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Mr R Hudson
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Dear Mr Hudson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 02 and 03 June 2009 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 the contribution of history to community cohesion and the development of independent learning in history.

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, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, an analysis of students' work and the observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are average.

- At Key Stage 3, most students make satisfactory progress and some make good progress. When given the opportunity, students write with appropriate detail and explanation. For example, the work produced by some Year 9 students on the reliability of the British government's film on the Battle of the Somme is of a high standard.
- At Key Stage 4, standards and progress in recent years have been disappointing and too many students have underachieved. However, since the arrival of the current head of department, a series of measures to arrest the decline in results and raise attainment at GCSE

has been introduced. Recent assessments of progress indicate that more students in Year 11 compared with last year are on track to match, and some to exceed, their target grades this year.

- Students are developing a sound understanding of topics studied. Some have good knowledge and, when encouraged to do so, they explain their ideas clearly and provide suitable evidence to support their opinions. Students in Year 7, for example, spoke well about the different ways of attacking and defending castles, while those in Year 9 had a clear grasp of arguments for and against the abolition of slavery and the slave trade.
- Students' historical skills are satisfactory. Younger students regularly investigate sources well, though their evaluation skills are undeveloped. Older students are beginning to acquire an understanding of why historians have different interpretations of individuals and events, and why this is important.
- Students are encouraged to use historical terms accurately and they are developing an understanding of the importance of history and how their historical knowledge helps to explain their world. Older students can articulate how the skills they use in history are useful in later life, for example, in relation to researching, selecting information, and creating summaries for reports and presentations.
- History makes a satisfactory contribution to students' personal development. Students work well together, show interest in their work and enjoy lessons. When motivated and engaged, they have positive attitudes to learning. However, when this is not the case, for example, when there is too much teacher direction and a lack of opportunities to be involved in lessons, they become restless.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Lesson planning is satisfactory and lessons have a logical structure. Teachers know what they are trying to achieve and this is communicated to students. Teachers use a common lesson planning format consistently and this provides a focus on aims and learning outcomes, which helps to structure learning and promote achievement.
- Some lessons have a variety of exercises and tasks. This maintains the students' interest and engagement. Students say how much they enjoy this variety. However, on the whole, students are too passive in lessons.
- Students are willing to answer questions but too often supplementary questions do not broaden students' knowledge and understanding. In addition, questions tend to be directed at specific students and opportunities for debate and discussion are not always taken. As a result, students do not have sufficient time in which to think about what they are learning and to reflect on what they have learned.
- The needs of those students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well met and teaching assistants give valuable support to those who require it. However, the needs of higher-attaining students are not fully met. This is because the level of challenge within

the exercises set is limited and overall expectations are not high enough.

- Teachers are enthusiastic about the subject and are reflective about their work. They want students to do well and their willingness to give of their time is much appreciated by the students.
- Marking and assessment are variable. Books are marked, comments are made on the quality of work produced, and praise is given when appropriate. In the best practice, guidance is given on how to improve in history. However, overall marking is not regular enough, not consistent enough and not diagnostic enough in providing sufficient subject-specific advice.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is broad and balanced. The department is revising the Key Stage 3 schemes of work but the curriculum does not yet fully meet statutory requirements. For example, teachers have yet to finalise how they intend to give appropriate time to all aspects of the revised programmes of study, especially local history and British Isles history.
- Students enjoy the GCSE course, particularly the work on the American West. They can articulate clearly why they enjoy the topics they study and how history contributes to their education. In an attempt to raise standards and achievement and to meet more effectively the needs of individual students, the department has decided to change the GCSE course from September 2009.
- Cross-curricular links are developing. Through the study of slavery and the slave trade, for example, strong links are made to citizenship. Close links are also being developed with the college's specialist subjects, for example, with English on the war poets of the First World War, and with geography on the development of 19th century seaside holidays.
- The department is keen to use learning outside the classroom to enrich learning. Students enjoy trips to places of historical interest, such as Warwick Castle and the battlefields of the First World War, and wish they could have more. The department has welcomed into college visitors from the British Legion each November, and students have been highly successful in a history of medicine debate organised by Oxford Brookes University.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are satisfactory.

- The head of department is well focused and keen to raise the profile of history throughout the college. In her short time in college she has worked hard to put in place systems and procedures, and she has started to create greater consistency and less variation across the department.

- The department is well organised and runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Teachers benefit from teaching in adjacent classrooms in a specialist block.
- The head of department is updating the schemes of work. The Key Stage 4 schemes of work provide appropriate guidance for teachers on what should be taught. However, the schemes for Key Stage 3 lack specific details and a clear rationale for the curriculum choices which have been made.
- The department is developing a clear picture of its strengths and areas for improvement. Examination results are analysed and action taken, as evidenced by the greater emphasis for Year 11 students in the last year on answering practice questions and on the closer tracking of students' progress.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

The contribution of history to community cohesion is satisfactory.

- Students have a satisfactory understanding of how places, people and events in the past impact on society today. Through the study of the Holocaust, slavery, and the struggle for civil rights in America, for example, the department teaches sensitive and controversial issues and strengthens students' awareness of life in a culturally diverse society.
- Students' understanding of community cohesion is enhanced through the exploration of, for example, faith issues in work on recent political and religious issues in Northern Ireland, and on gender issues through a study of 'Votes for Women'.
- Displays in classrooms celebrate students' work. Relationships are positive and students noted that studying history helps you 'to appreciate things more'.
- References to community cohesion are not clearly highlighted in departmental documentation. As a result, opportunities to make appropriate links are sometimes missed.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

The development of independent learning in history is satisfactory.

- The place of independent learning is clearly understood by the head of department who is developing appropriate activities for each year group. For example, the Year 7 unit on the Romans begins with the students being required to come up with the key questions they would like to answer. Subsequent lessons revolve around them finding the answers. In this way students become more involved in taking responsibility for their own learning.
- Students are developing a good grasp of enquiry skills. The Year 7 work on castles, for example, involves investigative research as well as a visit to Warwick Castle. However, schemes of work do not include sufficient guidance on how and when independent learning skills should be developed. As a result, opportunities to improve students' independent learning skills are not always taken.

- Some of the work produced by students in their independent learning activities is of a high standard. It provides evidence of students' commitment and enjoyment not only of the subject but also of this type of task. This contrasts sharply with the teacher-directed and more passive pattern of teaching and learning to which the students' are more usually accustomed.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving achievement and standards, especially results at GCSE
- developing teaching strategies so that teachers have higher expectations of what students can achieve, and that students take more responsibility for their own learning and have more opportunities to discuss and reflect upon what they are learning
- developing marking and assessment practice, particularly feedback, to ensure that there is greater consistency in the quality of marking and assessment, that work is marked regularly, and that there is sufficient subject-specific advice on how to improve
- ensuring the new curriculum at Key Stage 3 fully meets the requirements.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history in the college.

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

Michael Maddison
Her Majesty's Inspector
Ofsted's Specialist Adviser for History