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Mr Fowle  
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Dear Mr Fowle

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 21 and 22 May 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is judged as being satisfactory with some aspects which are good.

Achievement and standards

Standards at Key Stage 4 are good while at Key Stage 3 they are satisfactory. Overall students' achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Students' progress at Key Stage 3 is hampered by the fact that currently no geography is being taught in Year 7. This is compounded by the fact that many students' experience of geography in their primary schools is limited.

- Although middle ability and more able students make good progress to catch up and reach standards which are in line with national expectations, less able students struggle and make insufficient progress by the end of Key Stage 3.
- A majority of students have basic geographical skills, although mapwork remains underdeveloped. They are able to describe basic differences and similarities between localities and have a general understanding of global issues and sustainability. Their in-depth knowledge and understanding of contrasting localities, and especially of Europe, is less well developed.
- Most students enjoy geography and the numbers opting to take the subject at GCSE are double the national average. Most make good progress and examination results are usually above national averages. However, fewer of them attain the highest grades especially those more able students who opt to complete the course in one year.
- Relationships in class are generally good with students responding positively to the tasks set. They feel secure in those lessons which are heavily structured; however most are not independent learners.
- Students are well supported by established classroom procedures which ensure that most students can access their learning.
- Behaviour is satisfactory overall. It is good in most higher and middle ability sets but a minority of students in the lower ability sets can disrupt learning for others through inattention and shouting out.

### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is generally satisfactory with some features which are good.

- Lessons are well structured and activities are well sequenced to enable students to build up their knowledge, skills and understanding of the subject.
- The best lessons provide opportunities for pupils to discuss ideas collaboratively and consider alternative opinions and arguments. For example during a lesson on coastal management students used a range of photographs, diagrams and written information to reach conclusions about the most suitable protection strategies.
- Teachers have secure knowledge of their subject and explanations and instructions are clear enabling students to access their learning well.
- Frequent use is made of computer generated presentations to support teaching. Less use is made of these resources to interact with students on a regular basis to support their learning.
- Activities are too directed, even in good lessons. Opportunities are missed to give students a chance to take responsibility for their own learning.

- There are insufficient opportunities for enquiry based approaches and most able students are often occupied rather than truly challenged.
- The brisk pace of lessons engages and occupies students but does not provide sufficient time for them to reflect on their learning.
- Marking is regular, tells students what they have achieved but less about what they need to do to improve.
- Materials and approaches are not always appropriate to meet the needs of students in the lower sets.

### Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory overall.

- Recent changes initiated by the recently appointed head of department have improved the quality of what is now being taught at Key Stage 3. The new scheme of work is allowing for a greater use of a wider range of teaching and learning approaches and resources.
- This new issues based curriculum helps support students' learning about diversity, different cultures and inequality. This supports promotion of community cohesion well.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum may cover issues well but does not allow for sufficient opportunities to study localities in greater depth. There is little coverage of Europe. Fieldwork remains under developed.
- The current constriction of the geography curriculum at Key Stage 3 into two years does not allow for more in depth study or sufficient time for students to reflect on their learning. The school has recognised this and is putting alternative structures in place for next year.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 4 meets the requirements of the examination well. Good quality fieldwork enriches students' experiences and learning.
- The lack of easy access to information communication technology (ICT) and ICT resources constrains the opportunities to utilise geographical information systems (GIS) or other topical resources.

### Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are currently satisfactory.

- This is an improving department. The small team of geographers have a clear commitment and enthusiasm to improve the quality of geography provision.
- The recently appointed head of department has a clear vision and plan of action as to how the subject is to develop and meet the needs of the students better.

- Clear priorities have been identified and the deficiencies of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 have been tackled. Units of work have been updated to better reflect a more issues based curriculum.
- Most classes are taught by specialist geographers. Their subject knowledge is good but they are less secure with up-to-date developments in the subject.
- There has been a lack of subject focussed professional development centred on improving geographical practice. Little use has been made of the support provided by subject associations.
- The monitoring of provision and the quality of students' work is currently focussed more on processes rather than student outcomes.

### Subject issue

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

- There are good opportunities at Key Stage 3, especially in Year 9, for students to write extensively in a variety of genres. There are fewer opportunities at Key Stage 4 where writing is often geared to shorter examination style questions.
- Students, especially boys, are hampered by poor writing skills. Spelling remains a weakness for many.
- There is a strong focus on improving writing with writing frames frequently being used in lessons. Students are also expected to make regular use of key vocabulary.
- Over direction in many lessons reduces opportunities for speaking and listening to be developed.
- Displays around classrooms show good evidence of how literacy in geography is being supported and developed.

### Areas for improvement

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

- improve the quality of learning and challenge in lessons by sharing good classroom practice and ideas more frequently
- utilise the support of subject associations and engage in professional development to sustain improving practice
- allow students more opportunities to reflect on their learning and develop their confidence to become more independent learners
- ensure improved use of new technology to better engage pupils in their learning and to make more frequent use of topical resources and geographical information systems.

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

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow  
Her Majesty's Inspector  
Specialist Adviser for Geography