

Harlington Upper School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109673
Local Authority	Bedfordshire
Inspection number	325004
Inspection dates	24–25 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Mark Sims HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	13–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1331
Sixth form	366
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Richard Holland
Headteacher	Mr Shawn Fell
Date of previous school inspection	23 November 2005
School address	Goswell End Road Harlington Dunstable Bedfordshire LU5 6NX
Telephone number	01525 755100
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Age group	13–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Harlington Upper is larger than the average secondary school. It has specialist status as a science college and has recently acquired accreditation for Artsmark and Healthy Schools. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of educational need is below the national average. There is a small unit for pupils with hearing impairment on site. The percentage of students entitled to free school meals is very low as are the percentages for minority ethnic students and students for whom English is an additional language. The level of social deprivation is also low. When students join the school at the start of Year 9, they are working at levels that are above national expectations.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school where the excellent vision and drive of the headteacher and senior leaders coupled with the very high quality of care provided to students has led to rapid improvements in standards and achievement and ensured that the school has built an outstanding capacity to improve further.

Over the last three years standards, which are high, have risen in examination and test results. The latest indicative GCSE results for 2008 and the school's analysis of standards of students in school suggest this trend is set to continue. Although standards are rising, partly because students' attainment on entry in Year 9 continues to rise each year, the progress they make whilst at the school is also accelerating. Overall students make good progress but analysis of students' work suggests this will improve further. All groups of learners do well, including minority ethnic students, students with sensory disabilities and those who find learning more difficult.

The outstanding leadership of the headteacher and senior leaders has led to improvements in leadership and management at other levels in the school where there is still some variability. The school is well supported and challenged by its governors. Overall leadership and management are good. The strong focus on raising standards has also led to improvements in teaching and learning which are good. Whilst most teaching is at least good, there is not enough at the very highest level.

Students are very well looked after and cared for during their time in school, and the ethos of the school and the new building all help to make the students want to do as well as they can. Relationships in school are very harmonious and it is a calm and orderly environment. Although a few parents expressed concerns about student behaviour, the behaviour seen by inspectors in lessons and around the school was good and often exemplary.

The guidance students receive on how they can improve their work is good but there are inconsistencies in the way this is communicated through marking to students in different subjects. Whilst students usually know how well they are doing and what level they are expected to achieve they are not always clear how to get there.

Students are well served by a broad and balanced curriculum and a number of new curriculum developments have been introduced at the start of this term so it is too early to judge their impact. The specialist science college status is not only having a significant impact on standards but is also enabling the school to offer a wider range of opportunities to students beyond the academic subjects.

The school has made significant improvements since the last inspection, particularly in successfully addressing the issue of low achievement in English, which is now high, and improving the quality of teaching and learning which are mainly good. The efforts of the school to communicate more successfully with parents have been appreciated by the great majority but a minority still have concerns about consultation and communication.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good. Standards in the sixth form are above the national average although the proportion achieving the highest possible grades in Year 12 is

below national average. Students make good progress during their time in the sixth form because of the good quality of teaching and learning and the leadership and management provided which set a clear direction and focus on areas for development. Teaching and learning in the sixth form are mostly good although on occasions teachers spend too long talking from the front and introducing activities. Students respond well in the better lessons where they have the chance to engage in discussion or group activities.

The vertical grouping tutor system has enabled older students to take on greater responsibility and develop maturity by taking younger ones under their wing. In some curriculum subjects, such as modern languages, sixth form students provide support in lessons and take part in a peer mentoring programme. Relationships between staff and students are very good and students report they feel well supported by their teachers who 'treat us as individuals'. Students do not feel there is enough advice for those wishing to take vocational paths, however. Students have a wide range of academic subjects they can study but the curriculum is largely traditional with few options for those wishing to take vocational subjects.

What the school should do to improve further

- Build on the current best practice in the school to increase the proportion of teaching and learning judged to be outstanding.
- Ensure that the monitoring of student progress and guidance across all subjects matches that of the very best seen in the school.
- Extend the breadth and range of curriculum opportunities available in the sixth form.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards are high in the school and the trend over the last three years shows that they have risen at a faster rate than nationally at Key Stages 3 and 4. Standards in tests at the end of Year 9 are consistently above the national average. Indicative GCSE results for 2008 show that the rising trend at Key Stage 4 is set to continue as more pupils than ever achieved five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics. By the end of Year 11, standards are close to well above average.

Achievement is good throughout the school and over time is getting better as indicated by analysis of recent and projected results. The relentless drive from the headteacher and senior leaders to raise standards has led to rapid and sustained improvement, particularly in English, which was a priority to address at the time of the last inspection. The specialist status in science is also having a positive impact on achievement. All groups of learners are sharing in the improvements in standards and achievement including those who find learning difficult, those with sensory disabilities and minority ethnic pupils.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Most students enjoy school as demonstrated by their good attendance and punctuality. Students say they feel safe and relationships at every level are cordial. Racist remarks and bullying are rare but any incidents are dealt with quickly and fairly. Clear expectations are set for good behaviour and senior staff do not shrink, when necessary, from using the ultimate sanction of exclusion. A few parents expressed concern about lessons being disturbed by poor behaviour.

This was not seen during the inspection and even in lessons where students were not fully challenged by interesting work they maintained positive attitudes to learning.

Responsibilities, such as acting as peer mentors or house captains, are undertaken with efficiency and pride. The school council is a respected voice for students in the school. However whilst students have opportunities to express their views, for example through the vertical tutor group, the school recognises this can be developed further. Students' social, moral, cultural and spiritual development is good. All students are aware of other faiths and ways of life and give good consideration to a range of national and global issues including poverty, racial harmony and safeguarding the environment. The school is active in promoting healthy lifestyles and students understand the importance of keeping healthy. Students' good basic and work related skills prepare them well for life beyond school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The great majority of lessons are good, and take place in a calm and orderly environment. Students show positive attitudes to learning, and lessons are characterised by respectful and constructive relationships between teachers and students, and between students themselves. This gives learners confidence and adds to their enjoyment of lessons, while allowing valuable opportunities for co-operative work. Lessons are mainly well-structured and carefully planned, allowing students' knowledge and skills to build steadily and letting them see the links between their learning. In many of the better lessons, students are kept fully aware of the levels at which they are working, and of their targets, and lesson-planning reflects this. Some of the best lessons provide opportunities to develop students' independent learning skills; this could be enhanced by a wider use of information and communication technology (ICT) across the school.

A minority of lessons rely too heavily on whole-class teaching, which does not take sufficient account of the range of students' starting points, and leads to an inappropriate pace of the lesson for some. In the better lessons teachers use questioning strategies which enable them to check learning and assess progress at various points of the lesson. This also helps to keep students involved, while enabling them to clarify their thinking and reflect on their learning. Marking is carried out regularly in several subject areas, but there is inconsistency, which means that students are not always given sufficient specific feedback to help them improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The quality of the curriculum is good in the main school and satisfactory in the sixth form. The school provides a range of opportunities that supports the progress of the students. This academic year a range of new initiatives have been introduced that allows for a range of enhancement and taster activities to be included in Year 9, and a more flexible curriculum to be followed in Years 10 and 11. The impact of these on pupil progress is yet to be seen but the structure has been welcomed by the pupils and parents. The formal academic curriculum is complemented by the careers education and the Personal Social and Health Education programme and contributes to the good personal development of the pupils. The science specialist status has impacted on the school in raising the profile of science and allowing for a greater breadth of science subjects to be taught. The sixth form curriculum is still largely

traditional with few vocational options. The school recognises that the 14 to 19 pathways are limited.

There are a range of extra-curricular activities including a variety of out of school clubs, visits and extended trips. The students also have a range of opportunities to take responsibility in the local community and the community of the school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The pastoral care is outstanding and guidance provided by the school is good. All safeguarding procedures are robust. Students are confident that any problems they have will be taken seriously. Good links with a range of external agencies support and extend the care provided for students in school. Sensitive and very supportive steps are taken to ensure students settle quickly and confidently into school and this was especially valued by parents. Careers guidance is well planned and steps to ensure that parents are kept more closely informed about career opportunities have been taken.

Students' personal development is promoted well through the newly established vertical tutor groups which encourage supportive links between year groups and add to the family ethos of the school. There is well-targeted, sensitive help for students who find learning more difficult and those with sensory disabilities, beginning with efficient links to the middle schools. Academic guidance for students has improved so that targets are set and regularly reviewed in all subject areas. However, as yet, targets are not always sufficiently challenging for students of different abilities to help drive forward their progress.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good. The headteacher has shown outstanding leadership in implementing a vision, which has involved all members of the school community in raising expectations and standards. A sense of shared ownership and the involvement of staff in school improvement has been a key element in driving this vision forward. The headteacher has successfully assembled a very able and effective senior leadership team which is bringing about rapid and sustained improvements. Many subject leaders are working creatively and enthusiastically to implement these improvements but there is inconsistency in their levels of effectiveness. The school's motto, 'Know thyself', is reflected well in its self-evaluation and demonstrates a clear awareness of its strengths and areas for development. The school has in place a wide range of strategies to support community cohesion. The idea of 'family' is strengthened through the house system, and that of 'global family' is enhanced in many ways, including visits to local mosques and visits to Ghana.

Specialist status in science has contributed well to the raising of standards and the widening of the curriculum across the whole school, for example engaging students, who might not benefit from a purely academic curriculum, in a range of community settings. The school has developed an impressive range of partnerships. For example, collaboration between the school and its partner middle schools has allowed students to successfully complete Key Stage 3 tests at the end of Year 8 before joining the upper school. The governing body brings good expertise to the school, acting as an effective critical friend, for example, by working alongside senior

staff in reviewing departments. Governors and the headteacher have effectively reduced the deficit budget, and the school gives good value for money.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	IE ²

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2	

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

²IE - denotes that insufficient evidence was available to inspectors for a judgement to be made.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

26 September 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Harlington Upper School, Harlington, LU5 6NX

You will know that we recently visited your school. Thank you to those of you who took the time to speak to us or show us round your impressive new building, especially when we got lost looking for rooms.

I thought you would like to know what we have said about Harlington Upper. We think you go to a good school that is improving fast. The way your headteacher and senior staff have focused on raising standards has led to much higher results in your tests and examinations. This has given the school a very good platform to go on and improve further. You also receive exceptionally high quality care, which ensures you are able to learn in a safe and supportive environment.

Most of your lessons are good and you benefit from a wide range of curriculum opportunities. We were impressed with your behaviour and attitude to learning and this helps you to go on and do well in your examinations.

We think the school is exceptionally well placed to get even better and have suggested a few things that we hope will help Harlington achieve this. These are:

- To make sure that all your lessons match the high quality of the very best ones.
- Check that you receive the same high quality guidance on how to improve in all your subjects.
- Provide a wider range of curriculum choices in the sixth form that meet a wider range of needs and interests.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to thank you for making our visit an enjoyable one and wish you well in your future.

Mark Sims

Her Majesty's Inspector