

Acorn Independent College

Independent school inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Heather Yaxley HMI

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A¹ of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005², the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the college

Established in 1999, Acorn Independent College occupies a five-storey building on the main road in Southall. The college is run by two proprietors, one of whom is the principal. Their aim is: 'to help each one of its students, by offering sound advice and applying the highest possible educational standards, achieve the very best which he or she is capable of.' The college is non-selective and attracts students of all abilities. Almost all students are of Asian heritage and the majority are in Years 12 and 13. Of the 128 students currently on roll, 32 are of compulsory school age, including 10 students in Key Stage 3. There are no students with a statement of special educational needs. Most students come to the college specifically because of its reputation for academic standards, particularly for sciences and mathematics. The college is accredited by the British Accreditation Council (BAC) and was last inspected by them in March 2009. The last Ofsted inspection was in March 2007.

Evaluation of the college

Acorn Independent College provides a good standard of education for its students. The quality of teaching is outstanding, as is the progress that students make during their time at college. At the time of the last inspection, seven regulations were not met. Five of these have been addressed. A total of six regulations are not met on this occasion, four relating to welfare, health and safety. For this reason, this aspect of the college's work is satisfactory. Most safeguarding requirements are met, although some procedures, such as recording when staff have the required level of basic safeguarding awareness training, lack rigour.

Quality of education

The college successfully meets its stated aim: providing students with a good quality education that enables them to achieve the academic success that they aspire to. All students over the past few years have achieved the high grades necessary to gain places at the universities of their choice, often to study medicine, dentistry or optometry. This represents outstanding academic progress over time, particularly for those who retake exams in order to improve their grades at GCSE and A level.

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

The curriculum is good because it provides a good range of mathematic, scientific, human and social subjects. Chemistry, physics, biology and mathematics feature strongly. The range of courses includes one- or two-year programmes for both GCSE and A level. Short 're-take' courses of a term's duration are also available. There are 19 possible courses at A level and 16 for GCSE. Key Stage 3 students follow courses in 11 subjects, including three sciences, information and communication technology (ICT), personal, social and health education (PSHE) and religious studies. Thirty hours are available during the week for the curriculum and most students have a full timetable. Although limited to fine art because of timetable constraints and accommodation, art, GCSE and A level are very popular and students of all abilities achieve well in this subject.

The college still does not provide a suitably planned programme for careers education. In addition, students do not have sufficient information to gain work experience and say that they would like more extra-curricular opportunities to help them broaden their experiences around their chosen career path. However, they are very appreciative of the support that they get at the point of applying to university. Extra-curricular activities to support and enhance students' studies across the curriculum are limited, as are opportunities for sport. Citizenship and PSHE topics are now provided more regularly, usually through other subjects such as religious studies, although schemes of work are not always sufficiently explicit about what is being covered.

The quality of teaching and assessment is outstanding because teachers' outstanding subject knowledge and the way that they impart this to students make a significant contribution to academic achievement and love of learning. A very effective cycle of knowledge acquisition, oral debate and written application of knowledge mean that students' skills and understanding often go way beyond the specific subject knowledge being taught. This gives students the confidence to ask searching questions and offer hypotheses that successfully extend the level of thinking and reflection for the benefit of the whole class. Students are expected to keep up with a fast pace of learning and, in the best lessons, to contribute to high quality debate and explanations. This, they enjoy. Regular homework, either in the form of writing up notes or preparing answers to questions, is much appreciated by the students, acknowledging that this supports their academic studies well. The way that teachers use homework and questioning in lessons works well to consolidate learning through identifying and addressing any misconceptions. Teachers then build upon this work further in subsequent teaching.

Teachers at the college are the students' best resource when it comes to learning. Students acknowledge this and have great respect for teachers' high levels of experience and qualifications in their respective fields. But students also express some discontent about a lack of books and having to buy them themselves, and limited use of computers. It is true that there is a limited range of reference books for some subjects and that students are expected to use the local libraries and the

internet to supplement their studies. Students' access to computers for individual research at college is limited. It is also the case that, although ICT is taught as a discrete subject by a specialist, other teachers do not always make best use of technology to enhance learning across the curriculum. With regard to purchasing their own course books, some students are unclear of the changes made at the beginning of this academic year, whereby a book deposit fee is no longer taken. Some feel that the books that they have had to buy are not used enough as part of their studies. However, the student handbook does say that students are now responsible for purchasing their own text books and the teachers make clear at the start of the academic year which book(s) are recommended for the course.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students

The spiritual, social, moral and cultural development of the students is good. This is a result of the high quality teaching that they receive, as well as the good relationships that they enjoy with staff and with one another. Students' attitudes to work are outstanding and their attendance and behaviour are good. This not only enables students to achieve well in preparation for their future economic well-being, but also to challenge and develop an understanding of the moral positions that they and others hold within our diverse society. Students of all ages clearly enjoy their lessons. Such enjoyment makes a considerable contribution to their spiritual development because the breadth of understanding and reflection broadens their appreciation of the world. This is particularly evident through the sciences but also through art. Those studying fine art, some of whom have never shown an aptitude for the subject before, refine their techniques to a high standard through practice and researching the work of a wide range of artists. They are quite rightly very proud of their portfolios and are keen to explain the spiritual, sociological, psychological and cultural aspects that their art work depicts. Students' cultural development is also well catered for in other parts of the curriculum, as well as through the richness of experiences and traditions that staff and students bring to the lessons. Opportunities for this richness to be shown through displays of students' work around the college are missed.

