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Dear Mrs Fennell

### Ofsted survey inspection programme - geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 March 2008 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of students' work and observation of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

### Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Teacher assessments at the end of Key Stage 3 indicate average standards. Achievement and progress from Year 7 to Year 9 are good. Some more able students complete work of very high quality, and some lower ability learners make very good progress.
- Students use geographical terms accurately and demonstrate good ability to give explanations and express opinions on topics such as the exploitation of rainforests. Their work is generally presented well with effective use of diagrams, but they make less use of maps. Their understanding of physical processes is good. They have had limited opportunities to develop fieldwork

techniques or to frame questions for geographical enquiries and their skills are less developed in these areas.

- Most students in Key Stage 3 respond well to the department's high expectations of behaviour. However, a few do not always act responsibly.
- Most students achieve well in Key Stage 4 and above their predicted GCSE grade. In 2007, standards were average at A\* to C, but above average at A\*/A, especially for boys. Coursework is good and most students summarise arguments well when representing different viewpoints. Most students apply themselves to study very well and their exercise books indicate good understanding of GCSE topics.
- Standards at A Level are good. In 2007, most students achieved at or above the levels expected of them. At AS Level, girls were more successful than boys and several of the latter did not realise their potential, after failing to complete their coursework satisfactorily. Most Year 12 students in the current year are achieving standards at or above their target AS grade. While Year 13's written work demonstrates very good application and understanding, they lack the confidence to contribute orally in class discussion.

### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge, plan lessons thoroughly and set clear learning intentions which are shared with students.
- Teaching engages students in a variety of activities that promote and progress learning. For example in an excellent Year 9 lesson, lower ability students made good progress in a lesson where they used a fortune line technique to plot changes in their feelings as climate change unfolds in the future.
- Very occasionally teaching is less than satisfactory; here the work is not appropriately matched to students' needs so they make insufficient progress.
- Excellent use is made of data projectors and interactive graphics for stimulating and topical visual materials to motivate learners. For example in a lesson on rivers, students were helped to understand different features with the help of video clips, pictures and annotated diagrams and graphs. However, the students' own use of information and communication technology (ICT) in class has been limited by lack of access to resources.
- Teachers have high expectations for written work and set challenging tasks that are generally matched well to students' abilities and build on prior attainment. The use of extended homework tasks at Key Stage 3 provides students with the opportunity for in-depth research. However, these tasks focus on information gathering and give insufficient emphasis to the development of geographical enquiry skills.
- The quality of assessment is good and students are fully aware of the assessment criteria. Key Stage 3 students know how well they are progressing through unit assessments and the marks and comments they receive on their work. However, there is variability in the quality and regularity of the marking. Examination groups are regularly assessed using previous questions so they know whether they are on track to meet their predicted targets.

- Students enjoy geography as the higher numbers opting to study GCSE geography in the last two years testifies. The majority engage fully in lesson activities and respond positively to the opportunities to express their opinions and ideas. However, a few Year 10 students have low aspirations, showed little commitment in lessons and are achieving below their potential.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- The geography scheme of work is very well designed. The department has carefully considered how units build on each other and progressively develop students' geographical understanding and skills in a range of stimulating contexts. The scheme is colour coded indicating clearly the contribution made to key areas such as numeracy and thinking skills, as well as learners' personal and social development through collaborative and independent learning.
- Curriculum topics are relevant for young people today and they have been selected to give breadth and balance. Students have excellent opportunities to study places such as China in depth and important world issues such as climate change, refugees and environmental sustainability. Field experience is integrated into every year. This includes a visit to the tropical environment of a living forest and gathering data for coursework in Dovedale.
- The school is a specialist language college and since 2004 humanities has been a second specialism. This has resulted in a richer geography curriculum for students through improved visual resources, an extensive fieldwork programme and better links with primary schools. Visits abroad led by geography teachers include a Year 9 visit to Paris and the study of plate tectonics in the Auvergne, and visits to Switzerland and Iceland for GCSE and the Sixth form students. Students also have extracurricular opportunities to participate in activities such as a geography club and geography competitions. The college also has "Vocational Second Specialism" status and the rich programme of field work through the Key Stages is a good example of applied learning.

## Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are outstanding.

- Geography is led very effectively by the head of humanities. With the two full-time geography teachers, this innovating team has worked very well together to explore new ideas and approaches and incorporate them into their teaching. This includes using interactive technologies, developing a 'learn to learn' curriculum, and extending the fieldwork programme. Resources and plans are developed jointly and shared.
- The department has benefited from opportunities to work with others. For example, they have attended Post-16 network meetings and workshops, worked with the Local Authority on thinking skills and been involved in a project to share middle management practice with other schools.

- The department's work is monitored closely through observation of lessons, and scrutiny of plans and students' work. Students' progress is tracked closely so that underachievement is identified and can be tackled.
- Resources are good with up-to-date textbooks, fieldwork equipment, tablet PCs and video projectors. A class set of laptop computers has recently been purchased. Specialist college funding is used to employ an administrative assistant, who efficiently supports all the department's activities and development of resources.
- The department's self-evaluation is outstanding. It provides a thorough and honest appraisal, pays attention to the student voice and leads to clear priorities for development. In conjunction with the detailed departmental review by senior managers last autumn, this has provided the school with an accurate assessment of the department's performance. Together with the clear vision of the head of department, the successful track record, and detailed strategic plan, this puts the department in an excellent position for future development.

## Subject issue

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

- Geography lessons are planned well to play a part in improving literacy standards. The department has participated in a school literacy working group and has adopted suggested strategies within the curriculum.
- Good opportunities to promote literacy are included for all years. These include reading and responding to poetry and literature, different forms of writing including stories with a sense of place, newspaper reports, persuasive leaflets. Students have frequent opportunities for extended writing in geography, particularly as part of the Key Stage 3 unit assessments. In a Year 10 lesson students were taught how to use persuasive writing effectively to improve the quality of their GCSE coursework. Accuracy in the use of geographical vocabulary is stressed and key words are displayed in classrooms for the topics being taught. The school has an agreed policy for literacy marking which is used within the department.
- The contribution of listening and speaking skills feature less often in the geography curriculum. In a Year 10 lesson students participated in a debate on the Three Gorges Dam; some were articulate and persuasive in their geographical arguments, but others have yet to develop these skills, as well as to become effective listeners.

## Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is good overall.

- With the exception of Year 9, geography is taught in mixed ability classes. The scheme of work indicates how learning activities and topics should be made accessible for lower achieving students in this context and extension activities are identified for the gifted and talented.
- Teachers plan differentiated learning objectives for lessons, and frequently provide different resource sheets to support lower achieving students.

Specific consideration is given less often to the more able. The teaching successfully gives lower achieving students the confidence to tackle challenging activities and be effective geographers.

- The department is aware that planning how best to use teaching assistants to support learners should be more effective. However, good use is made of learning mentors to support students with GCSE coursework.

#### Areas for improvement

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

- increase the opportunities for students to develop fieldwork techniques and geographical enquiry skills and consider how students' personal use of ICT can contribute to this
- further consider ways to improve the behaviour and motivation of the few students who do not contribute positively in lessons and submit coursework
- develop students' speaking and listening skills so that more effective use is made of presentation, debate and discussion for geographical learning.

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

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and 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

Andrea Tapsfield  
Additional Inspector