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Dr Nikos Savvas
Principal
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Dear Dr Savvas

Short inspection of West Suffolk College

Following the short inspection on 10–11 May 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 July 2010.

This provider continues to be good.

Governors, senior leaders and managers have maintained the good quality of education and training in the college since the previous inspection. You and your team have strengthened the focus on sustaining the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the large majority of learners are at least making the progress expected of them. Lesson observations carried out by your team of observers mostly identify strengths and areas for improvement across all aspects of your provision accurately. Your self-assessment processes are timely and robust. Well-timed interventions ensure that underperforming courses continue to improve.

Along with governors and senior leaders, you have set a clear strategic direction. You work extremely closely and particularly well with the local enterprise partnership (LEP) and employers to ensure that provision is responsive to local and regional priorities and demands. As a result, a considerably high proportion of your learners progress to further study, higher education, apprenticeships or employment. Governors provide detailed and critical challenge and support to you and your senior leadership team in their drive to improve the quality of teaching and learning and the performance of the college. They question and review information they receive carefully, comparing outcomes with targets. As a result, they are very well informed about any areas that require improvement and they contribute well to the improvement processes implemented.

You have implemented the 16 to 19 study programmes very effectively. Progression routes are in place at all levels and you provide a wide range of academic and/or vocational programmes that prepare learners well for their next step into employment or further learning. You have a strong and appropriate focus on improving English and mathematical skills, with many more learners studying these subjects than previously.

Learners on 16 to 19 study programmes gain and develop their practical vocational skills well through relevant work experience and work-related learning tasks. Your links to many high-profile employers benefit learners greatly in their appreciation of good employability skills.

Governors, senior leaders and managers have identified correctly that improvement is required in the quality of your mathematics provision and in a very few other curriculum areas. Learners' progress in these subjects requires further improvement. You have appropriate strategies in place to address these concerns, for example in business studies.

In order to raise the success rates of GCSE mathematics, you have strengthened the monitoring of learners by managers and stabilised the teaching team to ensure consistency. Early indications are that the interventions have started to improve the provision.

At the previous inspection, actions to bring about improvement identified by inspectors included: improve success rates in line with the increasing retention rates; improve initial assessment; share the good practice identified in teaching, learning and assessment; and improve the accuracy of the college's self-assessment process. Your leadership team has taken decisive action to improve these areas and you have made clear progress to the benefit of learners.

Your relationships with employers and your employment provision have grown and strengthened. You now have very good relationships with employers and the proportion of apprentices completing their qualifications is improving significantly. Links with employers and the LEP are now extremely strong; these links support the work experience element of 16 to 19 study programmes successfully, where most learners access good-quality and relevant work placements.

Safeguarding is effective.

The governing body and leadership team have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are effective and fit for purpose. Highly effective action is taken by all staff to ensure that learners are safe. Governors, senior leaders, managers and staff are aware of their responsibilities and have undertaken appropriate training and steps to protect learners from radicalisation and extremism. They encourage a strong culture of respect and fairness which is shared by learners. Learners behave extremely well at college and respect each other and their teachers. Managers and staff at the college work highly effectively with a range of local agencies to ensure

that all learners, and particularly those who are most vulnerable, are safe. They work very well with external agencies to identify young people at risk, particularly those with high needs.

