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Mr D Horn
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Dear Mr Horn

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 17 and 18 November 2009 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how well students are becoming effective learners 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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with students and teachers, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good with some outstanding features.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Standards reached by the end of Key Stage 4 are above average reflecting good or, for students taking the full GCSE course, outstanding progress. Results for the AS and A2 courses in Philosophy and Ethics reflect satisfactory progress and current students are on track to achieve well.
- Most students are entered for the short course GCSE where results are above the national average, while the percentage gaining A* and A grades is in line with national figures. Results for those taking the full course

Philosophy and Ethics GCSE are well above the national average. There is a rising trend in performance across all the examination courses.

- The strength of the students' performance in the short course GCSE lies in their ability to explain and evaluate a range of social, ethical and philosophical issues. Their ability to apply religious perspectives to these issues is sufficient to meet the requirements of the examination but is less secure. This reflects limitations in the progress students make in relation to some aspects of RE in Key Stage 3.
- The progress of students across Key Stage 3, while satisfactory overall with some good features, is uneven across the year groups and different aspects of the subject. This reflects the variable quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Year 9 students make good progress in tackling some of the more philosophical and social issues which the scheme of work addresses. In Years 7 and 8, where the focus of work is on developing knowledge and understanding of the six major religions, progress is only satisfactory and students' understanding of the nature of religion and its impact on personal lives and society is relatively superficial. Students do not, for example, make enough progress in developing their skills of enquiry into religion.
- The department uses data about the performance of students on accredited courses well to analyse and take account of the achievement of different groups. As a result, the pattern of good progress in examinations is reflected across all groups of students. At Key Stage 3, the lack of challenge in some work can limit the progress of the more able students.
- Students generally enjoy RE and see its relevance, particularly from Year 9 onwards. The subject makes an outstanding contribution to their social and moral awareness and to their understanding and respect for diversity. The contribution to students' spiritual development is more constrained because the focus on this dimension of religion and belief is more limited.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is good.

- The strengths of teaching include the orderly management of lessons and the positive classroom relationships. Teachers use a wide range of strategies and lively resources to engage and interest students. In Key Stage 4 and sixth-form classes, teaching is carefully focused on the syllabus requirements but also allows time for discussion and debate. At its best, teaching is rooted in excellent subject knowledge and generates a genuine sense of excitement about learning. In one outstanding Year 10 full course GCSE lesson, the teacher very skilfully structured the learning to enable students to explore complex issues related to the nature of God within the Christian tradition.
- While teaching is strong overall, there is some variation in quality. In some lessons, in Key Stage 3 in particular, work is not always matched sufficiently to the range of students' needs and, on occasions, the purpose of the learning is not clear enough and the sequencing of activities can lose focus. When this happens, while students often complete the tasks

appropriately, they do not understand the links between the different parts of lessons and the depth of their thinking about the subject is limited. Elsewhere however, differentiation and the structuring of learning are strengths of teaching.

- There are some very good examples of high-quality questioning being used to promote effective learning and check students' progress; again, however, this is not consistent across all lessons.
- Much of the marking and assessment practice is of high quality, particularly at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form where students are often, though not always, given good feedback on their progress and have helpful targets for improvement. Practice at Key Stage 3 is more variable; there are examples of good marking and an increasing drive towards using levels to help students understand their progress, but the practice is uneven and the systems being used are not always clear or consistent.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is good.

- An outstanding strength of the provision is the range of pathways whereby students' work in RE is accredited at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. All students leave with a subject qualification and the numbers opting for the full course GCSE and A-level courses are growing. The choice of examination syllabuses is effective in balancing the importance of building on the specific religious backgrounds of the students in the short course GCSE while encouraging students with a diversity of beliefs to take the option courses.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum, by contrast, is satisfactory. While it meets statutory requirements, the focus on covering six religions across Years 7 and 8 has the effective of making much of the learning too superficial. There are some more challenging units of work, particularly in Year 9 but the overall pattern of continuity and progression across the key stage is not secure and some of the units of work lack a clear focus and direction.
- The school is moving towards the development of a more integrated, skills-based humanities curriculum in Years 7 and 8. The RE team have found it difficult to access guidance about ways of interpreting and integrating the locally agreed syllabus within this new model. The school is very aware of the need to monitor the innovations to ensure the development of the more enquiry-based approach to learning is effectively embedded within a coherent and progressive RE programme.
- An outstanding strength of the provision is the pattern of enrichment activity linked to the subject. RE-related projects include a high profile Free Trade programme, Peacejam and the Year 7 Bolton Abbey humanities visit. Students in Year 8 have opportunities to meet representatives of a range of faith and community groups from the Bradford area.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management is good with some outstanding features.

- The subject is led well and benefits from the opportunity to work collaboratively across the humanities faculty. It is strongly supported by the senior leadership team and reflects the wider school commitment to encouraging students to develop a broad understanding of, and interest in exploring, the world around them. The priorities of the subject are aligned well with the overall strategic vision for improvement within the school.
- A well-constructed self-evaluation and improvement plan has been produced which makes very good use of assessment data, particularly from the examination courses, to help identify development targets. The subject leadership is aware of the need to sharpen assessment arrangements at Key Stage 3 to provide a more thorough mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum. Arrangements for monitoring teaching are effective and there are clear plans to review the impact of the new Year 7 integrated humanities programme. The overall capacity for further improvement is very good.
- The subject benefits from a strong specialist teaching team and good resources. The identification of electronic resources within the schemes of work is a particular strength. The opportunities to work with other faculty colleagues in planning and teaching the humanities programme has supported professional growth and the development of a wider range of teaching strategies. The department has found it more difficult to access subject-specific training and support from outside the school although use is made of courses provided by the examination boards.
- The subject makes an outstanding contribution, both through its core teaching and the curriculum enrichment programme, to the promotion of community cohesion within the school.

How well students are becoming effective learners in RE

There is some strong provision supporting the development of students' broad learning skills in RE. A characteristic of much of the teaching is the focus on encouraging students to use a wide range of different approaches to learning and take responsibility for their work. There are good opportunities to develop the skills of working both collaboratively and independently. Teachers often encourage students to reflect on how they have been learning. An area for improvement which the subject leadership has recognised is that the focus on the process of learning is not always integrated effectively within the subject. On occasions the skills being used, while engaging in their own right, can distract from, rather than enhance, the development of understanding in the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum, building on the initiatives in Year 7, to ensure it embeds greater challenge and a stronger focus on enquiry into the study of religion and belief
- ensuring greater consistency in the quality of both assessment and differentiation especially at Key Stage 3, by making more structured use of levels in both planning and assessment.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector