

Abbey College Cambridge

Homerton Gardens, Cambridge CB2 8EB

Inspection dates

28 February–2 March 2017

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for students	Good
Sixth form provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

Summary of key findings for parents and students

This is a good school

- All of the independent school standards are met.
- Leaders have created a culture of ambition and high standards. Recent initiatives are driving standards higher.
- Leaders provide a caring and nurturing environment. Students from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds quickly develop safe, trusting and productive relationships.
- Students are highly motivated. They listen intently, concentrate hard and are determined to be successful.
- Students' behaviour is mature and self-disciplined. They are polite and respectful. Their conduct around the site is exemplary.
- Students feel safe and learn how to keep safe and healthy. They make a valuable contribution to the community during their time in Britain.
- Most students, including those in the sixth form, achieve extremely well and demonstrate good progress in their learning.
- The proportion of students achieving the top grades, especially at advanced level study, is extremely high. This enables most students to secure places at their chosen universities.
- A significant minority of current students, including some with special educational needs and/or disabilities, do not make rapid progress across all subject areas over time.
- Teachers have strong subject knowledge and explain difficult concepts well.
- Teachers do not consistently check students' understanding well enough or provide them with precise feedback that helps them to improve their work.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise students' achievements by sharing the highly effective practice that exists in some subjects more widely, so that students achieve well across all areas of the curriculum.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by ensuring that:
 - teachers systematically check to make sure that students have a good understanding of what they are taught
 - students have good, precise feedback that helps them improve their work
 - support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is provided quickly.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Senior leaders' systematic monitoring of the school's work ensures that the school meets all of the independent school standards.
- The principal, well supported by senior leaders, has created a culture of ambition, high standards and strong academic attainment.
- The exceptional care and welfare that exists throughout the school provides a nurturing environment in which students flourish.
- Leaders' actions have secured A-level results that have consistently been among the highest in the country in terms of attainment. The proportion of students achieving the highest grades is significantly above national figures.
- Leaders have overseen the relocation of the school from six sites in the centre of Cambridge to purpose-built premises highly successfully. The clear vision and thoughtful planning of leaders has led to a highly productive learning environment.
- Leaders tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of most individual students well. Many students follow additional English programmes to develop their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. The extra support for English helps students to access other parts of the curriculum more successfully and improve their outcomes.
- The management of teachers' performance is effective and rigorous. Recently introduced initiatives enable leaders to monitor the quality of teaching more closely, and pinpoint opportunities for staff to develop their practice. Staff are highly positive about the training they receive, especially the principal's 'Diploma in teaching mastery'.
- Recently appointed teachers appreciate the support they receive and feel the new extended induction period is incredibly valuable. The group say that leaders 'galvanise' staff and push them to be the best they can be. Leaders ensure that each teacher's targets link closely to school improvement priorities, as well as to their own professional development. As one said, 'I feel strongly appreciated by the senior staff and it is very rare for teachers' time to be wasted or lost.'
- Leaders have a broadly accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Their evaluation of some areas, including teaching, learning and assessment, is overgenerous. Leaders were disappointed with the standard of teachers' assessment and feedback seen when carrying out joint observations with inspectors.
- Leaders' assessment of the areas identified for improvement are perceptive and accurate. They form the basis of the school development plan, such as correctly identifying the provision for students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities as an area that requires improvement.
- Senior leaders have recently introduced comprehensive systems to assess how well students learn and develop over time. The regular 'conferences', where leaders analyse test results, help them to track students' progress more closely. This enables leaders to provide targeted interventions to support students who fall behind. Leaders now have a clearer picture of how much progress students make from their individual starting points.

