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Mr Danny Pearson
Principal
Aquinas College
Nangreave Road
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Dear Mr Pearson

Short inspection of Aquinas College

Following the short inspection on 10–11 January 2017, 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.

You have ensured that learners continue to receive good-quality education. You provide excellent care, support and guidance which learners value. This contributes towards the good progress made by most learners.

You, the governors and college staff promote an inclusive and welcoming environment. A strong ethos of mutual respect is evident across the college in lessons and in communal areas. Behaviour is very good in lessons.

Teaching, learning and assessment are of a good standard across most programmes of study. Most learners make good progress in lessons and are developing the necessary academic and technical skills and knowledge they need for further study or employment.

You, the governors, senior leaders and managers rigorously monitor the impact of your actions to rectify the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. This has led to many positive improvements to learners' experience and achievements.

You have improved achievement rates for most learners, which are now high and with very few differences between subjects. The number of young people who achieve A*–C grades in their GCSE English and mathematics is higher than that of similar providers. Most learners on level 3 programmes achieve at the expected level or better. However, in a small number of subjects, learners do not achieve their potential based on their starting points.

Teachers and support staff know their learners well and are quick to respond if they identify any learners at risk of not being successful on their course. As a result, the large majority of learners complete their course and are prepared well for their next step into further study or employment.

You, the governors and senior leaders have ensured that the requirements of study programmes have been implemented effectively. Young people achieve well on these programmes and most progress to higher education, further study or employment. The large majority of learners progress to the second year of their programme or to an apprenticeship programme.

Members of the board know the college well and hold senior leaders to account. As a result, there has been steady improvement in the quality of provision in the vast majority of subject areas, for example in English language, film studies, French, health and social care, and history.

Senior leaders have been too slow to ensure that clear targets are set to ensure that teachers are held to account for the outcomes of their learners. Outcomes remain too low in subjects such as mathematics, archaeology and economics.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have maintained the effective safeguarding arrangements identified in the previous inspection and have revised them in respect of the 'Prevent' duty. This ensures that learners are safe and feel safe. You, your managers and staff continue to prioritise safeguarding. Designated safeguarding officers have received regular training, including in the 'Prevent' duty.

Managers carry out appropriate checks when recruiting staff. Through mandatory training, staff know how to ensure and maintain safe working practices and are very clear about how to report any concerns about learners' safety. The number of learners disclosing personal safeguarding concerns has increased and staff resolve these well through effective partnerships with external agencies such as the local safeguarding board.

Learners have a good understanding of potential risks, including those posed by radicalisation and extremism, and know how to keep themselves safe, including online.

Inspection findings

- Experienced governors are determined to sustain the distinctive ethos and culture of the college reflected in the statement on your college website: 'aspire not to have more, but to be more'. Governors are proud to be associated with the college and the role it plays in the community. They scrutinise and monitor the work of senior leaders and managers effectively.

- Self-assessment is rigorous. Managers analyse and use data well to understand where there is poor performance. As a result, they accurately identify areas for improvement. The few weaker areas seen during this short inspection were accurately identified in the college's most recent self-assessment report. However, governors' recent self-assessment has recognised that they have been slow to challenge the persistent poor performance in a minority of subjects.
- Leaders and managers have improved the quality of study programmes since the previous inspection. Managers have taken appropriate action to improve the quality of the provision and have monitored closely the impact of their actions. As a result, achievement rates in most courses improved in 2015/16.
- Senior leaders forge positive relationships with local schools to help school leavers move on to an appropriate course. Effective partnerships with universities provide support for learners to progress to university from full-time study in the college.
- Leaders and managers ensure that there are rigorous and effective safeguarding procedures in place. The principal personally reviews the progress of all learners considered to be at risk on a weekly basis. This helps to ensure that learners are well supported, safe and are able to stay on their course and succeed. While visiting speakers are thoroughly risk assessed and supervised during their visit, the content of their presentations is not checked before they attend.
- Managers do not always receive timely information from schools, with sufficient detail, about learners who need additional support. This means that managers are unable to put the necessary support in place from the outset.
- Managers do not always set specific enough targets for individual teachers to ensure that they improve their practice and the outcomes that learners achieve.
- In some cases, managers do not set specific enough targets in the annual appraisals of teachers to ensure that the proportion of learners who achieve an aspirational target increases on those courses where it is low.
- Learners benefit from high-quality information, advice and guidance before and during their programme. High-quality enrichment, work experience and work-related projects support learners' progression to further study or employment. For example, learners in media studies are able to produce a professional television advertisement. Many students take part in voluntary or community work locally and overseas, which is of benefit to disadvantaged people in different parts of the world.
- Teachers routinely set and review learners' targets. Learners talk confidently about their personal targets and the progress they are making towards achieving them. Most teachers provide encouragement to learners to strive for higher grades in their assignment work. Learners routinely reflect on targets using a 'thermometer' that identifies which band the grade they achieve is in and what they need to do to improve. This motivates learners to aspire to achieve a higher grade.

- Learners are provided with plenty of opportunities to develop their skills in English and mathematics. Learners make good use of correct technical language and develop their language skills through discussion and presenting information. Learners are able to use mathematical formulas well. For example, in chemistry lessons, learners calculated the amount of energy each fuel produces, and in media lessons, learners accurately calculated the production costs of an advertisement.
- Most learners produce a good standard of work and they receive helpful guidance from teachers to help them to improve. For example, learners in performing arts were able to plan and choreograph dance routines. Media learners worked collaboratively to develop an animation project. In art and design, learners worked with a range of techniques to develop their sketchbook ideas, such as wax encapsulation, graphite texturisation and life drawing.
- Teaching equips learners with the skills they need to succeed in their examinations. Teachers provide detailed feedback on written work so that learners understand what they need to do to improve.
- Teachers and support staff monitor the attendance and progress of learners very well through an electronic recording system and by regular review meetings with subject tutors. Consequently, the attendance and progress of most learners are good. Where learners are not making good progress, senior tutors put effective plans in place to support them.
- A small number of learners make slow progress from their starting points on level 3 academic programmes because teachers do not place sufficient demands on the most able learners. The work is too easy in a small minority of lessons, and is often at the level of the least able learners.
- In a small number of lessons, teachers set too low expectations for learners. For example, too many learners wear outdoor clothing in lessons and bags and coats are left on the floor in classrooms, presenting trip hazards. Staff do not routinely challenge learners who eat food while sitting in corridors.
- Resources and classrooms are generally of a good standard. There are high-quality specialist facilities for science, media, performing arts and dance courses. Some classrooms are too small for the number of learners present and this hinders the learning that takes place, particularly in group activities.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers provide teaching, learning and assessment which ensure that learners, including the most able, develop and extend their skills and knowledge to make the progress of which they are capable
- governors provide effective scrutiny and challenge to senior leaders so that courses which have persistently poor performance improve more rapidly

- all teachers are set specific and challenging targets in their appraisals to make them accountable for improving the progress that their learners make
- the content of visiting speakers' presentations are checked for suitability prior to their attendance at the college.

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

Andrea Machell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we were assisted by you and the director of standards, as nominee. We met with members of the leadership team, managers, teachers and learners. We observed sessions in the college. We reviewed learners' assessed work and electronic tracking systems. We obtained learners' views through an online survey and face-to-face interviews. We reviewed key strategic and policy documents including those related to strategic planning, lesson planning and assessment, quality assurance and performance monitoring and safeguarding.