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Mr Stephen Sheedy
Principal
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Dear Mr Sheedy

Ofsted survey inspection programme – a comparison of the effectiveness of post 16 providers

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17 and 18 September 2007 to look at work in level 3 provision.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation and short visits to lessons and the Skills Centre.

The overall effectiveness of level 3 provision was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

- Achievement and standards are good. Students on AS and A2 courses and BTEC nationals make good progress, often meeting challenging targets. In 2007 students' achievement on A2 courses in groups of middle to upper ability was excellent. No groups of students underachieve as a result of the highly inclusive provision.
- In most subjects achievement is satisfactory or better and the college has robust systems to tackle the few areas where achievement is below average. There are still variations in achievement between subjects. This means that achievement overall is good rather than outstanding.

- The college has taken effective action to improve retention rates and these have improved over the last two years. Retention rates in subjects that were too low, particularly on AS courses, have improved as a result of specific targeted action.

Quality of teaching and learning

- The quality of teaching and learning and academic guidance is good. This is a result of well-qualified teachers working in successful partnership with students, personal tutors and parents.
- Teachers use prior attainment information and assessed work effectively to modify their lesson activities in order to best meet the needs of the students. Students are very clear about how well they are doing in all subjects and generally understand what they need to do to improve the quality of their work. Not all subject teachers make it clear to students what is needed to achieve specific grades in specific pieces of work.
- Students understand their target grades. The highly effective system of personal tutoring and frequent monitoring of progress enables timely and successful intervention to tackle underachievement. As a result, the academic guidance and support for students is outstanding, which the students themselves recognise.

Quality of curriculum

- The quality of the level 3 curriculum is excellent, with over fifty level 3 courses provided across a wide range of subject areas. Students are guided to follow programmes commensurate with their aptitudes and ability. Guidance for students as to which course to follow is good and is refined and improved following analysis of retention rates.
- Curriculum planning is good, based on analysis of the perceived needs of the local community, robust evaluation of the effectiveness of the existing programme and identified gaps in provision.
- Successful enrichment and support programmes for students deemed gifted and talented and those who have learning difficulties or disabilities are well established reflecting the college's inclusive philosophy.

Leadership and management of level three provision

- Leadership and management of level 3 provision, which makes up around 80% of the college's provision, is good with some outstanding aspects.
- In particular the quality of self-evaluation is excellent. This is based on an interactive, comprehensive electronic system for monitoring and tracking students' progress and a robust lesson observation schedule. This enables college leaders at all levels to have a well-honed understanding of strengths and weaknesses.
- Effective improvement planning is rooted firmly in analysis of the success of previous actions which underpins both longer-term planning and short-term interventions.
- Target setting is robust and ensures an element of challenge over and above simple predictions based on GCSE attainment.

- Leaders at all levels are focused on raising achievement and standards. The college performance management system and effective planning for professional development ensure this focus on improvement is maintained.

Inclusion

- Inclusion is outstanding. The college's inclusive approach is highly appreciated by the students including those receiving the specific support needed for 'Oxbridge' entry and those who need support as a result of learning difficulties or social and emotional problems.
- Curriculum provision, arrangements for personal support and guidance and approaches to teaching and learning clearly demonstrate the high quality inclusion at the college.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reduce the variation in subject performance
- ensure that students understand what is required to achieve specific grades for individual pieces of assessed work in all subjects
- ensure that steps taken to improve retention rates are sustained in order to further improve success rates.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop level 3 provision in the college.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Tom Winskill
Her Majesty's Inspector