

Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040  
F 020 7421 6855  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)



18 December 2009

Mr F Dierckens  
Headteacher  
Didcot Girls' School  
Manor Crescent  
Didcot  
Oxfordshire  
OX11 7AJ

Dear Mr Dierckens

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 8 and 9 December 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 satisfactory.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Results in 2009 in both the full and short GCSE courses were above the national average. They represented good progress overall by the students; the achievement of the more able on the short course was satisfactory. Students start their GCSE work in Year 8 and, as a result there is little data about their attainment in relation to the expectations of the agreed syllabus at Key Stage 3.
- The strongest aspect of students' work is their ability to offer explanations and opinions about a range of philosophical, moral and social questions.

They can identify and illustrate Christian perspectives on those issues. The work of the current students indicates that they do not have enough opportunity to develop the higher-level skills of using logical argument in their written work. Where students' progress is least secure is in the breadth and depth of their understanding of religion. The heavy focus on Christian values and teaching about a range of different issues from Year 8 onwards has narrowed the overall scope of their attainment significantly.

- The subject makes a sound contribution to students' personal development. They have a positive attitude to learning and behaviour in RE lessons is good. The pattern of teaching encourages open discussion of opinions and this takes place in an atmosphere of respect for differences of viewpoint. The opportunities for students to develop independence taking responsibility for their learning are more restricted. The subject supports students' social and moral development well but the scope to extend their spiritual and cultural development is more constrained.

### Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is satisfactory with some good features.

- Lessons are organised well and high expectations are set regarding behaviour. Some good use is made of class discussion and teacher exposition to engage students' interest. An ethos is established in which they are confident and enthusiastic to express opinions and responses. Teachers have good knowledge of the requirements of the examination courses and use this effectively to focus the learning. Some use is made of group work to involve the students more actively in their learning.
- The range of teaching and learning strategies deployed in some lessons is relatively narrow and occasionally this means some students are not very involved in learning. There is little differentiation of tasks or resources to meet the wide range of needs of students in the lessons, all of which are mixed ability. Some of the tasks set are not challenging enough for the majority of students in the class. While there are examples of some very stimulating resource materials, little use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) to extend students' learning.
- Students' work is marked regularly. In Year 10, they are given a clear understanding of their progress and how to improve. Marking in Years 7 to 9 is less effective and the department has yet to establish clear arrangements for assessment in these year groups. Very little use is made of any peer or self-assessment strategies.

### Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- All students have the opportunity to accredit their learning in RE through either the full or short course GCSE in Year 10. Changes in the pattern of the curriculum in 2009 mean all students from Year 8 will follow a full course GCSE on the basis of one lesson of RE a week. This focuses on examining a series of philosophical, moral and social issues from a largely

Christian perspective. The small group of students from the Muslim tradition are supported to study these issues from an Islamic perspective.

- The provision for studying a wider breadth of religion and belief is largely limited to Year 7. In practice, this means the requirements of the Agreed Syllabus in relation to Key Stage 3 are not being met in the depth and breadth expected. It also has the effect of narrowing students' understanding of the wider context of belief and practice which underpin the teaching of religions and beliefs in relation to moral and social issues.
- While the GCSE course forms a strong backbone to the provision for RE, there is no developed scheme of work in place and the subject relies heavily on the experience of the teachers to plan lessons. As a consequence, there is no clear pattern of differentiation in planning and little use is made of levels of attainment to help pitch the learning.
- There is no core provision for RE in Year 11 or in the sixth form, although an increasing number of students are taking GCE A-level courses in either religious studies or philosophy.
- Some students visit Auschwitz in connection with their RE course. However, there are very few opportunities to use links with local religious and belief communities to enrich the RE curriculum.

#### Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management is satisfactory.

- The subject is led by an experienced head of department who brings a commitment to promoting the well-being of the students through RE. She benefits from a specialist subject team and the strong support of the senior leadership in the school; the capacity for improvement in the subject is good. The subject benefits from two co-located specialist classrooms but access to ICT in the RE area is limited.
- Arrangements for monitoring and reviewing the provision are very informal and largely undocumented. Increasingly, use is being made of examination data to help evaluate RE but little other information is available about the students' performance. The school has, rightly, identified the need to monitor carefully the impact of recent changes to the RE curriculum on students' learning.
- The department has taken advantage of training opportunities provided by the examination board and the involvement in the graduate training programme is providing opportunities to develop the subject. However, overall, the arrangements for professional development are limited and the scope for the RE team to work together on developing the subject tends to be informal and fairly restricted.
- The rather narrow curriculum and limited links to local religious communities mean the subject makes only a modest contribution to the wider promotion of community cohesion.

How well students are becoming effective learners in RE.

RE makes a positive contribution to the development of the students' skills of empathy and to their ability to express their feelings and respond to a range of important issues. However, the opportunities for students to use a range of more challenging thinking skills, to exercise independence and to take responsibility for their learning in RE are limited. There is, for example, little scope for students to take an active role in shaping the pattern of their learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the curriculum for Years 7 to 9 to secure a stronger integration of the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus in relation specifically to the breadth of study and levels of attainment
- extending the range of teaching and learning strategies to raise the level of challenge and incorporate more opportunities for active independent learning
- ensuring the planning at all levels takes greater account of the range of students' abilities and needs
- improving the assessment arrangements in RE, especially in Years 7 to 9
- extending the opportunities for students to investigate and engage with a wider diversity of religions and beliefs.

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