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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Mark Kent
Principal
City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College
Leek Road
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST4 2RU

Dear Mr Kent

Short inspection of City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College

Following the short inspection on 17 and 18 October 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 April 2015.

This provider continues to be good.

Your leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the college since the previous inspection. You and your team understand what makes good-quality teaching and learning. You have maintained a strong focus on improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; as a result, most learners are making good or excellent progress. During the inspection, we agreed with the judgements that your managers made during joint observations of teaching, learning and assessment.

You, senior leaders and governors have set a clear strategic direction. Your college has recently converted to 16 to 19 academy status; it is now part of the Potteries Educational Trust (multi-academy trust). You and your managers work successfully with Staffordshire University to plan the curriculum, share science facilities and support students' progression to higher education. You all work closely with local schools by sharing staff, identifying ways to improve teaching, learning and assessment, and in developing the curriculum. As a result, together with your managers, you have developed the new foundation programme, which has a clear focus on academic progression built on improving GCSE performance and academic skills.

You and your team work effectively with the local authority, the Local Safeguarding Children Board and other agencies that support young people. Senior managers have a very detailed understanding of the particular local risks to young people. Your staff ensure that students feel safe, attend and achieve well. They are

successful in raising the aspirations of the students, a very high proportion of whom progress to further study, higher education, apprenticeships, and employment.

Governors support and challenge you well. They have a very clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement. You share with them a very detailed and accurate self-assessment report from which you and your team develop a well-constructed action plan. Governors and senior managers monitor this plan regularly and check on the impact of their actions. In the large majority of cases, management actions lead to improvements. Despite management actions, students on a small minority of the new linear A levels did not make the progress of which they are capable, given their starting points. In the first year of the foundation programme, as you have acknowledged, too many students in the first small cohort did not achieve the high grades needed to move onto the next academic level. However, your staff have tracked the destinations of all these students and shown that they have all progressed to further education, training, or employment.

The implementation of the study programmes is effective. Clear routes are in place, enabling students to progress between courses and levels, with a range of academic and vocational programmes. Good advice and guidance help students to choose appropriate courses, and to prepare them well for their next steps. You, managers and teachers help students to develop a wide range of skills. These include an appropriate focus on English and mathematics, and also effective development of independence, resilience, and team-working skills.

Your staff develop students' employability skills well through relevant work experience, work-related projects and competitions. The futures and foundation programmes support students particularly well in researching and preparing for particular careers. You and your team involve the students effectively in taking on job roles and projects within the life of the college. Students are now developing and leading their own enrichment activities. You and your managers are aware of the need to check that all students benefit from the wide range of opportunities, and that students or their tutors record their skill development in more detail.

At the previous inspection, inspectors recommended that governors and the senior leadership team should increase:

- the level of challenge in teaching, learning and assessment
- the level of scrutiny on the impact of actions taken by staff to improve outcomes for students
- the proportion of A-level students achieving high grades and participating in work experience.

The leadership team has taken action to improve these areas and has moved the college forward. The impact is clear:

- the level of challenge to students to progress, in line with their starting points, has increased; this is now evident in the large majority of teaching, learning and assessment

- increased scrutiny of the plans for improvement has resulted in increases in overall achievement rates, the proportion of high grades, the levels of attendance and progress to further study, apprenticeships and employment
- the proportion of A-level students achieving high grades has increased, as has value added for the last three years
- an increased number and proportion of A-level students participate in high-quality external work experience.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. They meet legal responsibilities and take effective action to keep students safe. Through working in partnership, senior staff have a very detailed knowledge of the particular challenges of the local area. Stoke-on-Trent is an asylum seeker dispersal area, and has been identified as an area of potential community conflict and tension. Staff take appropriate steps to protect students from radicalisation and extremism. Students' behaviour in lessons and in college communal areas is exemplary. They respect each other and college staff. Managers work effectively with a range of agencies to ensure that the most vulnerable students are identified and kept safe while at college. Particular and appropriate arrangements are in place for the small number of learners aged 14 to 16.

