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Mr M Lang
Principal
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Dear Mr Lang

**SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF UNITY CITY
ACADEMY**

Introduction

Following my visit with Sara Morrissey HMI and Jackie Barnes, Geoff Henshall and Iain Rodger, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 23 and 24 November 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures in March 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, the chair and vice chair of the board of trustees, members of the academy leadership team, the academy finance officer, groups of teachers and the academy improvement partner. Inspectors talked informally with students throughout the visit.

Context

The academy has continued to experience many operational challenges since the inspection of March 2005. The acting executive headteacher completed his term of employment during the summer. A new principal, put in post in April 2005, was appointed on the understanding that he would be supported by a substantive chief executive. Interviews for this post are only now about to be held, primarily as a result of ongoing difficulties locally and with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). These difficulties centre on a failure to agree the nature and scope of proposed federation with a neighbouring academy and the procedure for appointing a chief executive. Many issues concerning relationships between Unity City Academy and its neighbour academy, and with the DfES, remain unresolved. Communication has been often difficult and some mistrust is evident between key players; this has had a negative effect on efforts to stabilise the leadership and management of the academy and has deflected energy from improving the quality of education it offers. Although the majority of teaching posts are now filled, high levels of staff absence, some long-term but many occasional and repetitive, make it difficult to establish and sustain consistent approaches, for example in behaviour management and establishing a shared culture of learning throughout the academy.

Achievement and standards

Standards in almost all subjects are low, with little indication that occasional improvements, such as in information and communication technology (ICT), are sufficient to reduce substantial underachievement across the curriculum. In too many lessons, the students make insufficient progress as they move through the academy. Overall results of the 2005 end-of-Key Stage 3 tests and GCSE/GNVQ examinations showed little improvement from the previous year. They were again below the academy's targets and well below those of schools where students' prior attainment was similar. The academy's data shows small improvements in some areas, such as in the increased number of students attaining the highest grades in GCSE, but no improvement in achievement was evident for the bulk of students. Informative data, including analysis of the 2005 test and examination results, has been compiled but there is too little explicit comparison with previous years so that no evaluative judgements are made about trends or specific areas where improvement is most needed.

In most lessons, standards are well below expectations when taking account of the students' ages. In the younger year groups this is partly because standards on entry to the academy are below average. However, the main reason is that the students' progress is not sufficiently brisk to enable them to get closer to the standards expected. Slow progress is directly related to the quality of teaching; better progress is evident in lessons where the teaching is good. Written work is often poorly presented and too many students make persistent errors in spelling and punctuation. Where particular attention has been given to the importance of accurate spelling, such as in some technology lessons, there are signs of improvement in the students' work. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress when supported directly by adults or specific learning programmes, but their progress is inadequate in lessons where no specific provision is made and the teachers do not adapt work to these students' needs.

The academy has improved arrangements for collecting and analysing assessment information and test results. This has resulted in a useful range of data being made available to staff. However, the data is becoming complex so that key messages are difficult to extract from it; too many staff are unsure of how best to use the information in planning lessons that will most effectively accelerate the students' progress. The potentially useful tracking system is not as effective as it could be, because teachers' assessments of the students' attainment are not consistently reliable.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- raise standards of attainment and increase the rate of progress that the students make in their learning – inadequate progress

Personal development and well-being

The students' behaviour, and their attitudes to learning, remain unsatisfactory. In classrooms, standards of behaviour depend too often on the effectiveness of the teaching. The students participate enthusiastically in the best lessons, listening well to contributions made by others and applying themselves conscientiously to tasks. Where teaching is less effective, the students make little contribution; they are either passive or occasionally disrupt lessons through shouting out or causing other distractions. Around the academy, many students are sensible and thoughtful. A significant minority, however, is loud and boisterous. A few students show disrespect for their environment and for the well-being of others by discarding litter, damaging fixtures and dropping items down stairwells.

The rate of attendance is too low, despite an encouraging figure of over 90% achieved at the beginning of the term. This fell sharply to a low of 81% at

half-term, and is making only slow improvement since then. Attendance in lessons observed by inspectors was well below 80%. Unauthorised absence remains too high at five per cent, but has improved from the unacceptably high figure of 11% at half term. The rate of fixed-term exclusions remains too high, but is falling. It is too early to judge whether this is the result of normal fluctuations, or a positive effect of initiatives such as the tutor group system or facilities for the temporary segregation of disruptive students. The students' punctuality has improved since the introduction of a tutorial session at the start of the morning, but a significant minority of students arrives late for too many lessons.

Provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of students remains unsatisfactory. Many aspects are covered by the 'academy programme' that includes personal, social and health education and citizenship, but there is no co-ordinated approach to delivering this programme. The academy has made considerable progress in extending extra-curricular activities, and offering students greater opportunities for participation. 'Fresh News' allows students to create and share information with their peers through the internal broadcasting network; this is a good development for encouraging participation in the broader work of the academy and for celebrating success. New initiatives involving the community are beginning to raise the profile of the academy in the surrounding area.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- improve the behaviour and attitudes of the students, also addressing their attendance and punctuality – inadequate progress

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is inadequate overall. About one in five of the lessons seen was inadequate. This is a lower proportion than at the time of the inspection in March 2005. However, there were significant weaknesses in a number of lessons judged to be satisfactory overall, and the proportion of good teaching has not increased. No outstanding teaching was seen. The academy's view of the overall quality of teaching is in broad agreement with inspectors, but is over-generous in identifying good or outstanding practice in some cases.

The best lessons were characterised by thorough planning, a good emphasis on practical activity and a brisk pace. Relationships were generally good in these lessons and the students showed a willingness to learn and to persevere with the tasks they had been given. Teachers displayed an enthusiasm for their subjects and had sound subject knowledge.

The impact of much of the satisfactory teaching was lessened by ineffective strategies for managing behaviour. Where students created constant low level disruption, inattention and immature behaviour were not dealt with quickly or authoritatively. In such lessons, the pace of learning dropped and those willing to learn were often prevented from doing so. The academy uses a system of 'floor walking', when senior members of staff patrol public areas and deal with students ejected from lessons. The strategy does not involve intervention in the classroom, with the result that some teachers, including those who are newly qualified or inexperienced, are left to try and cope alone in very difficult circumstances. Classroom assistants generally provide good support for teachers as well as students; many are skilled at defusing potentially volatile situations.

Other features of the inadequate teaching include slow-paced lessons; low expectations of what the students might achieve; tasks that ask too little of the more able and too much of some others; imprecise explanations and demonstrations; and lesson objectives that do not clarify the purpose of the lesson.

The students generally lack efficient study skills and many struggle to concentrate for sustained periods of time. Some work has been completed to establish students' preferred learning styles but this, echoing the situation with assessment data, is not sufficiently informing lesson planning. The result is that students frequently do not learn as much as they could and their achievement is hindered accordingly. Students are uncertain of their individual targets and, although some teachers refer to National Curriculum levels, students do not fully understand what they should do in order to achieve them. The quality of marking is inconsistent; the best shows students the way forward, but too much merely records the quality of the work completed or comments on students' personal qualities.

The action plan for improving teaching is not sufficiently specific. Few of the tasks completed so far have had a discernible impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Some monitoring is undertaken but responsibility for this lies uncertainly between senior and middle management; the regularity and quality of monitoring is better in some departments than others. Coaching has been provided for a number of teachers and an external consultant has carried out lesson observations. This has led to the provision of some training in how to evaluate teaching quality. A teaching and learning group has been formed to disseminate best practice and to develop individual professional development plans. Senior managers accept that these strategies are still at an embryonic stage. Crucially, the academy has not reached its target for reducing teacher absence; on average, about 60 teacher days per week have been lost so far this term.

Teachers new to the profession feel well supported by senior professional and subject mentors. They value regular workshops and mentoring sessions

which focus on identified areas for development. They are less clear about whole academy systems, for example to support behaviour management, but have worked together to devise strategies that help them create a climate for learning in their classrooms.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- improve the quality of teaching – inadequate progress

Leadership and management

The budget has been re-structured, with the support of the DfES, so that the academy no longer has to manage a deficit. Control mechanisms are good. Detailed records of income and expenditure enable the principal and board of trustees to monitor monthly spending. Heads of department have been given responsibility to manage an allocated budget and have been required to indicate how they will use funds to tackle key areas for improvement. However, there is no clear overview of the pattern of spending to establish whether funding to individual departments is well used or whether spending is consistent with implementing academy policies. There is no systematic mechanism in place by which managers can evaluate the impact of spending on raising the students' achievement; the academy provides poor value for money, because standards remain too low.

An action plan to address the significant weaknesses identified in the inspection report of March 2005 was prepared under the guidance of senior staff at a neighbouring academy. Some tasks identified in this plan were completed during the summer term; however, it was decided recently to work with consultants and prepare a new plan for which Unity City Academy could feel more ownership. The initial plan was criticised by the consultants for being unmanageable, for lacking clarity about individual responsibilities and for being insufficiently cross-referenced to develop a coherent improvement strategy. While some of these criticisms are reasonable, and the plan might have been improved, it had a number of strengths, notably in identifying quantitative measures of progress. Moreover, the executive summary was a lucid and cogent statement of priorities within each key area and of progress made by the end of the summer term; it also provided a succinct list of remaining challenges. The new action plan is not an obvious improvement. It is difficult to see how, for example, evaluation and monitoring have been strengthened. These critical activities, which should be discrete, are lumped together under each key area with little indication of individual responsibility or accountability. Many success criteria make vague references to 'the right time' or 'an acceptable level' without stating what these might be; desired standards of achievement are not defined, other than in terms of a general aspiration towards improvement. There is no indication of how some

outcomes, such as 'less gossip and more communication' might actually be achieved.

Many of the planned actions, such as making links between lesson planning and National Curriculum levels, producing a strategy to target learning support to individual students' needs, or reviewing the effectiveness of teaching to set management performance targets, should have been tackled as a matter of urgency at the time the academy was made subject to special measures. All in all, eight months later, there has been an insufficiently robust and rapid response to the key areas for improvement identified in March 2005. Some senior leaders are too sanguine in their view of the progress made by the academy, particularly in respect of their capacity to drive further improvement. While accepting that the current self-evaluation is a draft document, it is difficult to understand how senior leaders can rate their own performance as satisfactory when standards of achievement, the students' behaviour and teaching quality are all acknowledged to be inadequate.

There are individual strengths among some middle managers, but others are inexperienced and do not feel sufficiently supported by senior colleagues in striving to establish consistent expectations in classrooms. Strong feelings were expressed about the quantity of paperwork to which staff are expected to respond and inconsistency in senior leaders' approaches to academy initiatives. The system of academy reviews has the potential to increase teachers' accountability, but feedback about performance has been too variable in its directness and usefulness.

The board of trustees has been concerned with trying to establish what they feel to be the best possible support arrangements for the academy. Inevitably, therefore, the concern has been more with structures and systems than with interrogating in fine detail the academy's academic performance and its ethos. Minutes of meetings, for example, provide much fuller accounts of deliberations about the nature of federation and of whether to recognise a teachers' union than of discussions about another set of disappointing test and examination results in summer 2005.

The academy remains a fragile community; it lacks the clarity of vision and the incisive leadership needed to address immediate problems and consolidate longer-term improvement. Despite individual strengths, senior leaders do not have a convincing range of corporate strategies to support beleaguered staff or persuade the students that the academy offers them opportunities to develop skills and interests that will enrich their futures. Only in pockets do individual staff have the skills and determination to engage, challenge and inspire the students.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- continue to improve the finances of the academy – satisfactory progress
- secure the permanent leadership of the academy and improve the overall quality of leadership and management at all levels – inadequate progress

External support

Since opening, the academy has made considerable use of consultants from the local authority to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the core subjects. Middle managers judge that the quality of this advice and support is good but there has been little obvious impact on standards or on improving the quality of teaching. An academy improvement partner, provided by the same organisation that assisted with the revised action plan, is helping the principal to develop a coherent framework for improving the work of the academy, both internally and in the local community. This work is in the very early stages.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

Additional newly qualified teachers may be appointed subject to discussion with the academy's monitoring HMI.

Priorities for further improvement

- articulate and communicate a vision and strategy for the academy that is shared by all stakeholders
- ensure that all teachers have sufficiently high expectations of the students to enable more rapid progress in their learning
- improve the quality of teaching so that all is at least satisfactory and more is good or outstanding
- improve the students' attendance and establish among them a culture that values learning and achievement
- rapidly establish systems of management that are efficient and effective in implementing improvement plans at all levels

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the Board of Trustees, and the academies adviser from the DfES.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Bennett
H M Inspector

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