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Mr Sean Heslop  
The Principal  
Folkestone Academy  
Academy Lane  
Folkestone  
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Dear Mr Heslop

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Folkestone Academy

## Introduction

Following my visit with Bradley Simmons HMI and Samantha Morgan-Price HMI to your academy on 17 and 18 March 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring visit in connection with the academies initiative.

## Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the principal, senior staff, middle leaders, groups of students and a representative from the academy trustees. A telephone conversation was held with the academy's National Challenge adviser. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and students.

## Context

Folkestone Academy opened in September 2007 and replaced the Channel School. The predecessor school was an 11 to 16 school, but the academy opened as an 11 to 18 school with a new sixth form. Most of the 1150 students are White British, but around one in eight comes from diverse minority ethnic backgrounds. Around one in ten of the students speak English as an additional language and many of these students are at an early stage of learning English. One quarter of the students are eligible for free school meals and almost half have been identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Most pupils with additional needs have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and/or moderate learning difficulties. On the death of the academy's founding principal last year, an acting principal and an executive principal led the academy whilst a substantive principal was recruited. The new principal took up his post on 2 March 2009. The academy has previously experienced



difficulty recruiting suitably qualified and experienced teachers of mathematics and health and social care.

### Achievement and standards

Performance indicators show that achievement and standards were significantly below average in the first year after the academy opened. The contextual value added figure for progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 for 2008 was 976 and was significantly below the national figure. Thirty-four per cent of students gained five or more GCSE grades at A\* to C. However, only 14% gained five or more higher grades including mathematics and English. Achievement in the sixth form was also low, which the academy attributes to a poor match of students to courses. Observation of lessons and the academy's own assessment data show that, although standards remain below average, achievement is satisfactory and more students are making satisfactory progress and on track to achieve challenging targets.

### Personal development and well-being

Students say that behaviour in the academy has improved and that they feel safe and enjoy each other's company. However, a significant proportion of students say that they do not enjoy lessons as much as they would like to. Effective management of behaviour and good pastoral support have resulted in halving the number of fixed-term exclusions. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. However, students have a limited understanding of Britain as a diverse society, and the promotion of cultural diversity is an area for further development. Students understand how to maintain healthy lifestyles. This is well supported by the school's good initiative of providing a healthy breakfast to all students throughout the week. There is good participation in the range of school sports clubs. Students welcome the move to a house system that enables all year groups to work together in tutorial groups and provides sixth form students with an opportunity to act as mentors to younger students. The house council provides an effective, but as yet underutilised, forum to explore and act on students' views. There are clear plans to raise the profile of this student body. Some students benefit from taking vocational courses, they say they value the skills they acquire in trades such as construction and motor vehicles. However, the low standards in English and mathematics and the underdeveloped literacy support across the academy result in students not being well prepared for the world of work or further study.

### Quality of provision

More than half of the teaching is good, but this is not consistent across all subjects. Although the quality of teaching is improving, it is not yet strong enough to enable all pupils to make rapid progress. Most teaching includes a good range of tasks and activities but often lessons are too teacher directed and students are not sufficiently engaged or challenged. The best lessons are characterised by a brisk pace and good use of questioning and discussion to aid learning. However, in many lessons, the pace is more pedestrian and teachers' expectations of what students can achieve are

too low. There has been a recent focus on using assessment information to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This is starting to have an impact, but some planning does not take advantage of the good range of information that is available to ensure that work is matched closely to the needs and interests of the different groups of students. The quality of marking is variable, in some cases is too infrequent, and does not provide students with sufficient advice on how they can improve or develop their work. In a few lessons, students are encouraged to look at teachers' comments, respond to them, and use the advice given to negotiate individual targets for their next unit of work. Untidy and poorly presented work of some students is not consistently challenged and too little is done to help students improve their spelling. There is insufficient focus on developing students' literacy skills in subjects other than English. Opportunities to improve speaking and listening skills are frequently missed and there is no clear policy on developing literacy across all subjects.

The curriculum meets the needs of the great majority of students in Years 7 to 11. A large number of clubs exist to develop students' skills in a range of curriculum areas such as dance, music, drama, art and sport. All students from Years 7 to 11 are engaged in timetabled activities until 5.00 pm over four days each week, which ensures good levels of participation in extension activities.

