



Sixth Form College Commissioner Assessment of Hartlepool Sixth Form College: Summary and Recommendations

Introduction

1. A Sixth Form College Commissioner assessment of the college was triggered by an inadequate grading following an Ofsted inspection in September 2014. This is in line with the intervention policy for sixth-form colleges outlined in "[Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills](#)". The purpose of the assessment is to assess the capacity of the current leadership and governance team to lead the college back to an Ofsted rating of good or better at the point of re-inspection, and whether leadership or structural change is required.

2. Ofsted found that:

- too few students stay to complete their AS courses or progress from AS to A level, resulting in low success rates that have remained static for the past four years
- the majority of students on AS and A level courses do not make good enough progress which results in only a minority of students achieving the high grades of which they are capable
- too many A level students do not achieve the grades they need to progress to the next stage in their careers. This results in a significant minority repeating their courses, often several times
- teaching, learning and assessment are not consistently good across the college and more able students do not have sufficient challenge
- insufficient attention is paid to the development of mathematics skills through learning and assessment. A minority of students pass mathematics functional skills examinations or attain high grades at GCSE
- initial advice and guidance and careers advice lack impartiality, resulting in a significant minority of students being placed on courses that do not meet their needs or aspirations
- leaders and managers, in the past, have not focused sufficiently on quality assurance and governance arrangements, resulting in insufficient impact on improving the quality of provision for all students.

Main findings of the assessment

3. The college had previously focused on attaining student numbers and financial viability to the detriment of quality.
4. Students had not been receiving impartial information, advice and guidance and this contributed to a decline in success rates and retention. The decline was exacerbated by students being allowed to enrol onto courses in which they were unlikely to succeed and which did not lead to progression, typically from AS to A level. In addition there was an accepted practice of a significant minority of students returning to the college to repeat their courses. This led to a culture of low student expectations, accompanied by insufficient monitoring and challenge of student performance.
5. Teaching, learning, and assessment have not been consistently good across the college. Whilst systems for observing teacher performance were in place they were not sufficiently robust.
6. The early signs of this were apparent at the 2010 Ofsted inspection which identified declining success rates while still rating the college “Good” overall. Indifferent results and poor practices were not identified or challenged over an extended period. The college has undergone significant change in the senior management team in recent years; including operating at reduced capacity with an interim principal for an extended period of time due to difficulties in recruiting a suitable permanent principal.
7. The new principal, appointed in 2014, identified a series of changes to improve college performance and the capacity and capability of the senior management team. These include focus on improving standards of teaching, strengthening the performance management of staff and tracking and challenging students’ progress. The current post-inspection action plan (PIAP) includes a comprehensive range of measures to address these areas and the college is sourcing external support, where this is required, including from high-performing colleges. These changes are being implemented with clear leadership and at pace and teaching staff are engaged with them.
8. The governing body has wide experience of governance in other contexts and has had a strong focus on the financial viability of the college. However it has lacked members with experience of managing 16 to 19 education and has not been able to provide sufficient challenge to the data presented to it by the previous senior management team on student performance. The chair of governors is strongly committed to making the required improvements. A number of actions are being taken including recruitment of new members, training and use of external consultancy and peer support.
9. The college faces increasing competition as well as a continuing demographic downturn in 16 to 19 student numbers over the next four years, both of which will present significant financial challenges. The college will need to take action to reduce costs in order to enable it to live within its 2015 to 2016 academic year budget. The current senior

management team would benefit from additional strategic financial expertise and this has been recognised by the principal who is taking action to address the issue.

10. Hartlepool Sixth Form College fills a significant gap in the area as a sixth-form college offering a broad academic and more limited vocational curriculum. It can retain its strong local position provided it regains an Ofsted inspection grade of “Good” or better by early 2016.

Recommendations

1. The governing body should review the frequency and arrangements with which it and/or its committees monitor implementation of the actions in the PIAP and their early impact in order to ensure that effective oversight of progress and challenge is maintained.
2. The chair of governors and committee chairs should consider twinning with peers in a high performing college to share experiences and learn from others’ approaches.
3. The governing body should rapidly recruit a governor with recent experience of managing a college delivering 16 to 19 education, and the Education Funding Agency will offer assistance in sourcing candidates if that is required.
4. The governing body should set criteria for evaluating its effectiveness and set out its view of how it will look and operate in 2 to 3 years time including in terms of membership, structure, behaviours and impact.
5. The Education Funding Agency will provide financial support to the costs of bringing in external expertise to deliver key improvements set out in the PIAP.
6. Action is required to strengthen the performance management of the principal and senior management team by the chair of governors.
7. The principal should strengthen the expertise available to the senior management team on strategic financial management and scenario planning.
8. The college should take action to reduce costs for 2015 to 2016 academic year to reflect the reduction in income in 2015 to 2016 academic year based on realistic three year forecasts of student numbers.
9. The college should undertake scenario and contingency planning for the consequences of a further decline in student numbers in 2015 to 2016 academic year and beyond, given local demographic trends and local competition.
10. The Education Funding Agency should attend governing body meetings and potentially committees in an observer status.

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Sixth Form College Commissioner

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