

03 April 2007

Mr Kevin Finnigan
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Dear Mr Finnigan

Ofsted Subject and Survey Inspection Programme 2006/07

Sector Skills Area: 2 Science and mathematics post-16

Thank you for the hospitality and co-operation shown during my visit on Thursday, 29 March 2007. I am particularly grateful to staff for all their work in preparing the programme and background documentation and giving up their time during the visit. Please pass on my thanks to staff and learners who also gave up their time.

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 feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website.

The evidence used to inform judgements included interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation and observation of lessons. As agreed, this letter provides a summary of the observations of good practice seen in the sciences and suggests some areas for development.

Good practice observed

Learners' achievement

- Learners' achievements are outstanding. High success rates were achieved in the vast majority of science courses in 2006. The overall success rate for science and mathematics programmes was 73.8% in 2006 compared to the national average of 63.5% for similar colleges.
- The trend of improvement in success rates for these courses has increased at a faster rate than the national rate of improvement over the previous three years.

- The proportion of high grade passes for level 2 and 3 courses is consistently above the national average.
- Value added results for GCE A2 science subjects are positive over the last three years but they are lower at AS level.
- Progression to Higher Education (HE) is good and a high proportion of learners move on to another appropriate further education (FE) course.

Teaching, training and learning

- The previous inspection of the college in November 2006 judged the teaching and learning of science to be outstanding. All the science lessons observed during the visit were good or outstanding.
- Teachers engage learners well by organising challenging exercises for them. Lessons are well planned and contain a broad range of activities to maintain the interest of learners. Learners work hard to discover answers for themselves and gain knowledge.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used effectively to promote and consolidate learning. For example, in an AS physics lesson, the teacher explained polarisation and then demonstrated how double slit interference affects this phenomenon. To reinforce the concept, learners worked on-line with slit interference simulations. They worked individually and displayed advanced IT skills as they refined their understanding and completed set questions.
- During an A2 biology lesson, the teacher provided laminated genetic grids for learners to complete timed genetic problems. They worked effectively in pairs to calculate the phenotypes, genotypes and probability of individuals carrying genes for diseases. The teacher used synoptic tests to encourage learners to recall protein synthesis and the learners demonstrated a good understanding of this work.
- Learners in an AS chemistry lesson showed a high level of practical laboratory skills while carrying out flame tests to identify unknown cations and anions. They recorded their observations carefully and made appropriate inferences employing a good level of scientific knowledge for their level of study. The teacher maintained a brisk pace to the lesson and monitored the understanding of learners regularly. Tasks were differentiated to ensure all learners were working to their full capacity.
- The assessment of learners' work is good. Teachers set formal and informal tests regularly and their feedback provides helpful advice to learners on how to improve their work.

Programmes and activities

- The high success rates and progression to university or other appropriate course illustrate that the college is offering programmes that meet the needs of learners. This is also demonstrated by the increase in enrolments for science courses over the past three years.

- College staff arrange a wide range of external visits and trips to enrich the curriculum for learners.

Guidance and support

- Learners are supported well. Attendance and punctuality are monitored regularly and learners who are absent without legitimate reason are challenged appropriately.
- All learners are set minimum target grades based on their previous GCSE performance. However, this target grade is under-used as a performance indicator and some learners were unaware of their current performance compared to their prediction.
- The learning web portal is having a positive effect to encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning and it is highly valued by them.

Leadership and management

- Leadership and management were evaluated as outstanding in the recent inspection. Managers have continued to have a strong focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning and to maintain the high standards of attainment.
- Managers and teachers recognise the importance of sharing good practice and this takes place regularly. A subject learning coach for science works well to ensure teaching is student-centred and that it uses a wide range of methods. High quality learning materials are available and the use of ICT to promote learning is actively encouraged.
- The self-assessment process is accurate and judgements are well supported by internal college inspection procedures that highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the provision.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- enhancing the use of minimum target grades as a performance indicator for learners
- further development of the procedures to capture the learner voice as a means of improving the quality of provision.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop your science provision. A copy of this letter will be sent to your Local Learning and Skills Council 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