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Mr A Thomas
Principal
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Dear Mr Thomas

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Sean Hanan HMI, on 2 and 3 February 2010 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the provision for RE, the visit had a particular focus on how far 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good with a number of outstanding features.

Achievement in RE

The achievement of students in RE is good.

- Results for the more able students entered for the full course GCSE in RE in 2009 were above the national average and reflected good achievement with many exceeding their target grade. This pattern of high attainment in full course GCSE has been sustained over recent years. Results for the students entered for the short course GCSE in Year 10 were below the national average and the predicted target. However, adjustments to the

provision have improved the progress of these students in Year 11 and most are now making better progress and are predicted to achieve their target grade.

- Overall, students make good progress at Key Stage 4. Their grasp of philosophical and ethical issues is good and they demonstrate an impressive understanding of the significance which religion plays in personal and social life.
- Results for AS level Philosophy and Ethics in 2009 were below expectations. Changes in the pattern of teaching have had a positive impact and students are now on track to meet their targets in all aspects of the syllabus. In class, students showed an impressive understanding of the complex philosophical issues under discussion.
- The data on achievement at Key Stage 3 are less reliable. Lessons and books indicate that there is some unevenness in the students' progress. Their ability to discuss and evaluate moral and philosophical issues is good. Many bring a high level of personal religious background to their studies and can discuss matters related to religion with confidence and fluency. However, overall understanding of a broad range of religious traditions is limited and some of the less able students struggle to make progress when topics are too complex or abstract.
- The quality of students' personal development in the context of RE is outstanding. Attitudes to the subject are often excellent and many show real perseverance in pursuing issues of interest. RE is making a major contribution to the students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. In addition, students have high expectations in lessons and benefit from the opportunities to extend a wide range of learning, literacy and oracy skills.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is good with outstanding features.

- Teaching in RE is planned very well with a high level of consistency of delivery. Lessons are often paced and energetic using a wide range of lively resources and strategies to meet students' needs and engage them actively in their learning.
- In the best lessons, learning is structured very effectively to ensure students steadily build understanding, making clear connections between different phases of their work. The context and direction of learning are explained carefully; very effective use is made of questioning to check the students' progress, and activities are skilfully adjusted when appropriate. Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use well to stimulate discussion and encourage students to participate. Very good use is made of oral work and group activities.
- Careful attention is paid to written requirements of the examinations but this is balanced with good opportunities to foster deeper understanding and lively debate. Work is marked very regularly and in detail, particularly

in the examination classes where students receive clear guidance and effective support about how to improve. Good use is made of self- and peer-assessment strategies. Assessment arrangements at Key Stage 3 are less effective and the use made of levels to monitor progress is inconsistent.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The RE curriculum throughout the school places a strong emphasis on challenging and extending students. A range of pathways is offered to accredit students' learning, including early entry in Year 9 for some. The more able have been successfully entered for full course GCSE for some years and this opportunity is now being extended further. There is a good take up of A-level courses reflecting the positive profile of the subject. The school does not offer core RE for all in the sixth form.
- A strength of the GCSE provision is the focus on Islam and Christianity, building on the significant religious background of many of the students. The school has also provided field trips to, for example, a local Sikh gurdwara, but has recognised there is scope to extend these opportunities further.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 has a number of strengths including the emphasis placed on investigating topics which are of relevance to the students, such as issues related to justice and medical ethics. Building on the Year 7 Learning for Life (L4L) programme, RE in Years 8 and 9 places emphasis on developing students' learning and literacy skills. The L4L programme deals implicitly with some concepts and material related to religion but there is scope to make these links more explicit.
- The school is aware that the Key Stage 3 curriculum needs further refinement. The sequencing and balance of work is not entirely effective. In particular, the range of religions studied is quite limited. Some of the topics selected are proving difficult for lower attaining students to access.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE is located within the humanities faculty and this is providing very effective leadership and a strong teaching team. There is a clear commitment to high standards, challenge and the future development of the subject. The capacity to improve is very positive.
- Monitoring of RE, particularly at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, is good. Any areas of concern are identified quickly and tackled effectively. The weaknesses in the Key Stage 3 curriculum are clearly incorporated within the well-structured RE development plan.
- The subject benefits from two well-qualified specialists and a programme of regular meetings to ensure all those teaching the subject are effectively

prepared and actively involved in planning and review. Arrangements for professional development are good.

- There is a strong ethos promoting both equal opportunities and community cohesion through RE and a commitment to extending links with religious and belief groups in the local area.

Subject issue: how well students are becoming effective learners in RE

RE makes a very positive contribution to the development of students as effective learners. They engage with a wide range of higher level skills in RE. Lessons have a clear focus on enquiry and students are routinely encouraged to reflect on the process of their learning. A number of students commented on the way RE has developed their confidence as learners and supported the development of their ability to organise ideas and write fluently and independently.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum to incorporate more breadth and continuity and ensure a better match to the full range of students' abilities
- developing the assessment arrangements at Key Stage 3 to ensure they are more reliable and consistent
- extending the links with local religious and belief communities to enrich students' learning further.

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 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