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Mr Armando Di-Finizio  
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Dear Mr Di-Finizio

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Bristol Brunel Academy

## Introduction

Following my visit with Paul Scott HMI to the Bristol Brunel Academy on 13 and 14 May 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, including lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the principal and other senior leaders, the executive principal, groups of staff, groups of students and the chair of governors.

## Context

The academy opened in new buildings in September 2007 following the closure of Speedwell Technology College on the same site. Virtually all members of staff transferred to the academy from the predecessor school. The principal took up post in April 2007. Bristol Brunel Academy works in federation with the John Cabot Academy as its educational sponsor. An executive principal has oversight of both academies. Each academy has its own governing body. Numbers on roll at Bristol Brunel have risen since September 2007. A sixth form was established in September 2008.

The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is above average; the largest such group is Black African. The proportion of students with English as an additional language is well above average, as is the proportion eligible for free school meals.



The percentage of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average, but the percentage with a statement of educational needs is below average. The level of mobility of students is much higher than is found typically elsewhere.

### Achievement and standards

The academy has taken, and is taking, many good steps to improve the quality of educational provision and raise standards and achievement. It has already been successful in many respects but more remains to be done. GCSE examination results in 2008 improved from those in 2007, although they were still significantly below average on most measures. The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A\* to C including English and mathematics rose from 23% in 2007 to 35% in 2008. The percentage gaining five or more grades A\* to C rose markedly and in 2008 was close to the national average.

Students' progress from Year 7 to 11, as seen in the 2008 GCSE examination results, had some good features but was significantly lower than average for English and mathematics. The overall rate of students' progress was speeded up from the previous year, although in English and mathematics it went up only very slightly. Boys' progress was generally better than girls'. The progress of lower attaining students was not as good overall as that for others.

In its second year, the academy is continuing to speed up students' progress overall in mathematics and to a lesser extent in English. This increase is due to a very close focus on students' attendance, attitudes to learning and their progress. It is also aided by the academy's determination to meet each student's individual needs and by its tremendous success in virtually eliminating exclusions. Well targeted interventions are helping to boost the achievements of those students who are in danger of not meeting their targets. Targets are suitably challenging and used well to raise expectations and drive up standards. The academy is aware that more needs to be done to improve students' attainment in some specific subjects and their skills in literacy and numeracy. Students generally listen well. Some students are very articulate but, overall, speaking skills are not as well developed as they might be. Although good discussions occur in some lessons, teaching does not, in the main, demand that students answer questions at length, give full explanations, or provide students with a wide range of opportunities to present work orally.

### Personal development and well-being

Students and staff speak positively about the way in which the academy has improved attitudes to learning, lifted aspirations and students' sense of self-worth, and created a safe and pleasant place in which to work. Students enjoy being in school. Behaviour has improved greatly. In a few lessons, disruptions occur but these are mostly swiftly dealt with. Relationships are strong and students have much trust in staff to help and support them whenever necessary, in lessons, in their 'learning families', through learning mentors, or in the personalised learning centre. Students move around the new building calmly and with courtesy to each other,

staff and visitors. The academy helps students to develop their understanding of how to lead healthy lives in many ways. Students appreciate the academy's system of rewards and sanctions and receive certificates with pride. Students feel that their views are sought, listened to and acted upon. They have confidence in the school council and feel that it provides meaningful and regular opportunities to contribute to school life and is useful in changing things.

Students are cooperative and arrive punctually and well equipped to lessons. The academy is rightly seeking to develop further students' skills in independent learning, though project based learning in Year 7, for example. For a significant proportion of students, however, weaknesses in literacy and numeracy limit their future economic well-being.

Attendance has improved, although the percentage of persistent absentees is higher than in similar schools. Through a wide range of strategies, the school works effectively to avoid excluding students. One permanent exclusion has occurred this year and no fixed term exclusions since October 2007; this is a vast improvement from the situation two years ago.

#### Quality of provision

The academy has made good progress in developing its educational provision. The quality of lessons is kept under review. Observations made by the academy's senior staff show an improving picture with roughly half of lessons being good or better. Based on a sample of lessons seen, inspectors agree with the academy's view on the quality of lessons.

