



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

ABBEY COLLEGE

STANDARD INSPECTION

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

Abbey College

Full Name of College	Abbey College
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Email Address	admin@abbeymanchester.co.uk
Head	Ms Liz Elam
Chair of Governors	Sir John Ritblat
Age Range	15 to 19+
Total Number of Students	220
Gender of Students	Mixed (123 boys; 97 girls)
Number of Day Students	Total: 220
Inspection dates	07 Dec 2010 to 08 Dec 2010 17 Jan 2011 to 19 Jan 2011

PREFACE

This inspection report follows the STANDARD *ISI schedule*. The inspection consists of two parts: an INITIAL two-day inspection of regulatory requirements followed by a three-day FINAL (team) inspection of the school's broader educational provision. This is the school's first inspection by ISI.

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is the body approved by the Government for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010*. The range of these Regulations is as follows.

- (a) Quality of education provided (curriculum)
- (b) Quality of education provided (teaching)
- (c) Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils
- (d) Welfare, health and safety of pupils
- (e) Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors
- (f) Premises and accommodation
- (g) Provision of information
- (h) Manner in which complaints are to be handled

*These Standards Regulations replace those first introduced on 1 September 2003.

Legislation additional to Part 3, Welfare, health and safety of pupils, is as follows.

- (i) The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA).
- (ii) Race, gender and sexual discrimination legislation.
- (iii) Corporal punishment.

The inspection was also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

The inspection of the school is from an educational perspective and provides limited inspection of other aspects, though inspectors will comment on any significant hazards or problems they encounter which have an adverse impact on children. The inspection does not include:

- (i) an exhaustive health and safety audit
- (ii) an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features
- (iii) an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures
- (iv) an in-depth investigation of the school's compliance with employment law.

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1. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

- 1.1 Abbey College Manchester is a co-educational day college situated in the centre of the city of Manchester. Founded in 1990, it moved to its present location in 2003. The college is a member of the Abbey DLD Group of Colleges, which itself is part of the Alpha Plus Group Ltd. The governing body of the Alpha Plus Group has a management board and a senior management team which exercise responsibility for the governance of the college.
- 1.2 Most of the students are prepared for GCSE and A level examinations. Some take the BTEC examination and 32 study the International Foundation Programme (IFP). The main year groups are Years 11, 12 and 13. Students are not admitted below the age of 15 and there are a few 'mature' students, up to the age of 23.
- 1.3 The college aims to guide its students to achieve academic success and fulfil their aspirations, to respect and value each student, providing a friendly, safe, supportive environment where students are happy and grow in confidence, and to prepare its students for university, for their future careers and to make a positive contribution to the community.
- 1.4 A total of 220 students attend the college, 123 boys and 97 girls. Most live in Greater Manchester or the surrounding area, but over a third come from overseas, from 29 different countries; English is an additional language for 63 students, 61 of whom receive support for their English. The college has identified 22 students as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD), and of these, four receive specialist learning support from the college.
- 1.5 Students come from a wide range of cultural, ethnic, educational and personal backgrounds, and several join during the course of the academic year. The main Year 11 intake comprises students sitting their GCSEs for the first time and students retaking their GCSEs, many of whom continue into the sixth form. The ability profile to GCSE is below the national average, with most students being either of below average or of average ability. The ability profile in the sixth form is slightly above the national average, with most students being of either average or above average ability. Many join in Year 12, where the number of students is approximately double that of Year 11. Ability in Years 11 and 12 is assessed using standardised tests which are used nationally. There is some uncertainty concerning the ability profile in Year 13, owing to the one-year courses offered by the college and the lack of initial data about some students' ability.
- 1.6 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the college.

2. THE SUCCESS OF THE SCHOOL

2.(a) Main findings

- 2.1 The college succeeds in its aim to help students to achieve their academic ambitions in an atmosphere which is sensitive and supportive. The overall quality of the students' achievements is good and their attitude to their studies is excellent. Coming to the college with a relatively wide range of basic skills, almost all make good or better progress in their learning in relation to their abilities and personal circumstances. A highly flexible academic curriculum enables courses to be tailored to individual students' particular needs and this is a key factor in their academic fulfilment. Another contributory factor is the small size of each class, in which teachers know their charges very well and give them close individual attention. The quality of teaching is mostly good or excellent. Some marking of students' work is too sporadic and superficial. Students receive expert guidance on choosing higher education courses.
- 2.2 Given the range of the college's provision, the quality of the students' personal development is excellent. They enjoy being at the college and grow in self-confidence. There is a real sense of community and relationships are characterised by harmony and understanding. Excellent pastoral care and effective welfare, health and safety arrangements contribute significantly to the personal development of the students.
- 2.3 Frequent and effective communication between the college and head office ensures excellent governance, with close monitoring and wholehearted support provided by the proprietors' management board and senior management team. A strong focus on rigorous self-evaluation is exemplified by the strategic development plan and by the continuing evolution of the academic curriculum. Dynamic leadership and efficient management are determining factors in the high quality of education provided. Now that a minor omission has been rectified, the college is fully compliant with the regulatory requirements. In their responses to the pre-inspection questionnaire, parents expressed great satisfaction with all aspects of the college; the students were similarly appreciative of their educational opportunities and, in particular, of the personal help and encouragement that they were receiving.

2.(b) Action points

(i) Compliance with regulatory requirements

(The range of the Independent School Standards Regulations is given in the Preface)

- 2.4 At the time of the initial visit, the school did not meet all the requirements of the Independent School Standards Regulations 2010, and therefore it was required to:
- include in its admissions register the name and address of every student's previous school [Part 3, paragraph 17, under Welfare, health and safety].
- 2.5 At the time of the final team visit, the college had rectified the above shortcoming, as noted in the text of the report.

(ii) Recommendation for further improvement

- 2.6 The school is advised to make the following improvement.
1. Ensure that all marking of exercise books and files conforms to a uniformly high standard.

3. THE QUALITY OF ACADEMIC AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

3.(a) The quality of the pupils' achievements and their learning, attitudes and skills

- 3.1 The overall quality of students' achievements is good, and reflects the college's stated aims. On the whole, the standard of numeracy and literacy is good, with a number of students displaying exceptional proficiency in mathematics and science. Students are confident and competent users of information and communications technology (ICT). Most display secure knowledge, skills and understanding of the material being covered in their lessons. In recent years the overwhelming majority of Year 13 leavers have been successful in their applications to their chosen university degree courses.
- 3.2 The following analysis uses the national data for 2007 to 2009. These are the most recent three years for which comparative statistics are currently available. GCSE results have been good in relation to the national average for maintained schools and have shown improvement throughout the past three years. A-level results have been similar to the national average for maintained schools, with almost half of the grades being A or B.
- 3.3 The range of GCSE and A-level grades is relatively wide, reflecting not only the academic ability range of the students but also their very diverse personal and educational backgrounds. All of these considerations, together with evidence from observed lessons and students' written work, indicate that students' progress during their time at the college is on the whole good and in some cases exceptional. The students themselves affirm that they are pleased with their academic progress.
- 3.4 Students have a very positive attitude to learning. Their behaviour in lessons is exemplary. They settle diligently to their work and are highly motivated. They are enthusiastic, keen to do well and eager to be challenged. Willing to contribute and prepared to think for themselves, they readily ask and answer questions. They co-operate very well in group work and listen appreciatively to each other's views. Some students' files are tidily organised and well maintained, while others are less likely to be useful when it comes to revision for examinations.

3.(b) The contribution of curricular and extra-curricular provision (including community links of benefit to pupils)

- 3.5 The academic curriculum is excellent and is a major strength of the college, fully supporting its aim to help its students to achieve academic fulfilment. It is successfully designed to suit the particular needs of each student, and the wide range of courses and subjects enables the college to make bespoke arrangements for individual students. In addition to the recently increased provision of seventeen GCSE subjects and twenty-two A-level subjects, the college offers the International Foundation Programme and has lately introduced BTEC courses. Accelerated courses, such as one-year A levels, are provided, as are 'catch-up' programmes for students who enter the college after the beginning of a particular course. A number of the students from abroad benefit from the programme of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) lessons. The college makes good provision for students with LDD, and the ablest students are given extension work in most subjects. The adaptability of the curriculum is also displayed in the thirty-one extra programmes of support in which students are taught in ones and twos. Students receive excellent

advice regarding their higher education choices. They are carefully and skilfully directed to appropriate universities and degree courses.

- 3.6 Because of the location and nature of the college building, together with the variety of the students' personal timetables and the college's expectations of its staff, the college cannot provide an extensive range of extra-curricular activities, nor does it set out to do so. Nonetheless, its extra-curricular provision does contribute satisfactorily to the students' all-round development and the college has increased its provision in recent years. There are a few lunchtime groups, such as the Abbey singers and the debating society, and subject-based clubs. The many 'one-off' ventures, such as the fashion show, the 'free rice' project and *The Abbey Factor*, are well supported, as are the annual sports afternoon and leavers' prom; these activities contribute significantly to the creation of a sense of communal well-being in a college where just under half the students attend for a year, about half for two years and a small percentage for three years. There is a good level of participation in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and most of the students play sport on one afternoon a week. Links with the wider community largely consist of charitable fund-raising ventures. The appointment of an enrichment co-ordinator reflects the management's wish to develop the programme of extra-curricular activities, to increase the out-of-hours provision for students in college accommodation and to create more links with the wider community in the city centre.

3.(c) The contribution of teaching

- 3.7 The quality of teaching, usually at least good and frequently excellent, makes a significant contribution to the students' progress and attainment, and to the college's fulfilment of its academic aims. Teachers' level of knowledge and expertise is high, not only in their academic subjects but also in examination requirements and techniques, which is particularly relevant and valuable to students at this stage in their education. Behaviour in class is managed outstandingly well, to the benefit of effective learning. The teachers' rapport with their students is excellent. In lessons, as elsewhere, everyone is on first-name terms and there is a strong sense of mature and friendly collaboration. With small or very small classes throughout the college, lessons are very much like tutorials, with teachers paying unusually close attention to the needs of each individual student. Students at all levels find their teachers helpful and appreciate their willingness to assist them with their work outside the timetabled lessons.
- 3.8 The lessons are carefully planned, with varied and imaginative approaches to the work in hand. Exposition is clear, lively and patient. While lessons observed were generally taken at a brisk pace, teachers were always ready to go back over imperfectly mastered material. Classrooms are well equipped and ICT is widely used as a resource for teaching and learning. Central to the best lessons observed was the teacher's communication of a real passion for his or her subject. Students said that they found their lessons interesting. The teaching is characterised by high expectations of all students' performances and friendly but firm encouragement of all students to extend themselves. Teachers stimulate a spirit of enquiry and they are adept at building students' confidence so that they increase the level of their academic success. Students benefit from the large number of trips to subject-based lectures and events in the Manchester area. In their questionnaire responses, the students acknowledged that they were encouraged to do things for themselves and to think independently, and this was confirmed during the period of the inspection.

- 3.9 The best of the marking of books and files is thorough, regular and with many useful and constructive comments. In some subjects, however, marking is sketchy and pays insufficient attention to the quality of presentation and to the correction of mistakes in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Throughout the college, the students' progress is closely monitored and remedial action is taken where required. Staff discuss with students their three-weekly effort grades and they are clear about the grades for which students should be aiming in their public examinations.

4. THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

4.(a) The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

- 4.1 The students' personal qualities are developing excellently, in accordance with the aims of the college. Each student is well known as an individual. Many students come to the college lacking in self-confidence: some, for instance, have been academically unsuccessful elsewhere, while others are living for the first time in a distant foreign country. The college successfully fulfils its aim to provide a friendly and supportive environment, thus ensuring that students grow in self-assurance and self-esteem. Conducting tours of the college, students expressed pleasure at being there and they felt that it was the right place for them. The students appreciate the fact that they are treated like young adults and on the whole they respond accordingly.
- 4.2 Because of the nature of the college, there are no formal positions of responsibility. The students contribute to the society of the college by the respectful way in which they treat each other, the staff and the facilities. They take the initiative in charitable fund-raising, and many students undertake community service activities, which help those less fortunate than themselves.
- 4.3 With so many different nationalities represented, students develop a very clear understanding of, and mature respect for, other faiths, cultures and traditions. Funds are raised for charities in this country and abroad, for instance in aid of a children's hospice in Manchester and of flood victims in Pakistan. The college is a model of harmonious inter-racial relations.

4.(b) The contribution of arrangements for welfare, health and safety

- 4.4 The quality of pastoral care is excellent, as parents and students affirmed in their responses to the pre-inspection questionnaire. The students see the staff as very approachable and are provided with high-quality support and guidance. Relationships throughout the college, between staff and students and amongst the students themselves, are outstanding. Appropriate pastoral structures are in place and are monitored by senior management. Channels of communication are effectively used. Staff know their charges very well, and frequent informal exchanges about students' welfare complement formal arrangements such as reports and the regular meetings of the leadership team. This close knowledge of each individual student means that their particular needs are addressed, thus contributing greatly to their personal development. The universal use of forenames is a notable feature of college life and undoubtedly contributes to the sense of companionable co-operation and common purpose.
- 4.5 Parents were unanimous in agreeing that the college achieved high standards of behaviour, and this view was fully borne out during the period of the inspection. Courteous and considerate, students conduct themselves in an appropriately mature fashion. The college's behaviour policy is clear and fair; sanctions for misbehaviour rarely have to be invoked. Students say that instances of bullying are extremely rare and that differences are resolved promptly and effectively.
- 4.6 Arrangements for students' health and safety are effective. The safeguarding policy is robust and implemented successfully. All staff receive regular child protection training. Appropriate measures are taken to reduce risk from fire and other hazards, and thorough risk assessments are carried out before college trips. The personal,

social and health education programme contains excellent material on personal well-being. The medical facilities for those who are ill conform to regulatory requirements. The school has a detailed plan further to improve access for students with disabilities.

- 4.7 The college does not provide food. Students bring in their own lunch or buy it in the city. From the evidence of what the students were seen to consume, the college's promotion of healthy eating habits is, on the whole, successful. Students are encouraged to take regular exercise: Friday afternoons are set aside for physical activity.
- 4.8 At the time of the initial visit, the admissions register did not include the name and address of each student's previous school; this deficiency has subsequently been rectified. The admissions and attendance registers are now properly maintained in all respects and they are correctly stored.

5. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.(a) The quality of governance

- 5.1 The quality of the governance of the college is excellent. Despite the distance between Abbey College in Manchester and head office in London, the governing body, through its management board and senior management team, exercises effective oversight of the college and fully supports its aims. It conscientiously discharges its responsibilities for educational standards, financial planning and investment in staff, accommodation and resources. All of this is achieved through: the regular visits of the Director of Colleges and Development; the Chief Executive Officer's annual visit; termly meetings of college Principals and of college management teams, under the auspices of head office; and frequent communication between the Principal and head office. Furthermore, the monthly report from the college to the Director of Colleges and Development elicits prompt responses and action as appropriate. When he visits the college, the Director of Colleges and Development takes the opportunity to have informal conversations with staff and students, from which he can gauge morale and pick up any matters of concern.
- 5.2 While the college is responsible for its everyday accounting, budgeting and management of its premises, overall control is in the hands of head office, which also provides guidance on policy, welfare, child protection, staff appointments and development planning, as well as controlling capital expenditure and managing training courses. In all of these aspects, both parties understand the terms of their roles and responsibilities, and the lines of communication are excellent. The governing body's senior management team receives and reviews regular reports from the college on health and safety, child protection and safeguarding matters. The strategic development plan was devised by the Principal in conjunction with the governing body's representatives. Thorough, wide-ranging and realistic, it is subject to regular review.

5.(b) The quality of leadership and management

- 5.3 At all levels of responsibility, leadership and management are excellent and highly effective in furthering the aims of the college through the provision of a friendly, supportive and academically ambitious environment, thus enabling the students to enjoy their schooling and achieve success in their studies. Leadership is dynamic, creative and forward-looking. In recent months many aspects of the college have been looked at afresh, with consequent changes and improvements, to the benefit of the students' education and personal development. The senior leadership team has been restructured and many staff roles have been redefined. New courses have been introduced, and a new system of staff appraisal is in the early stages of its cycle. The constructively self-critical approach of the senior leadership team is seen in its institution of, and responsiveness to, surveys of staff, students and parents.
- 5.4 Management is efficient and college life runs smoothly. In a building which is fully and busily occupied, there is nonetheless a sense of calm purposefulness. All of those in senior positions operate an 'open door' policy and are readily accessible. Communication at all levels is frequent and effective. The transparency with which the college is led and managed creates a sense of shared vision and unity of purpose.

- 5.5 The college has been responsive to the recent rapid increase in numbers and has managed the necessary changes extremely well. A notable feature of senior and middle management is its exceptional flexibility regarding new students. Whatever their date of entry to the college and their particular academic needs, every effort is made to accommodate their requirements; students and their parents are very appreciative of the college's sympathetic understanding and adaptability.
- 5.6 The college ensures that rigorous procedures are followed concerning the recruitment of staff, and management takes appropriate steps to confirm the suitability of the proprietors' governors and executives. A centralised register of appointments is accurately kept. All staff are suitably trained and aware of the importance of their roles in safeguarding, welfare, health and safety.
- 5.7 Parents expressed great satisfaction with the governance and management of the college.

5.(c) The quality of links with parents, carers and guardians

- 5.8 Relationships between the college and parents are excellent. Parents of new students from this country usually have lengthy meetings with the Principal and the leadership team in order to ensure that the most appropriate and realistic academic programme is devised. International students are screened and tested prior to admission and thereafter close liaison is maintained with parents or their agents. The detailed introductory handbooks are exceptionally helpful.
- 5.9 Parents are very well informed, thanks to the high quality and quantity of communication. They receive half-termly reports and substantial end-of-term reports which are detailed and helpful. In addition to the programme of parents' evenings, the college welcomes meetings with parents, by appointment, at any time. The newsletter is lively and the website is very informative. While the nature of the college offers parents relatively few opportunities to be involved in its life, those that do exist, such as the charity dinner, the fashion show and the art exhibition, are well attended.
- 5.10 In their responses to the various sections of the questionnaire, parents expressed high or very high levels of satisfaction. They appreciate the openness of the college, the availability of information, the ease with which they can communicate with the college, its timely responses to questions and the way in which concerns are handled. Parents subscribe to the ethos of the college and thoroughly approve of the education which their children are receiving.

What the school should do to improve is given at the beginning of the report in section 2.

INSPECTION EVIDENCE

The inspectors observed lessons, conducted formal interviews with students and examined samples of students' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with the governors' Director of Colleges and Development, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended registration sessions. Inspectors visited the facilities for sick or injured students. The responses of parents and students to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined regulatory documentation made available by the college.

Inspectors

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