The school's specialisms are making a satisfactory impact on the life of the academy. The arts and media specialism has been very effectively led. Work in this specialism has intentionally and sensibly been limited to photography, dance and drama. Students achieved considerable examination success in these subjects in 2008 and their popularity, and the range of courses offered, have increased this year. As part of this specialism, students have made strong links with the Creative Foundation in Folkestone, and have participated in community work to enhance a gloomy subway in the town. Students of all ages have worked in local schools, taking their breakdancing project into local schools to motivate identified disaffected primary students.

The impact of the specialism in European culture has been limited. Although there are plans to extend the range of languages taught at the academy, most students only have the opportunity to learn French and a small number learn Spanish. Initial promising links have been made with a school in France.

A combination of challenging and supporting students who have poor attendance or punctuality and rewarding students who have good attendance has resulted in a good improvement in attendance, which is now close to the national average. Staff know their students well and are committed to providing good pastoral care. Heads of house and pastoral managers work in partnership to support students at risk of failing. In Key Stage 3, students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with complex needs, are receiving effective support through the new foundation studies programme. However, the academy does not have a clear analysis of the progress more vulnerable groups of students are making. Students know what their expected end of year National Curriculum level or GCSE grade

targets are, although some are less clear about their next steps of learning to enable them to achieve these targets.

Students are kept safe, but inspectors drew the academy's attention to elements of non compliance with the current government requirements regarding documenting the checks carried out on the suitability of adults to work with children.

The provision in the sixth form is unsatisfactory. Although some individual students speak highly of their experience in Year 13, the curriculum lacks the breadth necessary to allow students to make the progress of which they are capable. Systems for providing students with sharp and timely advice as to the options to which they are most suited, although recently improved, are not yet making sufficient impact to ensure all students are well matched to courses. The overall impact is that too many students have had to leave courses mid year. Individual students told inspectors that they are pursuing at least one unsuitable course to top up their study hours to allow them to access the Educational Maintenance Allowance. All these students made the point that they would pursue alternative accredited courses if they were available.

#### Leadership and management

Until July 2008, the strategic work of assistant principals was largely limited to faculty management responsibilities. In September 2008, leadership structures were reorganised, firstly with the intention of involving assistant principals more consistently in the strategic leadership of the academy and, secondly, with the intention of making middle leaders more accountable for the work of their departments. The result of the restructuring has not been wholly effective. Although members of the senior team now complement each other well, the work of middle leaders is more variable. At their best, middle leaders have a very clear and accurate view of teaching and learning across their departments. They are active in intervening to improve teaching, and have developed structures to hold the teaching staff in their department to account. They have a strong grasp on the progress of each year group, from Year 7 to Year 13. They know what needs to be done to improve the progress of students, and they do it. However, many middle leaders do not feel sufficiently empowered or enabled to monitor the work of their departments, and have relied on more senior leaders to do this. As a result, there are gaps in their understanding of the issues in teaching and learning they must address if improvement is to be more rapid.

Trustees provide senior staff with a good level of support and challenge. They demonstrate clear ambition for students and their recent work to find appropriate housing for vulnerable students demonstrates their determination to break down barriers to achievement. The academy improvement plan focuses on the correct priorities but it lacks clear timescales and details of monitoring and evaluation procedures. Thus, for example, the information received by trustees on the progress of students across the school lacks specificity.

The senior leadership team has worked hard since the academy was founded and has had success in improving students' behaviour, reducing exclusions, and raising levels of attendance. Its effectiveness in pursuing these issues demonstrates the team's capacity to move the academy forward on all fronts.

#### External support

The academy has made good use of external support to aid staff development and to validate and inform the evaluation of its own performance.

#### Main Judgement

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- Build on existing good practice to develop leadership and management at all levels.
- Develop students' skills in reading and writing across all subjects.
- Ensure that the monitoring of student performance results in timely and effective support and guidance for all vulnerable students.
- Review and revise the range of sixth form courses to provide a better match to students' capabilities and prior attainment and ensure that students receive good quality guidance when selecting sixth form courses.
- Ensure that the checks conducted on the suitability of adults to work with children are documented appropriately.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, Paul Hann, the chair of trustees and the Academies Group at the DCSF. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Robert Ellis  
Her Majesty's Inspector