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Mr Phil Davies
Principal
City College Plymouth
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Dear Mr Davies

Short inspection of City College Plymouth

Following the short inspection on 8 and 9 March 2016, 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.

Learners continue to receive good education and training. They make good progress on most courses and the very large majority complete their main vocational qualifications successfully. The gap between disadvantaged learners and others narrowed significantly in 2014/15. Apprentices make very good progress, with a higher proportion than the national average completing their programmes successfully.

Learners achieve well on functional skills courses in English and mathematics and significantly more learners following GCSE English courses achieve high grades than the national average. Despite robust action by managers to bring about improvement and good teaching, learners do not attend GCSE mathematics lessons regularly and only a third achieve high grades.

Leaders scrutinise the performance of the college carefully. Quality assurance procedures are robust, resulting in a detailed self-assessment which accurately identifies the strengths and areas for improvement of the college. Action plans for improvement are well considered and implemented effectively by leaders and managers.

Leaders have developed extensive links and partnerships with employers and employer organisations. They use these well to develop a curriculum that reflects the employment priorities of the city. Learners develop the skills and attitudes required by employers and their behaviour at college is consistently good.

Learners are provided with good advice and guidance by staff prior to enrolment and during their time at college. Teachers use initial assessments of learners' needs to provide timely additional support when required and to set goals and targets for individual learners. Staff provide apprentices with particularly good advice and guidance and match them well to training opportunities offered by employers.

Leaders have tackled areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection well and have made good progress in implementing study programmes for 16–18-year-olds. Leaders are careful to ensure that learners are safe and feel safe. They promote learners' understanding of British values well, along with developing their understanding of the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

Governors use their experience and expertise well to steer the college. They provide very effective support and challenge to senior leaders and focus firmly on improving outcomes for learners and ensuring that the college plays a full and prominent role in the economic development of the city. Governors are investing well in improving resources and accommodation that benefit learners. They are embarking on a major building programme which will improve resources in a number of key areas, including science, technology and mathematics at the time of the inspection.

Safeguarding is effective.

Learners state that they feel safe at the college. Managers act promptly when learners express any concerns about their safety and put appropriate measures in place. Leaders ensure that arrangements for safeguarding, including suitable pre-employment checks on staff and staff training, are effective. The safeguarding team works closely with college support services and external organisations to protect and support vulnerable learners. Leaders play an active role in partnership with other agencies across the city to protect learners from the risks of sexual exploitation and the dangers of radicalisation and extremism. Through participating in effective tutorials, learners are aware of British values and how to use the internet and social media safely. Governors monitor the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements carefully.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have placed a strong emphasis on developing learners' English and mathematics, and management responsibilities and accountabilities for both subjects are clear. Learners are enrolled on courses at the appropriate level based on their prior achievements and results of assessments carried out when they join the college. Teachers use initial assessment information effectively to plan lessons, often linking English and mathematics to learners' vocational interests; they support learners well to develop their skills in these subjects. Teachers of vocational subjects integrate English and mathematics into lessons well and correct spelling and grammatical errors in learners' work. The number of learners aged 16–18 achieving GCSE A*–C grades in English has improved and is well above the national average. Although the number of learners achieving qualifications in mathematics has improved, too many do not attend lessons regularly, and the proportion achieving high GCSE grades is in line with the low rate nationally.
- Leaders and managers have strengthened the arrangements for monitoring and improving the quality of teaching and learning successfully. They use experienced external consultants well to validate their judgements and to target improvements promptly when they identify learners' progress to be of concern. Teaching and learning coaches work closely with new teachers and those identified as requiring support. Leaders use peer observations and individual mentoring well to help teachers improve their practice. Teaching in the very large majority of lessons is consequently effective, resulting in good outcomes for learners and good development of the skills and attitudes they require for employment.
- Since the previous inspection, managers have developed the use of electronic individual learning plans well. Teachers use initial assessments effectively to inform these plans and to record learners' starting points in English and mathematics clearly, together with learners' knowledge and skills in their vocational study areas. Learners have a good understanding of their potential, what teachers expect of them through the targets they set in their plans, and what they need to do to improve their work.
- Managers have been successful in establishing an effective approach to tracking learners' progress based on the best practice within the college. The majority of learners benefit from prompt and appropriate support and interventions when they need them. In a small minority of cases, the tracking of learners' progress is not used to best effect. A minority of tutors do not hold individual meetings with learners at risk of not achieving their potential early enough and do not encourage learners sufficiently to assess their own progress and clarify the actions they should take prior to meetings with their tutors.

- Leaders, managers and teachers have embraced the principles of study programmes well and are determined to ensure that young people are fully prepared for employment. Leaders have set high expectations for all 16–18-year-olds to gain external work experience and they provide this for the vast majority of learners. Learners benefit from work placements designed to support their individual aspirations and career goals as well as from the college’s highly professional work environments. All learners complete a log to help them reflect on their experiences but these are not used consistently across the college to ensure that all learners gain maximum benefit from their placements.
- Since the previous inspection, learners’ success rates have declined for health and social care. Leaders have reviewed the provision carefully and are implementing a robust action plan to bring about improvement. They have carefully analysed the support needed by learners, particularly those on intermediate-level courses, and have redesigned the curriculum in response. Learners now undertake a more varied range of enterprise activities and work-related visits, which have improved significantly their confidence, attendance and commitment to learning.
- Governors are well informed about the strengths of the college and areas requiring improvement. They maintain a clear overview of developments through detailed performance reports. Since the previous inspection, the college has recruited new governors with significant experience of education, and the corporation has established a performance and standards committee to scrutinise learners’ outcomes and the quality of teaching and learning. The committee is focusing well on key areas for improvement and receives regular monitoring reports. Members of the committee challenge senior managers well and hold them accountable for bringing about improvements.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all teachers maintain the college’s rigorous follow-up procedures to ensure that learners improve their attendance in mathematics lessons
- teachers and tutors help all 16–18-year-old learners to reflect on their work experience to ensure that they gain maximum benefit from placements
- tutors hold individual meetings for learners at risk of underachieving early enough to set high expectations for the year.

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

Kenneth Jones
Her Majesty’s Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Ofsted Inspectors were assisted by the college's deputy principal as nominee. We met with you, governors, members of your leadership team, managers, teachers and learners. We carried out observations of lessons. We scrutinised key strategic and policy documents, including those relating to quality assurance, safeguarding and the college's performance. We analysed data on learners' achievements and learners' progress relative to their starting points. We also analysed feedback from learners and employers, gathered during the inspection and from Ofsted's online questionnaires.