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Mr G Smith  
Principal  
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Dear Mr Smith

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography 2009/10

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 15 and 16 September to look at work in geography.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how effectively geography teaching and the curriculum promote community cohesion.

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 data; analysis of students' work; and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is inadequate overall.

- Standards fluctuate year on year and are currently below national averages at GCSE and A level, reflecting clear underachievement, with too few students making satisfactory progress.
- The proportion of students who choose to study geography at GCSE level is good but too few of them continue to study the subject at a higher level.

- Transition between Key Stages 2 and 3 is not planned sufficiently well to support learning in geography. Currently, students have very limited opportunities to develop knowledge, skills and understanding in geography in Year 7.
- In Years 8 and 9, students' progress is inconsistent. A lack of challenge prevents the more able students, in particular, from developing their potential.
- Adequate opportunities to participate in fieldwork enable students to develop some investigative skills. However, the heavily guided structure of many lessons does not encourage independent learning.
- There is generally little difference in outcomes for different groups of students. However, girls outperform boys in coursework and in post-GCSE courses.
- Behaviour is good overall. However, where lessons are insufficiently stimulating, students lose concentration and can become distracted and restless.

### Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is inadequate overall.

- Teaching is inconsistent across classes and this detracts from students' engagement and achievement. There is too much inadequate teaching and no good teaching was observed.
- In too many classes, students are too dependent on the teacher who tends to dominate discussions and discourages independent thinking.
- In the weaker sessions, there is a disproportionate focus on factual recall rather than developing understanding. There is insufficient challenge to engage students and the frequent use of closed questions limits their responses.
- In those lessons where teaching is better, there is greater interaction and students are more involved in their learning.
- Students have very limited opportunities to utilise information and communication technology, especially geographical information systems (GIS), to support their learning.
- Work is not adapted sufficiently to meet the varying needs and abilities of students, particularly the most able.
- Currently, assessment does not inform lesson planning or contribute effectively to improving learning, other than with classes preparing for examinations.

### Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory in examination classes but inadequate at Key Stage 3 where statutory requirements are not fully met.

- In Year 7, geography is not explicitly delivered and assessed to an appropriate level which may disrupt any progression from primary school.

- The quality of geography taught in Year 8 does not compensate for the lack of provision in Year 7.
- An imbalance in the places studied limits students' view of the world. Currently, students learn little about their own country and there is an excessive focus on West Africa.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is incomplete. Some units cover topics which are recent, real and relevant to students and can promote discussion and develop opinion while others focus on content and factual recall. There is insufficient planning for the progressive development of students' skills, knowledge and understanding.
- Provision for fieldwork is satisfactory. Students at Key Stage 3 have some opportunities to develop practical geography skills. At Key Stage 4, fieldwork provision meets examination requirements.

### Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is inadequate.

- Monitoring of provision has been insufficiently rigorous in challenging weak practice or identifying where there is a need for additional support to improve outcomes for students.
- Insufficient recent and relevant subject-specific training for staff has hindered improvements. Poor practice has not been tackled.
- The subject leader has a positive vision for the future of the subject. However, his colleagues rely too heavily on him to initiate improvements and do not share responsibility for this.
- Strategic planning is weak and focuses too much on organisational processes and resources, rather than on improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- Resources are adequate but are not always used to best effect to enhance learning in the subject.

### Subject issue

The effectiveness of geography teaching and the curriculum in promoting community cohesion is inadequate.

- Students have the opportunity to engage with a range of topical issues linked to poverty, development and equality on a global scale. However, this is not balanced by a national perspective and can lead to reinforcing stereotypical views about countries that are less well developed economically.
- Currently, the geography curriculum does not provide sufficient relevant contexts through which students enrich their understanding of other cultures and societies in the United Kingdom.
- There is considerable variation in the experiences that classes receive. In many lessons, teachers do not focus sufficiently on promoting meaningful interaction between different groups of students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring more effective monitoring of provision, in order to identify and remedy weak practice and to hold the department more accountable for the outcomes achieved by students
- establishing a more cohesive, relevant and well-planned curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3, to enable students to make good progress in their learning and develop a balanced view of the world
- establishing a programme of staff development to disseminate good practice and improve the quality and range of teaching strategies in the classroom
- making more effective use of the support provided by the local authority and professional organisations to support improvements in geography.

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

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow  
Her Majesty's Inspector