

Unity City Academy

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	133768
Inspection number	316695
Inspection dates	9–10 May 2007
Reporting inspector	Andrew Bennett

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Academy
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1036
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr David Halladay
Principal	Mr Robert Dore
Date of previous school inspection	1 March 2005
School address	Ormesby Road Middlesbrough TS3 8RE
Telephone number	01642 326262
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Unity City Academy is situated in an area of considerable social and economic deprivation. Almost one half of the students are entitled to a free school meal, a figure more than three times the national average. Many students enter the school with very weak basic skills, especially in literacy. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, over one in three, is more than twice the national average. The overwhelming majority of students are from White British backgrounds.

Since opening in September 2002, there have been many changes in the leadership of the academy and in teaching personnel. Greater stability has been achieved during the current school year, with a new principal in post since September 2006 and reduced staff mobility. Alterations to the building have improved safety and security both inside and outside. In September 2006 the academy, which had opened as a specialist college for information and communication technology (ICT), was re-launched with a specialism in applied enterprise. This was supported by a grant from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to fund a new enterprise centre, presently under construction, and extended vocational opportunities within the curriculum, many in partnership with local providers.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

Inspectors agree with senior leaders that, overall, Unity City Academy now provides a satisfactory education for its students. While some areas of weakness remain, and are honestly acknowledged within the academy, recent changes in staffing, notably at senior leadership level, have consolidated a sense of direction and urgency. Standards in most subjects remain very low when compared with national figures but are improving at least steadily; the majority of students are making at least reasonable progress when their previous attainment is taken into account. Most students know what they might achieve, and how they should set about doing so. Levels of care and support for students are good; they receive thoughtful and helpful guidance when selecting options within an impressive curriculum which has been developed to meet individual needs and interests.

Teaching is satisfactory and a substantial proportion of lessons are good in many ways. Academy leaders and curriculum managers are aware, however, that teaching has to be more inspirational if students are to become enthusiastic learners. Much marking is of good quality and clearly points students towards improvement but day-to-day assessment is not used sufficiently to mould lessons to the specific needs of individuals or groups of students. Behaviour in lessons is generally satisfactory and good relationships are evident between most teachers and their classes. While the majority of students are satisfied with what the academy offers, and express confidence in recent improvements to behaviour, a few continue to feel uneasy about incidents of boisterousness or worry about bullying. Respect for the building has increased, but too many students continue to drop litter casually, jostle on unsupervised stairways or allow doors to slam shut behind them without considering others. Academy leaders are keen to enhance the impact of the student council; current opportunities for students to become involved in the development of the academy, or to assume greater responsibility for their own learning and conduct, are limited. Some groups of students attend more regularly than before because they appreciate recent improvements but attendance remains poor, despite the academy's best efforts and the support of the local authority (LA) in taking legal action against the parents of persistent non-attenders.

Very few parents submitted responses to the inspection questionnaire. While one or two expressed concerns, others were keen to acknowledge changes that have taken place in the academy. For example, after commenting on experiences that upset her son in the past, one mother wrote 'behaviour is being sorted out ... the school now seems to have a direction to follow, and that's positive'. Another mother explained that when her son opted to join the academy this year she was 'very worried as the rumours at the time weren't very encouraging, but once I came over to the open day and judged for myself I must say I was impressed with the attitude of the teachers'.

Leadership and management of the academy are good. This is largely because the first priority for improvement in the previous inspection report, to secure the permanent leadership of the academy and improve the overall quality of leadership and management at all levels, has been successfully addressed. The impact of the principal, especially, has been recognised and welcomed by staff and students alike. Not all priorities have been dealt with so effectively, but inroads at least have been made, even if standards of attainment and rates of attendance are

not yet good enough. The academy provides satisfactory value for money and has good capacity to improve further.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise attainment.
- Improve attendance.
- Ensure that a greater proportion of teaching is good or outstanding so that students engage more actively with their learning.
- Use assessment to target work precisely to the needs of individuals or groups of students.
- Develop students' independence and encourage them to take responsibility for their own actions.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Standards achieved by students at Key Stages 3 and 4 are well below average but are rising consistently and more quickly than in many schools.

Students enter the academy with standards well below the national average. Their reading and writing skills are particularly weak and many lack confidence in speaking. Additional support to help them improve is mainly successful and this ensures that the majority of students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make satisfactory progress in meeting their targets.

The proportion of students reaching the expected level in national tests at the end of Key Stage 3 has improved steadily in recent years. However, there is considerable variation between subjects. Improvement has been notable in mathematics and better in English than in science. The proportion achieving 5 or more A* to C grades in GCSE doubled in 2006 compared with 2005. However, not enough students achieved these higher grades in English and mathematics.