Opportunities for students to play a full part in the development of the college, as well as contributing to the local and wider communities, are not well developed through the curriculum. There is so much more that they could contribute. For example, many students hold strong opinions about there being insufficient facilities for sport, developing healthy lifestyles, for recreation and for learning resources. They have some valid points in these respects but limited formal opportunities for their views to be taken into consideration, and to share perspectives, experiences and concerns, leads to some misconceptions between the students and staff. Furthermore, opportunities are missed to enable students to take more responsibility for, and involvement in, aspects of their college experience such as developing the quality of the common rooms.

Welfare, health and safety of the students

This aspect of the college's work is satisfactory. There are a number of weaknesses in relation to the college's provision. There is no action plan to fulfil the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, although a suitable policy is in place. Tutors record students' attendance for each lesson but the arrangements for attendance registers do not meet requirements. There is no separate policy for first aid and procedures set out in the health and safety policy in this respect are insufficiently detailed. In respect of safeguarding, while evidence can be found that the training of staff is up-to-date, the college has not organised well the recording of this training. The child protection policy is adequate to safeguard the students, but does not reflect all of the recent changes in legislation and guidance for safeguarding pupils. In general, the collation of documentation and the content of policies relating to health, safety and welfare lack rigour, which makes it difficult to monitor the effectiveness of procedures and practices.

Recent improvements to the laboratory facilities have enhanced the health and safety of students during science lessons. Resources have been audited and rationalised, and new storage facilities purchased. However, not all staff and students consistently demonstrate good awareness of laboratory practice such as removing all outdoor clothing and wearing lab coats.

A majority of students who responded to Ofsted's pre-inspection questionnaire disagreed that the college helped them to be healthy. The absence of food available on the site and limited opportunities for physical activity on site was cited as the main reasons. The latter is a valid one because there is no play space on site, although physical activity is arranged each Wednesday afternoon at the local leisure centre. In addition, although health education is threaded through PSHE in different subjects, programmes for developing these aspects in tutor time and through other subjects are not well thought through. Availability of food on the site presents a problem for the college because of limitation of the accommodation but students do not always take responsibility for taking healthy options available locally or by bringing snacks prepared at home. Students say that they feel safe in college, that they are treated with respect, are treated fairly and that staff care about them. When asked who they would go to with any problems, students said that they can go to any member of staff and especially mentioned the principal and two other senior members of staff. It is clear that staff are very thoughtful and sensitive to students' individual needs.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

All appropriate checks on staff are in place and recorded appropriately on a single central record.

The college's premises and accommodation

The accommodation is suitable and generally fit for purpose, allowing students to learn effectively and safely. Space is limited for recreation and physical activity and there is some pressure on laboratory and ICT facilities. The college has not yet provided the required outdoor play space, particularly for the younger students. There are some parts of the accommodation where the quality of the environment does not match the same high level of aspiration present in teaching and learning.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The college prospectus and website provide parents, carers and others with the required information. In addition, the twice-yearly parent evenings are very well attended and a written report on students' progress is provided three times a year.

Procedures for handling complaints

No formal complaints have been made over the past year and the college has a suitable policy and procedure in place to address any informal or formal complaints should they arise.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended ('the Regulations'), with the exception of those listed below.³

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the curriculum (standard 1) and must:

- provide appropriate careers guidance for students of compulsory school age (paragraph 1(2)(g)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety (standard 3) and must:

- prepare and implement a revised policy for safeguarding students and attend to other weaknesses in the health and safety provision (paragraph 3(2)(b))
- prepare and implement a written policy for first aid (paragraph 3(6))

³ www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031910.htm

- maintain attendance registers that meet the required standards (paragraph 3(9)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the premises and accommodation (standard 5) and must:

- provide appropriate arrangements for outside space for students to play safely (paragraph 5(t)).

In order to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 as amended the school should devise a three-year accessibility plan.⁴

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- provide formal opportunities for students to express their views and discuss ways in which they might take more responsibility and contribution in college, the local community and the wider community
- revise policies and procedures to ensure that their effectiveness is more easily monitored and reflect good practice
- involve the students in improving the common rooms so that they are pleasant places for relaxation and consuming food and drink.

⁴ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1995/ukpga_19950050_en_1

Inspection judgement recording form

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education		✓		
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of students		✓		
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of students' needs	✓			
How well students make progress in their learning	✓			

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development		✓		
The behaviour of students		✓		

Welfare, health and safety of students

The overall welfare, health and safety of students			✓	
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The quality of boarding provision *(leave blank if not applicable)*

Evaluation of boarding provision				
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School details

Name of school	Acorn Independent College		
DCSF number	307/6081		
Unique reference number (URN)	131982		
Type of school	Tutorial college		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1999		
Age range of students	13–19 years		
Gender of students	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time students)	Boys: 77	Girls: 38	Total: 115
Number on roll (part-time students)	Boys: 5	Girls: 8	Total: 13
Annual fees (day students)	£5,100-£13,100		
Address of school	39–47 High Street Southall Middlesex UB1 3HF		
Telephone number	020 8571 9900		
Fax number	020 8571 9901		
Email address	acorncollege@hotmail.co.uk		
Principal	Gladys Watt		
Proprietors	Gladys Watt and Graham Watt		
Reporting inspector	Heather Yaxley HMI		
Dates of inspection	17–18 March 2010		