

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
www.ofsted.gov.uk
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr S Williams
Headteacher
Vale of Catmose College
Cold Overton Road
Oakham
Rutland
LE15 6NU

Dear Mr Williams

Ofsted 2009-10 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 07-08 July 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 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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is good.

- Students are entered for either the GCSE full and short courses and attain exceptionally high standards compared to national averages. In 2008, the proportion of students attaining the highest A*-A grades in the full course was particularly impressive. All students attained A* to C grades. Students can explain the role and impact of religion in contemporary society confidently and are able to evaluate different viewpoints, including those from religious perspectives, with discernment and skill.
- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is good overall. Most students acquire a broad understanding of the key features of the religions they have encountered, with a stronger grasp of the beliefs and practices within Christianity. Students'

ability to explore and respond to religious and moral issues is developed well to secure a good foundation for their studies at GCSE level at Key Stage 4.

- The personal development of students in the context of RE is excellent. Their attitudes to RE are very positive and they behave well in lessons. The subject makes an important contribution to developing their appreciation of religious and cultural diversity. Students comment very positively on how RE promotes respect for different opinions and the value of diversity.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge which they use skilfully to probe students' knowledge, thereby deepening their understanding of religion. The most successful teaching in RE is when students are active participants in their learning. They enjoy lessons that have organised small group discussions and debates as well as those that require them to learn independently, for example, incorporating homework tasks that require research. Students are encouraged to record their findings in a variety of ways and share their learning which helps to build positive relationships in lessons.
- Lessons are well-organised through detailed lesson plans. Students have a clear view about learning objectives and outcomes. Progress towards these is checked during the course of lessons and end of lesson plenaries review what has been learned.
- Ongoing assessment informs teachers' planning and their feedback through marking and verbal discussion gives clear guidance to students for improvement. Marking of coursework is suitably detailed and helpful. Students have opportunities to assess their own work and the use of peer-assessment is valued by them as an effective tool to improve their learning. There are some challenging assessment tasks at Key Stage 3 which help inform staff and students about attainment and progress, but there is some inconsistency in the use of assessment criteria to form reliable and accurate judgements.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The Key Stage 4 curriculum for RE is well planned and all students have opportunities to accredit their learning through GCSE courses. This has helped to raise students' motivation and application to learning.
- The curriculum in Key Stage 3 has some demanding and imaginative elements, for example the interplay between science and religion, which ensure that students develop their critical and investigative skills. However, much more of the students' written work relates to 'learning about' rather than 'learning from' religion.
- Students have few opportunities to visit places of worship or to engage with visiting speakers from a wide range of religious communities.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- RE is part of a larger faculty. The team leader is enthusiastic and keen to innovate in order to keep students interested and challenged. A strong direction is given to improving students' achievement. Staff teaching RE share this purpose and are passionate about the subject's contribution to students' personal development, with very good impact.
- Strengths and weaknesses in the subject are accurately identified through careful evaluation, reflecting the impact of monitoring the quality of teaching and learning.
- Detailed schemes of work ensure that non-specialists are able to plan their lessons well and the team leader ensures that resources are used purposefully.
- Opportunities to keep abreast of initiatives in RE are taken up when offered to ensure continuing professional development.

Creative thinking in RE

There are some examples in the curriculum where students encounter challenging questions and use strategies to enable them to think critically, particularly in Key Stage 4. There are also examples in Key Stage 3 where students investigate and interpret concepts specific to religious enquiry and respond in creative ways, for example through poetry and art. This enables them to take risks and be more creative in their thinking.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring consistency and rigour in the use of assessment criteria at Key Stage 3
- extending the opportunities that students have for first hand contact with religious communities through, for example, use of more fieldwork and visitors as part of learning in RE.

I 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

Dilip Kadodwala
Her Majesty's Inspector