

Inspection report

The Abbey College, Malvern

Independent tutorial college

DfES ref no: 885/6026

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 13 – 16 November 2006

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the college's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

The Abbey College is situated in an attractive, elevated seventy acre site in Malvern Wells. The extensive site has facilities for a wide range of sporting and recreational activities. It is privately owned and was established by its present proprietors in 1974. The college is accredited by the British Accreditation Council for Further and Higher Education (BAC) and its English language courses are inspected by the British Council. Both bodies visited the college during 2005.

The college provides education for male and female students between the ages of 14 and 20, although students may on occasions be a little older. There are currently 63 students on roll of whom 14 are of compulsory school age. For a large proportion of the students, English is not their principal language. An English language programme is available to these students. Although the student population is predominantly from abroad, a small number of British students attend the college and currently there are three on roll. The college is unusual in the diversity of nationalities who attend. It describes its aim as 'to foster a community of international understanding and shared values in which overseas students receive the quality of academic education and support in English Language which will enable them to succeed both in the short term and in the longer term to progress successfully to higher education in the universities and subjects of their choice'.

The college, which aims to offer 'an international boarding school environment', offers a variety of flexible programmes within both the academic school and the English language school. All courses are offered on a co-educational, fully residential basis. The college also provides an intensive one year foundation course for those students wishing to enter medical programmes at a range of universities, including Charles University in Prague, where courses are taught in English. In addition the college also provides vacation language courses during the summer break.

Summary of main findings

The college has many strengths. Significant improvements have been made since the last inspection conducted by Ofsted in 2000, so much so that a number of the features of its current provision are of a notably high quality. Improvements, as well as future development plans, demonstrate the clear vision provided by the current college leadership. The quality of teaching is good and some is outstanding. Teachers work hard and show clear commitment in their support for students. Students' welfare is given appropriately high priority and this view is confirmed by

inspections conducted by other bodies, including the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI), which carried out an inspection of boarding facilities in 2005. Students representing all ages progress well and confirm that they are happy to be at the college. The college meets all but two of the requirements for registration.

What the college does well:

- it offers a wide range of courses that meet individual students' needs;
- its strategies to ensure effective support for teaching students for whom English is a foreign language are thoughtfully planned and particularly effective;
- its students make rapid progress in achieving a good level of competence in English. At the end of their courses most students successfully progress to university courses or to advanced level study;
- students from a wide range of countries mix very well together in a calm and harmonious atmosphere;
- it provides a very wide range of activities for students; and
- its procedures to ensure the welfare of students are thorough.

What the college must do in order to comply with the regulations:

- ensure that medical checks on all staff are carried out prior to them taking up their posts; and
- ensure that more appropriate and adjustable seating is provided for students using computers.

Next Steps

Whilst not required by the regulations, the college might wish to consider the following points for development:

- to improve further the quality of reports so that they are of a consistently high standard and that they are clear about how well individual students are progressing;
- to improve further the consistency of marking and schemes of work;
- to improve and upgrade some of the college's resources, in particular for science; and
- to develop further, strategies for making links with the local community.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the college

The quality of the curriculum

The college provides a wide range of courses. The curriculum policy is clearly articulated in information available from the college. It is supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work. The overall planning of the curriculum has improved significantly since the last inspection by Ofsted, although there is still some variation in the degree of detail that subject schemes of work provide.

The courses offered meet the needs of the students who, for the most part, come to the United Kingdom from a wide range of countries. The aim of most students is to develop their skills in English language, as well as gaining academic qualifications, as a step to ultimately moving on to higher education in universities in this country, but also elsewhere in Europe and, on occasions, in America. The courses available to students of all ages are clearly described in a range of documents, including the college brochure which is available to parents and prospective parents. The college website provides more detailed information in the context of curriculum content, and is particularly useful for parents and prospective parents who live abroad. The college emphasises that it is able to tailor courses to meet the individual student's particular requirements. Comments received from students in a questionnaire completed prior to the inspection, as well as discussions with students of all ages during the inspection, indicate that the majority are content with their courses.

