

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 fourth 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. This inspection took place after the students' term had ended but student ambassadors were present and spoke to inspectors about their experience of the college this year.

Themes

Improvement in outcomes for students on AS- and A-level courses

All the evidence points to a strong drive for improvement in outcomes based on a range of well-considered strategies. Recent college assessment data suggest that success rates will improve this year when compared with 2013/14.

As a result of the strategies pursued by college managers, teachers and support staff, overall retention rates at the end of the 2014/15 academic year have improved by more than five percentage points when compared with 2013/14. They exceed college targets. Where students have sought to leave college, staff have worked hard to encourage them to persevere, for example by making special arrangements to overcome barriers. Almost all of those who have left have known destinations and in a number of cases students have taken up apprenticeships.

Attendance has improved considerably this year when compared with the previous year. On level 2 courses the increase is particularly notable at seven percentage points. Smaller but significant improvements have also been achieved on vocational courses. Managers carefully review attendance data by course and have been vigilant in ensuring that absence is followed up assiduously.

Teachers, managers and governors have scrutinised data from the monitoring academic progress (MAP) system thoroughly and have put additional interventions in place to support underachievers. For example, following the most recent MAP assessments, teachers adapted revision strategies and did additional work on examination technique where data showed the anticipated student outcomes might be lower than targets.

Managers' tracking of progress on vocational courses shows that where marks and grades have been finalised for 2014/15, success rates are typically above the previous year's national averages.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in teaching and learning

College observers now refer to previous observations, highlighting whether previous strengths continue to be strengths, and areas for development have been addressed. Where common themes emerge around areas for improvement managers use these to inform their planning of professional development. Where an individual has continuing areas for development these feed into the performance management system forming part of the teacher's targets.

Students say there is a very different and much improved culture across the college this year. They report an improved range of teaching strategies used by the majority of teachers. Teachers include 'stretch and challenge' activities in many lessons. Students recognise that teachers now pay more attention to their preferred ways of learning and modify tasks and activities to meet their individual needs better. They recognise and value the good range of support provided by their teachers, especially for those at risk of not achieving their target grades or at risk of falling behind or dropping out of their studies. Academic-support tutorials were particularly helpful in the run-up to the summer 2015 exams. Most students attend support tutorials readily and voluntarily. If teachers find that students who do need help are reluctant to attend they formally direct students to do so to ensure that they have the best chance of success.

Second-year students report that their courses are more structured than they were in year one. Teachers provide good feedback on their progress using the MAP system. However, students are aware that the process is new; they are the first cohort that teachers have used it for and the validity of in-year assessments has yet to be tested by a full set of results.

Teachers are improving their use of information and learning technology to support students' learning. Students value the range of resources available through the college intranet. Examples include podcasts, videos, lesson presentations, and past-paper questions grouped by topic.

In GCSE mathematics, attendance has improved significantly in recent months reflecting students' increased enjoyment of mathematics. The scheme of work has been revised to include more activities to engage and interest students, and to help them develop their mathematical skills.

A 'community week' at the end of the summer term after the examination period provided good opportunities for students to develop employability skills including curriculum vitae writing, letters of application, and budgeting and financial management. Potential university students had sessions on drafting personal statements.

The new role of curriculum developer, established through the middle management re-structure, is designed to improve the quality of teaching across all departments, reduce inconsistencies across subjects and share best practice. These managers are

already discussing research and improvement projects as a team but it is too early to make a judgement about the impact of these plans. Two full staff-development days are planned for the summer to further develop teaching, learning and assessment skills.

Several new teachers have been appointed for September 2015. The Principal has observed all shortlisted applicants teaching a short lesson to students as part of the selection process.

Reasonable improvement for learners

Improvement in assessment and progress tracking

The MAP system introduced this year is now well established. Teachers and managers collate and analyse data at different levels and take action where weaknesses are evident. Teachers have refined the summative assessments that they use to provide student marks and grades at key points to ensure that they give an accurate reflection of current performance. Students, teachers and managers are using the new systems introduced this year with increasing competence and confidence. Students' understanding of the system has improved and they have a good understanding of their progress against their target grades.