Governance

- Governors' established programme of regular monitoring activities works well to check on the quality of provision. Governors have a clear understanding of the standards in specific areas of the school's work, including:
 - the quality of teaching, learning and assessment
 - strategic planning
 - progress against improvements noted in the development plan
 - educational provision for all students, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Governors have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas to be developed. Governors note, for example, that 'new systems for monitoring teaching, learning and assessment are innovative, but not yet embedded'.
- Governors rightly highlight the need to improve provision for students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities as there were concerns about their needs not being met consistently well.
- Governors give the right balance of both support and challenge to senior leaders.
- Despite the accuracy and perception of the school's strengths and areas for development seen in governors' reports, governors spoken to during the inspection, in common with senior leaders, have an overgenerous view of the school's effectiveness in some areas.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The comprehensive safeguarding policy that is available on the school's website reflects the latest statutory guidance.
- Leaders take their safeguarding responsibilities very seriously, and many school and boarding staff undertake higher-level training.
- The curriculum is planned well so that students know how to stay safe. Staff receive full safeguarding training on induction, reviews at least annually and regular updates about the latest statutory guidance.
- Staff are well trained to be alert to any potential safeguarding concerns. Staff are very clear about how to refer any concerns they might have.
- Staff are familiar with their responsibilities to protect students from the dangers of radicalisation and extremism.
- Academic mentoring counsellors provide useful help and support for students suffering from stress and anxiety.
- Staff maintain a suitable single central register for recording safeguarding checks. A few minor administrative omissions were corrected during the course of the inspection.
- Leaders carry out health and safety checks regularly and act on any concerns raised. The school carries out detailed risk assessments on all aspects of school life.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Leaders' view is that 'every teacher is a teacher of English', which works well to improve students' English language skills.
- Teachers embed the development of students' language skills well across all subject areas. The clear pronunciation and well-defined explanation of subject-specific vocabulary by staff helps students to develop their language and understanding well. Students improve their ability to explain their thoughts precisely, using the correct terminology.
- Most teachers use questioning skilfully to check what students know and can do. They plan work that increases students' understanding.
- Teachers' use of visual resources is highly effective, such as writing key vocabulary and drawing graphs on the walls, which, alongside clear teacher explanations, helps accelerate students' learning.
- Teachers often have strong subject knowledge and use of well-considered real-life situations help students grasp difficult abstract concepts. An example of teaching enabling students to gain greater understanding was seen when a teacher used the experiences of a skydiver to explain the concepts of surface area, air resistance and terminal velocity. Students were able to apply the knowledge when later solving problems linked to viscous drag.
- Teachers support students effectively in creative subjects so that they can progress from learning specific techniques to applying the knowledge independently. Students' confident use of different media highlighted the good progress that they make.
- Teachers' high expectations ensure that the most able students tackle work that they find difficult with resilience. In mathematics, where students were required to apply both the parallel and perpendicular axes theorems when considering problems on moments of inertia, the students made accelerated progress because teachers set tasks that were sufficiently demanding.
- Leaders noted that in the past some students did not receive timely assessments of their needs. The newly formed team, including the vice-principal, the special educational needs coordinator, the heads of year and academic tutors, has clear plans in place to reduce the time between referrals being made and having the necessary support in place.
- Some teachers do not check students' understanding regularly enough, which leads to misconceptions in students' learning and prevents them from making the progress they should.
- Some teachers do not assess work in line with the school's policy. They do not guide students sufficiently well on how to improve their work.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote students' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Leaders' rigorous adherence to statutory guidance, their meticulous record-keeping and the high priority given to students' welfare mean that students feel safe and well cared for.
- Leaders successfully create a 'home away from home' that promotes students' physical and emotional well-being exceptionally well.
- Having identified gaps in students' engagement, leaders acted swiftly to ensure that students are fully involved in school and community life. Opportunities for increased involvement and better direction have helped students to be more effective on the student council. Students are involved in decisions, organise voluntary work and raise money for local charities.
- Students develop into well-rounded individuals and develop valuable life skills, which prepares them extremely well for the next stage in their education.
- Students say there are no areas in school where they do not feel safe. Staff from the school and the boarding provision work closely together to ensure that they meet students' needs. On the very rare occasions that students have disagreements, staff support those involved highly effectively.
- A new 'house' system was introduced in September 2017 and this, alongside the relocation to a single site, gives students a greater sense of community. Students organise competitions against each other and feel this helps them to feel even more motivated.
- Leaders have introduced extended tutor roles. Staff now have additional responsibilities for the academic progress and well-being of the students in their group. Students speak positively about the impact this has on their overall experience.
- An extended personal, social, health and economic education programme helps promote students' aspiration well. Many students now take advantage of the increased number of opportunities to develop skills that will equip them well for life. Students speak highly about the Year 12 leadership programme and the 'Pre-U' qualifications.
- Students enjoy the wide range of sporting and extra-curricular activities on offer. The 'ABC' programme has greatly improved provision in response to requests from students. It now provides the 'Action, Belonging, Creativity' that leaders desire, such as regular sports fixtures and far more activities specifically for girls. Students appreciate the improvements they have seen and say that there has been a much higher uptake this year.
- Leaders work closely with other schools and the safeguarding lead from the local authority to ensure that students are safe online. Students' internet usage is monitored effectively to help ensure that students are keeping themselves safe.
- Assemblies, tutor time, and additional time in personal and social education are all used constructively to educate students on how to be safe and stay safe. Students confirm the high levels of support that are in place.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of students is outstanding.
- Students' conduct around the site and in lessons is impeccable. Inspectors did not see any poor or disruptive behaviour in lessons or throughout the school over the course of the inspection. Leaders have created an ethos of high expectation and cooperation between staff and students.
- Students are polite, friendly and respectful. They enjoy the many healthy options available in the clean and well-run canteen area. Mealtimes are sociable and civilised occasions. Students are keen to point out that they are involved in decisions about what appears on the menu.
- Leaders track students' behaviour regularly and systematically. This enables them to spot patterns of concern and act quickly. Records show very few incidents of poor behaviour, and almost all are linked to relatively minor incidents. Leaders use exclusions sparingly and effectively. On the rare occasions that leaders exclude students, it is to uphold the high levels of behaviour expected of all.
- The overall attendance of 97% is above the national average. A small number of persistent absentees have a notable impact on the attendance of some groups of students and, where this happens, leaders' proactive approach and effective interventions result in substantial improvements. Leaders highlight the need for eternal vigilance to maintain these high figures.

