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Dr Philip Harland
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Dear Dr Harland

Short inspection of Varndean College

Following my visit to the college on 20 and 21 September 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 September 2013.

This provider continues to be good.

Since your previous inspection, you have worked successfully with governors, leaders and managers to make sure that the college continues to provide a good educational experience for young people. Staff at all levels promote a culture of high expectation, which instils in students a strong work ethic and a good level of confidence in their abilities. Students and teachers work together well, often exploring topics beyond curriculum requirements. Almost all students who seek places in universities or with other providers of higher education are successful.

During the past two years you have reduced the number of senior leadership roles, and successfully established a new curriculum management structure. The small team of heads of school and assistant heads of school provides effective management of subject clusters. The relatively small subject clusters allow managers to know the quality of provision well, and understand fully how well students are progressing. The deputy principal provides good leadership to heads of school and works effectively with you as senior leader.

Governors visit the college frequently, and have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of provision, together with a clear understanding of the college's strategic position and direction following area-based review. Together with governors and managers, you have put in place a coherent strategic plan that prioritises improvement, takes good account of government policy, seeks to maintain the college's place as an inclusive provider, and takes appropriate account of the financial challenges facing the sixth-form college sector.

Students enjoy being at the college and value very highly the inclusive, tranquil atmosphere that pervades. The large majority of students make good or better progress, achieve their main qualifications and move successfully on to higher-level courses, to university or into employment. Students studying at level 3 benefit from a broad curriculum choice that allows a good range of combinations of academic and vocational courses, in addition to the large and highly successful International Baccalaureate programme. At level 2, the large majority of students successfully boost their GCSE scores and receive good preparation for transition to level 3 courses.

Teachers, managers and staff across the college have worked successfully to introduce meaningful study programmes for students aged 16 to 18. Students benefit from a very wide range of enrichment activities, many of which are employment-focused, though only a small minority benefit from real work experience placements. You acknowledge that students, even those on academic programmes aiming for places at university, would enhance their employability, confidence and preparedness for adult life if a wider range of work experience placements were available. Managers have put in place a comprehensive core studies programme that deals with a good range of challenging topics relevant to young people. In core studies sessions, students enjoy discussing the principles and practicalities, as well as the moral dimensions, of the 'Prevent' duty and the values that underpin college and British society.

Governors, senior leaders and managers know the provision well, and are realistic in acknowledging that while Varndean College remains a good and steadily improving college, further work is required to transform it into an outstanding college. You have made good progress in tackling the recommendations contained in your previous inspection report of 2013, and you have maintained strengths in provision. However, the relatively lower progress from starting points made by students on vocational programmes continues to slow your journey towards being an outstanding college. Vocational courses make up a small proportion of the college's provision, but you, your governors and managers are clear that such courses are important in providing a rich and inclusive curriculum offer in the city. You are actively engaging with other colleges and providers to seek examples of good practice in raising the progress made by students on vocational programmes.

Teaching, learning and assessment are of a consistently high standard, and students enjoy the vibrant and challenging lessons they attend. While inspectors were at the college, punctuality and attendance were good. Teachers and students work hard to make sure that lessons and tutorials are productive and stimulating.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have put in place safeguarding arrangements that successfully promote students' safety, health and well-being. Senior leaders, managers and teachers work effectively to make sure that students consider their own safety and well-being alongside those of the greater college community, so that tolerance, inclusivity and awareness of personal needs are well balanced.

Around the college, students benefit from a good range of eye-catching displays that deal with physical and psychological well-being and provide clear information about specialist support and external agencies who can provide further advice. However, in public areas of the college there are relatively few posters or visual displays providing information about British values, though there are posters and displays focusing on college values, which mirror fundamental British values. Students understand the risks associated with careless use of the internet and social media, and the dangers of radicalisation from those supporting extremist ideologies. Senior staff maintain a good range of links to specialist bodies, and have strong links with the local authority 'Prevent' coordinator. Across the past two years, a number of successful interventions and referrals have been made where staff have identified students at risk of radicalisation. All staff and governors complete face-to-face initial training, and online refresher training in a good range of safeguarding topics.

