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Mr D Forshaw  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Forshaw

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 01 and 02 December 2008 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, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons or part-lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are average.

- Students make satisfactory progress in acquiring and developing historical skills, knowledge and understanding. Students on the 'fast track' programme in Year 9 are beginning to interpret evidence with confidence and can make accurate comments on its usefulness for historians. Students in Years 10 and 11 have a good understanding of the topics they are studying but their skills in handling sources are variable. A significant number are fully aware of the value of history but others have a less secure knowledge of how historians make their judgements.

- Students following the 'Opening Minds' programme in Years 7 and 8 make well-founded links between history and other subjects, English in particular. However, their understanding of the nature of evidence and how it is used to put together a picture of the past needs to be further developed. Nonetheless, they produce thought-provoking poetry, empathising with soldiers fighting in the trenches during the First World War.
- Over time, standards at GCSE are broadly average but improving and the 2008 results were the best the school has had for four years. The school recognises, however, that students who do well at Key Stage 3 in history do not always fulfil their potential in their GCSE examinations.
- Standards and achievement in A-level history show no consistent trend over time. However, more students are now opting for A-level courses. Achievement in the current Year 13 group is satisfactory. Several students have applied to read history at university.
- Students' personal development is good. They behave well in lessons and generally enjoy the subject-matter. When given opportunities to work in groups, they do so maturely and support other students with their learning.

### Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Teachers demonstrate secure knowledge of the subject and produce good resources for their students in all three key stages.
- Classroom management is good and relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves are a strength.
- Teachers in the 'Opening Minds' programme reinforce students' learning well by linking historical topics with other subjects, the study of Shakespeare's England 'Mind your head' for example.
- In the most effective lessons, sophisticated questioning provides realistic challenge for students and requires them to justify their answers. However, challenge is inconsistent across the subject and teachers are sometimes satisfied with brief answers rather than extended comment. In these lessons, students are not required to think as deeply about the subject-matter as they could.
- On occasions, there is too much teacher direction of learning and students sometimes lose concentration as a result.
- Assessment is satisfactory. In the 'Opening Minds' programme the lack of emphasis on the development of historical skills makes any assessment of students' historical abilities difficult. Nonetheless, marking is good in all key stages and teachers give their students accurate advice on how they can improve their work. Moreover, teachers are exposed to well-ordered and accurate data about student performance higher up the school and, as a result, have identified that students should be performing at higher levels in their GCSE examinations.

## Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- The 'Opening Minds' initiative is relatively new but already comprises some well planned topics, 'Time Travelling with the Doctor' for example, which encourage students to be creative in their learning and make links between different periods of history and across other subjects of the curriculum. However, the development of students' historical skills is not fully embedded into this programme.
- The 'fast track' course contains a variety of historical projects and allows for students to begin their GCSE course at the beginning of Year 9, with tuition planned for AS history in Year 11.
- Planning is sound and teachers prepare their lessons with the varying abilities of their students in mind.
- The number of students opting for GCSE history is low but the World Studies faculty, of which history is a key component, is looking at alternative accredited courses to attract more students to choose history at Key Stage 4.
- Students benefit from several historical trips and visits, to Speke Hall and to the Normandy battlefields for example.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are satisfactory.

- Although relatively new in post, the lead planner for history has already begun to have a positive impact on provision for the subject and is supported well by her colleagues in the World Studies faculty.
- History self-review is facilitated by the impressive whole-school procedures which include the clear and comprehensive data produced by the school. The subject leader places appropriate emphasis on the scrutiny of planning and of students' assignments. As a result, self-review is both rigorous and accurate.
- There are increasingly effective links between the World Studies and 'Opening Minds' faculties and, as a result, a clear vision for history is developing.
- History runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis and there are secure levels of teamwork amongst staff.

## Subject issue: ICT

The use of ICT in history is good.

- There are impressive assignments produced using ICT by students in 'Opening Minds' and also on the 'fast track' programme.
- Students also use Moviemaker with confidence; for example, the moving film produced by a Year 7 student as part of Holocaust Memorial Day.

- Teachers produce well-researched PowerPoint presentations to introduce new topics and have also added extensive history material to the school's learning platform.
- Students are encouraged to submit their coursework via the learning platform and it is marked on line by their teachers.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

The provision for gifted history students is good.

- Gifted history students are well catered for by the 'fast track' programme beginning in Year 8 and by the range of history projects in which they can take part.
- The opportunities for early GCSE study in Year 9 provide gifted students with the challenge to reach the highest standards. Students enjoy this challenge and some are already looking forward to opting for AS study at the beginning of Year 11.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising standards and achievement in history
- embedding opportunities for students to develop historical skills in the 'Opening Minds' course in Years 7 and 8
- challenging students to think more deeply about the subject-matter.

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

Jim Kidd  
Additional Inspector