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Mr S Haigh
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Haigh

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 13 and 14 October 2011 to look at work in RE.

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 staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; observation of six lessons and observation of a sixth form tutorial period.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory with good features.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- The results of students taking GCE A level religious studies are broadly in line with their targets reflecting satisfactory achievement.
- The standards attained by students at the end of Key Stage 4 have varied over recent years. In 2009 and 2010, results were above the national average. In 2011, the majority of students were entered for full course GCSE; results were below the national average and a significant number of students did not meet their targets. Interim results for Year 10 students, all of whom are following a full course GCSE, were at the national average. A small number of students in Year 11 were entered for GCSE short course and again, most did not meet their targets. In the lessons observed, GCSE students were able to evaluate religious and philosophical ideas and produce balanced arguments.

- School assessment data indicate that attainment at Key Stage 3 is average. Students' ability to ask incisive questions, debate complex ideas and give their own opinions is strong. However, students' progress is hampered by the lack of appropriately challenging activities in some lessons and assessment tasks. As a result, students generally make satisfactory progress.
- Students' attitudes to learning and behaviour are good. They feel well supported by their teachers who make lessons interesting and relevant. They can see the value of the subject in terms of understanding diversity, listening to opposing viewpoints and developing respect for others. They particularly appreciate the opportunities given to debate questions of truth and meaning.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is good.

- Teachers have good subject specialist knowledge and a clear understanding of the value of the subject which they communicate to students effectively. Relationships with students are positive and enable them to be confident in making responses.
- Planning ensures that learning proceeds at a good pace and all students are actively engaged. Teachers use a wide range of teaching strategies to motivate and interest students. For example, in a Year 9 lesson, Venn diagrams were used to enable students to compare Hindu and Christian beliefs about God. Resources are well produced by teachers to promote good learning.
- Students are given the opportunity to develop high-level skills of enquiry and analysis. As a result, they are able to make links between the study of religion and their own personal reflections. For example, in a Year 7 lesson, the teacher used stimulus material well to challenge students and enable them to ask questions and offer opinions about the existence of God.
- In some instances, activities do not fully challenge students and there is an over-reliance on descriptive recall. As a result, students' progress is hampered. Little use is made of planning differentiated activities, particularly at Key Stages 3 and 4, to match the varying abilities of students.
- Work is marked regularly. Teachers' comments are positive and give specific advice for improvement using examination criteria. Some good use is made of self- and peer-assessment in lessons. However, the accuracy of assessment at Key Stage 3 is inconsistent, which limits the value of some marking.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- Provision in the sixth form offers students some opportunities to consider a range of ethical and religious themes through the weekly tutorial period. Students have opportunities to take GCE A level religious studies.
- In recent years, the school provided for the range of students' abilities at Key Stage 4 through a mix of full or short course GCSE accreditation. The school has now introduced short course GCSE lessons for all students based on the very limited provision of one lesson a fortnight. A small number of students follow the full course as an option subject.
- Students at Key Stage 3 are given some opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and practices, and ethical and philosophical ideas. However, the sequencing and balance of work are not enabling students to progress from their learning in primary school or to develop a coherent understanding of religious traditions and their impact on individuals and communities. Continuity and progression between Key Stages 3 and 4 are limited.
- RE makes a good contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, particularly by enabling students to discuss ultimate questions through philosophical study at full course GCSE.
- Some opportunities are given to enrich learning through visitors to schools from local faith communities. As a result, students have gained some understanding of the diversity of religious traditions in the local area. Opportunities to visit local places of worship are limited.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- The new RE leader is an experienced and highly committed practitioner. She is creating a team where all teachers have a common purpose, are able to share good practice, and contribute ideas to bring about positive change.
- Subject reviews, self-evaluation and improvement planning are well focused on school priorities, particularly on raising standards. The RE leader is aware of the current issues affecting progress and is developing specific action points to bring about improvement. She is a good advocate for the subject across the school and with senior leaders. As a result, the capacity for improvement is good.
- Accommodation and resources are good. The use of information and communication technology is underdeveloped. However, the RE leader has identified ways in which this can be improved and is being supported by senior leaders through the allocation of extra funding.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- monitoring carefully the impact of the recent changes to GCSE provision on students' progress
- developing accuracy in the use of levels of attainment for lesson planning and assessment activities

- developing the use of differentiated activities to ensure that the needs of all students are met more effectively
- revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum to develop greater coherence and balance, and secure better progression into Key Stage 4.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE 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.

Yours sincerely

Isobel Short
Additional Inspector