Inspection findings

- In response to a recommendation at the previous inspection, college leaders and managers have made good progress in ensuring that students' learning targets are explicit, easy to understand and that they help to raise aspirations. The vast majority of students are fully aware of their targets and feel these provide good, achievable levels of stretch and challenge. Second-year students were able to provide inspectors with numerous clear examples of ways that targets had given encouragement and helped them to raise their performance during their first year at the college. The student intranet, 'STS', provides clear sight of targets when students log in, so that they are reminded of these daily. In core studies sessions and in subject lessons, teachers and students make frequent references to targets and discuss their strategies for achieving them. New first-year students would appreciate, and would benefit from, an earlier explanation of how teachers and managers derive initial target grades from GCSE scores, and of the ways that they amend targets to reflect real progress on courses during the year.
- Teachers in the large majority of lessons employed a good range of challenging and supportive questioning techniques that tested understanding well and developed students' confidence. Managers have helped staff to develop their skills in managing aspects of questioning in classes, though the last all-staff training event was three years ago. A number of subject teams are currently involved in project work to explore effective questioning practices, but managers need to share the work of these project groups more widely to achieve maximum benefit.
- The progress that students make from their starting points continues to be good overall, and better than in the majority of similar colleges. However, progress from starting points on academic courses remains better than on vocational programmes despite good achievement on vocational programmes. Leaders and managers should press ahead with work to investigate and replicate best practice in securing high levels of progress from starting points on vocational programmes so that students' progress is good or better across all their courses. Managers and teachers have worked successfully to ensure that the progress made from

starting points by students on A-level and AS-level courses remains outstanding under ALPS (Advanced Level Performance System) criteria, and on the International Baccalaureate (IB) course, progress is also outstanding. In 2015/16, just over 80% of A-level students achieved a grade equal to or higher than their forecast ALPS target grade. Scores for the college's large cohort of IB students are exceptionally high, with an average score of 36.2, which is six points ahead of the international average. One student achieved the maximum score IB of 45 points in 2015/16, only matched by around 150 candidates worldwide.

- Teachers and managers continue to support students to enjoy relatively high achievement rates on GCSE English and mathematics courses. During 2014/15, achievement rates for GCSE English were around 73% at grades A* to C, compared to a national rate of around 27%. In mathematics, achievement rates were around 45% at A* to C, around 20 percentage points above the very low national rate. Students of English and mathematics talked enthusiastically to inspectors about the value of teachers who taught the subjects at higher levels and who had high expectations of them.
- Leaders and managers have improved self-assessment processes at subject, curriculum cluster, and at whole-college levels. In response to recommendations at the previous inspection, you have improved the use of students' performance data to inform self-assessment. The current self-assessment report is realistic and firmly based on analysis of outcomes and other data. Managers base identified strengths on sound evidence and discuss these rationally. When dealing with identified weaknesses, however, managers tend to provide summary statements and spend insufficient time reflecting on causation. Current plans to grade provision types and key judgement areas at subject level look to provide a helpful process of reflection and evaluation for teachers and curriculum managers.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all students on level 3 vocational programmes make good or better progress from their starting points and at least achieve their expected target grades on these qualifications
- all students new to the college have an earlier and clearer understanding of the processes that create their initial target grades and the ways they can work to raise the target grades during the early weeks of the term
- staff are supported to share good practice from existing curriculum improvement projects and are supported to further share best practice among teacher teams.

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

Dr Richard Beynon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors, plus two Ofsted inspectors visited the college for two days. The deputy principal, as nominee, assisted inspectors. We met with you, as the head of college, with curriculum heads and deputy heads, the chair and another member of the governing body, and with a range of teachers and students. Inspectors observed teaching, learning and assessment, and reviewed students' written work. We reviewed key college policies and documents, including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We also considered the views of students.