

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 third 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

Leaders and managers have worked very effectively to improve the retention of students by ensuring that they are on suitable courses that meet their aspirations and abilities. They are improving teaching and are providing a wide range of support strategies for students who might be at risk of leaving. These actions have resulted in a very significant improvement in the retention rate for AS-level students when compared with the previous academic year. Leaders and managers have made similar improvements in retention on vocational courses and level 2 courses and a smaller but still notable improvement for final year A-level students.

Students show very good attitudes to learning; they engage readily with activities set by teachers and work well both collaboratively and independently. Students enjoy their lessons and speak highly of their teachers' support particularly that provided through additional support tutorials (ASTs). Students' behaviour in lessons and around the college is excellent and students are sensible, polite and cooperative. Managers and teachers collect student views in several ways. The student council is functioning more effectively than in previous years. Managers and teachers clearly listen to students and respond to requests for changes, for example, they have established a debating society.

Managers have scrupulously examined attendance and assessment data and taken rapid and effective action to address weaknesses identified. Attendance is over 90% for most subjects and courses. Attendance at GCSE mathematics lessons has increased significantly since the previous monitoring visit, but still requires further improvement. Managers have appointed a new mathematics teacher this term as part of their strategy to improve GCSE mathematics' outcomes, and initial observations and student feedback are positive.

Managers' analysis of the most recent formal assessment data suggest that outcomes will improve well in 2015 for most AS and A-level courses. There are occasional examples where this is not the case, for example, a lower proportion of students is expected to achieve high grades in a very small number of subjects. For A-level courses this is often associated with the weaker AS-level outcomes in 2014.

Managers' value added calculations suggest that students' progress is at least in line with expectations for most courses and better for some. Inspection evidence shows that in lessons students are making at least steady progress.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in teaching and learning

The culture among teachers has changed. They show a strong commitment to developing their own skills and a real willingness to participate in training and peer observation, share good practice and work with consultants or coaches. Teachers are reflective practitioners. They accept accountability for their students' results, especially since senior leaders have introduced more formalised arrangements for them to provide additional support for students. Teachers value the changes senior leaders have brought to the assessment system and acknowledge where refinements were necessary to improve reliability. Teachers are confident about their assessment of students' improving progress and achievement. They are not complacent and continue to seek new ways to support students, for example with different revision strategies. Students are positive about the teaching they receive and value the support provided. Second year students are particularly appreciative of changes made this year.

A full day's training in teaching strategies took place in February after the previous monitoring visit. All teachers, including all senior leaders participated. Teachers' evaluations of the day, lesson observations, informal discussions with teachers and student feedback all demonstrate that teachers have responded quickly and positively. Many have introduced new teaching methods to their lessons which are more focused on the individual needs of the learner. Staff development days now focus wholly on teaching, learning and assessment as part of the college strategy to make teaching and learning the central priority for the college and to promote improvements in the quality of teaching. Staff meetings in departments include a focus on teaching, with open discussions about practice and how it might be improved.

Additional support tutorials (ASTs) have been refined to make them better attuned to the specific needs of the individuals attending, rather than the more generic approach adopted earlier in the year. Support strategies are beneficial. They include holiday schools for revision and catching up, and the use of the study zone for homework or missed work due to absence. Senior leaders continue to work very hard to expand the range of support options available, including making specific individual arrangements where appropriate.

Inspection observations and visits to lessons show that teaching is improving. Many strengths are evident. A few weaknesses remain. Managers recognise these and continue to take steps to address them. The pace in second year A-level lessons is steady rather than rapid. The development and reinforcement of subject specific

terminology requires improvement in some subjects. A few teachers do not use questioning effectively, for example, over-praising weak answers rather than asking further questions to encourage more articulate or detailed responses. Teachers do not plan well enough to stretch and challenge all students including the most able.

Teachers' feedback on student work is helpful and provides guidance on how to improve. Teachers make increasing use of information learning technology (ILT) to support learning both during and outside lessons. Some make effective use of social media to encourage students to give attention to subject work out of lessons.

The curriculum for level 2 students has been enhanced through the introduction of additional employability skills sessions.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in assessment and progress tracking

Senior leaders have refined the formal progress monitoring system. They carried out a thorough analysis after the January mock examinations which revealed some differences in assessment practice between departments. Managers now scrutinise the formal assessment exercises used and give more attention to standardisation. This is helping to improve the reliability of assessments and ensure that they reflect a fair and accurate picture of student performance at a given point in time.

Leaders acted swiftly after the mock examinations by putting additional interventions and support in place for underachievers. The most recent data in March 2015 show a broadly improving picture, markedly better than at the time of the mock examinations. Most subject assessments show students to be achieving in line with expectations or better. Assessments suggest slower progress in a very few subjects. Leaders continue to work closely with heads of department and teachers to strengthen the reliability of the formal assessment system. Managers and teachers use assessment data very effectively to plan support.

