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Dear Mr Haring

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 19 and 20 February to look at work in geography.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a focus on how literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of students' work and observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is judged as being inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Overall student achievement in geography is inadequate with standards variable across the subject.

- Student outcomes at Key Stage 3 are variable. In most lessons students make less than satisfactory progress due to the weak structure and the lack of challenge in many of the tasks set. The focus is frequently on the acquisition of factual knowledge rather than a

deeper understanding of concepts and issues. The progressive development of geographical skills is also less well developed.

- At GCSE, students attain standards above the national average. However, fewer pupils attain the higher grades in comparison to most other subjects in the school. In relation to their abilities this only represents satisfactory progress for the greater majority of these students.
- Very few students opt to take the subject post-16. Standards are below national averages and overall achievement is inadequate.
- The most able students are insufficiently challenged in lessons and many do not meet their full potential in the subject. Girls also do less well than boys who frequently monopolise discussions in class as well as those occasions when students are asked to work collaboratively.
- Teachers enjoy mainly good relationships with their students and most students are also keen to learn and have high aspirations. However, many easily lose interest and concentration where lessons lack structure or are dominated by too much teacher talk. In a minority of lessons, low level disruption hampers progress and prevents students from making best use of their time.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is inadequate.

- Some good teaching was observed; however, the greater majority of lessons were judged to be inadequate. In those lessons which were judged to be inadequate, there was a lack of structure and limited evidence of planning.
- In many lessons, there is a lack of clarity about learning outcomes for the students. In many cases these are confused with the tasks to be completed. Students are frequently told learning objectives rather than being encouraged to understand what it is they are expected to achieve.
- There is too great a focus, in too many lessons, on the accumulation of factual information rather than the progressive development of skills and understanding in geography.
- Information communication technology (ICT) is readily available in all classrooms. However, little of its potential is utilised to engage students in learning geography. ICT is used far too frequently as an alternative to the blackboard, for notes and questions, rather than as an interactive resource which brings geography into the classroom and learning to life.
- Teachers' questioning is weak. In many cases opportunities to extend and stimulate discussion are not developed. Too many question sessions are over-dominated by the teacher with a tendency to finish off answers for the students or to talk whilst they are inattentive.
- Many learners are frequently unclear about how to access the tasks set or are unclear about what is expected of them because of a lack of

clear instructions or modelling by the teacher. As a result, learning is frequently incidental or unstructured.

- Tasks set do not differentiate for the needs of all students. More able students, in particular, do not meet their full potential. The pace of learning in too many lessons is often too comfortable to challenge students.
- Plenary sessions were rushed or ineffective in observed lessons. They failed to enable students to reflect on their learning or help teachers to identify what has and what has not been learnt.
- Marking is inconsistent and often ineffective. Some students and some classes have their work marked regularly; others have little feedback. Monitoring of students' progress is also inconsistent despite sound structures being in place.
- Where teaching was seen to be good, the lesson was well planned and good use was made of the starter activity to engage and interest the students. Good attention was paid to involving learners through questioning by encouraging them to develop their reasons and explanation. The activities were practical and enabled students to become engrossed in their learning.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory overall.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 ensures coverage of national requirements in geography. However, the scheme of work is too heavily focussed on content rather than the progressive development of geographical knowledge, skills and understanding.
- There is little evidence in the planning for increasing complexity of tasks. There are also inconsistencies in the structure of units and in what is taught.
- There is an over-reliance in the planning on a narrow range of teaching and learning approaches and an over-emphasis on the text book.
- At Key Stage 4 and post-16 there is no scheme of work, merely an elaboration of what is required to be covered in the syllabus.
- Fieldwork is a relative strength, particularly in exam classes. Students benefit from their residential experiences in Somerset, North Wales or the Lake District. They speak positively about these experiences and how they support their learning in geography and bring the subject to life. However, at Key Stage 3 opportunities are more limited.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are inadequate.

- The department has judged overall provision to be satisfactory. Inspectors disagree because there is insufficient consideration being

given to improving the quality of teaching and learning in order to challenge students and raise achievement.

- All classes are taught by specialist geographers. Their subject knowledge is sound but they are less secure with up-to-date developments in the subject.
- The monitoring of provision and the quality of students' work is inadequate. There is little evidence that this is being done on a regular basis and in a systematic way to ensure that learning is of the highest standard.
- Resources are adequate. There is an over-reliance on a narrow range of text books, some of which are dated. New technology is not being used effectively to enhance learning. Insufficient use is being made of the geographically rich and diverse immediate locality to support learning in the subject.
- The department has made little use of training opportunities to improve performance and re-energise the subject. The National Strategy has had little impact on improving teaching and learning and specific support provided by subject associations and the Action Plan for geography has not been utilised.

Subject issue

The extent to which literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography is currently inadequate.

