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Mrs C Robinson  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Robinson

**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 with Dilwyn Hunt on 21 and 22 March 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 nine lessons and an assembly.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory and improving.

**Achievement in RE**

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Results in the full course GCSE are below the national average but have improved year on year. There has been a change in entry policy for 2012 and the progress of the students taking the full course this year indicates that results will be above the national average. Results in the short course GCSE are also below the national average but again have shown a pattern of steady improvement. This overall pattern of attainment reflects satisfactory achievement at Key Stage 4.

- Many students at Key Stage 4 demonstrate a fluent understanding of Islam, the faith background of the majority in the college. They are less confident in their understanding of Christianity, the other religion chosen for study. Many students, including the more able, struggle to develop the skills of evaluation needed to gain the higher grades at GCSE.
- Results at GCE A level have fluctuated over recent years. In 2011, attainment in the GCE A2 level was well below the national average but was above average for those taking AS level. Overall, students' progress is good. They demonstrate an impressive understanding of some of the more challenging aspects of Islamic faith and practice.
- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3, while improving, is below expectations reflecting the students' low prior attainment. Achievement is satisfactory but is uneven. More progress is made in Year 9 where the topics and tasks involve a greater level of challenge. Progress in Years 7 and 8 is more limited and, overall, the students' understanding of different religions is very weak.
- The school analyses the progress of different groups of students carefully. The rate of improvement in performance is more marked among girls. The less able make satisfactory progress. However, there is some underachievement by more able students because they are not always challenged sufficiently.
- The quality of learning is satisfactory. Attitudes and behaviour in lessons are generally good. However, there is limited opportunity for more independent work. Students appreciate the value of RE in promoting community cohesion and an understanding of diversity. A marked success is the way in which students develop confidence in talking about their beliefs and in listening to the views of others.

### **Quality of teaching in RE**

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching is variable. In many lessons, work is well organised and a variety of tasks and resources is used to maintain interest. Material is adjusted, and good use is made of in-class support, to address the needs of the less able. The improvements at GCSE are the result of effective strategies enabling the students to meet examination requirements. In the best lessons, teaching is lively and engaging. Effective use is made of questions to check students' progress. Sensitive issues such as same-sex relationships are handled very well.
- Less effective teaching reflects the limited opportunity for students to raise questions, undertake their own enquiries and participate in structured active discussion. Some tasks lack challenge, particularly for the more able. Often, questioning is not used effectively enough to probe students' initial ideas and extend their thinking. On occasion, where emphasis is placed on the uncritical acceptance of specific beliefs and values rather

than on the promotion of more open critical enquiry, this restricts the effectiveness of the learning.

- Where lessons are less than satisfactory there are weaknesses in teachers' subject knowledge, learning lacks a clear structure, and questioning is not used effectively to check on understanding and progress.
- Assessment at examination level is generally good although there is a tendency to focus very heavily on techniques for answering questions at the expense of developing students' understanding of the topics under investigation. Work is marked regularly, but at Key Stage 3 students do not fully understand the progress they are making or how to improve.

### **Quality of the curriculum in RE**

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- A strength of the curriculum is the diversity of pathways, including entry-level courses, used to accredit students' achievement. There are healthy-sized full course GCSE and GCE A-level option groups. Care is taken to match the curriculum to the specific faith background of the majority of students. Provision is made for all students in the sixth form to undertake some exploration of beliefs and values through the tutorial programme.
- The school meets the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. However, the quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum is limited by the inclusion of too much content at too superficial a level. Insufficient time is devoted, for example, to the development of students' grasp of the key beliefs of Christianity and this impacts on their progress at Key Stage 4.
- The Key Stage 3 scheme of work lacks detail about the purpose of each unit and how progression is built into learning. This impacts on assessment and progress. For example, tasks set at the end of Year 8, show little greater challenge than those at the outset of Year 7.
- Within the subject limited use is made of opportunities for enrichment through the use of visits or visitors. However, RE benefits from wider activities across the college such as the Comenius project.
- RE makes a positive contribution to the promotion of students' social, moral and cultural development but less so to their spiritual development. While care is taken to develop some aspects of students' literacy through, for example, use of scaffolds to support writing, overall there is insufficient development of students' oral skills, for example in the form of discussion and debate, and more attention could be given to supporting the evaluative writing skills of the more able.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE**

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- The subject benefits from inclusion within the faculty of humanities, strong senior leadership support, and a team of seven subject specialists. There is a pattern of distributed leadership within the RE team but this is not fully effective in securing rigorous self-evaluation, driving improvement and establishing a clear vision for the future of the subject.
- The college analyses data about student performance very thoroughly and identifies areas requiring improvement and intervention. Teaching is carefully monitored and there is detailed documentation reviewing the subject and identifying development priorities. The subject improvement plan is extensive and closely aligned with wider whole-college priorities. However, the effectiveness of the curriculum is less well monitored and while the subject team can identify the priorities for improvement, they are less clear about the strategies to adopt to secure success.
- The team has found it difficult to access high-quality subject-specific training to support developments in the subject beyond those provided by the examination boards.
- An important strength of the subject is the contribution it makes to, and the way it reflects, the wider values and commitments of the college, most notably to community cohesion and the promotion of positive relationships with the local religious communities.

**Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- raising standards and improving the quality of teaching by:
  - involving students more actively in their learning by, for example, identifying their own questions
  - increasing the level of challenge for the more able students
  - establishing a shared understanding of the place of open critical enquiry and building this systematically into lessons
  - improving the use of probing questions to check students' progress and extend learning
- developing the curriculum and assessment at Key Stage 3 to ensure:
  - greater depth of understanding of specific religions, and in particular Christianity
  - a better match of the learning to the students' needs
  - students have a better understanding of the progress they are making and how to improve
- improving leadership and management by ensuring the roles and responsibilities for the subject are more clearly understood and cohere together to raise standards and improve teaching and learning.

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 and sent to SACRE. 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

**Alan Brine**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**