Courses offered by the college fall under two main headings: academic courses which include those that lead to students taking examinations at International General Certificate of Secondary Education, General Certificate of Secondary Education, Advanced Supplementary, Advanced (A2) levels and the college's own university foundation course; and the English language courses. Academic courses are helpfully designed to cater for students at different levels of competence in English. Foundation courses have a specialist nature, catering for older students who wish to pursue careers in medicine, law, science, engineering, business and occasionally in art. In addition to the English language courses run during term time for these groups of students, all of whom attend the college on a full-time basis, the college provides vacation language courses during the summer. These latter courses were not the subject of this inspection.

Students of compulsory school age experience a suitably wide range of learning opportunities. When they enter the college, tests are used to determine their competence in English, to inform the level of support that they require and to guide appropriate grouping. All students of compulsory school age take an appropriate course, which includes personal, social, and health education (PSHE), aspects of which are supported by the college nurse, and citizenship and physical education (PE). Careers guidance is supported within PSHE and other aspects of the college provision. Nevertheless, the college emphasises that, without exception, it is the express aim of all parents placing their children with them that they will continue in education beyond the age of sixteen and ultimately proceed to university.

The subject matter of the curriculum is suitable to meet the needs of students of all ages and abilities. This is supported by teachers' overall very good awareness of students' language needs in their teaching and the positive development of students' speaking, listening and literacy skills in the context of their competence in English. All students acquire skills in numeracy and some show above average ability in this respect. Although no students are identified as having statements of special educational need, the college on occasions calls upon specialist support to diagnose learning difficulties. Courses provided for students who are above compulsory school age are appropriate to meet their needs.

A wide range of opportunities is provided for students to take part in activities outside the college or as extensions to the curriculum. This is appropriate for a college catering exclusively for boarders. A number of students interviewed during the inspection indicated that they had visited several parts of the United Kingdom as part of the programme of college visits. An unusually wide range of sports activities are available, including for example, soccer, basketball, netball, archery and grass skiing. These, combined with a range of social activities, curriculum opportunities, the experience of living away from home and the focus on giving students responsibilities, ensures that they are well prepared for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is good overall and some teaching is exceptional. Most students work very hard, have a positive attitude to their studies and concentrate well in lessons. This enables teachers to work effectively. The helpful organisation of the curriculum to meet individual pupil's needs, supported by effective guidance provided by the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) department for teaching in general, contributes effectively to students' making generally good progress. Students who spend a period of time on intensive English programmes make very good progress.

Statistical evidence and information provided by the college indicates that overall students make appropriate progress in public examinations, relative to their ability on entry, and particularly well in English. This is supported by evidence both from classroom observation and from the college's established systems for tracking their progress. However, comparisons are difficult to make because of the changing nature of the college intake each year and because the vast majority of students were previously educated in a variety of countries.

The college has a clear view of the essential issues relating to teaching students for whom English is a foreign language. Monitoring and appraisal systems, introduced since the arrival of the new principal, are making a strong contribution to the quality of teaching overall, but particularly to this aspect of the provision. Formal and informal lesson observations by the college management track support for students learning EFL. Analysis of information is used effectively to identify development needs in relation to teaching students for whom English is a foreign language. The analysis clarifies the ways in which teachers can accelerate students' understanding of English and so improve the quality and rate of learning. Provision for the training and development of teachers' EFL skills is exceptional, leading to rapid improvement

in communication and a strengthening in students' confidence and capability. For example, in an English lesson, students were drawn skilfully into narrating a story built around consequences. The teacher's innovative methods of developing English language and excellent communication skills set the scene for an exciting lesson. Simple resources encouraging students to use their imagination, together with an effective classroom layout, gave students the confidence to contribute as the story developed using past and future tenses.

Overall staff expertise, as well as their passion for their subject, is often contagious and students respond by seizing opportunities to use teachers' energy to inspire their own learning. Teachers know their students well; they have good understanding of their prior experience through the college's positive links with students' families. In discussions students explained what they like about the college. They see their teachers, house parents and general support as an important cornerstone in their development and happiness.

The college tests students shortly after they arrive. Information derived from the tests is used with other effective assessment strategies such as Sunday tests, to measure the progress students make as they move through their courses. Information is effectively built on each student which can then be used through various means. These include students' regular meetings with their tutors, to provide advice about progress. Overall written feedback to students is of inconsistent quality. Despite this some students remarked positively about teachers' written comments on their work, and particularly the opportunities provided to discuss improvements needed with teachers.

Teachers generally have high expectations of what students can achieve and they plan thoroughly. In the best lessons, the effectiveness of their planning ensures the active participation of the students in the learning process. In these lessons an effective range of teaching strategies is used to engage students' interest and support their developing understanding. This teaching style encourages students to ask questions and to think independently. For example, in a science lesson, younger students worked in pairs to construct an experiment to test equilibrium, balance and moments. Good discussion and teacher questioning enabled them to see how they might improve the experiment. This added to their scientific knowledge and understanding, as well as developing their communication skills. However, where teaching strategies are more limited students' attention occasionally wanders. Classroom management is very well supported by the college's clear behaviour policy. Resources are generally adequate to support teaching, but in science the unavailability of some equipment constrains some learning opportunities.

Does the college meet requirements for registration?

Yes

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students

The college makes good provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This aspect of their development is promoted by the wide range of nationalities who attend the college and who work and relax together harmoniously. Students comment that they feel privileged to enjoy one another's company. Their

confidence grows with their development of English language skills. Students are keen to speak with visitors and about their life at college and their studies. They demonstrate maturity in their general social interaction and conduct in classrooms and around the college. Their self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence are developed effectively by the range of activities available.

The college is sensitive to students' cultural backgrounds in developing a programme of activities and explaining issues linked to British festivals and traditions. Whilst the autumn programme for students highlights significant periods or events such as the end of Ramadan and the Harvest Festival in China, Hong Kong and Korea, it also ensures that students are aware of the significance of Christmas in British and Western culture and the source of those traditions within a Christian context. The attractive grounds play a significant role in developing students' awareness of their environment and the beauty of the world around them. Comments from students show that they are aware of the quality of their surroundings, both in terms of the college grounds and the surrounding area. The opportunity for students of compulsory school age to take part in art activities during their time at the college supports the development of their sensitivity to colour and form.

Overall students of all ages demonstrate a clear understanding of the difference between right and wrong. This is shown through their positive response to the opportunities provided and the responsibilities required or requested by the college. Students' behaviour both in and out of the classrooms is very good. This supports the provision of the good range of activities available outside the college as staff can be confident that students will be good ambassadors. Those of compulsory school age are provided with a basic knowledge of British institutions through their citizenship lessons. The range of courses and experiences available has a positive impact on all students' awareness in this respect.

Students' cultural development is very good in terms of enriching their knowledge of different cultural views, preferences and traditions. They have ample opportunities to increase their understanding of British culture through a range of activities. In addition, all students have the opportunity to experience art, and a minority study music, outside the college. The college social programme includes the use of the well equipped sound booth in the common room for listening to music from different parts of the world, provided by individual students.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

This is a very good aspect of the college provision. All policies and practice in these areas are appropriate. They are effectively implemented as a result of the positive collaboration between teaching and residential staff. Students are involved in the development of policies through questionnaires and committees, such as the food committee, which monitors the provision of meals. The commitment of all staff, supported by the very positive relationships between staff and students, results in the college having a very nurturing family feel. Welfare issues raised by the most

recent CSCI report have been addressed through a good action plan and are all either completed or in the process of completion.

The excellent array of diverse sporting and fitness opportunities ensures that exercise is part of students' approach to a healthy lifestyle. However, sporting opportunities are stronger for boys than girls. Students understand clearly the need for a balanced diet. The active food committee meets regularly to review the strengths and weaknesses of college meals. A very positive debate between the chef and the students keeps the quality of provision under review

Close supervision and support for students of compulsory school age throughout the school day and in their houses ensures any potential problems are addressed early. Older students are given more freedom as befits their age and responsibility. Staff interact well with students and are involved with them in activities such as playing table tennis and working alongside them in the internet café. They provide good support for activities in general. The active participation of staff at break and lunchtime ensures that policies relating to behaviour, anti-bullying and health and safety are monitored effectively. Policies link well to the school mission statement, which is 'to foster a community of international understanding and shared values'. This promotes the harmonious relationships where students do well.

The school is very committed to safeguarding students' welfare and safety. Senior managers have the role of child protection officers. All staff are suitably trained. The college's respect for confidentiality inspires trust and honesty from the students. However, one area of concern raised by students was the security of their possessions. Inspectors found that the issue had already been taken up by the principal through the school council and a range of entirely appropriate actions have already been taken to resolve the situation. Despite the many measures put in place by the college to safeguard against such problems, students are still too casual in the care of their possessions.

Health and safety policies are rigorous and the updated Health and Safety Manual for 2006 is appropriately linked to the student and staff handbooks to secure implementation. Effective risk assessment procedures precede all college trips and situations where there are potential hazards. Students are well informed about good health and safety practice and respond appropriately. Fire safety precautions and First Aid are monitored regularly. This term a consultant fire officer has trained staff in the use of fire extinguishers and all staff have received First Aid training. An admissions register and daily records of attendance are carefully maintained.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

The college has established strategies and procedures for ensuring that new staff are appropriately checked to ensure that they are suitable to work with young people. In most respects these procedures work well. However, the college does

not yet carry out all the required medical checks for new staff prior to them taking up their posts.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets all but one of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *ensure that medical checks are undertaken for all new staff (paragraph (4)(c)).*

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The school premises and accommodation are appropriate to the requirements of college courses. The extensive grounds provide rich opportunities for sports and outdoor activities.

Three houses are available for student accommodation, while younger students are housed in the main building. A rolling programme of renovation to improve the quality of accommodation is beginning to address the recommendations of the previous CSCI report. The school is clean and well cared for by its full time team of maintenance and cleaning staff. Hard work by the site maintenance team is making a positive contribution to the improvement of the premises in general.

Many interesting features in the main block enrich students' social life at college. A common room with good sporting equipment, a multi-gym, a television lounge, an internet café and a 'music booth', are a few examples of the diverse opportunities students have for social interaction and relaxation. A room is set aside to provide a surgery which is run by the nurse each morning and two appropriate sick bays provide single sex accommodation for students who may be taken ill.

Good specialist subject rooms for art, the sciences and PE enhance learning and help prepare students for examinations. Effective development of independent research and reading for pleasure is supported by a well stocked library. The library is organised appropriately by the use of the Dewey system, thus helping students to become familiar with the systems that they will find in public and university libraries. The library offers a good selection of reference and fiction books, including booklets written by students, for example on the local area. A wide range of useful periodicals and broadsheet newspapers, plus access to a computer, provide the opportunity for students to extend their knowledge of the United Kingdom and world matters, and to gain access to relevant subject research and information. A small computer suite above the library is used effectively for information and communication technology lessons. The facility is used well, but student seating does not comply with health and safety requirements for working with computers, as the chairs are not adjustable.

The good sized hall is used for assemblies, house meetings and school productions, such as 'the Abbey Show' at Christmas in which all students are encouraged to take

part. There is no damage to property and students show respect for their environment. Classrooms are light and airy and provide appropriate learning environments.

The college meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in that it has clear and succinct plans which refer to the problems of the site and how matters would be dealt with on a needs basis. The college's approach to the DDA is appropriate in the circumstances of the unusually steep site. Despite the difficulties, there have clearly been occasions in the past when the college has gone out of its way to provide appropriate access for students with significant disability.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The college complies with all but one of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *ensure that seating used for computer lessons is more appropriate (paragraph 5(r)).*

6. The quality of information for parents, prospective parents and other partners

The college has appropriate means of providing information to parents, prospective parents and other partners. Information about the college, its courses and policies are mainly provided through the attractive new college brochure, the students' handbook and the college website. The website provides a particularly effective means of communication, as the vast majority of parents live abroad in a wide range of countries.

The college is aware of those aspects of information that have to be provided as a matter of course through its information, and those which they make clear are available on request from the college.

The college sends reports to students' parents four times a year, twice during the students' first term and once in each of the other two terms. The reports have a number of strengths, but they show inconsistencies in the detail provided between subjects. Some reports concentrate too much on attitude and say too little about what the individual student has achieved. Reports set targets, but these too often lack precision.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

The college's complaints policy has a number of important strengths, not least of which is in the context of an institution serving foreign parents and students. For example, there are good graphic representations of how complaints are dealt with. Several minor points within the detail of the complaints policy were addressed during the inspection week to ensure that the college fully understood why it should be presented in a particular way and to ensure appropriate compliance.

Recent inspection by CSCI confirms that matters are appropriate with regard to procedures relating to boarding.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.