These improvements have been underpinned by the introduction of regular and detailed assessments which enable staff to track students' progress in exacting detail. Current records present a convincing picture that the recent trend of improvement in results will continue and that the academy is on track to meet the majority of its challenging targets for tests and examinations in summer 2007.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

The personal development and well-being of students are satisfactory. Attendance is well below average, which is a significant factor in limiting students' progress, but the academy is working strenuously to improve this. Particular success has been achieved with a group of very poor attenders, for whom special curriculum arrangements have been made. Other strategies, including the appointment of mentors, close links with the LA, and specific support for targeted individuals, are having some impact. Behaviour in and around the academy is satisfactory. Whilst most students show consideration for others and are responding well to the academy's expectations, a significant minority are sometimes boisterous and inconsiderate when moving

around. Students are increasingly positive about the academy and most are willing to learn, although some do not display great enthusiasm or commitment to their studies. The revised policy for behaviour management is reducing the need to use exclusion as a sanction. A united and effective approach to promoting positive behaviour is emerging. Students say they appreciate the fairness of the staged consequences to their actions and that behaviour is much improved since the previous inspection. The academy council provides students with increasing opportunities to take responsibility and influence the life of the academy, and senior leaders are keen to enhance the role of this council. Other ways in which students might develop independence and responsibility are limited. Provision for the students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is satisfactory and is supported by the well planned academy programme. Students are encouraged to adopt healthy and safe lifestyles; physical education and dance lessons together with extra-curricular activities provide adequate opportunities for exercise, although curriculum time for physical education is not generous in Key Stage 4. Careers advice, the growing range of vocational courses and enterprise activities, together with positive links with local employers, provide a thorough foundation in the preparation of students for their adult lives but weaknesses in basic skills remain a factor in restricting choices available to them in further education and training.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning has improved since the previous inspection and is now satisfactory overall. There is more good teaching than before and only a very small proportion of teaching that is inadequate. Staff are given clear guidance about what is expected and, as a result, there is greater consistency of practice. A regular, rigorous programme of lesson observations provides useful information about what is going well and where further development is needed, so that academy leaders have a broad and accurate view of what is happening in classrooms. There are good opportunities for professional development from academy staff and external providers. These activities are well organised and support staff at all stages of development very effectively.

Teachers plan lessons carefully using a common format. Information about the prior attainment of students should ensure that work meets individual needs. However, this is not always the case; some learning is too difficult and some is not challenging enough. Too much emphasis is sometimes given to half-termly assessments and not enough use is made of on-going assessment so as to respond to emerging weaknesses in students' learning. Staff do a great deal to support and motivate students. Classrooms are bright and well organised. There are helpful frameworks that explain levels or grades in a way that students can understand so that some are able to identify for themselves what they have achieved and what requires improvement. Most students know their targets and their current achievements. Many teachers mark work carefully, commenting helpfully on strengths and weaknesses. Displays of students' work celebrate achievement and provide useful guidance about how to improve. Students now receive the additional support they need to improve their basic skills, although this is not yet consistent in all subjects.

In the best lessons, students make good progress because they are given a number of small, manageable and interesting tasks. Teachers' explanations are short and well focused, the pace is brisk and students understand how what they are doing will help them improve. Students

are given frequent opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas with others and to ask for help or support so they become more self-confident and expect to do well. This is important, because many students are not yet effective learners. Even those who achieve well are easily discouraged. Many are reluctant to answer questions, even when they know the answer. The academy has a number of strategies in place to improve student participation, for example, a system that allows individuals or groups to contribute to class discussions using a computer. This helps them participate without embarrassment or fear of failure.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The academy provides a good and increasingly innovative curriculum but is still working towards offering sufficient opportunities for physical education at Key Stage 4 and religious education for all students.

At Key Stage 3, the increased emphasis on improving students' basic skills is helping raise standards and enables students to access more successfully a range of subjects. It also prepares them effectively for study at Key Stage 4. Some Key Stage 4 courses are started in Year 9, which motivates students and sets a high level of challenge. Staffing changes have improved students' access to specialist teaching, although the legacy of poor curriculum coverage and lack of specialist, permanent teachers in several subjects still affects the progress made by some.

The extended range of vocational options at Key Stage 4, and good collaborative working with other providers, ensures a more suitable mix of options for students in Year 10 and better preparation for their post-16 choices. Effective links with other establishments and agencies is encouraging an increasing proportion of students to remain in education and training. As a result of these curriculum changes, students' attitudes are improving, the number who ask to change courses during Key Stage 4 has substantially reduced, and the attendance of a significant number of previously disaffected students has increased dramatically.

The academy provides an adequate and expanding range of extra-curricular activities. These opportunities make an effective contribution to students' personal development.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Care, guidance and support of students is good. There is a strong level of commitment to their welfare. Procedures for child protection are fully implemented and understood by staff. Systems for risk assessment, including those for off-site visits, are thorough. Required checks for ensuring the suitability of staff to work with young people are meticulously completed. Students are well known to staff, and most say they feel safe in the academy. Some have concerns about bullying, but they trust adults to help them resolve any difficulties. Sensitive and wide-ranging support is provided for vulnerable students and for the higher than usual proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Teachers, support assistants, mentors and others link effectively with outside agencies to give these students constructive individual help. Close links with primary schools enable a smooth transfer of students into the academy. Older students receive thoughtful guidance about subject choices in Key Stage 4 and about their career opportunities. Students' academic progress is closely tracked and this is helping to raise standards. Students know their targets and how well they are doing. Any who slip behind are identified quickly and given effective support. The rewards scheme provides genuine praise

for those who do well, and actively supports improvements in personal development and achievement.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Inspectors agree with the academy's judgement that leadership and management are good. A strong, effective and focused lead is provided by the principal and other senior leaders who are assisting the academy on a short-term basis. Intensive work continues on devising the most effective structure for the extended leadership team. Recent professional development for leaders and managers at all levels has successfully increased understanding of their roles. They now readily accept accountability for improvement; most show a commendable commitment to raising standards of attainment and enhancing opportunities for students to fulfil their potential within a supportive but challenging community. One middle leader commented, 'For the first time, we've all got a common goal.' Thoughtful exit strategies have been planned for the gradual withdrawal of the senior intervention team. The academy's self-assessment is concise and coherent; judgements are generally accurate and often corroborated by an impressive array of data derived from effective systems for monitoring the work of students and staff. Sharper use might be made of analysing and evaluating the most critical data. Minutes of meetings show that members of the board of trustees ask pertinent, searching questions about the academy's achievement; they have been instrumental in the academy's impressive recent recovery. Attainment targets, although still low compared with national figures, are suitably demanding in the academy's context and, most importantly, are achievable: being able to meet demanding targets is an integral part of senior leaders' strategy to restore confidence in the academy. Improvement was slow after the previous inspection, but has accelerated rapidly since the start of the current school year, not least because of the rigorous demands made of teachers and the gradual appointment of a more experienced and stable teaching staff. Productive relationships have been established with other providers and agencies. The LA has contributed to the development of the academy through membership of the board of trustees. Financial management has improved and the academy now provides satisfactory value for money. Within the academy, there is good capacity to secure and continue its recent improvement.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3
The behaviour of learners	3
The attendance of learners	4
How well learners enjoy their education	3
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

11 May 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Unity City Academy, Middlesbrough, TS3 8RE

Thank you for your willingness to show us your work and talk to us when we visited the academy recently. What you told us was very important in helping us understand the recent changes and the effects they are having.

We appreciate that some of you feel concerned from time to time about boisterous behaviour and bullying. However, we do believe that adults in the school are ready to listen to your worries and help you. Don't keep problems to yourselves – they will be sorted out if you share them with someone who can take the necessary action.

Most of you told us that life in the academy is much better than it was and many of you are sure that Mr Dore has been a big influence on this. We agree. You probably know that the previous inspection made the academy subject to special measures; this meant that it was not nearly good enough and inspectors would make regular visits to check if it was getting better. We are very pleased to tell you that the academy no longer needs special measures since it has improved in so many ways. This is a real achievement, and you have played your part in that by co-operating with teachers, working hard to improve your results, and – in many cases – attending school more regularly. Of course, all the adults in the academy have made a difference too, and there is a good feeling of mutual respect about the place now.

We have asked Mr Dore and the staff to look at a few things. These are to:

- raise the standards you reach in tests and exams: this is a big challenge, and one that depends a lot on you and the effort you put into your work
- improve attendance further: you can't learn and make better progress in subjects if you aren't in the lessons!
- make sure that more lessons are interesting and exciting like the best of them already are, so that you enjoy learning and want to be there
- ask teachers to use the information they have to plan work that is just right for each one of you so that you can improve your levels and grades
- consider how you can play a bigger part in the development of the academy and take more responsibility for what you do, relying less on adults to tell you.

If you can help in these areas, then we are sure that Unity City Academy will go from strength to strength. We wish you and the academy every success, now and in your futures.

With best wishes,

Andrew Bennett – Lead Inspector

Christine Graham

Tom Grieveson

Andrew Henderson