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7 December 2016

Mrs Linda Rowe
Chief Executive Officer
University of Chester Academy Trust
University Church of England Academy
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Dear Mrs Linda Rowe

Focused review of the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT)

Following the focused review of three UCAT academies in November 2016 and the subsequent follow-up visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the Trust between 15 and 17 November 2016. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The Trust, which is responsible for seven schools, was selected for a focused review because of Ofsted's concerns about the performance of a number of its schools. The findings from the sample of focused inspections and a wider consideration of the Trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- School improvement strategies developed in the Trust's first five years have failed to deliver the necessary improvements in pupils' outcomes, particularly in the secondary sector.
- Only one of the Trust's seven academies has been judged good in its most recent Ofsted inspection. None are outstanding.
- Standards remain below average in two of the three primary and three of the four secondary academies.
- Where improvements did occur, they proved unsustainable because they were too dependent on temporary external support.
- Pupils' progress is not good enough, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils in one primary and three of the four secondary academies. Disadvantaged pupils' poor progress in mathematics from key stage 2 to key stage 4 is particularly stark.

- The progress made by the most able pupils is weak. For example, all key stage 2 to key stage 4 progress scores for pupils with high prior attainment are lower than those of pupils with middle or low prior attainment. Not enough has been done by the Trust to ensure that the most able achieve well.
- Persistent absence rates are too high in all of the primary academies and in half of the secondary academies. However, attendance rates have improved to above average in two primary academies and are now broadly average in the other.
- The number of pupils temporarily excluded from two of the three primary academies is too high. Permanent exclusion rates are unacceptably high in the most recent published information for the University Primary Academy Kidsgrove.
- Fixed-period and permanent exclusion rates are above average in all secondary academies and unacceptably high in two of them. It is most worrying that this is particularly the case for boys, disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- The chief executive's focus on improving leadership and management across the Trust is beginning to bear fruit. Although all three academies inspected during the focused review were judged to require improvement, judgements on leadership and management improved to good in one of these academies and another was removed from special measures.
- Strategic plans of the Trust identify appropriate priorities for improvement. However, there are not enough measurable targets against which the board can hold the chief executive and leaders to account robustly for the impact of these priorities on pupils' outcomes.
- Action plans from external agencies commissioned by the Trust to implement targeted support to individual academies are similarly imprecise.
- The governance responsibilities and accountabilities in the Trust are opaque. The Trust did not publish any information about the scheme of delegation for governance on any of the individual academy websites. A new scheme has been developed, but it does not spell out precisely enough the actual responsibilities delegated to the local governing bodies, statement of action committees (SOACs).
- The board responds effectively to the areas of improvement identified in the Ofsted inspection reports relating to individual academies. Impact can be seen in the improvement in leadership and management in two of the academies inspected in the last 12 months. However, the board does not check whether there are any similar weaknesses in other academies. Consequently, common areas of weakness are not tackled in a timely fashion.
- The Trust now has very detailed assessment information about all pupils and pupil groups across all of its academies. While academy leaders and the chairs of SOACs have a good understanding of the data and its implications, the board depends too much on the interpretation provided by the director of data. Other governors are too dependent on the assertions of their academy leaders.

Evidence

Focused inspections of three academies were carried out between 8 and 9 November 2016. All of these inspections were carried out under the Education Act 2005. The inspection outcomes were:

- one academy judged to require improvement at its previous inspection continues to require improvement, but leadership and management and pupils' personal development, well-being and behaviour improved and are now good
- one academy was judged to no longer require special measures; the section 5 inspection judged that it now requires improvement.
- one academy had its first inspection following conversion into the Trust and was judged to require improvement. Its predecessor school had been judged to require special measures in January 2013, a year before joining the Trust.

Telephone discussions were held during the week of 7 to 11 November 2016 with the principals of the four other academies in the Trust. During our visit, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff from the Trust. Inspectors also spoke to a range of external partners whom you have commissioned to help drive improvement. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised by HMI.

Context

- UCAT is a small multi-academy trust. It is an educational charity sponsored by University of Chester. The Trust comprises five sponsor-led academies, one academy converter and one free school. The first academy opened in 2009, with the remaining six opening between January 2012 and January 2014. All academies are located within three local authorities: four schools in Cheshire West and Chester, two in Staffordshire and one in Warrington. Five of the seven schools are in areas of significant deprivation, with 43% of pupils being identified as living in disadvantaged communities, which is well above that found nationally.
- The Trust comprises three members from the university, a board of directors, a chief executive officer and local governing bodies for each academy, called SOACs. Following the issue of a pre-warning notice from the Department for Education (DfE) in April 2014, the Trust tightened lines of accountability, including in its governance arrangements. Arrangements for governance have been subject to regular formal review and revision, the latest review being in September 2016. Outcomes of this review were to be presented to the board in late November 2016.
- There have been significant changes in leadership at board, chief executive, governor, principal and staff levels in the past two years and particularly in the past 18 months. The Trust's central team has been streamlined and is now located in one of the secondary academies, the University of Chester CE Academy. A new chief executive officer was formally appointed in September 2015 following the appointment of a new chair of the board in February 2015.

Main findings

- The sponsor has been too slow to recognise its leadership role in driving improvement across the Trust's academies. School improvement strategies developed in the first five years of the Trust's existence failed to deliver the necessary improvements in pupils' outcomes. Where improvements did occur, they were unsustainable because they were too dependent on external support.
- Partnership with two school improvement partner organisations secured by the sponsor failed to deliver the required improvements in the long term. Standards remain below average, particularly in UCAT's secondary academies. For example, there are wide differences between the proportion of pupils gaining a good GCSE qualification in English and mathematics, especially for disadvantaged pupils, than that found nationally. In 2016 less than a quarter of Year 11 disadvantaged pupils gained a good GCSE in both of these subjects.
- The progress disadvantaged pupils make through their time in the secondary academies is often poor. This is also the case for the most able disadvantaged pupils and for other most able pupils in most of the secondary academies, particularly so in mathematics.¹
- Attendance rates have improved to above average in two primary academies and are now broadly average in the other. Attendance rates in three of the four secondary academies have also improved but are still below average in two.
- Persistent absence rates are too high in all three primary academies and two of the secondary academies. This is particularly the case in the University of Chester CE Academy where last year, 20% of pupils had less than 90% attendance rates. This compares to 12.4% nationally.
- In the most recent published data (for the academic year 2014 to 2015) the percentage of pupils with one or more fixed-period exclusions in three of the four secondary academies was well above that found nationally. In University of Warrington Academy, 15% of pupils had one or more fixed-period exclusions, compared to just under 4% nationally. The University of Chester CE Academy fared little better, with over 14% receiving at least one fixed-period exclusion.
- The most vulnerable pupils are at most risk of being temporarily excluded in all UCAT's secondary academies and two of the three primary academies. Rates for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have been far too high.
- Permanent exclusions are also too high in one of the three primary academies and in all four secondary academies. The 2014/15 national figure for the percentage of permanent exclusions in secondary schools as a percentage of the pupil group was 0.15%. Rates in University Academy, Warrington and University of Chester CE Academy stood at 0.35% and 0.92% respectively. Leaders indicate that there was no significant improvement in 2015/16.
- In the most recent inspections of UCAT's academies, the following have been identified as common areas for improvement:
 - the quality of teaching

¹ Progress data on the most able and disadvantaged pupils was provided to the team by the Trust.

- the progress made by pupils and groups of pupils, for example boys, the most able pupils and disadvantaged pupils
 - the development of subject and middle leaders
 - the need for compliance with DfE requirements about what needs to be published on academy websites
 - opportunities for pupils to learn about other faiths and cultures.
- Some of these areas identified for improvement were evident in the inspections conducted as part of the focused review, indicating that lessons are not always learned from previous individual inspections or checked or challenged in other academies.
 - The University of Chester initial teacher training partnership is highly successful in ensuring that teachers entering the profession are well prepared and highly skilled practitioners. The sponsor is only just beginning to draw on its own expertise in formally supporting schools in raising aspirations and supporting improvement. Some initiatives have yet to begin.
 - The sponsor recognises that it was too slow to intervene and tackle head-on the weaknesses in leadership. This has led to significant turbulence in leadership, staffing and pupil outcomes.
 - The sponsor took action to address weaknesses in leadership across the Trust in January 2015 and secured the formal appointment of the current chief executive officer in September 2015. This has been instrumental in the significant changes currently taking place. The Trust is now taking effective action, but it is too soon to see the impact of its work on Trust-wide improvement in pupils' outcomes.
 - The chief executive understands that there are few quick fixes in the academies, most of which have been underperforming for many years and have significant barriers to improvement. She and the chair of the board have been instrumental in developing essential systems and processes to drive improvement. They have also provided an appropriate focus on building capacity, improving teaching and learning, and raising attainment across the Trust.
 - Systems for checking quality of teaching and leadership are now regular and more robust. Early impact can be seen in the improvements identified in the recent inspections. This has given the Trust confidence that things are moving in the right direction.
 - The sponsor has restructured and streamlined leadership and functions of the Trust. The director of finance is working closely with academies and the Trust to tackle significant budgetary issues. This is in order to put the Trust on a more secure footing and to direct resources, challenge and support to academies more effectively. Leaders are acutely aware of the remaining challenges and are working closely with the Education Funding Agency (EFA) to resolve these.
 - Improved assessment procedures to track regularly pupils' achievements across the Trust's academies and the interrogation of this information by the chief executive with academy leaders and SOAC chairs have ensured that there is no hiding place for underachievement or concerns. Weaknesses are now quickly identified and actions taken to tackle issues. Checks to make sure actions are being taken are also regular.

