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Mrs Isobel Bryce  
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Dear Mrs Bryce

Ofsted survey inspection programme - History

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 14 and 15 November 2007 to inspect work in history.

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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: visits to classes, interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, and a review of a sample of students' work.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

In recent years, there has been variation in students' rate of progress and standards attained. However, students are now making satisfactory progress overall and reach broadly average standards.

- In Key Stage 3, standards in 2006/7 were above average and progress good.
- In Key Stage 4 the trend over the past three years has been upward. However, in 2006/7, standards were below average and the progress of some students unsatisfactory. Girls did significantly better than boys.
- In the sixth form, the last AS level results were average and students made satisfactory progress. A-level results were below average with some students making unsatisfactory progress.

- The history department has analysed carefully the reasons for this pattern of results and has identified problems linked to staffing instability, teaching, the curriculum and the role of students in their own learning. The department is successfully addressing these and, as a result, standards are now broadly average and students' progress is satisfactory.

### Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory although as a result of recent improvements, has the potential to be good when students' achievement becomes consistently good.

- Teachers are well qualified and they are enthusiastic about the subject. They want students to do well and offer much support outside normal classes; for example, in the run-up to examinations and in providing additional facilities for students to do their coursework.
- In the recent past, there have been frequent changes in staff which has hindered students' progress. Staffing is now stable.
- Lessons are well planned and new assessment arrangements mean that both teachers and students have a much better idea of how well they are doing. Teachers now adjust teaching more precisely to meet needs and students' progress is more consistent in all key stages. However, the more able are under-challenged.
- Given that students tend to be reluctant to take initiatives in their work, the department is also right to be considering how to get them to take more responsibility for their own learning – asking questions, identifying resources, evaluating them and communicating findings effectively.

### Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- Until recently, Key Stage 3 has covered fairly traditional topics and the other key stages, the examination specification requirements. The department has now begun to think more actively about developing a curriculum in Key Stage 3 that will help students understand the world in which they live. The changes this year have met with an enthusiastic response from teachers and students. However, to avoid curriculum fragmentation, the department is right to consider the development of overarching themes or 'big questions' to provide coherence. The department's choices in the new A-level specifications for 2008 also seek to support the idea of creating a curriculum that is relevant to students.

## Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management is satisfactory.

- The new head of department appointed two months ago is proving very effective. She has already undertaken an audit of strengths and weaknesses and has begun, successfully, to address matters such as underperformance in GCSE, approaches to teaching and learning and improvements to the quality and use of marking and assessment. She has also introduced debate about the curriculum and as a result, positive changes have already been made.
- If this present progress continues, resulting in improved achievement by students, there is strong potential in the future for the quality of leadership and management to be judged to be 'good'.

## The subject's response to Every Child Matters

The department is aware of issues raised in Ofsted's report 'History in the Balance' and, as is already indicated elsewhere in this letter, has already taken steps to improve the quality of history provision in the school and make it more relevant to students.

## Inclusion

The school's overall profile shows differing patterns of performance for different groups of students. This has a bearing on the history department as well as other departments. However, the strongest feature in history is the difference in performance between boys and girls. The department recognises this, has analysed the causes and is taking reasonable steps to address the issues.

Students with learning difficulties and disabilities get good support especially from teaching assistants. I discussed with your head of department the possibility of Assistants giving slightly wider support to other students who are finding history difficult.

Comment on meeting the needs of more able students has already been made above.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- consolidating the recent improvements in achievement and standards, teaching and learning and the curriculum
- improving provision for more able students
- providing more opportunities for students to take more responsibility for their learning
- raising boys' achievement.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term and made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Armitage HMI  
Ofsted Specialist Adviser for History