Inspection findings

- Teaching, learning and assessment are consistently good, resulting in an increasing proportion of learners achieving their qualifications and progressing either to employment or further study. Teachers mostly plan and structure a good range of learning activities to ensure that all learners participate well in lessons. They gain good practical and work-related skills, valued by employers, and develop their knowledge and skills effectively.
- Managers review the quality of teaching, learning and assessment often and the self-assessment report for this key judgement is mostly accurate, although it overstates a minority of the strengths.
- Managers have strengthened the evaluation of teaching recently with the introduction of more targeted and shorter observations covering a wider range of lessons, complemented by curriculum audits, to give a more comprehensive view of the standard of teaching and learning across the college. Managers rightly recognise the need to further streamline arrangements, in order to increase their effectiveness and ensure that leaders and managers prioritise cross-college training needs more swiftly.
- Staff have access to a good range of staff development. Teaching and learning coaches provide effective individual support to those who need to develop their teaching and to aid in the sharing of best practice.
- The performance management of staff is effective overall. Senior leaders meet frequently to scrutinise provision and identify further actions for improvement throughout the year. Where managers identify persistent underperformance, formal capability processes are initiated as appropriate. Leaders have recognised the need to review the process further from September 2016 to ensure that all objectives are focused sharply and reviewed comprehensively so managers can hold staff clearly to account.
- Learners work well in most practical sessions and in many they work collaboratively to good effect. In a few lessons, however, teachers do not give sufficient consideration to practical considerations to support learning, such as room layout. In a small minority of sessions, they set work for learners that is too easy and, as a result, this hinders the progress learners make in the time allocated.
- Most learners and apprentices are making at least the progress expected of them and, in a minority of cases, better than expected progress. Teachers monitor and check learning and progress regularly and routinely in the large majority of lessons. However, the correction of spelling and grammar on learners' marked work requires further development.
- Learners on GCSE mathematics courses in 2014/15 did not make the progress expected of them and many failed to achieve grades A* to C. Leaders did not ensure consistency in the delivery of GCSE mathematics

effectively. However, following actions taken by managers, current learners now benefit from improved and stable teaching, learning and assessment, and a majority are now on target to achieve.

- Learners benefit from highly skilled teachers and gain good work-related skills at an appropriate level. For example, learners in construction produce work to a very high standard, working as a team to complete their assessment outcomes while performing arts learners undertake comprehensive peer assessment to ensure that their performances are of a professional standard.
- Learners' rates of progression after their courses to further study, higher education, apprenticeships or employment are high. An increasing proportion of learners are making the transition into apprenticeships.
- Learners take part in a good range of activities, sports, educational visits and work experience. Almost all learners take part in relevant external work experience, often at high-profile employers. Learners benefit from very good ongoing advice and guidance to help them make the correct choices regarding their next steps.
- The apprenticeship provision at the college and at subcontractors is managed well. The vast majority of apprentices make at least the progress expected of them and a large majority complete their qualifications and gain sustainable employment or promotion in their workplace. Apprentices benefit from very good training and assessment. Those apprentices able to work at a higher level are targeted to enhance their English and mathematical skills further. However, the setting of short- and long-term targets for the majority of apprentices and trainees requires further development.
- Governors, senior leaders and managers have developed an effective strategy and employer relationships to meet the LEP's priority to increase the numbers of learners on science, technology and engineering programmes. The relationship between college senior leaders, managers and the LEP is highly effective.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the arrangements for observing teaching, learning and assessment are strengthened so that observers can define precisely the priorities for improvement which will further enable teachers to improve their practice; in addition, managers should use the combination of this information, along with progress data, to define the strengths and weaknesses for self-assessment purposes more sharply
- the planned review of performance management is carried out as soon as possible to ensure that all staff are set precise, measurable targets that enable them to be held to account, especially where performance falls below the expected standard

- all staff have high expectations for their learners and encourage them to make the progress of which they are capable and so reach their potential
- they increase the proportion of learners achieving their GCSE mathematics qualification at A* to C grades
- teachers, assessors and learners set and record meaningful short- and long-term targets, which are individual to learners and apprentices, so that they know what to do to improve more precisely and teachers and managers can monitor progress more effectively.

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

Yours sincerely

Stephen Hunsley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we were assisted by the vice-principal, curriculum and quality, as nominee. We met you, your senior leaders, middle managers and governors, including the chair of the governing body. We visited lessons and apprentices with members of your management and lesson observation teams to observe teaching, learning and assessment and to look at learners' work. We spoke to learners and apprentices. We held meetings with learners and staff, spoke to employers and reviewed key documents including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We considered the views of learners and employers by reviewing the comments received on Ofsted's online questionnaires and by seeking the views of learners and employers during the on-site inspection activity.