

17 November 2006

Mr Patrick Harty  
Principal  
St. Dominic's Sixth Form College  
Mount Park Avenue  
Harrow-on-the-Hill  
Middlesex  
HA1 3HX

Dear Mr Harty

Ofsted Subject and Survey Inspection Programme 2006/07

Sector Skills Area: 2 Science and mathematics post-16

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation during my visit on Friday, 10 November 2006. I am particularly grateful to the staff involved for all their hard work in preparing the programme and background documentation and giving up a great deal of their time during the visit. Please pass on my thanks to staff and learners who gave up their time to talk to me.

The visit provided much useful evidence for the good practice survey in science. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but should we wish to cite specific aspects of practice we will contact the college first. All college letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform judgements included: interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of learners' work and observation of three lessons.

I agreed to provide a summary of my observations of good practice seen in the sciences and to suggest some areas for development.

Good practice observed

Learners' achievements

- Learners' achievements are outstanding. Consistently high success rates, above the national average for similar colleges, have been obtained in all science subjects offered over the past three years. The proportion of high grades obtained are also consistently above the

national average for all science GCE AS and A-level science subjects for the past three years.

- The majority of ALPS value-added results for science subjects are all significantly positive and place the college in the top quartile of colleges over the last three years, with the exception of AS physics.
- Progression rates are excellent with a large proportion of learners moving on from AS to A2 subjects and from A2 to higher education courses, many of which involve a high level of scientific skill such as medicine, dentistry, optometry, pharmacy and physiotherapy. Attendance rates in science subjects are good.

### Teaching, training and learning

- The college's self assessment report indicates that 80% of science lessons observed through the internal inspection were good or better. The observations in this visit were all good or outstanding.
- Lessons are well-planned and contain a wide range of activities to maintain the interest of learners. ICT is used effectively to promote and consolidate learning. For example in an AS chemistry lesson learners collected information and used a database exercise to demonstrate trends in chemical periodicity. The learners worked at an individual pace refining their techniques to search for different web sites to extracting boiling and melting points. They displayed advanced ICT skills to consolidate chemistry concepts and interpret their findings. An A2 human biology lesson covered the workings of the mammalian eye through the use of well-designed booklets and a series of different experiments. Learners were highly motivated and worked effectively as independent learners to achieve a broad understanding of how the eye functions.
- During an AS biology lesson a PowerPoint animation reinforced to learners visually how mitosis occurs in cells.
- Occasionally, the pace of parts of a lesson was too fast for all learners in the group. Also, in a small number of occasions the teacher failed to check the understanding of all learners.

### Programmes and activities

- The high rates of achievement and the excellent progression rates to higher education clearly show that the programmes offered meet the needs of learners.
- The lack of level 2 provision is partly due to the pressure on accommodation at the college and partly because the science learning area wishes to focus on running advanced level provision that is popular and meets the needs of learners.
- A broad range of external visits and trips are offered.

## Guidance and support

- Learners are supported well. Attendance and punctuality are regularly checked and learners who are absent without a legitimate reason are challenged. All learners are set a minimum target grade based on the previous GCSE performance and every five or six weeks subject teachers grade the learners' efforts and current achievements. These grades are held on-line for tutors, learners and parents to monitor and the parents of any poorly performing learners are contacted.
- Individual learning plans are completed in November and March through individual discussion with subject teachers and specific, measurable targets are set. Subject workshops are provided for learners daily in all subjects to enable teachers to give additional support, although attendance is not high in some subjects.
- The iLearn VLE is having a positive effect on supporting learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Students are able to gain access their ILPs and the system is highly valued by them.

## Leadership and management

- Leadership and management are outstanding. Managers have a strong focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning and to maintain the high standards of attainment. Course reviews are demanding in their targets for students' performance.
- The sharing of good practice is recognised as important and takes place at departmental meetings. A subject learning coach for science works well to ensure teaching is student-centred and employs a broad range of methods.
- High quality learning materials are available and the use of ICT is actively encouraged.
- Subject course reviews are comprehensive and contain an audit of the way that the outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda are being met.
- The self-assessment process is honest and transparent and the judgements are well-supported by an internal inspection process that highlights strengths and weaknesses of the provision.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- the ALPS value added results for GCE AS physics is low
- although value added results are high for females, they are below those for males
- all teachers should ensure the pace of teaching is appropriate and that the understanding of all learners is checked regularly.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop science courses in the college. As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your LLSC and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Sarbdip Noonan  
Additional Inspector