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Dear Ms Dixon

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 21 and 22 April to look at work in history.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on information and communication technology (ICT) in history and on provision for gifted and talented history students.

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, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, an analysis of students' work and the observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are average. However, achievement and standards vary between the key stages.

- At Key Stage 3 standards are average and achievement is satisfactory. Evidence from books and lessons indicates that most students are making satisfactory progress although some students make good progress.
- At GCSE standards are above average and achievement is good. In 2007, 73% gained A*-C grades in history and this is higher than the national average. The proportion of students gaining A*-A grades also exceeded the national average. Departmental monitoring indicates that

students in Year 11 are on track to attain their targets. As a result, the proportion of students attaining A*-C grades is likely to be much higher this year than last. Students are doing well at GCSE because of the quality of the teaching they receive in Years 10 and 11.

- Relatively small numbers of students take history at AS and A2 levels. Although there has been some underachievement in recent years, some students are achieving above their targets. On the whole, in the sixth form standards are average and achievement is satisfactory.
- Students are developing a clear understanding of the topics they study. Some have a good knowledge and can analyse sources appropriately. When given the opportunity, many can articulate sound views and provide suitable evidence to support their opinions.
- Most students are enthusiastic about their studies and are keen to learn. In the words of one Year 9 student 'It's never boring. You learn something new every lesson'. Relationships between students are positive and there is a sound rapport between staff and students. Behaviour is satisfactory and sometimes good, although not all low-level disruption is dealt with promptly. Student attitudes are generally constructive. Classrooms are welcoming and displays are vibrant. On the whole, there is a positive climate for learning.
- Overall, students' personal development is satisfactory and history contributes to students' general progress in a number of ways, for example, through the development of important skills for life, such as group work, analysis of evidence and making presentations. However, the limited use of ICT in history means that opportunities to develop students' ICT skills are missed.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory, although some good teaching was observed on this visit.

- Teachers are well qualified and enthusiastic. They have good subject knowledge and a clear understanding of examination requirements. This strengthens learning for students, especially at GCSE. They want students to do well and offer much support outside normal lessons, especially at Key Stage 4. This is much appreciated by students.
- Lessons are well planned and have a logical structure. Teachers know what they are trying to achieve and this is clearly communicated to students. Teachers consistently use a common lesson planning format and this provides a clear focus on objectives and outcomes to structure learning and promote achievement. The needs of those students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are regularly considered, but the needs of those who are gifted in history are not. As a result, the needs of all students are not fully met.
- Teaching is stronger in examination classes, especially at Key Stage 4. In these lessons there was good questioning by the teachers and students had the opportunity to give their views, a feature welcomed and commented on by students. There is a clear emphasis upon developing knowledge, understanding and skills in all year groups.

- Teachers use a range of activities so lessons have variety to help motivate and stimulate student interest and engagement. However, pace is lacking in too many lessons, especially at Key Stage 3. As a result, there is insufficient time to review learning which has taken place in lessons and opportunities for students, in particular those at Key Stage 3, to pose their own questions, discuss opposing views and reach their own conclusions are missed.
- Exercise books at Key Stage 3 are generally marked in line with the department's policy but comments do not always provide clear guidance for students on how to improve. However, this is not the case at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form where comments are detailed and helpful. Some students at Key Stage 3 were unclear about their targets for improvement.
- Assessment is generally accurate; the department has thorough assessment procedures and there is regular evaluation by teachers of students' progress through set assessment tasks. At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, results are collated and analysed and the marking of set assessment tasks are standardised. However, such good practice does not take place at Key Stage 3.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The curriculum is broad and balanced and meets all requirements. During the current academic year the department has undertaken a major review of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and is considering a thematic approach. Final decisions – including how to integrate local history – have yet to be made.
- Students at GCSE enjoy studying the course in modern world history, while sixth form students like studying, for example, sixteenth century Britain and Europe not least as it is a change from the modern world. Students are engaged by the topics and appreciate the relevance of what they are studying when links are made. Year 11 students, for example, could make clear links between what they had studied on America and the depression with today's world economic difficulties.
- Some cross-curricular links are made, especially to citizenship through the study of human rights and slavery, and politics and government. However, links to other curricular areas are not strong.
- Schemes of work and suggested lesson plans provide a useful basis for teachers to prepare their lessons. Together with a series of detailed resource packs, they give teachers a firm foundation on which to begin their preparation. However, as yet the department does not identify within the schemes specific tasks to challenge gifted history students and precise opportunities to develop students' skills in ICT.
- Students enjoy the visits to places of historical interest such as the Year 7 trip to Helmsley Castle and Rievaulx Abbey and the Year 8 visit to the Royal Armouries in Leeds. Two sixth form students have recently visited Auschwitz as part of the 'Lessons from Auschwitz' programme and plans are in place for them to work with Year 9 prior to that year group studying the Holocaust and visiting the Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are satisfactory.

- Since the start of this academic year the department has been led by an acting head of department whilst the current head of department has been on maternity leave. The acting head of department is dedicated and thoughtful and has worked hard to ensure that the department has maintained its focus on improving provision and raising standards and achievement. He is well respected by colleagues and by students for his enthusiasm for the subject and for the support he provides.
- The department is well organised and runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Documentation is clear and well presented.
- Self-evaluation is reasonably accurate in identifying strengths of the subject and what needs to be done to bring about further improvement.
- Good practice is shared and students comment on how much they appreciate the way history teachers do all they can to help them.
- Examination results at GCSE and AS/A2 are thoroughly analysed. However, there is no similar analysis of data at Key Stage 3. As a result, the opportunity is missed to include the outcomes of that review in future departmental planning.

Subject issue: information and communication technology (ICT)

The use of ICT in history is satisfactory.

- Digital projectors are occasionally used in history teaching but currently the department shares them with colleagues across the humanities faculty. Students enjoy it when they are used because, as they pointed out, digital technology helps to bring variety to their learning.
- Students have the opportunity to produce work on computers, to research on the internet, and to create and deliver their own PowerPoint presentations. However, the use of ICT by teachers and by students is limited. Opportunities to develop ICT skills are not taken partly because they are not identified within schemes of work.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

The provision for gifted history students is satisfactory.

- Some opportunities are identified within schemes of work for gifted history students to develop their interests and abilities. However, such references are limited.
- Plans are in place to develop provision outside lessons for gifted history students. For example, some of the gifted history students in Year 8 are about to test out some teaching and learning materials based on the Merchant Adventurers Hall in York and developed by the acting head of department during a recent work placement.

- Lesson plans mention differentiation but tend to concentrate on the needs of less able students. They do not identify opportunities to challenge gifted history students and do not indicate clearly what is expected of them. As a result, opportunities to challenge these students to attain even higher standards are missed.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion is satisfactory.

- Lesson planning takes into account the needs of most but not all groups of students. Whereas students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported in history classes and make the same progress as their peers, the provision for gifted history students is limited.
- The differences in performance between boys and girls are carefully monitored and appropriate action is taken. For example, steps have been taken to remedy the underperformance of girls at GCSE in 2007 and the intervention strategies and targeting of individual students are having a positive impact.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing teaching and learning strategies so that there is sufficient time in lessons for students to undertake their learning, discuss what they are discovering and review what they have learned
- identifying precise opportunities for developing students' ICT skills within the schemes of work
- improving provision for more able history students
- analysing student performance data at Key Stage 3 and using it to inform planning in the department.

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 and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Michael Maddison
Her Majesty's Inspector
Ofsted's Specialist Adviser for History