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Dame Shelia Wallis  
Headteacher  
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Dear Dame Shelia

Ofsted survey inspection programme: History

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 26 and 27 March 2008 to inspect work in history.

As well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on school visits to places of historical interest.

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 made included: visits to four classes, interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, and a review of a sample of students' work.

The overall quality of history was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards and the progress made by students in history vary considerably. Overall, they are just satisfactory.

- The achievement of some students is very good; for others it is satisfactory. Some students underachieve.
- The school's data on students' progress in Key Stage 3 indicates below-average standards; GCSE results reflect average standards and satisfactory progress; and at AS and A Level, standards are below average suggesting some underachievement.

- The school is well aware of this pattern and, during the past two years, has begun to put in place a series of measures to improve students' performance. Particularly relevant to sixth form history is a new recruitment policy which is now ensuring that only suitably qualified students are admitted to AS and A Level courses.
- Lower down the school, changes are being made to the curriculum to make it more relevant to students; and improvements have been made to the tracking of students' performance and the use of this information in influencing what is taught and how. These improvements are a good start but have not yet gone far enough.
- The history department has a lot of data on student performance. This is not yet sufficiently well used to monitor the department's overall performance.
- Students' personal development, encouraged by what they learn in history, is satisfactory. In their handling of evidence, making judgements and communicating them, they are clearly becoming more confident. However, personal development is not encouraged sufficiently; students are not yet given enough opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning.

### Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Students' attitudes to learning in history are good and behaviour in classes is excellent. In the main, they are keen to learn and very willing to work with teachers. A reflection of this is that a very high number of students opt to take history at GCSE.
- Though they are happy to listen to teachers talking about history, they prefer it best when they do it. Older students interviewed made this point strongly and cited the value of coursework in support.
- Teachers' very positive attitudes and their love of subject also come across very strongly; something which is acknowledged by students. They are keen for students to do well and have been both surprised and disappointed when examination results have not been as good as they expected.
- Students' work is regularly marked although comments do not always provide clear guidance on how to improve. However, this is not the case in the sixth form where comments are detailed and helpful. Students interviewed in Key Stage 3 were unclear about the level at which they were working and their immediate targets for improvement.
- In the lessons I attended, teaching was clear and well organised but some tended to be overly-dominated by the teacher with students given too few opportunities to pose their own questions, identify sources, research the sources, reach conclusions and communicate them.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- It covers, adequately, the National Curriculum and examination specifications, and innovation is beginning to take place; for example, the forthcoming suspension of the normal timetable so that history and other subjects will work together on a topic to encourage broad understanding and the development of students' skills.
- This innovation well supports the department's interest in providing experiences which are coherent, interesting, fun and relevant to students in their adult lives.

## Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management is satisfactory with an element that is excellent.

- Senior managers openly acknowledge the weaknesses indicated earlier in this letter and are already working with the head of department and other history staff to address matters. The changes are now beginning to have significant impact.
- The head of department is well respected by both students and staff, for her passion for the subject and for the support she gives colleagues. The recognition by senior managers and the head of department of current strengths and weaknesses, their willingness to be flexible and explore new directions for teaching and learning and the curriculum, and the success of remedial measures already introduced are highly effective.

## Subject issue: History Visits

During the inspection I was able to see something of the use made by the department of visits to historical sites. GCSE students, as part of their course, were preparing for a forthcoming visit to Bodiam Castle. The aim of the study was to explore the changes to the castle and its use over time. The study supported well other aspects of the course, in particular the interpretation of evidence. Students were interested, undertaking the preliminary work with enthusiasm.

The school is also a venue for others to visit. History plays an important community role in its contribution to the school's Youth University for 4 – 14 year olds on Saturday mornings. The 'Histories Mysteries' history and drama course set in the time of the Great Plague is offered to pupils in Years 4, 5 and 6 .

## Inclusion

Not all aspects of inclusion were inspected. However, it was clear in the lessons visited that teaching assistants were well deployed to support students with a range of difficulties. 'Gifted and Talented' students are also well supported through activities such as the joint history, geography and science club.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included the need to ensure that students' progress continues to improve by:

- providing more opportunities for students to take more responsibility for their learning of history
- using data more effectively to encourage better teaching and learning and to support all aspects of planning in history.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term and made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Armitage  
Additional Inspector