- Students have good generic literacy skills which are not being fully utilised in geography to both engage and stretch them.
- Most units of work at Key Stage 3 identify some opportunities to write in different genres and to develop geographical vocabulary. There is little evidence from students' work to show that these opportunities have been used consistently to enhance learning in geography.
- Displays around classrooms show little evidence of how literacy in geography is being supported and developed.
- Lack of rigorous monitoring of students' work means opportunities to address issues such as spelling and vocabulary are not happening.
- Texts are often used in a limited way. The frequent focus on completion of questions from books or worksheets encourages simple comprehension rather than encouraging students to be selective in their retrieval of information or in developing critical analysis. There is also little evidence of students engaging with a variety of geography texts, both fictional and non-fictional, for reading and enjoyment.
- Lessons provide only limited opportunities for students to develop their speaking and listening skills. Students lose interest in many lessons and do not listen. Insufficient strategies for students to develop their oral work are employed.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is inadequate overall.

- Activities are not planned to meet the needs of the full range of abilities in the mixed ability classes. The most able students, in particular, are not being stretched by many of the tasks set.
- There are no strategies in place to support girls' learning in geography. Too many girls are currently underachieving in the subject.
- There is a lack of effective monitoring and support for those students who are underachieving in the subject.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include the need to:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning
- improve the quality and effectiveness of marking and monitoring of students' progress in line with school policy
- plan a curriculum which meets the needs of students better and makes more imaginative and effective use of the resources available
- make more effective use of the subject specific support offered through subject associations and the 'Action Plan for Geography' in order to improve the quality of teaching and keep abreast of current developments in the subject
- ensure that provision in the subject and the progress that the department is making is monitored closely so that support can be offered appropriately.

Religious education (RE)

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of lessons and SACRE.

The overall effectiveness of RE is judged to be inadequate because the current provision does not meet the statutory requirements for RE at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. However, the effectiveness of the provision for the subject in Key Stage 3 and the full course GCSE option group incorporates a number of good features.

Achievement and standards

Standards reached in RE, where this is provided, are generally above average and achievement is good.

- Results at GCSE in recent years have varied considerably, reflecting the changing models of curriculum provision made for the subject. In

2006, when all pupils were entered for the short course at the end of Year 10, results were well below the national average and achievement was inadequate. However, in 2005, when all pupils were entered for the full course, results were above the national average and reflected good achievement. Students taking the A Level courses in Philosophy make satisfactory progress although results tend to be below the national average. The pupils currently following the full course GCSE in Year 10 are making good progress and the standards they are attaining are above average.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are well above average and represent good achievement. Changes in the curriculum in Year 9 in 2006/7 led to a marked improvement in the performance of boys and the gap in attainment between boys and girls closed significantly.
- The strength of the pupils' achievement is their ability to use higher order thinking skills to interrogate, analyse and evaluate religious and philosophical issues and concepts. The pattern of achievement at Key Stage 3, while good overall, is rather uneven and, with a more coherent curriculum and better assessment arrangements, could be even higher. For example, while their understanding and evaluation of ideas about life after death or the existence of God is good, their grasp of the meaning and significance of the key beliefs of Christianity is more limited.
- RE makes a positive contribution towards pupils' personal development particularly at Key Stage 3. Their attitudes towards the subject are good, supported by the strong focus on challenging pupils to think for themselves. Pupils respond positively to the emphasis placed on issues of personal and global significance. They are clear that the subject provides very good opportunities for them to articulate their own ideas, to express opinions, and learn to respect the views of others. The contribution made by RE to the development of pupils' understanding of cultural diversity and the significance of religion in the daily lives of individuals and communities could be extended further.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- While the quality and effectiveness of teaching in RE is variable, it is good overall. Where teaching is at its best the strengths include: effective use of strategies, including ICT, to capture pupils' attention and engage them in the topics; very good subject knowledge and skilful use of questioning; high expectations about the level of challenge expected of the pupils; and good use of discussion and group work to extend learning. Marking is regular, manageable and supportive. Some good use is made of self and peer assessment although there is scope to extend this further.
- The relationships are usually good and the teachers often model the expectation that pupils will take responsibility for their learning and will treat issues maturely and intelligently.

- Some aspects of teaching and learning are sometimes slightly less effective. Lesson planning rarely makes clear how the tasks will meet the needs of the whole ability range. Limited use is made of levels to indicate to pupils how they are making progress. The links between lessons and units of work are not always made explicit when, for example, plenaries are not always planned carefully enough.
- Occasionally, the pattern of learning is slightly over-structured and teacher-centred. As a result, pupils have insufficient opportunity to take an active role in shaping the direction of lessons, the pace of learning sometimes drops, and pupils lose concentration and focus.
- By contrast, the structuring of learning in some A Level classes is not planned in sufficient detail and as a result the pace and focus of learning is not always good enough.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the RE curriculum is inadequate because the provision at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form does not meet the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. Where RE is provided at Key Stage 3 and the full course GCSE group, provision is satisfactory.

