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Mr J Gillard
Principal
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Dear Mr Gillard

Ofsted 2013–14 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 8 and 9 May 2013 to look at work in English.

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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of pupils'/students' work; observation of ten English lessons; and a brief drop-in to a library lesson.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English is good.

- Students make good progress in English. The proportion making expected progress is above the national average, with significant numbers making better-than-average progress. In 2012, the proportion of students achieving a GCSE grade A* to C in English was below average, although students had made rapid gains from very low starting points. The average points score gained by students known to be eligible for the pupil premium was higher than for all students nationally. The academy's detailed analysis of information about students' learning indicates that students continue to make good progress and that where gaps exist, for example between students with special educational needs and their peers, these are closing.

- In 2012, sixth form students achieved less well in AS English Language and English Literature, though those who completed A level in both subjects made better-than-average progress from their starting points. A careful analysis of students' performance in early entry examinations has led to curriculum adaptations which are sharply focused on developing students' skills. As a result, students in the current Year 12 and 13 cohorts are making much better progress.
- Students are keen to do well. They generally show good focus in groups and are willing to answer questions, particularly when there is an element of stretch and challenge. Lessons are characterised by good relationships with teachers, enabling students, including those who lack confidence, to make thoughtful contributions to discussion. A consistent approach to marking technical errors in students' writing is improving students' skills, for example with spelling. Work in students' exercise books shows good progress over time and, in most cases, pride in presentation.

Teaching in English is good.

- Teachers plan lessons effectively to cater for students' individual abilities and needs. They draw on a wide range of high-quality resources to engage students, including the use of film and visual stimuli. Students are given helpful materials to support their progress. These include key vocabulary and prompts to structure longer pieces of writing. In the most effective lessons, teachers set tasks which encourage students to think for themselves and to deepen their understanding of challenging texts.
- Students can confidently explain the progress they are making towards challenging targets. English teachers mark books regularly, with helpful comments. Most marking offers well-targeted guidance on how to improve. However, not all teachers make it clear how students should act upon this advice and make the necessary improvements.
- Teachers have high expectations of behaviour and lessons provide a safe environment in which to learn. The best teaching is characterised by very high expectations of what all students can achieve. Clear explanations, a brisk pace and challenging questions engage students fully. In a very small number of lessons, the pace is slower and the time allocated for extending ideas in writing is too short, which results in less rapid progress.

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum provides suitable breadth, with a wide range of texts and units of study. Teachers regularly review texts and schemes of work, to ensure that the curriculum is relevant, engaging and appropriately balanced. Students speak enthusiastically about reading 'The Tempest' in Year 7. Students in Year 9 enjoy the challenge of studying GCSE texts, which include 'Of Mice and Men'. Enrichment activities such as reading and film clubs provide additional stimulus, though the number of students accessing these is relatively limited.
- The academy organises students by ability, in curriculum pathways. This has enabled the effective targeting of resources, such as additional literacy

support for less able students and smaller class sizes in the lower pathways. In addition, higher ability students are able to start GCSE courses in Year 9 and take English Language examinations in Year 10. Those who do not achieve the highest grades in relation to challenging targets have a further opportunity to enter in Year 11, in addition to completing the GCSE literature course.

- The academy-wide commitment to developing more confident readers has proved highly effective in promoting more regular reading habits and developing students' skills. Many have reading abilities well below their chronological age on entry. Targeted support for students from teachers and additional support staff enables them to make rapid progress. The academy's 'Drop Everything and Read' strategy and accelerated reading programme have made a significant impact. Students say that it is important to read regularly. They are keen to complete quizzes based on the novels they read and to be recognised for their achievement.

Leadership and management of English are good.

- The head of department is passionate about English and is very well supported by pathway co-ordinators. Together they show determination that all students will achieve well and experience high quality teaching.
- There is a clear expectation that members of the department will share good practice and learn from each other's successes. The department is cohesive, with a good balance of experienced teachers and some who are relatively new to the profession. Along with effective support and challenge provided by senior leaders, the head of department regularly reviews and monitors provision. Action-plans are sharply focused on areas for improvement, based on rigorous and detailed self-evaluation.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that all teaching is as good as the best, providing effective pace, stretch and challenge for students of all abilities
- increasing the proportion of students attaining higher grades at GCSE and at GCE AS and A level
- embedding good marking practice across the department, so that students are always clear about how to improve their work.

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

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Russell Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector