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Better education and care

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Ms L Siddall
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Dear Ms Siddall

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 30 October and 1 November 2006. I am grateful to your 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 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 six 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

Achievement and standards

- Overall standards are good, although pass rates and the proportion of high grades dipped slightly in 2006. GCE A level and AS pass rates have been at or above the national average for the past three years. Retention is generally good and has also been at or above national average for the past three years.

- Both GCE A and AS psychology pass rates have improved over three years and there were a good proportion of A and B grades in 2006. Biology A level pass rates improved to above national average in 2006 whilst AS pass rates were at national average. Environmental science pass rates have improved over the past two years and were above national average in 2006. In chemistry, A and AS pass rates declined in 2006 and were just below national average. Physics pass rates at A and AS were at or just below national average in 2006. However, the proportion of high grades in physics at A level rose to above national average, whereas those for AS were below. The AS pass rate in geology has declined over three years and although the A level pass rate was below national average in 2006 the proportion of A and B grades was good. GCSE pass rates were low in 2006 with around a third of the students achieving an A*-C grade.
- Overall AS and A level students make progress in line with their prior attainment. However, students in psychology make better progress than their GCSE achievements would predict and geology students make less progress.
- Around 63% of students on science AS courses progress on to A2. Three quarters of the psychology students go on to a second year of study and in the other sciences the proportion is around 57%.

Teaching and learning

- Overall, teaching and learning are good and no unsatisfactory teaching was observed. Teachers are confident in their specialist knowledge and are well prepared. They make good use of Information Learning Technology (ILT) in their lessons. Useful web addresses, visual materials in the form of downloaded animations and other internet materials all form part of the lesson structure. Students respond positively to this approach which is linked to other effective activities such as small group practical work, presentations, discussion and 1-1 advice on coursework. Appropriate attention is paid to safety in laboratory practical work.
- In addition there is a strong emphasis on assessment and monitoring of individual progress. Students appreciate this and feel that it sets a high standard for them to work towards.

Quality of Provision

- The laboratory facilities for teaching science are fit for purpose but are in need of decoration and refurbishment. Data projectors were well used by teachers. However the PCs for student use in the geology/environmental science area are very slow and students go elsewhere to access the internet. The thoughtful printed course materials for AS Perspectives on Science are both interesting and stimulating to the students.

- Careers support and guidance is very good and the provision is led by an enthusiastic and research orientated head of department. Much useful work has been completed in collaboration with the science teams in comparing science students' career aspirations with the final outcomes. These data are put to good use when students complete their choice of university course. Assessments are regular and rigorous and students value this. Target grades are set and regularly reviewed. Workshops and revision sessions are part of the provision but science teams do not currently have a well thought through or consistent strategy for out of class support.

Leadership and management

- A relatively recent change to the management of curriculum areas has taken place and there are now clear lines of responsibility. The day to day management of teaching and learning and resource allocation is efficiently dealt with. Assessments are on time, well received by examination awarding bodies and accurately predict student outcomes.
- Lesson observation is well established and team leaders were confident in identifying the strengths of science teaching. They were less confident, however, on how to continue to develop and improve teaching and learning.
- Recent curriculum developments in science have included the introduction of Salters syllabuses, the planned introduction of Salters Nuffield biology in 2007 and the recent introduction of AS Perspectives on Science to broaden students' studies. Science curriculum leaders spoke confidently about their role in curriculum development and resource allocation but were less confident on using the college strategic priorities to plan for change.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- improve pass rates in geology and GCSE science and progression from AS to A2
- some teachers talk for too long and the students are passive; lessons might be more consistently active to meet the needs of the full range of ability
- teachers use ILT effectively, but little students' use of IT in lessons was observed during the visit
- decide on a strategy for examination revision and workshops that is both beneficial to students and sustainable
- build the team of science curriculum leaders into reflective managers who give both operational and academic lead to their teams.

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

Alex Falconer
Her Majesty's Inspector