- RE at Key Stage 4 is provided for a modest cohort of pupils taking the full course GCSE. It is anticipated that numbers opting for the course will rise next year. Some elements of the subject are covered in the Global Dimension of the General Studies GCSE course which all pupils follow. This has the potential to provide a very positive context for the delivery of RE for all, but at present the RE component is not coherent or focused enough to meet the requirements of the agreed syllabus. There is no provision for core RE in the sixth form.
- The full course GCSE syllabus has been carefully selected to ensure that the focus of work at Key Stage 3 on religious, philosophical and ethical issues is sustained into Key Stage 4. This is further extended into the Philosophy A Level courses, although these do not include a focus on religion.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 includes some innovative and challenging features designed to engage pupils' interest and ensure the work has relevance to their lives. Many units are designed to promote higher order skills of analysis and evaluation, and the engagement with demanding religious and philosophical thinking. In practice, only limited use is made of the agreed syllabus in designing the curriculum, and a number of the topics, which are particularly valuable and demanding, are not obviously linked to the levels of progression in the syllabus.
- Insufficient use is being made of the levels of attainment in planning. As a result, the overall pattern of progression and continuity in the Key Stage 3 curriculum is not entirely secure. Some units offering high levels of challenge are followed by others which are much less demanding. Also, the links between topics are not made explicit enough.

- Significant and thoughtful work has been undertaken to develop the pattern of assessment in RE. A series of challenging assessment tasks are in place. Much of the marking of work at Key Stage 3 and GCSE is impressive with extended and detailed guidance to pupils on their work and how to improve. However, pupils do not always understand the use being made of levels on their work or how the assessments relate to those levels. While some assessments at Key Stage 3 include clear levelled criteria, others do not and not all relate clearly to the pattern of progression incorporated in the agreed syllabus.
- Very little use is made of enrichment activities such as fieldwork and visitors to extend learning and enable pupils to engage directly with the impact of religion in people's lives.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory with good features.

- The subject is led by an experienced and committed head of department who is supported well by his subject colleague and receives good line management from within the senior leadership team. A strength of the leadership is the expectation regarding the potential of the subject to provide a high level of intellectual challenge.
- The self-evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the subject are generally accurate although there is a slight tendency to underestimate the strengths of the provision. The subject improvement plan is closely aligned with whole school priorities and is focused clearly on closing gaps in achievement.
- The subject has benefited recently from opportunities to become more actively involved in wider whole-school initiatives. The work on the Global Dimension curriculum has been worthwhile and the engagement of the department in the peer observation programme is beginning to prove effective.
- The opportunities for subject-based professional development have been very limited including support or guidance from the local authority with the process of implementing the planning and assessment demands of the agreed syllabus. The head of subject has taken the initiative in developing links with an advanced skills RE teacher in another local school to provide an opportunity for some exchange of ideas.
- The arrangements for monitoring the work of the department are under-developed. Observation of teaching and of pupils' books by the senior leadership team is rather limited and the monitoring of the curriculum has not enabled the school to identify clearly the gaps in provision at Key Stage 4.
- The accommodation for the department is adequate although one of the main teaching rooms is used for a variety of purposes and, as a result, does not have a strong subject flavour. Access to ICT for pupils is very limited. The quality of display is not a strength of the subject.

The promotion of community cohesion

Religious education makes a satisfactory contribution to the promotion of community cohesion in the school. The subject encourages pupils to take matters of faith and religion seriously and to respect the views of others. Some units of work on, for example, Islam in the modern world in Year 8 provide good opportunities for pupils to explore important issues about religion in contemporary life. While the Global Dimension curriculum at Key Stage 4 provides a very positive opportunity for pupils to engage with significant political, social, economic and moral issues, this does not include a strong focus on religious diversity and the impact of faith in people's lives. The RE curriculum does not provide much opportunity for pupils to engage directly with the religious and cultural diversity of the wider local area. Given the relatively monocultural nature of the school population, this is a significant missed opportunity.

Inclusion

The subject provides good challenge for the most able. Pupils with learning difficulties are often helped to make the appropriate progress in lessons and those struggling with the demands of the A Level courses in Philosophy are given additional support. However, on occasions, insufficient attention is given to planning to meet the needs of the whole ability range in some of the mixed ability classes. Good progress has been made in adapting the curriculum at Key Stage 3 to address the needs of boys and this has resulted in a significant improvement in their performance.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring the curriculum at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form secures greater compliance with the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus
- incorporating, if the Global Dimension is selected as the vehicle for the delivery of RE at Key Stage 4, a stronger focus on issues related to religion
- developing the use made of the levels of attainment in both planning and assessment to secure, in particular, greater progression and continuity in the Key Stage 3 curriculum
- ensuring all teaching incorporates more opportunities for pupils to take a more active role in their learning
- extending the opportunities for fieldwork and use of visitors in RE.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography and RE in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your Local Authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector
Specialist Adviser for Geography