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Dear Ms Vigar

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 27 and 28 March 2012 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 staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of five lessons. At the time of the visit, the subject leader was on a planned leave of absence, and her classes were taught by a long-term supply teacher. The college admitted students in Years 7 and 8 for the first time in September 2011.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Attainment is rising steadily and securely in response to improved provision, ambitious target-setting and careful monitoring of student performance and progress. Although students' standards on entry are often below the levels expected, they make good progress to achieve results at GCSE that are broadly in line with the national figures.
- Students who opt to study geography in Key Stage 4 make particularly good progress. Despite temporary staffing arrangements this year, GCSE unit results indicate that good achievement is likely to be sustained in 2012. Students demonstrate a good grasp of complex human and physical

processes and a sound locational knowledge of case studies. Their skills in geographical decision making are less well developed because they do not synthesise information well or articulate their decisions persuasively.

- Students' fieldwork skills are well developed in Key Stage 4. Work submitted for the GCSE controlled assessment, based on a river study, demonstrates a good understanding of physical processes, a clear understanding of fieldwork methodology and well-developed skills in data handling, including information from geographical information systems (GIS).
- Achievement is satisfactory at Key Stage 3 because schemes of work in Years 7 and 8 are new, and there remain noticeable gaps in students' locational knowledge and their wider understanding and application of geographical concepts, such as development and sustainability.
- Students develop awareness and positive attitudes on social and moral issues, such as environmental stewardship. Geography also makes a positive contribution to students' wider skills, such as independent research and use of information and communication technology (ICT).
- The very few students who opt to study geography at AS and A level are taught under collaborative arrangements at a neighbouring school. They make progress that is broadly in line with their capabilities and starting points.
- In general, students enjoy geography, particularly when learning is active. They speak enthusiastically about their fieldwork experiences. Students' positive attitudes to learning are a key factor in their good progress. They behave impeccably, volunteer answers and collaborate well when working together in pairs and small groups.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Lessons are well structured with clear objectives and stimulating multimedia and ICT presentations based on an impressive range of high-quality resources using stimulating videos, images and resources from the internet and GIS.
- Learning is well managed and directed. Teachers ensure that the pace of learning is sustained throughout the 100-minute lessons by planning a good variety of activities, balancing their own input with pair and group tasks and independent work.
- In the best sessions, effective use is made of the well-prepared resources to engage all students and develop specific skills and understanding. Year 11 students, for example, honed their sketch mapping by memorising and redrawing details for their group; and Year 8 students pieced together the key facts about rice farming from a dominoes exercise.
- Marking is regular and encouraging, and summative evaluations provided by the end-of-unit assessments are detailed and constructive. Students know their targets, their current working levels and what they can do to

improve. However, routine marking rarely makes reference to the specific objectives being assessed, and there is too little follow-up to check that students implement the guidance given.

- Teaching deepens students' knowledge and understanding, but opportunities to develop their literacy and numeracy skills are too often missed. Students' writing often lacks fluency and accuracy, but too little support and guidance are given to develop and use subject vocabulary or on the specific conventions for writing for different purposes.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The subject leader has worked impressively hard to develop a new curriculum for Years 7 and 8, complete with learning resources for each lesson. Key Stage 3 units of work are carefully structured to cover a range of physical and human themes, including some topical issues such as 'the geography of crime' and 'the heroin journey from Afghanistan'.
- While the curriculum covers a suitable range of topics at different scales and contexts, it does not explore in sufficient depth interesting and significant social and moral questions, such as those linked with interdependence and sustainability. Lessons are sensibly based on specific learning objectives, but often these are not sufficiently ambitious in defining conceptually more complex outcomes for the most able students to achieve.
- Opportunities for fieldwork are identified in the planning. However, the progressive development of these skills and wider subject skills, such as problem solving and decision making, and students' wider personal experiences and qualities such as spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, are not mapped or planned in sufficient detail.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The subject is well led and energetically managed. The college has rigorous procedures for monitoring students' progress, analysing performance, evaluating the quality of provision and planning improvement. Non-specialists are well supported.
- Leaders and managers consistently communicate high expectations so there is a clear focus on raising standards and securing good achievement for all students, regardless of their starting points or particular needs.
- The college supports well the professional development needs of geography teachers, although this is undertaken without making use of guidance from subject associations or external expertise.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3, to ensure the progressive development of specific concepts, subject skills and personal attributes, such as:
 - interdependence, development and sustainability
 - fieldwork, decision-making and adapting writing for different purposes
 - spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- using routine assessment more astutely to assess and steer students' progress in lessons and through marking by:
 - ensuring that learning objectives set suitable challenge for different groups
 - using these objectives to effectively check and guide students' understanding and progress.

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