Outcomes for students

Good

- Leaders prepare students well for the next stage of their education, training or employment. The vast majority continue to university, and over 99% of students last year received at least one offer of a place.
- Students who study A-level qualifications attain excellent results. From starting points that the school assesses as broadly average, students achieve results that demonstrate good progress. The proportion of students achieving the top grades is significantly above national figures.
- Most-able students achieve extremely well. The results at advanced level especially are highly impressive. Leaders set challenging targets, which they have consistently met for a number of years. The A-level results the students achieve are extremely high in terms of attainment.
- The vast majority of students make very good levels of development in their language and literacy skills. Students learn to read, write and understand in an additional language quickly. Students are able to access the material more easily in all subject areas as a result of the improvements in their English skills. This helps students to make good progress from their starting points.

- In their development plan, leaders highlight the need to improve the provision for students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Recent changes to the staffing structure and monitoring processes mean that there is a far more coherent approach to meeting the needs of the students. Some are now achieving in line with their target grades. However, some students are significantly below target and leaders' actions need more time to have a sufficiently positive impact on the outcomes for all students.
- The school's own information on the progress current students make shows an inconsistent picture. Some departments routinely record high levels of progress for the vast majority of students across all year groups. In some subjects, the progress current students make shows them to be below their target grades – for example, in chemistry and economics at GCSE, AS level and A level, the proportion of students below target is close to or in excess of half of the group.
- Leaders' monitoring of students' progress shows a dip in attainment between the first test in October and the most recent test in February. Records show that the number of students likely to make good or better progress has fallen. While leaders use the information to arrange targeted interventions to ensure that students' final attainment grades are significantly higher than currently, this does not represent substantial and sustained progress over time.