- The improved understanding leaders within the trust have of the strengths and weaknesses in the academies is ensuring that resources are targeted more effectively to those in most need. At the same time, this understanding is developing capacity in leadership and management, including subject leadership across the Trust. Key to building capacity has been the greater collaboration between academies and subject departments, which did not exist before the arrival of the current chief executive. She has prioritised increasing the quality of leadership in each academy effectively.
- Academy senior and middle leaders, governors and partners speak convincingly and positively of the rapid change and improvement in the work of the Trust since the appointment of the chief executive. Leaders are generally enthusiastic and feel empowered and trusted, whereas previously many felt they were simply told what to do. They understand the accountability that comes with the trust and feel that they are now part of 'Team UCAT'.
- Academy leaders report that the Trust now knows their academies well. This is because the chief executive, through the effective monitoring and evaluation cycle, has made improvements in the way each academy's work, pupils' progress and achievements are regularly checked.
- Subject leader networks are helping to share good practice across academies. They are also helping to provide leaders with the skills to support improvements. Subject leaders value the externally provided leadership development programmes that are helping them to better understand their responsibilities. However, they are not yet able to convincingly explain the impact of their work on pupils' outcomes.
- Trust leaders are adept at spotting the few pockets of strength and exploiting these to support weaker areas in other Trust schools. Principals and leaders reported on specific incidences when actions secured by the Trust have led to rapid improvements. For example, the work undertaken to improve pupil outcomes in English across the secondary sector, and in subjects such as history and geography in schools where concerns were identified.
- All HMI monitoring letters of UCAT academies judged requires improvement and inadequate have reported positively on the improvement in the effectiveness of the Trust's work. This is verified in the most recent inspections.
- The chief executive and board have acknowledged the need to review and implement a refreshed scheme of delegation to reflect the changes in the Trust and to ensure that accountability arrangements for each of its statutory and other functions are clear.
- However, not enough has been done to ensure that governing body and Trust responsibilities are clearly laid out. This includes clarifying who is responsible for ensuring that school websites meet statutory requirements or government guidelines. For example, a number of academies did not have the full information required on the use and impact of pupil premium funding, Year 7 catch-up or sports premium grants. In addition, none had the Trust's scheme of delegation on their websites. Furthermore, the Trust's new safeguarding policy was not available on any academy website.

- The Trust's strategic plans identify the correct priorities and appropriate actions that need to be taken. However, the intended outcomes are not always expressed in precise terms. This results in too much emphasis being placed on the completion of actions rather than the difference these actions will make.
- The Trust has looked outwardly to commission external support where there is a lack of capacity from within. External partners speak positively about the step change in leadership since the appointment of the current chief executive. They talk of a new realism, a pragmatic approach and an unflinching focus on pupils' outcomes.
- The work of external agencies such as local teaching schools and senior leaders of education is now more closely aligned to the individual needs of each academy. Time-limited interventions are provided and these are monitored carefully by leaders in the Trust. Action plans required of these agencies are detailed.
- However, measures to check the impact of this considerable resource are not specific enough. This means it is hard for principals and the board to hold these leaders to account sufficiently, or to ensure that they represent value for money. This is also the case for leaders within the Trust who are working to drive improvement in the Trust's academies.
- The Trust has recognised the need to increase the representation and skills of local governing body arrangements and has commissioned an external review. Outcomes of this review have yet to be reported to the board.
- The development of the SOACs is supporting improvement by holding academy leaders to account more effectively for their impact on pupils' progress and achievements. The chairs of the SOACs, who are experienced national leaders of governance, have a very clear view of each academy's performance. They are adept at asking challenging questions and securing answers. Minutes of meetings, however, do not always reflect this challenge.
- Challenge from the SOACs is variable overall. Some governors still have too optimistic a view of their academy's impact because they are too quick to celebrate information from leaders about pupils' achievements before outcomes from national tests or examinations are known.
- The board has a good understanding of the current strengths and weaknesses across academies in the Trust. This is because of the honest and transparent evaluations of the chief executive and the improved data and information about pupils' progress and achievements at the end of each key stage. The board receives information Trust leaders have about progress in other year groups but as yet does not undertake detailed analysis of this information. Furthermore, members of the board depend too much on the interpretation of information from Trust leaders, limiting their ability to hold academy leaders fully to account.

Safeguarding

- At the time of this review, the safeguarding policy on each academy's website was not up to date. However, new, comprehensive policies are in place and being used by all staff. Effective systems are in place to ensure that all staff are suitably trained in safeguarding, including in the most recent DfE requirements. School

inspection evidence and recent external reviews of safeguarding in all schools indicate that safeguarding procedures meet requirements.

- The designated safeguarding leaders for each academy work together to make sure the new policies support staff in understanding how to spot and respond to concerns regarding pupils' safety and welfare, including from extremism or radicalisation. They also share good practice across the Trust.
- The designated leaders have a clear understanding of risks to young people in their own local areas and learn from incidents that may occur. For example, they have developed additional work and procedures in response to any serious incidents of physical, emotional or online bullying.
- Strong partnerships have been developed with local authority designated safeguarding officers and local safeguarding children's boards in the local authority in which each academy is located. However, there is no strategic oversight of the individual referrals that may go to local authority officers. This means there is a missed opportunity to understand the number of incidents referred, or to use the outcomes of referrals in terms of amending policy and practice or managing risks. Leaders are taking action to tackle this.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the sponsor works with the chief executive officer and board to:
 - develop formal, targeted professional development opportunities through university departments and links with outstanding schools thereby capitalising on the high-quality resource available to improve provision and pupils' outcomes across the Trust
 - develop a career pathway from initial teacher education through to induction and beyond so that new teachers trained within the Trust, who have the potential to be outstanding practitioners, are recruited, developed and retained.
- Reduce the absence rates and fixed-period and permanent exclusion rates in the primary and secondary academies where rates are too high, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Ensure that strategic planning has more measurable outcomes against which the board and members can hold the chief executive and leaders of academies to account robustly for the impact of their collective work.
- Ensure that action plans for leaders in the Trust and external partners commissioned to deliver academy improvement strategies on the Trust's behalf have clear actions for improvement and measurable outcomes against which their work can be evaluated for impact.
- Use the areas identified for improvement from individual academy inspections to tackle any common weaknesses across the Trust.
- Ensure that the new scheme of delegation identifies clearly the varying responsibilities of local governance and the board.

- Improve the effectiveness of the challenge and support to the chief executive and principals in the Trust by training the board and SOACs on the detailed assessment procedures now in place across each year group and for groups of pupils. This includes training on how to check the progress, achievements, attendance and exclusion rates of disadvantaged pupils and the most able disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational need and/or disabilities.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the Trust

Academies inspected in November 2016

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade in November 2016
University Academy Warrington	North West	Warrington	1 January 2013	26 November 2014 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
University Academy Kidsgrove	West Midlands	Staffordshire	1 June 2013	26 February 2015 Inadequate - special measures	Requires improvement
University Primary Academy Weaverham	North West	Cheshire West and Chester	1 January 2014	Not previously inspected (predecessor school judged inadequate – special measures)	Requires improvement

Academies that are part of the trust that were not involved in the focused inspections.

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent inspection grade and date
University of Chester CE Academy	North West	Cheshire West and Chester	1 September 2009	11 October 2013 Inadequate - serious weaknesses	1 April 2015 Requires improvement
University of Chester Academy Northwich	North West	Cheshire West and Chester	1 January 2012	6 February 2014 Inadequate - special measures	2 December 2015 Requires improvement
University Church Free School	North West	Cheshire West and Chester	2 September 2013	Not previously inspected	4 June 2015 Good
University Primary Academy Kidsgrove	West Midlands	Staffordshire	1 September 2013	Not previously inspected	10 July 2015 Requires improvement