

Alexandra House  
33 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040  
F 020 7421 6855  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)



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Mr M Hall  
Headteacher  
The Duchess's Community High School  
Howling Lane  
Alnwick  
Northumberland  
NE66 1DH

Dear Mr Hall

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and for the help of your staff and students, during my visit on 09-10 March 2009 to look at work in modern languages.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how information and communication technology (ICT) is being used by teachers and students to improve language learning. It also looked at where you are in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4.

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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of modern languages was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is good.

- Although the numbers entered for GCSE are below average, a high proportion secures a pass at grades A\*-C. The percentage with A\*/A grades is about average in French and above average in German. Students perform as well in modern languages as in their other subjects.

- At Key Stage 3, teacher assessment indicates that standards are high. Above average numbers of students reach Level 5 of the National Curriculum, though last year the proportion reaching the higher levels fell to below average.
- A-level results vary considerably from year to year but overall are about average; all students pass and most achieve their expected grade.
- Despite being well prepared for their examinations, students show limited skills when speaking the language. In French many have poor pronunciation and intonation. The youngest students lack confidence and are unable to respond to some basic questions about themselves. Many students find it difficult to construct their own simple sentences, largely because of their failure to master even basic verbs. While some understand the link between the way a word is spelled and how it is pronounced, others do not.
- With support, many students write accurately and use a good range of vocabulary and structures, though most of their work is limited to the first person. The amount of extended writing varies between classes.
- Students' exercise books and folders are not all well organised to make revision easy or to enable their teachers to see the progress they make with the advice they are given when their work is marked.
- Older students have positive attitudes to the subject. They understand the value to their future careers of learning a language. They take pride in the presentation of their work. A significant number in Year 9, however, lack enthusiasm for learning languages and have decided not to continue with the subject.

### Quality of teaching and learning in modern languages

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teachers have very good knowledge of their subject. They speak the language for most of the lesson and usually take care to ensure students understand what they are saying. They have a detailed knowledge of the examination syllabuses, which they use effectively to improve their students' performance.
- Lessons are very well planned and structured. Warm-up activities, though not always terribly exciting, are used successfully to settle the class and to involve the learners quickly in work that forms the starting point for the main part of the lesson. Objectives are clear and build on students' prior learning. Activities are designed and sequenced well to move the students step by step to meet the lesson's objectives.
- Activities are varied and carefully chosen to make sure all students are actively participating for most of the lesson.
- Teachers use the whiteboard and other resources imaginatively to present and practise new language.
- Working relationships are very good. Teachers use praise to encourage their students and to build up their confidence.

- Lessons are not always effective in teaching the students the rules of the language in a way that would enable them to use it independently.
- For the most part learning is good. Students behave very well in class, concentrate and are keen to succeed. With the exception of some students in Year 9 they show interest in the subject and enjoy their lessons.
- Students' progress is closely monitored by the teachers. The students know their targets and have a good idea of what they must do to achieve them. Teachers mark work regularly, but do not provide enough clear advice on how the student needs to improve.

### Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The time allocated in all key stages is adequate.
- The more able students have the opportunity to learn two languages in Key Stage 3. Although few continue with both in Key Stage 4, some decide to concentrate on the second language, and with considerable success.
- The curriculum content gives a thorough coverage of what students need to gain a good grade at GCSE and A-level.
- Comprehensive schemes of work set out clearly what is to be learned. They place a suitable emphasis on grammar and on useful vocabulary, but give little indication of how students will use ICT or use the language creatively. In particular, they do not emphasise how students will be enabled to manipulate the language so they can use it to make up their own sentences.
- The sixth form curriculum is enriched by opportunities for non linguists to pick up a useful language qualification.
- Very good extra-curricular activities, including study support sessions and an annual exchange visit to France, give students much appreciated opportunities to develop their language skills beyond the classroom.
- The department has worked with its partner middle schools to establish greater consistency in content, teaching and assessment, but with only limited success. Students start in Year 9 with widely varying experiences, for instance in the amount of time they have been learning French and in their attitudes to the subject.

### Leadership and management of modern languages

Leadership and management are good.

- The subject is coordinated well by an effective head of department. The consistent approach evident in the department is due to strong teamwork and the support of some high quality documentation.
- Managers have a good awareness of the department's strengths based on their regular monitoring of its work. The extensive range of

approaches to self-evaluation usefully includes peer observation and surveys of student views. A comprehensive action plan, based on this accurate self knowledge, includes the right priorities for improvement.

- Resources and accommodation are very limited. Students are all conscious of the difference in the quality of facilities in the languages department and elsewhere in the school. The limited access to ICT seriously affects the range of learning opportunities the department can offer.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

- Take-up is low but rising. The department is keen to maintain and improve its numbers in Key Stage 4 but has no explicit plan to increase take-up to 50%.

How well is ICT used by teachers and students to improve language learning?

This is satisfactory.

- Teachers use whiteboards effectively and efficiently to present and practise new work, but the department has limited opportunities for using this sort of equipment interactively with the students.
- Older students sometimes use ICT for presenting their work in front of the class. Others use computers at home to carry out tasks such as word processing. However, most get few chances to use ICT in school; for example, they seldom use the internet for wider reading or research in French or German.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increasing the subject's popularity in Key Stage 3 by enabling students to use the language more creatively
- developing ways in which students use ICT to enhance their language learning.

A copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Derek Neil  
Her Majesty's Inspector