not responding to the usual support and discipline arrangements are being mentored by senior managers who provide additional challenge, motivation and support.

The vocational curriculum has been planned in semesters, to reduce assignment bunching. Very tight monitoring of assignments and much tighter rules and structure around resubmissions have been introduced.

The new processes introduced to improve attendance are having an impact and attendance and punctuality have improved, especially for final year A-level students. Nevertheless, there is scope for further improvement. A detailed analysis of attendance has identified subjects and courses where attendance remains a concern. Overall attendance on level 2 courses has not improved enough. In particular, attendance at GCSE mathematics lessons is poor, in contrast to GCSE English. Managers are beginning to develop strategies to improve this. At present there is too ready an acceptance of telephone messages with reasons for absence, and not enough is done to challenge absences and to reinforce the relevance and importance of GCSE mathematics, especially with the minority who have frequent absences.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in teaching and learning

Senior leaders are implementing improvement strategies and these are beginning to have some impact. A good practice database has been developed on the staff intranet. A recent staff development event involved teachers showcasing good practice ideas. This was well received and teachers were keen to share ideas and to learn from their peers. Those unable to attend are required to undertake peer observations instead; this is being carefully monitored by senior staff. Peer observations outside teachers' own curriculum areas are actively encouraged to spread ideas more widely across college. A staff development event led by external consultants and devoted to improving learning strategies is planned for the near future.

The outcomes of joint lesson observations and a series of brief visits to lessons during this inspection are indicative of a slowly improving picture in teaching and learning. Broadly there is not yet enough consistency to ensure that all students, regardless of course or subject, receive good teaching. Across the college there are many examples of good practice but equally there are many where improvement is needed.

Particularly effective group-work strategies were observed in two lessons, where teachers had carefully planned tasks and determined which students should work together to maximise progress. Some effective use of information and learning technology was seen. Other good features included examples of planning using student profiles effectively and effective recap activities to reinforce learning. Aspects requiring improvement included limited checking of progress, poor questioning techniques and extension activities to challenge the most able not well targeted so that some chose easier tasks. Students did not always get enough opportunity to apply their learning to examples and practise skills enough. Instances were also seen where students were working on independent assignment work and the teacher's presence added little value. Students commented that they did not feel they learned enough in such lessons.

English is reasonably well integrated into many lessons. However, relatively little integration of mathematics was observed in the small sample of lessons visited, except where the subject matter particularly lent itself to this. Managers have recently appointed a 'maths champion' to help teachers develop this and provide ideas.

Written records of external consultant observations record strengths and areas for improvement but do not formally develop these into an action plan. Managers are now reviewing this to ensure that all teachers are clear about aspects of their classroom practice that they are required to act upon and improve, which will be followed up in subsequent observations and through the appraisal system. A coaching programme has been introduced to mentor and support a number of teachers to improve their practice. This initiative involves regular meetings, individual targets for improvement and regular progress reporting to senior managers.

Students commented that some of their best lessons occurred when teachers asked how they learned best, then taught them in different ways so that all could learn in a way that suited them. Students also noted that where they were required to follow up learning immediately, for example with questions requiring written answers at the end of a lesson, this helped them to remember what they had learned.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in assessment and progress tracking

Most teachers set work regularly and mark and return it quickly. However, this is not universal and students reported a few cases where they had been waiting some time for work to be marked and returned, or to receive mock examination results. Systems are in place to ensure that students submit work on time. The volume of work set outside lessons varies and a few students acknowledged that they could do more. Ongoing assessment in lessons is not consistent, with some teachers assiduously checking all students' understanding and work and adapting their teaching accordingly, and others not doing enough and making unfounded assumptions about the extent to which material has been grasped.

Feedback from teachers on assessed work usually provides clear guidance on how to improve. Students regard their individual target grades as appropriate and know their progress towards these. Managers, teachers and students report that academic-support tutorials are now being better used. Increased attention has been given to students of different abilities so that some sessions are designed to stretch and challenge the most able, while others support students who are struggling. Individual sessions are more clearly focused on specific problems that students need help with. Where students are directed to attend this is followed up and checked. Students value the additional help they receive in these sessions.

The student information system provides senior staff with an overview of performance at different levels. Performance directors are using this in their fortnightly meetings with heads of department to check that underperformance is tackled vigorously.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in advice and guidance

Students value the good advice and guidance they receive with university applications. A job club has been established which focuses on local job search and vacancies and includes national opportunities for apprenticeships. This is being supported for the first time by a careers and apprenticeship fair planned for March. This will enhance the information and advice available to those level 3 students who

do not wish to go to university. Not enough of these students have meaningful work experience at present.

A revised programme of open days, bridging courses and taster programmes is planned for all the local feeder schools, and for a small number of out-of-area schools, to ensure that prospective students have a good understanding of the courses on offer and to enable them to make informed choices.

Managers have reviewed the level 2 pathways so that all level 2 students have an identified vocational or academic route mapped out. Work experience is to be included in level 2 courses in future. The current cohort of level 2 students will have an individual careers guidance interview to ensure they are provided with enough support to make their choices. Plans are also in place to offer individual advice and guidance to any other students lacking a clear progression plan.

A much wider range of work experience is now being offered including opportunities for volunteering in schools, mentoring programmes and a partnership with the local power station for those students studying science, mathematics, technology and engineering subjects.

The college learning zone now offers informal drop-in sessions for careers advice and support with UCAS applications, making it more accessible for students.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in governance and quality assurance arrangements

The new senior management team has been instrumental in helping to develop a culture of challenge from the governing body. The information supplied to governors has improved and they now receive a revised range of management reports with a key focus on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and student outcomes. A data dashboard has been developed. This is updated after each monitoring and assessment point to provide governors with up to date information on key performance measures.

The governing body has undergone a full self-assessment to ensure an appropriate range of skills are represented. This has identified some skill gaps across committees and their composition is under review. There is limited educational experience specifically with 16 to 18-year-olds and there are plans to rectify this.

A training regime is now in place with all governors. An external consultant has been employed and has made some initial proposals which will be followed up shortly.

All governors now have a link to a curriculum area. This is proving effective in developing a more informed approach through regular meetings with the subject leaders and meeting with students.

Revised lesson observation arrangements are now in place that involve three unannounced observations per year. All staff are required to undertake two peer observations per term particularly focusing on any identified actions from their management observations. Opportunities to share best practice are now happening more informally and frequently as a result. A significantly revised appraisal system includes direct links to student outcomes and actions identified through the observation process. As a result teachers are beginning to take more ownership of their individual targets ensuring they link directly to overall college targets.

Regular analysis of observation action plans is providing senior managers with clearly identified themes that are used to plan continuing professional development and training for staff. Almost all staff development now focuses on improving teaching, learning and assessment practice.

Reasonable improvement for learners

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