Managers are making arrangements to ensure that academic-support tutorials are better integrated into timetables for next year to further improve the subject-specific support available to students. Building on this year's experience, teachers are becoming more adept at providing support for students with different needs, for example using different techniques for those struggling to grasp the basic concepts and for those aiming for the highest grades.

Progress reviews for Year 12 students at the end of the summer term are helping them to confirm their next steps. Managers developing the tutorial programme for 2015/16 are including scheduled opportunities for students to reflect on their own progress at assessment points so that, with support if necessary, they can plan their own actions to improve their grades or consolidate their performance.

Significant improvement for learners

Improvement in advice and guidance

The Principal and senior managers are in the process of re-structuring the student support and careers advice and guidance functions under one Assistant Principal. A new role of achievement coach has been established. Two members of staff appointed to this role will provide personal and academic support for all students following academic study programmes from September 2015.

The college has good links with local schools and other post-16 providers to signpost potential and current students to appropriate types of provision and subjects. The 'secondary college' Year 10 taster day for pupils from local schools provides potential students with direct experience of the college. They sample lessons and obtain advice about the courses available.

This year the college extended to four days the Year 11 bridging course to students who have completed their GCSEs and are due to enrol at the college. This provides first-hand experience of the college to help students confirm their choice. Additions to the bridging course for prospective students include a careers information, advice and guidance session and an optional one-to-one meeting with the college's careers adviser. Previously structured as a taster about subjects which focused on enjoyment and experimentation, this year subject tutors made clear to prospective students who were on the bridging course, the challenges of each subject and appropriateness of it for their planned progression aspirations. As a result of these changes to the bridging course, prospective students are in a better position to make informed choices about the course and qualifications they choose.

Students not planning to progress to university have a good awareness of employment opportunities, including apprenticeships. The dedicated tutor group for students not planning to progress to higher education encourages students to explore and progress with alternative options. The careers adviser holds weekly careers workshops every Wednesday where students can receive advice on employment and apprenticeship opportunities available, and support to complete applications and curricula vitae.

The college has continued to implement changes to students' programmes, identified in the April 2015 monitoring visit, designed to give them improved advice and guidance about their future options. In addition, managers are re-designing the academic tutorial and enrichment programme for 2015/16 to improve the range of external visits and input from higher-education providers and employers. As a result of the recent re-structure, the college's careers adviser is reviewing the work-experience strategy and plans.

Significant improvement for learners

Improvement in governance and quality assurance

Two governors have resigned and suitably qualified replacements have been appointed. Records of meetings show that governors give close attention to key performance indicators associated with student outcomes. Four governors have attended training courses specifically designed for college governors, which has enabled them to understand better their role in both supporting and challenging college managers and providing strategic direction. Further training is planned, including training related to the quality of teaching. Some link governors have had meetings with subject leaders, teachers and students of their linked curriculum areas

to develop a better understanding of the college's work. An outstanding sixth-form college has agreed to support governor development through a governor shadowing programme for the chair of governors and committee chairs. Records of meetings show governors' determination to establish the college as a base of academic excellence. A recent governor development day resulted in productive discussions about the strategic plan, which is about to be finalised. This includes key priorities and objectives related to student outcomes and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Arrangements for the appraisal of the chair of governors and the Principal have been organised.

Senior managers have continued to strengthen quality assurance arrangements. They have also continued efforts to link improvement plans ever more explicitly with performance management processes for managers and staff. Recent re-structuring at middle-management level is beginning to have an impact. Six performance managers and seven curriculum developers are now in post working with subject teams, strengthening accountability and providing more support to improve teaching. Teacher performance management records include clear targets mainly related to student outcomes such as attendance, success rates, high grades, value added and quality of teaching. Where appropriate, targets set make reference to specific aspects of teaching such as questioning techniques. Records of performance-management discussions include clear evidence of weaker aspects of performance being discussed and addressed through targets, as well as commendation for stronger aspects. Where teachers' self-evaluations feature in performance-management records, the examples seen often show a reflective approach and ready acknowledgement of the need for improvement, with ideas to implement.

Significant improvement for learners

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