Sixth form provision

Good

- Students make at least good progress and achieve well. Students' results in some subjects, notably mathematics, are exceptionally high.
- Leaders are very aware of the importance of each 'student's journey'. A four-day induction programme, alongside pre-course preparation materials, helps students settle in and choose the right courses. Teachers check students' suitability for each programme through initial baseline assessments, which works well to direct students to the most appropriate courses based on their ability and aspirations.
- Teaching, learning and assessment in the sixth form are good, and lead to good outcomes for students. The strong relationships that exist between students and staff ensure that time in lessons is used productively. The support from staff, alongside teachers' in-depth knowledge of the examination board's assessment criteria, help students prepare well for examinations.
- The vast majority of students' parents live outside the United Kingdom. The school has agents in home countries to provide close links between the school, parents and students. Parents receive reports, newsletters and praise cards to keep them informed of their children's progress.
- Students are involved in wider aspects of the school and the wider community. The 'ABC' extra-curricular programme offers over 50 clubs, societies and activities that students use and appreciate. Students regularly raise funds for charity, and recently donated £4,000 to the East Anglian Children's Hospice, the chosen charity of the school.
- Students attend well and are punctual to lessons. Retention rates are high.

- Leaders' actions to extend the breadth of the personal, social, health and economic education programme make a positive difference. Students are a cohesive group. They practise equality and diversity on a daily basis, and their actions encapsulate the true meaning of fundamental British values.
- The growth of the leadership and diploma programmes successfully prepare students for the next steps in their education.

School details

Unique reference number	136083
DfE registration number	873/6049
Social care unique reference number	SC43876
Inspection number	10026072

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Other independent school
School category	Independent boarding school
Age range of students	13–21
Gender of students	Mixed
Gender of students in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of students on the school roll	361
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	323
Proprietor	Alpha Plus Group Limited
Chair	Sir John Ritblat
Headteacher	Julian Davies
Annual fees (day students)	£21,000–£27,300
Telephone number	01223 578 280
Website	www.abbeycambridge.co.uk
Email address	Julian.Davies@abbeycambridge.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	28–30 January 2014

Information about this school

- Abbey College provides international education and is part of the Alpha Plus Group Limited. It was founded in 1994 as Abbey Tutorial College.

- Until recently, the school was located on six sites in the centre of Cambridge. In June 2016, the school moved to a new purpose-built site at Homerton Gardens and includes on-site boarding accommodation for 120 students.
- The school is registered as an independent boarding school for boys and girls. It provides GCSE courses, A-level courses and a university foundation course for up to 580 students aged 13 to 21.
- There are currently 361 students on roll, the vast majority of whom are international students from 32 countries including China, Malaysia, Kazakhstan and from Europe. All students are boarders and live either independently, in residential accommodation owned by the school or in lodgings with host families.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- In October 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Ofsted to conduct an emergency inspection following concerns about the welfare, health and safety of students. All of the independent school standards that were checked at that time were met.
- The DfE commissioned Ofsted to consider the proprietor's request for a material change in August 2016. As a result, the DfE increased the school's student admission number from 320 to 580, approved the move to the new premises and accommodation, and reduced the school's registered age range from 14 to 21 years to 13 to 21 years.
- The most recent inspection of the boarding provision was in October 2016, when the overall progress and experiences of boarders were judged as outstanding. The inspection report for boarding can be found on Ofsted's website.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in a number of lessons, seven of which were joint observations with the vice-principal. Inspectors scrutinised students' work while in classes.
- Meetings were held with the principal, vice-principal (academic), vice-principal (pastoral), heads of department, heads of year, newly appointed staff, the school's special educational needs and disabilities coordinator, the school's site manager and two governors.
- Inspectors considered the views of students through informal discussions and during two meetings held with groups of students from different age groups.
- There were insufficient responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, for inspectors to consider parental views during the inspection.
- Inspectors considered the views of the 25 members of staff who completed the Ofsted questionnaire.
- A range of documents were scrutinised including the school's own evaluation and improvement plan, governors' reports, curriculum plans and schemes of work, and records of students' achievement.
- Information about safeguarding arrangements was checked, as was the single central record, risk assessments and a range of policies.
- All of the independent school standards were checked during this inspection. The boarding provision was not inspected during this inspection.

Inspection team

John Randall, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Jenny Carpenter

Ofsted Inspector

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