Inspection findings

- Teachers develop students' study skills well.
- Teachers develop students' independent learning skills. For example, in mathematics, teachers direct students to well-crafted online materials, and in economics teachers provide support through a clear and helpful learning booklet. All teachers set regular homework, which they assess promptly. Students use the study areas well to complete these tasks.
- Teachers enhance students' collaborative and team-working skills. For example, learners on the digital media course research a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to help them plan how they might market their new game designs. Students work on the task online and the teacher monitors the contributions of each student.
- Teachers improve students' reading, writing and speaking skills. For example, in sociology, English and religious studies, teachers require students to read extended and complex texts. In politics, sociology and psychology, teachers take students through the steps required to develop essays through sharing clear essay formats. As a result, learners develop effective writing skills and the confidence to produce essays of a high standard. In classics, students talk fluently from the perspective of the characters in the text.
- Teachers support students well to become more resilient. Following assessments, which are early in the course or under examination conditions, teachers provide additional support and clearly explain the areas for improvement. In dance, the teacher encourages the students to assess their peers to improve their

performance. This builds their resilience in readiness for work in the entertainment business.

- In the large majority of teaching, learning and assessment, teachers challenge students to extend their learning. Teachers provide challenge through the careful design of learning activities, the development of analytical and evaluative skills, the skilful use of questions and clearly written feedback on how to improve.
- In a small minority of teaching, learning and assessment, teachers provide the same learning activity at the same pace for all students. As a result, a small minority of students do not progress as quickly as they could.
- Managers and teachers develop students' employability skills well. Students experience a range of learning experiences that prepare them well for employment. Managers develop in-house work experience from which students benefit. For example, the college has its own film crew, and students work on live projects for the college's marketing department. An increasing number of A-level students are now undertaking a high-quality work experience placement, which supports their academic studies and career intentions well. However, managers do not systematically check that all students have a record of the skills that they have developed to help prepare them for their next steps.
- The proportion of students who achieve their qualifications is high. The large majority of students make at least the progress expected given their starting points. Students' attendance is high, and has improved.
- Managers have improved the high achievement rates in vocational programmes over the last three years; they are above national rates. A high proportion of students on vocational programmes achieve high grades and achieve or exceed their target grade.
- Managers have been successful in increasing the proportion of A* to C grades in English and mathematics; they are above national rates. However, achievement rates and high grades on the full GCSE programme, known as the foundation programme, are too low.
- Overall, A-level students achieve the expected grades given their starting points. Current students are making positive progress according to internal reports. In 2017, students taking a small number of A-level subjects did not make the progress of which they are capable. Achievement rates and high grades on the foundation programme were too low.
- A very high proportion of students progress to higher education. An increasing proportion of these students progress to the most competitive courses. A fifth of students progress into apprenticeships and employment. Managers track a very high proportion of leavers.
- Governors, leaders and managers have a clear and detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the college. Senior leaders and managers develop detailed action plans to address the key areas for improvement. Managers record progress against the actions. They identify underperformance quickly and swiftly put plans in place to resolve any issues. Governors monitor completion of the plans closely. For example, the achievement rate and progress measures in geography, physical education and health and social care have improved

significantly.

- However, during 2016/17 management actions had insufficient impact on the progress students made in a minority of A-level courses, including business studies, chemistry, biology, and English literature. Too many learners did not achieve a GCSE high grade on the foundation programme.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- managers, teachers and tutors monitor closely the progress of A-level students in the small number of underperforming subjects and act swiftly and effectively to ensure that students achieve the grades of which they are capable, given their starting points
- managers, teachers and tutors monitor closely the progress of students on the foundation programme and act swiftly to support more students to achieve high grades at GCSE and progress to a higher level of study
- managers and teachers provide evidence of the benefits students gain from the opportunities that are provided for work experience, work-related activities, and other activities that prepare them for their next steps
- teachers share good practice in challenging all students to achieve their best, given their starting points.

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

Yours sincerely

Martin Ward

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors were assisted by the deputy principal, curriculum and quality, as nominee. They held meetings with a range of governors, managers, teachers and students. Inspectors carried out observations of teaching, learning and assessment, and conducted walk-through observations of courses to explore particular themes. They scrutinised students' work and assessment records and key documents relating to the provider's strategy and implementation plans, self-assessment and improvement plans, and safeguarding records. Inspectors considered the views of students through discussions and through responses received through Ofsted's online questionnaire.