Lessons vary greatly in quality, and include examples of both outstanding and inadequate work. The leadership team is very aware of the areas of strength and is working effectively to reduce instances of weaker teaching. Leaders have set out clearly their expectations in relation to teaching and provide support to improve it. Teachers' use of data, to plan lessons at the appropriate level of challenge for students, is developing well, although some tasks are too easy or could be done for homework. Some teachers employ good strategies to assess how well students are learning, but others have only a limited range and do not check on this thoroughly enough in lessons. Students are generally clear about their targets. They are not always sure about the smaller steps needed to achieve them, although Year 7 students were clearer about this because of the nature of their work. At times, teachers talk for too long and students are too passive. Some good marking exists but, in the main, it does not regularly give students diagnostic feedback to help them to improve. The extent to which teachers are making use of information and communication technology (ICT) in lessons is still too variable. A clear strategy for improving the use of ICT is being implemented.

The academy has taken some innovative approaches to developing the curriculum in order to meet the needs of students. For example, a project based learning

programme for Year 7 students has been implemented. These students enjoy the independence that this gives them in managing aspects of their own learning.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and offers students a range of appropriate progression pathways. These include part and full time placements in colleges and with other providers. Students in Year 9 have started GCSE courses and expressed their appreciation and excitement about this opportunity to achieve. The academy keeps a close watch on how changes in the curriculum are affecting outcomes for students and is constantly seeking to modify provision as necessary. A wide range of enrichment activities is on offer to students. Activities include sports, music, drama, catering and film making.

The care, guidance and support provided by the academy are much valued by students. In addition to support from teachers and learning mentors, students have easy access to support from, for example, peer mentors, the personalised learning centre, careers advisers, and the school nurse service. The learning mentors have a very high profile in the school, assert their authority calmly, and are highly respected by students. Academic guidance has some good features, particularly in the comprehensive tracking system used with increasing effectiveness to ensure that students are making sufficient progress and that appropriate interventions are put into place.

The academy's specialism in communication is beginning to make an impact in all areas of its life and through a wide range of media, such as the making of videos to deal with subjects such as bullying.

### Leadership and management

The clear, supportive, encouraging, authoritative leadership and management of the principal and his senior leadership team are having a visible and positive influence on the educational provision and outcomes for students, and on the effectiveness of the work of staff. Staff express their confidence in senior staff to guide them in further improvements. They welcome the opportunities to engage in valuable in-service training and development activities. They state that their views are valued. They feel part of a learning community that is working together for the benefit of students, able to take risks with new ideas, and share expertise across the academy and the federation.

Senior leaders are very well aware of the academy's strengths and what still needs to be improved. Improvement plans are focused on the right areas. In particular, actions are being taken to address the relative weaknesses in the quality of some lessons and to increase effectiveness of some middle managers. Good work has been done to raise the skill levels of staff in relation to the use of performance data, and to evaluate and promote students' progress. More needs to be done here in places.

Governance is another of the positive factors underpinning the academy's work on raising standards. Governors' clarity of vision, coupled with strong systems of accountability and much care over making any key strategic decisions, supports greatly senior leaders' work and effectiveness.

### External support

The academy welcomes and values support from a wide range of sources. The main element is in relation to its work within the federation, through its educational sponsor, the John Cabot Academy. The executive principal plays a valuable role in acting as another critical friend, adviser and strategic leader. He too is held to account for the academy's success. The academy works in effective partnership with a number of businesses, and with a wide range of organisations and agencies that support students. It employs external consultants for advice and challenge over specific aspects of its work.

### Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

### Priorities for further improvement

The academy has already identified the need to work on these two key areas.

- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding lessons. Where necessary: increase the level of challenge and pace of work; develop teachers' questioning skills; and, encourage students to speak with each other or to the class about their ideas, approaches and outcomes.
- Develop further, and where necessary, the leadership and management skills of leaders of learning. Increase further the effectiveness with which leaders use and analyse key performance data in order to improve provision and outcomes for students.

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

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola  
Her Majesty's Inspector