

19 March 2009

Mr R Lamb  
Headteacher  
King James's School  
St Helen's Gate  
Almondbury  
Huddersfield  
West Yorkshire  
HD4 6SG

Dear Mr Lamb

Ofsted 2008-9 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 09-10 March 2009 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 a 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 inadequate. The subject has experienced significant challenges in recent years but recent developments are beginning to raise standards and there is now a good capacity for improvement.

#### Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is inadequate.

- In 2008 a high proportion of students were entered for an RE GCSE in Year 10 and Year 11. Those taking the full course GCSE exam in Year 11 gained results which were well below the national average reflecting a pattern of underachievement particularly amongst boys. Those taking a short course exam in Year 10 gained results which were closer to the national average and this reflects a rising profile of achievement.
- The data on the progress of the current students in Year 10 and 11 still reflects a pattern of under-achievement with a significant number not yet on

track to meet their target grades. There is also a pattern of variability between different teaching groups. Generally students find it difficult to write with confidence about religious perspectives on social and ethical issues.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 are below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus because weaknesses in the curriculum and assessment often limit students' ability to develop their understanding and skills sufficiently. There is little evidence about students' progress in Year 9 as all their work to date has been focused on personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE) rather than RE. In Years 7 and 8 students make some progress in developing their knowledge of key features of religion and in understanding the significance which religion has in the lives of believers. Occasionally some activities are more challenging and support the development of thinking about issues related to, for example, religion, injustice and poverty. However, students' grasp of many of the key concepts of the subject is limited and they have too few opportunities to develop higher order skills of enquiry into religion.
- A number of aspects of RE's contribution to students' personal development are good. Students enjoy the subject and find it to be worthwhile. It provides some positive opportunities to extend their appreciation of religious and cultural diversity particularly through the use of a number of enrichment activities such as the multi-faith day in Year 7. Other activities provide opportunities for students to reflect on aspects of their own experience in a meaningful way. Overall, however, the limited challenge of some of the work inhibits the scope of the subject to extend students' independence as learners and their critical thinking skills.

### Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory but there are areas requiring improvement.

- While many features of teaching are good, there are limitations in the way students' learning is structured and this restricts their progress. Some lessons are taught by non-specialists some of whom do not have sufficient subject expertise.
- Relationships with students are good and effective use is made of praise. Lessons are well-organised and orderly. A range of tasks and resources is deployed to maintain students' attention and provide a variety of styles of learning. Plenaries and questioning are sometimes, though not always, used effectively to check on students' progress and adjust the pattern of work accordingly. Work is marked regularly with appropriate use being made of the school's mark scheme.
- The structure of learning is not always secure. Links between different tasks and lessons are not always well-constructed. Tasks are often not challenging enough or are unclear in terms of their purpose in relation to the overall objectives of the learning. Sometimes assessments or homework tasks are not integrated into the learning effectively. All these features point to limitations in the quality of the curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3.
- Students generally have too little opportunity to take responsibility and make decisions about their learning. Too much of the written work is low level copying, cloze procedure or recount writing. Students at Key Stage 4 are not

being given enough opportunity to develop the skills of independent discursive writing required by the examination.

- Where learning is least effective, limited use is made of assessment in lessons to check students' progress and their understanding of the tasks, and to decide whether the learning is pitched appropriately.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory overall but there are areas of inadequacy.

- The school has recently reviewed its arrangements for RE at Key Stage 4 and has stabilised the provision. It now offers a variety of pathways which are matched well to the differing needs of the students. Use is made of data on students' progress to identify those at most serious risk of underachieving and provide them with additional support. However, a key factor impacting on the under-achievement at GCSE is the limited opportunity provided for all students to develop the skills of structuring and organising their thinking in order to construct well-argued examination answers.
- A detailed closely documented scheme of work is in place at Key Stage 3 which is tracked against the requirements of the agreed syllabus and utilises some of the local authority's guidance material. Use has also been made of the new Kirklees Toolkit to construct an integrated studies programme at Key Stage 3 which includes RE and PSHEE. This provides opportunity to block RE teaching and secure more sustained and focused learning. While there is scope to forge links between the RE and PSHEE work, as yet the potential has not been realised to any significant degree. In practice, some of the blocking arrangements are not effective; for example, in Year 7 it leads to some fragmentation and some very brief unsustained units of work, or in Year 9 students currently do no RE for the first half of the teaching year.
- While statutory requirements are met, the department recognises that the quality of the curriculum planning needs significant improvement. A number of units lack coherence and a clear pattern of progression. There is insufficient emphasis on identifying and using progressive skills and concepts in the planning. As a result learning is often insufficiently challenging and can become driven by completion of tasks. This is a key reason why a number of good features of teaching are not translating consistently into good learning.
- A series of assessment tasks with levelled criteria have been put in place providing structure in the process of tracking students' progress. However, these are often not well constructed; some of the tasks and criteria are poorly matched to the levels set out in the locally agreed syllabus. As a result the way students' progress is tracked is often unreliable. In addition, attempts are made, in Year 9 for example, to use levels across all aspects of integrated studies, including PSHEE, leading to spurious judgements about achievement.
- A significant and developing strength of the provision is the curriculum enrichment which are being built into the structure. These reflect the department's commitment to promoting community cohesion and students' awareness of equalities and diversity issues. Good links have been forged with the Kirklees RE adviser and the local Faith Centre to extend these opportunities.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory with some good features.

- RE has undergone a period of significant challenges in staffing and leadership which have had a very negative impact on quality and standards in the subject. The senior leadership team has provided strong support during this period and, as a result of some sensible strategies, the status and provision of the subject is now being re-established in the school. However, the legacy of difficulties is taking time to work through.
- The secondment of an advanced skills teacher to lead the subject, together with the appointment of a second subject specialist, has provided stability. This has ensured that there is now a positive capacity for improvement once a new permanent head of subject is in place.
- The structure of the curriculum is now secure and documentation is in place to ensure the provision is orderly and in line with statutory requirements. Resources have been reviewed and enhanced and the two teaching rooms model a positive ethos for learning.
- A significant strength is the quality of the self-evaluation and development planning. Both are thorough and well-conceived. Close and effective links have been forged with the local authority and good use is made of local network groups to provide support and share ideas. The professional developments of the staff are carefully evaluated and the non-specialists are provided with appropriate support. Some good use is made of data to monitor student progress and review the provision overall.
- The department is now in a position to monitor and evaluate the provision in more detail. In particular, the impact on achievement of the weaknesses in the curriculum and assessment require more thorough analysis and action.

## Creative thinking in RE

RE incorporates a number of opportunities for students to use creative activities to express their responses to their learning. In some cases these activities require students to use higher order thinking to interpret and analyse ideas and religious material. For example, students in Year 8 were asked to apply their thinking about injustice to a series of recent media stories using annotations of newspaper articles. In one Year 11 lesson students used a series of statements to identify and then try to apply different religious perspectives on punishment in a creative way. However, too many tasks lack challenge or, on some occasions, because the structure of the learning is unclear, students are not able to engage effectively with more challenging tasks.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- building on recent improvements in RE by raising the level of challenge and overall achievement
- reviewing and revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure it incorporates greater coherence and progression in students' learning
- providing students taking GCSE with more structured support in developing the skills of independent discursive writing in RE

- reviewing the pattern of Key Stage 3 assessments to ensure these are better related to the expectations and levels in the locally agreed syllabus.

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