

13 October 2008

Mr K Hall
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Dear Mr Hall

Ofsted 2008-09 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 25-26 September 2008 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had particular focus on creative thinking in RE.

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, discussions with students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is good.

- The results for the large cohort of students entered for the GCSE Short Course in 2008 were well above the national average and represented good overall achievement. However, the gap in performance between girls and boys was very wide, with girls gaining significantly higher grades. Results in the A2 examinations in 2008 were also positive with the majority of students gaining grades which were above their targets.
- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory. Most students acquire a reasonable grasp of the key features of different religions and can offer thoughtful responses to issues under consideration with a number producing some good extended personal writing. Where progress is slightly less secure is in relation to their ability to make coherent links between aspects of their

learning in order to extend their ability to engage in more critical independent enquiry into the key concepts and questions of RE. Much of the more extended written work relates to thinking in relation to 'learning from' rather than 'learning about' religion.

- The personal development of students in the context of RE is good. Many display a lively interest in the subject and value the opportunities it provides to discuss and debate issues of importance. They are clear that the subject has promoted their understanding of, and respect for, diversity. Attitudes to RE are usually positive; however, a small minority do not always concentrate or engage appropriately with the subject.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Teaching in RE has a number of important strengths. Classes are usually well-managed and relationships with students are good. Effective use is made of praise and good humour to encourage students to engage in their learning. Teachers use a variety of activities to maintain interest taking account of students' different styles of learning. Expectations are high and are reflected in the stimulating displays in classrooms.
- Lessons are well-organised to ensure learning starts promptly and resources are readily available. A range of increasingly effective strategies are being deployed to promote boys' success, recognising that this is a priority for improvement. Teachers intervene effectively to support less able students.
- At Key Stage 3, where achievement is satisfactory, a number of features of teaching sometimes narrow progress. Students are not always clear how specific tasks relate to the wider purpose and direction of their learning. One impact of this is that more able students are unable to work independently in order to move ahead more quickly. The sequencing of activities in some lessons is uncertain and, as a result, learning can lose its sense of focus. While learning objectives and outcomes are always shared with students these are not always reinforced or explained clearly enough.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- Overall the curriculum for RE is good, reflecting the positive provision made at Key Stage 4 and the examination opportunities for post-16 students. The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory.
- The Key Stage 4 curriculum for RE is well planned and all students have good opportunities to accredit their learning through the short course GCSE or Asdan qualifications. There is a successful GCE A level provision and all students in the sixth form explore religious, moral, social and cultural issues through their General Studies or Preparation for Life programmes.
- A good start has been made to adjusting the Key Stage 3 schemes of work for RE to take account of the 2008 Leeds Agreed Syllabus and the wider school initiatives in relation to the review of the curriculum. The department is also taking the opportunity to explore some innovative approaches to the delivery of RE in Year 7 and is aware of the need to review these developments carefully.

- Some of the current units of work at Key Stage 3 are not wholly effective. In some cases, the overarching purpose and focus of the units are not clear enough. Units do not always make the pattern of progression and continuity explicit and limited use is made of levels in planning. A strong enquiry-based approach to learning is not yet fully and consistently embedded.
- The department is working hard to develop a programme of enrichment activities to support student learning through use of local faith tutors in assemblies and building other links with local religious communities. This work is at an early stage.
- Work is marked regularly and consistent use is made of a simple and manageable grading system. Progress of students at GCSE and A level is monitored carefully and their work clearly indicates what they need to do to improve.
- Assessment arrangements in RE at Key Stage 3 are being developed through the identification of a series of assessed tasks and the introduction of a process for standardising judgements. To date, the impact on students' understanding of their progress is limited but greater use is being made of levels and of peer and self assessment to strengthen these arrangements.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- RE benefits from a well-run department which is supported effectively by the senior leadership of the school. The newly appointed head of subject has quickly established her position and has a clear grasp of the priorities for further improvement. She is being very well supported by her main subject colleague. The subject has a strong teaching team who have a clear commitment and highly professional approach towards their work.
- There is a drive for improvement supported by a well-devised action planning process, by good use of data to analyse student progress, and by effective monitoring arrangements. The inspection has largely confirmed the subject's self-evaluation.
- The department has successfully accessed a range of local and national professional development opportunities and is keeping abreast of current initiatives in the subject. Clear links are being forged with wider whole school developments. The subject is well-resourced and the two suited teaching rooms are attractive.

Creative thinking in RE

Some positive initiatives are being taken to develop opportunities for students to use more creative thinking in RE. A project on The Island in Year 7 is imaginative and aims to promote a more engaging way of thinking about religion. RE is also involved in a transition programme using a more integrated programme of learning to support lower attaining students in Year 7. As yet it is too early to judge the full impact of these initiatives. Students are often provided with activities designed to encourage them to express personal feelings about important aspects of human experience; sometimes these are constrained by insufficient opportunity to engage critically with the key ideas and concepts underpinning the learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising the attainment of boys in RE particularly in Key Stage 4
- reviewing and monitoring the Key Stage 3 schemes of work to ensure the focus, coherence and purpose of each unit of work support continuity and progression in the students' learning
- extending the level of challenge in students' thinking by ensuring they develop their critical and investigate skills more rigorously
- ensuring that students are able to contextualise specific tasks and activities more effectively within the broader picture of the learning in RE.

We hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector