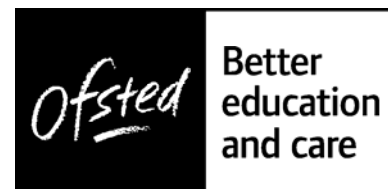


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3rd March 2006

Mr D Triggs  
Chief Executive  
Unity City Academy  
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Dear Mr Triggs

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

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with Adrian Gray HMI, Christine Graham HMI, Judith Straw and Moira Fitzpatrick, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 28 February and 1 March 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second 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 in 37 lessons and a number of learning support sessions. They scrutinised documents and held discussions with: the Chief Executive; the Principal Designate; members of the leadership group; other staff; the chair of the board of trustees; a consultant who participated in the 'due diligence' analysis of the academy in January 2006; and groups of students from Years 7, 9 and 11.

### **Context**

There have been a number of significant changes in the senior leadership of the academy since the previous monitoring inspection. A Chief Executive was appointed on 13 December and took up post with effect from 1 January 2006; he currently spends two or three days per week in the academy. At the same time, the chair of

the board of trustees resigned, together with several fellow members of the board. The resulting vacancies were filled by the academy sponsors in consultation with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), with a new chair appointed on 26 January. The Principal stepped aside at the end of the first half of the spring term. A new Principal has been appointed and will take up his post in the middle of the summer term. At the time of this monitoring inspection, he was able to spend one or two days per week in the academy and this commitment will increase gradually over the coming weeks. There have been other staffing changes and some restructuring in management roles is under discussion; several teachers have recently returned from, and others remain on, long-term sick leave. As at the time of the previous monitoring inspection, many classes are taught by temporary or supply teachers. High overall levels of staff absence have continued to impact on continuity in teaching and learning and on establishing consistent expectations in daily academy routines. The DfES has recently agreed to a change the designated specialism of the academy from information and communication technology (ICT) to vocational education, in order to meet more closely the needs of a broader range of the academy's students. This will take effect from September 2006.

### **Achievement and standards**

Students arrive at the academy with low standards. The academy reports particular concerns about low reading ages and weak literacy skills in general. Students' standards in the Key Stage 3 national tests in 2005 were very low. The progress they made between the ages of 11 and 14 was exceptionally low overall and particularly so in English and science, where it was amongst the lowest in England. The progress made by more able students was marginally better than that of other students, although still too low; however, this was due almost entirely to sound progress in mathematics. In science, more than 80% of all students who started Year 7 with the higher than expected Level 5 in the Key Stage 2 national test had made no measured progress by the end of Year 9; the equivalent figure in English was 60%. The progress made by students eligible for free school meals and many of those recognised as having learning difficulties was especially low.

Standards at the end of Key Stage 4 were very low in 2005. A mere 6% of students gained five or more higher GCSE grades including English and mathematics. An unusually large proportion of students gained no GCSE passes at all, although the figure of 8% improved from 12% in 2004 and some of these students followed alternative courses. Students' progress between the ages of 11 and 16 was exceptionally low overall. In English, it was amongst the lowest nationally but progress in mathematics, where standards have been rising slowly, was broadly in line with the national trend. Across all subjects, the progress made by more able students was above average, but for others it was low in comparison with similar students nationally. Whereas a few students, mainly boys, made excellent progress overall, too many others made very limited progress. The progress made by girls of average or below average ability was exceptionally low.

The progress made by students in lessons is generally too low. In a number of classes, tasks lack challenge and some Year 7 students reported that the work they

are given now is easier than it was in Year 6 of their primary schools. Assessment data is rarely used effectively to provide consistent challenge in lessons. Although the school has an increasing bank of performance data, there remains a tendency among some key staff to use data to seek excuses for current performance rather than to plan for future improvement. Students learn well when the teaching is good, but in too many lessons students are over dependent on the teacher and lack opportunities to develop as confident, independent learners.

Progress on the areas 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**

Behaviour is improving and is now satisfactory overall. An increasingly successful range of strategies is being developed to improve the management of the students' behaviour. The number of exclusions has fallen considerably in recent weeks. The students themselves say that behaviour has improved. The tutorial system ensures that students have regular contact with form tutors, which is beginning to have a positive impact in many cases. A small, but vociferous, number of students who cause disruption in lessons are taught separately. These students benefit from individual attention, while the conditions under which other students may make better progress are consequently better. Where effective teachers manage lessons well, the students' behaviour is generally satisfactory and often good. In lessons taught by temporary or supply teachers whom the students do not know, or where the quality of teaching by permanent staff is inadequate, behaviour frequently deteriorates. There are still too few staff willing to challenge low productivity in lessons if they do not wish to disturb an apparently calm atmosphere. Behaviour at break and lunchtimes is often boisterous and rowdy, especially on stairways and in corridors; unacceptable behaviour outside classrooms is too often ignored by staff and their interventions are sometimes ineffective.

Students' attitudes vary from good to inadequate. The nature of the building, while impressive at first sight, means that some students do not feel safe or secure. The layout of corridors is confusing and high, open balconies and stairwells are daunting. Plans have been agreed to alter parts of the building and work has already begun in some areas. A few students report that bullying is a concern but all students interviewed feel there is an adult to whom they could turn if they experience problems. A new system of rewards for students who achieve well and behave sensibly is effective in raising their self-esteem. The weekly academy news magazine, broadcast to tutor groups, is helping to build a more secure sense of community through shared celebrations of success.

Attendance is inadequate. The average for the school year of 79% is very low compared with the national figure and has fallen slightly compared with the previous year. Within the overall figure, there is considerable variation in the rate of attendance by different year groups, but none is satisfactory. The academy recognises the wide-ranging factors that affect attendance. For example, the

curriculum is not yet appropriate for a number of students and worries about bullying have an effect on others. Until students feel safe and secure in the academy, and enjoy the work presented to them, attendance is unlikely to improve dramatically. Arrangements for recording and analysing attendance have improved, although information is not shared sufficiently with staff. In some lessons, teachers are not clear about how many students should be present or if some are taught elsewhere. Occasionally, teachers accept students' confirmation that their friends are indeed at school. This is unacceptable, and poses a considerable health and safety risk, for example in the event of an emergency evacuation of the premises.

Full compliance with the Every Child Matters agenda has yet to be achieved. The academy promotes a good programme of education about healthy eating and sets a good example through the menus available in the school canteen. However, there are currently no physical education lessons for girls over the age of 13. Students enjoy fund-raising and make some contribution to the community, but enjoyment of their education and achievement is limited in scope.

Staff who deal with inclusion issues are dedicated, enthusiastic and committed. The seclusion unit has been particularly successful in reintegrating many students to mainstream lessons. The learning support team makes a positive impact on the progress of students identified as having specific learning difficulties. However, staff have no proper base for their work and they lack strategic support and leadership, so that the overall efficiency and effectiveness of their work is less than it could be.

Progress on the areas 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 broadly similar to that seen during the previous monitoring inspection. Once again, no outstanding teaching was seen although a slightly higher proportion of good lessons was observed. There were about the same number of inadequate lessons, a proportion that remains too high.

The best lessons were characterised by detailed planning that translated into well structured sessions, drawing on good relationships to maintain a brisk pace of work. Activities were varied, using a range of interesting resources. Teachers had good subject knowledge and explanations were clear and concise. The students' attitudes were very positive. Teachers had high expectations and praise was used effectively to enthuse individuals. As a result, students were well behaved, highly motivated, and made good progress.

Where teaching was less effective, the pace of work was too slow, activities were not matched to the needs of individuals, and strategies to manage behaviour were ineffective. Where behaviour was challenging, teachers were often too slow to manage low level disturbance so that students became more demanding and disruption increased. In the least effective lessons, the pace is determined by the

slowest workers. As a result, time is wasted that could be used to learn new skills and accelerate progress. The deployment and management of support staff was not always adequate either to support individual students or to assist teachers generally. Resources were often of poor quality; powerpoint presentations were sometimes illegible because of inappropriate choices of colour, or style and size of fonts; errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar were seen in worksheets and notes issued by teachers. Such basic errors do little either to promote better literacy skills or to enhance the students' self esteem.

The use of assessment data is not yet sufficiently developed to ensure that teaching is well matched to individual needs. Too little attention is given to closing gaps in the students' previous learning. This is a significant problem where there has been discontinuity in staffing and where little or no information is provided for replacement staff. Supply or temporary teachers often have little understanding of the levels at which students are working. In some lessons, students know their current levels of attainment and what they should do to improve. However, teachers' understanding of National Curriculum levels is not always secure and assessments are not always accurate. Students respond well to opportunities for improving study skills and independent work, but this does not happen enough.

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

- improve the quality of teaching – inadequate progress

## **Leadership and management**

The new academy leadership team has begun to address shortcomings in previous improvement planning. The Chief Executive has shared a vision with staff, initially intended to secure their safety and sense of well-being alongside that of the students. Efforts will then be concentrated on providing a relevant curriculum, professionally taught, so that achievement and standards may rise and students provided with the individual support needed to ensure their academic and personal progress. The verbose and inaccurate self-evaluation completed in autumn 2005 has been superseded by a briefer, sharper document that honestly acknowledges where the academy falls short of providing an acceptable standard of education for its students. The 'due diligence' report is stark in its evaluation of shortcomings in past leadership and management that allowed inadequate performance and low expectations to become the norm in too many aspects of the academy's work. Action plans, criticised for lacking sufficient focus and bite, remain but are being reconsidered sensibly as changes are made to the management structure of the academy and new development priorities emerge. Clarification of responsibility and accountability at all levels of leadership and management has begun but much remains to be done, for example, in establishing job descriptions and line management structures that will secure the consistently high performance demanded by the new senior team. The reconstituted board of trustees is consciously adopting a strategic role and has begun to establish committees to undertake specific aspects of its work. Oversight of the academy's finances is rigorous.

Analyses of the academy's performance, and initiatives arising from them, have the potential to secure improvement in leadership and management but have had little time in which to make a positive impact. The capacity of senior and middle managers to implement and sustain improvement is not consistently strong.

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

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

### **External support**

Formal federation with a neighbouring academy is no longer an immediate priority, but the chair is a member of its board of governors and is therefore in a position to be aware of where informal targeted support might be helpful. While senior managers recognise that the local authority provides useful professional training and support services for vulnerable students, they are committed to managing this provision in terms of their own defined needs.

### **Main Judgements**

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate progress

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate progress

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- ensure that strategies for the development and sustained improvement of the academy are understood and supported by all stakeholders
- arrest the decline in students' attendance
- consolidate plans to improve the students' literacy skills in order to improve their access to the curriculum
- improve the premises, redesign the curriculum and evaluate resources to provide a secure, relevant and engaging experience for all students
- model outstanding teaching and improve the use of assessment so that students make more rapid progress
- make explicit the responsibilities and accountabilities of leaders and managers at all levels so that academy policies and procedures are implemented consistently and effectively

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the board of trustees and the academy's adviser from the DfES.

Yours sincerely

**Andrew Bennett**  
**H M Inspector**