The individual target-setting system for students involves targets based on prior achievement at GCSE and also more aspirational targets. A few students find this confusing and are not entirely clear which they should be aiming for, or how these targets were arrived at. Senior leaders are planning to improve communication about individual targets and progress monitoring next year. Parents will be given more frequent progress reports as part of this plan.

Teachers' assessment of students' progress in lessons is improving, but further work is needed to ensure a consistent approach across the college. More teachers are using questioning techniques effectively, for example, through directed questions and more probing follow up questions that encourage deeper thinking and more articulate responses. Other techniques are used well in some lessons but again practice varies between teachers and departments. More teachers are encouraging

students to use self-assessment, for example to prioritise their revision and examination practice. Most teachers know their students very well and understand their strengths and weaknesses. However, strategies to adapt teaching in the light of this knowledge need further development to ensure that all students are suitably stretched and challenged.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in advice and guidance

The college invites students who do not wish to apply to university to join a bespoke tutorial group, dedicated to preparing them for employment or training. Students in this group follow a specific programme which draws on information from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the priorities for employment in the local area. Six of the region's largest employers are involved in the tutorial provision and at the end of the programme invite all students for a day of interviews. In addition, the employers notify students of all vacancies, including permanent positions and apprenticeships. Employers will give students on the programme the opportunity to be interviewed for any position they are interested in. Recent initiatives, including the college's careers fair and apprenticeship week were very successful in making all students aware of the wider opportunities available to them at the end of their study programmes. Students speak highly of the changes made to the advice, support and guidance they receive to help secure employment or training and many say they now feel better served by the college.

Opportunities for students to take part in work experience have increased and staff are planning more. For example, the college has recently begun work with an organisation that targets LEP priorities. This has resulted in high-quality summer placements for interested students. BTEC Applied Science students have been given a 'live brief' by a local company which is linked to their class-based laboratory work. Students are comparing science laboratories in a teaching environment with those in a typical scientific industry. Media students continue to support the running and managing of Stanton Primary School radio station, developing their skills for the college's own radio station which is planned to go live in September 2015.

Significant improvement for learners

Improvement in governance

Governors have reviewed the composition of the corporation and appointed several new governors. They have rectified the gender imbalance, including through the appointment of a female chair of governors from one of the college's feeder schools. Governors have also appointed a recently retired vice-principal of a local general further education college to fill an identified gap in 16–19 expertise. Governors have revised their committee structure. This now includes a group comprising the chairs of

other committees who monitor progress against the college's post-inspection action plan. This group meets monthly and reports to the full corporation at their usual meetings. Governors have planned training to remedy gaps in their knowledge in, for example, teaching and learning. However, actions taken on this aspect have been slow to date. Individual governors have links to curriculum areas and many have spent time with staff and students in these areas to better understand the day-to-day life of the college. A governor shadowing scheme for the chair, clerk and chairs of committees is now in place with another college to help develop governor skills.

The principal provides governors with regular updates on student outcomes after each measure of academic progress (MAP) assessment, including an analysis of performance against key performance indicators. The reports are presented in a clear format which makes it easy for all governors to understand and therefore challenge the principal and senior managers with greater rigour than that noted at the previous inspection.

All of the changes implemented so far are beginning to increase accountability of the governing body. Governors are now better equipped to represent the college and to challenge performance. They are more aware of their shortcomings and understand clearly that they have much more work to do in overseeing the work of the college so that all students achieve as well as they can.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in quality assurance arrangements

Senior managers have reviewed and considerably tightened the arrangements for quality assurance. The process for the observation of teaching and learning is robust and linked closely to the performance management of individual teachers. Teachers are observed three times a year. This is a move from the former annual scheme of lesson observation. Their performance as teachers is judged using a range of criteria including value added data and student outcomes as well as lesson observations. Outcomes of individual observations feed into extremely detailed action plans which managers monitor frequently. Senior managers carefully collate and analyse thoroughly the outcomes of all observations and use this to inform college-wide training to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Sharing of good classroom practice is improved and much more widespread. Shrewd use of external consultants to help improve the quality of teaching and learning, especially in science and mathematics subjects, is having a positive impact.

It is clear that current arrangements for quality assurance are leading to secure improvements in the quality of teaching and learning for all students. Even so, senior managers continue to refine the college's already robust quality systems, especially for teaching and learning and performance management. Data from a range of sources are easily available, accurate and used routinely and well by all staff to

inform progress against key performance indicators. This is helping to drive improvements in all areas of the college.

Significant improvement for learners

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