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Mr N Swann
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Dear Mr Swann

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 15 and 16 March 2010 to look at work in mathematics.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the effectiveness of the college's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics.

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, analysis of students' work and observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students start at the college in Year 9 with standards that are low. They make good progress to reach average standards at the end of Year 11. Over half of the students gained grades A* to C in their GCSE examination last year and all gained appropriate accreditation at the end of Year 11.
- In 2009, four sets of students completed their GCSE examination at the end of Year 10 and then followed a complete AS course or elements of it in Year 11. This has led to a large increase in the proportion of students continuing to study mathematics at A level.

- The college offers an exciting range of relevant vocational courses including hospitality, hair, beauty, car mechanics, animal welfare and construction. Mathematics supports students to ensure they have the appropriate level 2 qualifications in numeracy.
- Standards at A level are improving and in 2009 were above average at AS and A level. A small but increasing number of students are also successful in further mathematics. This is indicative of the increased confidence in the subject. Students across all years and ability levels say they enjoy mathematics. It is also reflected in the good behaviour observed within lessons.
- The quality of learning within lessons is generally good. It is best when lessons are planned to consider how students will learn and the teacher's exposition considers how to ensure students are to understand their work as well as being able to answer questions. However, this is not consistent across the department.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is good.

- Excellent relationships between staff and students are very evident with students greatly appreciating the commitment of staff in ensuring they succeed in examinations. They commented, 'there is always somebody who will help you.' While some homework is set, staff encourage students to take greater ownership of their own learning by identifying work which will be of benefit for students to complete. They respond very well to this advice and often complete additional work outside of lessons.
- In many lessons, teachers use questions and students' responses well to make teaching points and rectify errors or misconceptions. In the best lessons, teachers plan opportunities for students to work in groups and discuss mathematics. Teaching often develops students' understanding of the concepts being covered. One student said; 'teachers often make sure we know why we are studying the topic as well as how to do the questions.' However, in other lessons, the work is mainly about learning an algorithm and then practising it.
- Development of oracy and support for literacy is often good through attention to mathematical language, including the use of vocabulary books.
- Students are tested regularly by completing GCSE examination papers. These are marked thoroughly to identify areas of weaknesses which are then rectified through additional teaching and support for students on what they need to do to overcome errors. Work in students' books is not as well marked. Although students are informed how well they are working relative to their expected levels, marking does not consistently identify or inform them what they need to do to improve.
- Staff use the electronic whiteboards appropriately and, in some sets, students use information and communication technology (ICT) effectively to enhance their learning.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- Schemes of work are relevant and include a good variety of activities. Many lessons include suitable investigations to motivate and enthuse students.
- ICT is used well in some lessons to motivate and further students' understanding; for example, the use of a graph-plotting package to enable students to see the relationships between changes in the equation and transformations to the graph without spending an undue amount of time drawing them by hand.
- Students start their GCSE course when they arrive in Year 9. Many take the examination early and then continue to AS mathematics. This has been successful in raising the proportion of students who take mathematics at A level. One Year 12 student commented; 'being able to tackle the AS work over two years made sure I had a better understanding.'
- Good use is made of the college's farm to engage students, for example in using the data from the weights of a group of piglets to see how well they are developing or correlating the length of daylight with the number of eggs laid by the hens.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of mathematics is good.

- The subject leader has a clear vision and ambition for the department which is shared and understood by the staff. An accurate self-evaluation, based on lesson observations, book scrutinies and students' views, has informed the priorities for further improvement. For example, some students identified that they rarely get the opportunity to decide which questions to answer as they work systematically through an exercise. The college is responding to this by ensuring students have more opportunities to take ownership of their own learning and identify which questions are the most appropriate for them to complete.
- You have a clear vision of how the college is to develop and your commitment to ensuring that students have the best possible opportunity to develop socially and academically is palpable. You, along with other senior leaders and the subject leader, are driving forward improvements within the mathematics department so mathematics can continue to be one of the better performing subjects within the college.
- The department has demonstrated good progress in raising standards, developing young mathematicians, and improving the overall quality of provision. These indicate a good capacity for the department to continue to improve.

Subject issue: the effectiveness of the college's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics

- A collaborative approach is developing with other post holders within the department taking a more strategic role in developing the curriculum and improving the quality of teaching.
- The range and variety of teaching approaches are increasing. The department has received good support from the local authority and the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics in developing and disseminating a wider variety of approaches to teaching certain topics.
- The college is careful to match the expertise of staff to different groups of students so that overall students achieve well.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the consistency of teaching and assessment by:
 - ensuring lessons develop understanding as well as students' ability to learn and practise mathematical algorithms
 - improving the quality of assessment so that marking in books identifies areas for improvement and informs students how to get better.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Michael Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector