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Mr M Smith  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Smith

### **Ofsted 2012-13 subject survey inspection programme: geography**

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 14 and 15 May 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate.

#### **Achievement in geography**

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- The school recognises that GCSE results have not been good enough. Attainment in 2010 and 2011 was too low and achievement was inadequate. However, sharply focused intervention and support have strengthened provision and addressed previous underachievement.
- Progress is accelerating and is broadly satisfactory at Key Stage 4. Students are now better prepared for each assessment component of the GCSE syllabus, and rigorous tracking has underpinned more timely interventions to support any students who are falling behind.
- The school's baseline assessments indicate that attainment on entry in Year 7 is generally below the levels expected. Students' mixed experiences

of geography at primary school are reflected in their weak place knowledge and patchy understanding of basic processes.

- The quality of learning observed in lessons, including in the sixth form, was at least satisfactory and sometimes good. Students acquire new knowledge and develop a sound grasp of patterns and processes, for example, linked with urbanisation, tectonics and deforestation.
- Students recall their prior learning, but do not apply this well. For example, Year 7 students know three causes of rainfall and five climatic types, but do not understand the basic principles, or appreciate the everyday relevance of this information.
- Weaknesses in learning stem from shortcomings in curriculum planning. Geographical concepts, such as sustainability, are not studied in greater complexity across Key Stage 3 and students' skills in geographical problem solving are underdeveloped.
- Suitable emphasis is given to teaching map work and developing fieldwork skills, and close attention is paid to strengthening students' literacy. However, weak literacy is often a barrier to rapid progress.
- Behaviour in lessons is satisfactory. Students generally enjoy the subject and have positive attitudes to learning. When given the opportunity they work enthusiastically together in pairs and small groups.

### **Quality of teaching in geography**

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- The department has three experienced subject specialists who use their expertise to plan some lively and interesting lessons. Good use is made of a range of stimulating resources, including computers, to support learning and present work that captures the students' interest.
- Teaching is satisfactory. Teachers direct learning well and have high expectations of students' behaviour and involvement. They plan a range of activities, and engage students with pair and group work, and encourage independence. However, this work is not always challenging enough, particularly when teachers do not assess what students already know.
- The quality and pace of learning varies between lessons. Some work, particularly at Key Stage 3, lacks sharp focus and does not stretch the more able students. When planned outcomes lacked ambition or clarity, the learning activities were rather dull or aimless.
- Students know their target grades and have some idea of how they can raise their level. Marking is completed conscientiously and provides guidance for students on how to improve. However, it has very limited impact because students routinely ignore the 'even better if' comments.

## **Quality of the curriculum in geography**

The quality of the curriculum in geography is inadequate.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is largely unimaginative, although some Year 9 units explore a more interesting range of topical issues. Understanding is not developed coherently or systematically, and students' grasp of key concepts such as sustainability and the interdependence of people and their environment is weak.
- Similarly, a lack of clarity exists in showing how students will progressively develop their geographical skills. GCSE students do not hone the skills needed to excel, for example in synthesising information from different sources or articulating well-substantiated locational decisions.
- Weaknesses in schemes of work mean that short-term planning lacks sharpness. Even when students are kept busy in lessons, the purpose of their work is not always clear and opportunities are missed to deepen students' understanding and develop their subject skills.
- Work has started on reviewing the curriculum to ensure that it meets the students' different needs and aspirations. For example, opportunities to undertake fieldwork, both locally and with residential experiences further afield are being established across all key stages.
- Importantly, the subject leader has worked hard to promote wider enrichment opportunities. The work of the eco-school group, for example, the burgeoning Duke of Edinburgh programme and initiatives linked with the bid for International School status, all make a positive contribution to students' interest in the subject and their wider personal development.

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

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The school's rigorous self-evaluation recognises weaknesses in strategic leadership and day-to-day management. Senior leaders have taken swift and effective action to provide support and challenge. A new faculty leader has been appointed from September 2012.
- Since September 2011, systematic monitoring of performance, robust action-planning and unequivocal line management have strengthened provision and secured better progress. A sharp focus is now placed on raising standards, although this has yet to permeate Key Stage 3 where curriculum development has been neglected.
- Despite the weaknesses identified, the subject is buoyant and is currently being well steered by senior leaders. Numbers opting for GCSE are increasing, and a small AS level group is running for the first time in several years.

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

- developing a coherent and imaginative Key Stage 3 curriculum that:
  - is skilfully designed to match to the full range of students' needs
  - ensures continuity and progression in students' learning
  - encourages geographical enquiry and more independent learning to challenge all students, especially the more able
- sharpening the use of assessment information to present suitably challenging objectives in each lesson, to review students' learning and steer their improvement.

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**