

14 October 2006

Mr Neil Hopkins
Principal
Peter Symonds College
Owens Road
Winchester
Hampshire
SO22 6RX

Dear Mr Hopkins

Ofsted Subject and Survey Inspection Programme 2005/06

Sector Skills Area: 2 Science and mathematics post-16

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation during my visit on 12 and 13 October. I am grateful to your staff for all their work in preparing the programme and background documentation and giving up their time during the visit. Please pass on my thanks to staff and learners who also gave up their time.

The visit provided much useful evidence for the good practice survey in science. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but should we wish to cite specific aspects of practice we will contact the college first. All college letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform judgements included: interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of learners' work and observation of five lessons.

I agreed to provide a summary of my observations of good practice seen in the sciences and to suggest some areas for development.

Good practice observed included:

Achievement and standards

- Standards are outstanding and achievements remain very good. Retention is outstanding and has been significantly above national benchmarks in biology, chemistry, physics and psychology for the past three years. This represents a considerable commitment to complete studies by a large number of young people. It also reflects the very good support and teaching the students receive.

- GCE A and AS pass rates are also outstanding and were well above the national average in 2006. Of particular note were the proportions of high grades (A and B) which have been well above national averages for the past three years. Pass rates have improved considerably over four years in human biology and in 2006 in environmental science. Overall, success rates are very high and significantly above the national benchmarks.
- Value added data for GCE A level sciences are good and indicate that students achieve above that predicted from their previous attainment. The picture is less clear for AS where students' progress is at or just above that predicted. Again some dramatic changes for the better have been recorded in human biology and environmental science.

How effective are teaching, training and learning?

- Teaching and learning are very good with some outstanding aspects. Lessons are well prepared and engage the students in an interesting and relevant variety of learning activities.
- Science teachers are confident users of information and communication technology (ICT) both in the preparation and delivery of their lessons. Electronic whiteboards are effectively used with microscopes, statistics software, animations and other internet downloads to bring relevant and interesting learning materials into the laboratory. In one lesson a first year physics student's query on the college intranet was used as revision for second year students and led to students agreeing to respond to the query in full.
- Teachers are confident in their subject knowledge and are skilful in relating activities to assessment outcomes. There is much good humour in lessons and the pace is brisk and busy. However, in a small minority of lessons, teachers assume that all the students have understood and move on too quickly. Standards are very high and students make very good progress.
- Assessments are well planned and students' progress rigorously tracked and monitored.

How well are learners guided and supported?

- Support and guidance are key strengths of the science departments. Teaching and learning are organised so that effective support, both informal and formal, are integral parts of the student experience. Tracking, monitoring and assessment are rigorous and backed up by well organised records. The result is that students are confident about their progress, know how to improve and speak positively about their target grades. Regular reviews are both useful and productive.
- ICT is increasingly used to communicate between students and staff. For example in 2004 psychology students logged on to the departmental intranet at the rate of 300 visits per month; in 2006

visits are now at 3000 per month. Departmental intranets contain useful links to websites along with past examination papers, mark schemes and the opportunity to pose questions and receive answers.

- But above all the workshops run by the teachers are the most effective support mechanism. All students, and not just those falling behind or experiencing difficulties with their studies, are actively encouraged to attend subject specific workshops that run throughout the week. As a result many students use them to complete assignments and to seek help in ensuring they make good progress. Students speak very highly of the workshops and the support they receive from teaching staff.

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?

- Leadership and management are outstanding. The science departments have confident, reflective teams who are proud of their work and set high standards. The science teams are well led and have demonstrated their capacity to improve. For example, close analysis of weaknesses and determined action have brought about significant improvements to retention and achievement rates in human biology and environmental science. Data on retention and achievements is very well collected and analysed centrally. This ensures that there is a consistent approach to evaluations for quality assurance purposes.
- Environmental science is now taught in the main science block following some well thought out accommodation changes.
- Departmental SARs are concise and evaluative and contain clear development plans. However, some do not put enough emphasis on how managers will continue to develop teaching and learning or how value added at AS could be further improved. In addition, the lesson observation system has awarded no outstanding grades in the sciences over three years. Given that the sciences were judged to be outstanding at the last inspection and success rates continue to be very high, a proportion of the teaching in the science may very well be outstanding.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- use of the full scale of grades when observing lessons
- encourage a more strategic view in the leadership and management section of subject self assessment reports.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop science courses in the college.

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

Yours sincerely

Alex Falconer
Her Majesty's Inspector