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Mr A John
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Dear Mr John

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 19 and 20 September 2011 to look at work in geography.

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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with nominated staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Attainment has fluctuated in recent years. Having previously been above average, results at GCSE dipped in 2010. Following significant increases in 2011, standards are rising strongly in response to improved provision.
- Students make consistently good progress in lessons in response to lively and engaging teaching. From their starting points, sixth-form students make good progress, particularly at A2 level.
- Students develop sound locational knowledge and geographical vocabulary because teachers are alert to opportunities to extend and consolidate their geographical knowledge. They are adroit in using data and information sources to investigate and present their research findings. Students are

able to use maps and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to research, analyse and present information.

- Geography makes a positive contribution to students' wider skills and personal development. Students develop positive attitudes to social and moral issues, such as sustainability. They develop a good understanding of the ways in which places are interdependent and interconnected and how physical and human environments are interrelated.
- In general, students enjoy geography. They particularly like working outside collecting information or role-playing geographical processes. They speak enthusiastically about their fieldwork experiences.
- Students behave well and work steadily. They follow instructions and volunteer answers, but are naturally quite reserved when it comes to asking questions, expressing opinions or challenging ideas.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Most lessons observed were good or outstanding because teachers work hard to make lessons interesting, with a good range of stimulating resources. High-quality multimedia and information and communication technology (ICT) presentations engage the students' curiosity, model key processes and guide learning effectively.
- Well-prepared activities encourage students to work independently, often in pairs and small groups, to develop their learning. The 'collective memory task', for example, very effectively consolidated and extended Year 12 students' understanding of sand dune succession.
- Classrooms provide a stimulating environment, with good displays that effectively support learning and assessment. Learning is consistently well managed and directed; some exposition is outstanding.
- The best lessons are ambitious and enjoyable because teachers confidently direct learning and use positive relationships to engage students and give them a sense of achievement. However, students are not always clear what they should achieve in each lesson because learning outcomes, although shared with students, are not specific enough.
- Formal assessment of students' progress is systematic. Students are aware of their targets and what they should achieve. Marking is encouraging, but guidance on how to improve often lacks precision.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The curriculum is structured creatively and is well informed by current initiatives in the subject. The Key Stage 3 programme of study has been skilfully revised to ensure effective continuity and progression in geographical learning. It covers a variety of topical and interesting issues, raising important social and moral questions.

- The curriculum is designed so that students progressively develop a broad range of skills in the use of maps and GIS. Opportunities for outdoor learning and fieldwork are suitably identified for each year group, so that students develop skills in investigation and data handling. The subject makes a positive contribution to cross-curricular skills such as literacy and ICT.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The department is cohesive. Staff have a common purpose, with good opportunities to share good practice and expert subject training from within the department. Non-specialists who are new to teaching the subject feel well supported.
- Geography is a popular subject with a good take up at GCSE and AS/A level.
- Leadership is well-informed by current developments in geography. Self-evaluation is systematic and improvement planning is clearly focused on raising attainment and improving provision.
- Following the disappointing results in 2010, suitable steps have been taken to strengthen outcomes. Changes to schemes of work, coursework assignments and revision materials ensure that students are better prepared for examinations.
- Procedures for monitoring students' progress have been sensibly strengthened so that early intervention and additional support can be provided for any individual in danger of falling behind.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- defining more precisely the intended learning outcomes for different groups in each lesson so that:
 - students understand what they can achieve and are more ambitious
 - teachers steer learning more purposefully
 - progress can be more rigorously assessed and guided against criteria that the students themselves understand.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography in the school.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector