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Mr C Johnson
Principal
Duke of York's Royal Military School
Dover
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Dear Mr Johnson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Duke of York's Royal Military School

Introduction

Following my visit with Sheena MacDonald HMI to your academy on 28 and 29 September 2011, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, staff, groups of pupils and the chair of the governing body's education sub committee.

Context

The Duke Of York's Royal Military School opened as an academy for boys and girls aged 11–18 years in September 2010. Its predecessor status was that of an independent boarding school. All students board. The predecessor school had strong links with the military stretching back over 200 years. These links remain with the new academy. There are 427 students on roll, 102 of whom attend the sixth form. Most students come from families where one or more parents are serving or have served in the armed forces. A small proportion of students are from families that are

not linked to the services. The school's admissions policy will allow for this proportion to increase. The school has established strong links with a local federation of schools. The school has specialisms in science and physical education and outdoor activities. It has maintained its long and well-established traditions in music and military ceremonial activities.

Many of the staff transferred from the predecessor school but there have been new appointments and some departures. This proved to be unsettling for the school at the start of its changed status.

Students come from many different backgrounds. The largest group is White British but other main groups include Nepalese and those of Asian backgrounds. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is lower than average. A small proportion of students speak English as an additional language but only a few are at an early stage of speaking English.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

The school's 2011 GCSE results show that a higher than average proportion of students gained five A* to C grades. Attainment in the sixth form was broadly average. Students start in the school with generally higher than average key skills. The current pupils are making satisfactory progress in their academic studies. The practice of collecting and analysing information from assessments to monitor students' progress accurately is at an early stage of development. Therefore senior leaders' overall knowledge of students' progress is patchy. Systems for monitoring are not yet thoroughly embedded. This means that students' achievements are not yet systematically built on consistently across all subjects, term by term and year by year.

The most recent results show that not enough students gained the highest grades in external examinations. There was a marked variation in performance between subjects at the end of Year 11. Overall, a higher proportion of girls gained the higher A*/A and B grades. There are variations in performance between boys and girls in the key subjects of English, mathematics and science. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress. The newly appointed coordinator for special educational needs has made recent good progress in sharpening up procedures for identifying the needs of this group. Students speaking English as an additional language make satisfactory progress.

Students report that they mostly enjoy their lessons. They show this by engaging well with their work and tasks. They work conscientiously. They ask and answer questions willingly and engage effectively in discussions, exemplified in a physics lesson when groups of students shared ideas about static electricity.

Students' learning is consolidated very effectively by regular formal evening prep (homework) sessions in the boarding houses. Sixth formers manage their own prep times. Staff rigorously monitor students' completion of out-of-school tasks.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' consistently good behaviour makes a strong contribution to their learning and to the outstanding community ethos of the school. All students who spoke with inspectors commented highly on the supportive nature of the school community. Students are very polite to staff, visitors and to each other. They are mature and have their own views which they are able to articulate clearly. The whole school staff, both academic and boarding, have very successfully transferred the well-established and positive ethos of the predecessor school to the new school. This aspect of the change to academy status has been seamless from the students' point of view.

Students are becoming increasingly aware of their academic and personal targets which are followed up in the regular tutor periods. The wide range of extra-curricular activities keep students' bodies and minds alert and contribute strongly to them developing healthy lifestyles. Attendance is high.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching and learning are improving because senior leaders are beginning to monitor more rigorously the quality of lessons, identifying strengths and weaknesses to establish development points to help teachers improve their skills. Most lessons observed by inspectors were satisfactory, though some good teaching was seen. Senior leaders' own records show that the proportion of lessons that are good and outstanding is increasing. Senior leaders have a mostly accurate view of the quality of classroom practice and experience.

Teachers are knowledgeable and confident in their subjects. The tasks that are presented to students are relevant to the planned curriculum. Lesson objectives are made clear in the best lessons but the thread of 'key' learning during lessons is not always reinforced from start to finish and this limits students' understanding and progress. Too few lessons have clear challenges for students of different abilities. In some lessons, there is good questioning to gain ideas and students' views and the pace of learning is brisk. There are, however, some missed opportunities to involve and engage pupils more. The quality of marking is variable both in its frequency and content.

The use of assessment to inform teaching and learning is a major area of development for the school. Students are now more aware of the level at which they are working and what skills and learning contribute to these levels.

The curriculum offered is suitably broad, and provides a 'traditional' range of subjects, including religious education and personal social and health education. English, mathematics and science have due prominence, including the opportunity to learn physics, chemistry and biology as separate sciences. Students successfully develop competence and confidence in speaking and listening.

The school is beginning to implement some vocational courses such as Business and Technical Education Council (BTEC) qualifications in public services and military music in order to appeal to a wider range of students' preferences and needs. This is an area of development and further additional courses are being considered. The school's specialisms of physical education and science have not yet had a significant impact on raising standards. The school offers a very wide range of physical education and musical experiences for students through lessons and extra-curricular activities. These opportunities are well thought of and welcomed by students. Both the physical education and science departments have started 'outreach' work in local schools.

The school has continued to offer a very wide range of activities that encourage the development of personal endeavour and leadership through visits abroad, sporting challenges, and outdoor activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. Links with a local arts college have also expanded the opportunities for students to take part in a range of activities, including participation in shows and other productions.

There have been recent important improvements in the way that provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is organised. Processes to identify specific needs and arrange support for these students are becoming sharper and beginning to give greater clarity to what additional help is required, either through the class subject teacher or from additional specialist support.

There are thorough procedures for safeguarding students. They are well supervised and staff are alert to, and aware of, possible dangers. Senior leaders take appropriate action to improve the procedures if any weaknesses emerge. Students feel safe and are very confident that any issues of bullying are quickly dealt with. They are very aware of the consequences if they should transgress any rules but believe the sanctions are fairly applied. There are excellent links between the boarding staff and academic staff, some of whom have dual roles.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders have an adequate understanding of what needs to be done to improve the school and raise students' achievement. There is a keenness to succeed and there is no complacency about the tasks ahead. They have put in place a number of appropriate initiatives focused on raising the quality of teaching to lift students' attainment. There is a clear view from senior leaders that the school needs

to 'press on', update and modernise the practices of the predecessor school. The pace of change has not been particularly fast but there are signs now that actions are having an impact on improving the rigour of the school's work. The improvement plan is appropriate but there is a lack of sharpness in the way the senior leaders conduct self-evaluation and then act on the findings.

There has been a good range of training for leaders, managers and all staff, which is beginning to have a positive impact on teaching, assessment and target setting, as well as helping to clarify the role of middle leaders. Overall, middle leaders have positive views about the changing nature of the school and can see new opportunities that will benefit students. They are, however, still developing into their new roles and getting to grips with different accountabilities and expectations. Some subject leaders commented positively on the appointment of new teachers and how this has stimulated ideas and discussion. Overall, senior leaders and governors are building an at least satisfactory capacity to improve.

External support

Links with a local federation of schools have led to good support in helping senior leaders to establish more rigorous methods to record and analyse assessment information. Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) advisers have provided good support to senior and subject leaders, giving guidance on developing roles and responsibilities, help in developing skills in lesson observation and improving assessment and monitoring. This support has been welcomed by staff. The chief executive of the linked federation of schools has brought a good degree of educational expertise to the governing body. The Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence, the school's sponsor, are providing capital investment which will be used to greatly enhance both boarding and academic facilities.

Main Judgement

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Establish more rapidly a clearer view about the academic progress of all students.
- Sharpen the processes of self-evaluation so that information is up to date and, where necessary, acted on quickly.
- Increase the number of good or better teaching by:
 - supporting teachers in the use of assessment, enabling them to provide appropriate challenge for students of all abilities.
 - ensuring that learning is developed effectively from the start to the end of lessons and that the sequence of activities and learning is well thought through.

- making the most of opportunities to involve students in their learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Daniel Towl
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc.
Miss C Cawston
The Academies Group, DfE