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Dr Lindsey Whiterod OBE
Principal
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Dear Dr Whiterod

Short inspection of South Tyneside College

Following the short inspection on 15–16 December 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in October 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

You and your leadership team have maintained the good quality of education and training in the college since the previous inspection. You, your senior team and governors are clear about the strengths of the college and the remaining areas for improvement. Clear plans are in place to support further improvement in the large majority of instances. Governors receive regular updates regarding headline curriculum performance indicators such as retention, attendance and progress. Consequently, governors are well informed regarding the performance of the college.

You, together with your governors and leadership team, have a clear strategy for the college's key role in meeting local skills needs. You have established effective links with employers, local authorities and local enterprise partnerships. A partnership with employers and a local secondary school has enabled you to develop a career college specialising in engineering, advanced manufacturing and computer science for 14–19-year-olds. Through this you are providing a new route for young people seeking careers in these fields. Your effective employer links have also enabled the college to develop traineeships for young people. Your specialist provision offered at the South Shields Marine School includes cadetship training for those wishing to pursue a career in the merchant navy, as well as a new pre-cadetship course for those needing additional preparation before embarking on a cadetship. In addition, the main college offers a wide range of vocational courses.

Leaders and managers have successfully tackled weaknesses identified at the previous inspection and improvements are evident. Outcomes for learners have improved. Destinations are positive for a large majority of learners. Managers have adapted the curriculum offered in science and mathematics to better meet learners' abilities and aspirations, and teaching and learning in this area have improved. Across the college teaching and learning continue to be good as a result of effective management strategies, including a range of staff development initiatives and performance management. Teachers' and learners' use of information and learning technology (ILT) has improved and this is helping learners to learn more effectively and make good progress. Teachers identified as being very good practitioners are taking a lead in sharing good practice, and teaching is improving as a result.

Self-assessment is inclusive, based on sound evidence and having a positive effect on supporting improvements, particularly in weaker subject areas. Managers are held accountable. Managers' improvement planning, tracking and monitoring of progress on underperforming courses are effective. A good focus on 'three key things to improve' is sharpening the attention and priorities of the curriculum teams involved and having a positive effect on in-year outcomes.

Leaders have successfully implemented all key aspects of study programmes for 16–19-year-olds. Learners undertake a comprehensive initial assessment which clearly identifies their starting points and enables staff to place them onto appropriate levels of study. Teachers develop learners' employability skills, such as working together in teams, very well. Learners are enrolled on suitable English and mathematics qualifications depending on their attainment on entry, including GCSEs for those who already possess a GCSE grade D.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding arrangements are highly effective and include specific appropriate arrangements for 14–16-year-old pupils. Pupils feel safe and are encouraged to raise any concerns with tutors or other staff. Policies are clear, thorough and robust, and are well understood by staff as a result of comprehensive training, including regular refresher courses. Strong links with relevant local agencies help to ensure that any issues are followed up assiduously.

You and your senior team have effectively implemented the requirements of the 'Prevent' duty. All staff have received training that has improved their awareness and confidence in discussing issues around radicalisation and extremism with learners. British values are promoted effectively through tutorials, the curriculum and displays.

Inspection findings

- Outcomes for classroom-based courses have improved since the previous inspection. Overall apprenticeship success rates are above average. Success rates within the planned timescale for the minority of younger apprentices are low. Although above comparable national figures, too few learners gain grades A* to C for GCSE English and mathematics. Value-added data show that progress for learners on a few level 3 courses is slower than expected.
- Managers have effective strategies in place to improve teaching, learning and assessment. A well-established team of improvement practitioners works closely with new teachers in order to coach, mentor and develop good teaching practice. Robust, time-bound and effective action plans following lesson observations are in place to address poor practice. Performance management practices are closely aligned to the college's lesson observation procedures, and result in improvements to teaching and learning.
- Managers' curriculum improvement reviews focus on risk assessments using attendance data, feedback from learners and observations. Senior leaders and curriculum managers use the information to plan improvements in teaching, learning and assessment in curriculum areas. Cross-college themes are also drawn from these reviews to inform whole-college professional development events. However value-added data are not included in risk assessment activities, which limits opportunities to identify areas where learners' progress needs to be accelerated. Managers are aware of this and are planning refinements.
- Teachers identified as outstanding practitioners through the lesson observation process share good practice and contribute to the whole-college development days, particularly those which focus on integrating English and mathematics into vocational learning.
- The tutorial programme concentrates on effective pastoral care and covers aspects of safeguarding well. In tutorial sessions, tutors do not focus sufficiently on learners' progress towards achieving their targets in their main learning programme. As a result, a few learners are unclear of their progress towards achieving their target grades.
- Teachers make effective use of a range of teaching, learning and assessment strategies to promote collaborative learning, and this is complemented by effective use of ILT to reinforce and enhance learning. Teachers plan lessons well so that they meet the needs of learners effectively, engage them in their learning and help them break down their barriers to learning. However, they do not use individualised targets sufficiently to challenge and accelerate progress from the learners' starting points.
- Work experience is well planned. For example in childcare, learners use their placement experiences to relate theory to practice. Teachers use practical examples which make learning more relevant to learners.

- Leaders have given a high strategic priority to the importance of English and mathematics to ensure that learners improve these skills. Much professional development has taken place for vocational and support staff. Themed weeks are planned with a specific focus on the integration of English and mathematics into other subject areas across the college.
- Teachers increasingly use their vocational experience and expertise to plan appropriate work-related activities that skilfully develop learners' English and mathematics skills. For example, on a hairdressing course, the learners calculated their bonus from a session with external clients. In addition to taught lessons, comprehensive support arrangements are in place for learners to improve their English and mathematics, especially for those deemed to be at risk.
- Managers scrutinise schemes of work to check that opportunities to develop English and mathematics skills are not missed. Managers have issued guidance on the marking of written work, and particularly spelling, grammar and punctuation errors, but not all teachers use it effectively to help learners improve the standard of their written work.
- Following identification of attendance as an area for improvement in 2013/14, the college has put in place a range of strategies to monitor and follow up absence more stringently. The indications to date are that attendance is improving this year.
- A new progress tracking system has been piloted in selected areas of the college incorporating a range of measures, including attendance. This is helping to improve progress tracking in these areas but it does not as yet, provide an overview for managers at whole-course or higher level.
- Middle managers understand the strengths and weaknesses of their provision. Self-assessment at curriculum level is usually supported by sound evidence that clearly supports the key judgements made. In a minority of instances, self-assessment lacks critical evaluation and detailed explanation to underpin key strengths and weaknesses.
- Leaders have made significant improvements to the management and quality assurance of subcontractors' work. A risk-based approach and broader evidence base on which to judge the effectiveness of this provision is now in place, although it is too early to judge the potential impact on end-of-year outcomes.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they raise outcomes for the small minority of classroom-based courses where success rates are below average, and better manage progress reviews for younger apprentices so that success rates within the planned timescale improve
- learners' progress on level 3 vocational courses is accelerated where value-added data show that it is slower than expected

- the college systems and processes for setting individual targets and monitoring learners' progress are improved so that a consistent approach is implemented by all managers, teachers and learners
- the proportion of learners gaining grades A* to C in GCSE English and mathematics increases
- self-assessment and improvement planning are refined to ensure that evidence for judgements is more explicit and specific
- quality improvement plans focus clearly on all identified weaknesses and include measurable improvement targets so that progress can be monitored more effectively.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ruth James
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, the team was assisted by the Principal of the professional and vocational college as nominee. We held meetings with you, your senior leaders, governors, managers, teaching staff and learners. We visited two sites to observe teaching, learning and assessment, and to look at learners' work. We also visited a partner high school involved in delivering aspects of the curriculum to career college learners. We reviewed key documents including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We considered the views of learners by reviewing the comments received on Ofsted's online questionnaires, from your own learner surveys and by seeking the views of learners during on-site inspection activity.