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12 March 2012

Mr C Hirst
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hirst

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 27 and 28 February 2012 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; and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is outstanding.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is outstanding.

- Students make very good progress in the shortened Key Stage 3 as a result of high-quality teaching, effective arrangements for transition from primary school, and careful monitoring of their progress. Evidence from their work and discussions show that students are very well motivated in their learning from an early stage. Their enthusiasm carries forward into the three years of Key Stage 4. Here, all students make at least good progress in the core learning programme and better than expectations set out in the locally agreed syllabus which the academy chooses to follow.
- In addition to following the core RE programme, a significant and rising number of students in Key Stage 4 opt to follow the GCSE full course where progress is very good and attainment excellent in comparison both with other subjects in the school and with national averages.

- All students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, make good progress in the subject because of teachers' very clear awareness of their needs and the individual attention they receive.
- This good level of progress is carried forward into the sixth form where well-motivated GCE advanced subsidiary and advanced level groups attain very well.
- RE contributes extensively to students' personal development. Their learning enhances their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. It also has a significant impact on their own growing self-confidence, their enjoyment of learning and their sense of discernment in dealing with complex and controversial issues. In discussion, they are very clear about the relevance of their studies to their own sense of well-being and their development as young adults. Students' awareness of cultural diversity is good, and the school uses the limited range of local opportunities to develop this awareness.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is outstanding.

- All the lessons observed were at least good and most were outstanding. Teaching is characterised by careful planning, the deployment of high quality and focused resources, brisk and lively activities linked clearly to intended and differentiated outcomes, and probing and challenging questioning. The same quality extends into sixth form teaching where, for example, a double lesson will typically include a wide range of different activities and approaches to stimulate interest, motivation and challenge.
- One particularly engaging Key Stage 3 lesson helped students to grapple with a variety of emotive language and concepts to aid their exploration of the symbolism of light and darkness. The development of their literacy skills, while at the same time engaging with religious ideas to deepen their understanding, provided a particularly well-focused introduction to a series of enquiry-based tasks encouraging independent learning and creative thinking.
- Effective formal and informal assessment of students' learning contributes well to monitoring their progress and monitoring their achievement. They usually receive detailed and targeted comments on their written work which is substantial and shows strong evidence of a high level of challenge in tasks. Regular homework, in line with whole-school policy, adds to the overall quality of learning through stimulating tasks and offers good opportunities for research and imaginative and creative work.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is outstanding.

- The provision for RE is impressive. It extends beyond recommendations in the locally agreed syllabus, which the academy has chosen to follow. All students receive a full entitlement to the subject in addition to the range

of opportunities to follow examination courses, in Years 9 and 10, or in Year 11, as well as in the sixth form. The core course followed by all students in addition to examination courses, is carried through into the sixth form through a significant element of RE in a general studies course. This core of learning achieves a good balance of breadth and depth of study across the key stages. It helps students both to engage with contemporary issues and to study what it means to be a follower of a range of religious traditions.

- Examination courses follow the more philosophical and ethical approaches. These are dealt with in the light of focused Christian teaching as well as the insights of other religions. Typically, key concepts are explored and developed through case studies and pertinent examples so that students are increasingly aware of the application of beliefs and values to real-life contemporary issues. Further enrichment in this area, through opportunities to visit and meet with representatives of religious communities where practicable, would add to their already strong sense of valuing diversity in the UK.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is outstanding.

- Leadership of RE is highly effective at all levels. The school gives clear priority to RE as an area of worthwhile academic study and a significant contributor to students' own personal development and maturity. School-wide quality assurance processes ensure that good practice is shared and that cross-curricular opportunities contribute to students' awareness of connections between different aspects of their learning. The department's own development plan is well focused and targeted at further enhancing the quality of learning for all students. The quality of subject provision is widely recognised by key stakeholders. This includes not only the students themselves, but also their parents and carers. It is also affirmed by the Governing Body in their policy statement about the subject.
- Strong and very able subject leadership ensures that the department is characterised by shared commitment and a pooling of ideas. Well qualified and experienced subject experts add their own areas of specialism to the overall quality of the subject provision. This teamwork is a strength and adds to the effectiveness of the subject. Consequently, those who teach in the department usually have very good subject understanding and deploy this well in their lessons. Occasionally, it is evident that conceptual understanding of some religious traditions requires further development. The department is aware of the need to provide ongoing subject support and professional development for all those who teach the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- considering how to give further support to individual teachers in the department to enhance their confidence in dealing with the key ideas, beliefs and values of religious traditions

- considering how to offer students wider experience of interaction and engagement with religious and cultural diversity in the UK.

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

John Rudge
Additional Inspector