

Record of HMI Visit

Quality Improvement Through Professional Engagement

Section 1: Summary Information

Name of establishment	Merchiston Castle School
Address of establishment (including postcode)	Colinton Road, Edinburgh, EH13 0PU
SEED Number	5581036

DATES

Notification date	12/05/2011
Professional engagement visit	2 & 3/06/11
Working Documents due	
Publication date	

ESTABLISHMENT DETAILS

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Name of MI Name of Team Member	Kate Cherry Alistair Kirkwood

Section 2: Evidence Notepad

The evidence contained in this notepad is based on the information from the school's own self-evaluation, discussions with staff and students and reference to the school's documentation. In addition, we were able to take into consideration a paper submitted by Sixth Form students which offered their own evaluation of aspects of their school.

Context of the school

(eg aims, and distinctive features, roll, area served; basic structure/terminology of stages; overall management structure)

From the school's self-evaluation summary and the initial discussion meeting held with the School Leadership and Academic Management teams and student representatives from Sixth Form, HMI focused on the following aspects.

- Impact on learning and teaching approaches and curricular developments with exemplification in the Science, Mathematics and Language departments, and in the Junior School.
- The Harvey Hub and its approach to supporting all students.
- Arrangements for raising attainment, including the use of internal and external assessment across the school 8-18.
- Developments in self-evaluation, including the 'observed learning journey'.
- The linked academic and co-curricular dimensions of experience.

1. How is the school developing the achievement and progress in learning of all its children/young people?

(overall approaches to encouraging personal achievement and improving attainment, including performance in national examinations.)

The school has strong and very effective approaches to develop each boy's personal achievement and ensure progress in his learning.

- Very thorough and considered use of external screening to assess ability has shown clear benefits. Boys' assessments and predictions of external examination achievements form the foundation to raise attainment aspirations. The actual results offer clear evidence of the value added by the school in ensuring each student reaches his full potential. The introduction of staged external assessment provides a coherent process of monitoring from Junior forms through to Senior. Formative and summative assessments within classes and department support and corroborate progress.

- Careful support and planning of programmes ensures individual students have courses to suit their progress. For example, where A Levels may not be the appropriate path, staff search out appropriate course and certification paths for individuals. Staff and students comment on the flexibility of support as a key strength.
- Students are very positive about the range of approaches in attainment and achievement. They include the regular exam routine across the school which builds their confidence in their own knowledge and helps in the setting of targets for next steps; co-curricular activities broadening experience and helping find out strengths/talents; report card system and feedback which help students push to do better.
- The school has clear plans for sustaining the very positive attainment record and each boy's achievement. Tracking through PASS systems is already in the school development. Further involvement of teaching staff in using assessment information in their planning and teaching are identified in the next stage of development to give even more consistency and continuity in setting individual targets. Increased student involvement in their assessment and target setting is also a next step in personal achievement.

2. How does the school ensure consistently high standards of learning and teaching in the school?

Considerable work has been done in developing teaching approaches across the school. Particular attention has been given to the needs of an all-boys learning environment in order to tailor approaches, where appropriate. The school has introduced structured methods of looking more closely at the learning experience. These include observation of the learning journey for individuals, and the introduction of learning and teaching committees.

- A variety of stimulating learning environments is a continuing process of development to expand students' experiences and ways of learning. Examples include new science lab facilities, 'the Biology pond', the Spawforth library. The recently established boarding facilities for senior boys are having a positive impact on their learning, with each student having personal study/bedrooms, and the general ethos of respect and expectations of the responsibility of these older students.
- Discussion with staff confirmed the school's commitment to opening the learning environment in the classroom. Peer observations and sharing experiences within and across departments have enhanced teaching approaches. Staff comment on the considerable positive shift in attitudes to reflecting on practice. Staff are increasingly aware of the importance of skills development being shared and transferred across subject areas. They feel boys respond to their teaching approaches and classroom ethos by being more questioning and engaged, and open about seeking advice.

- Students have (and appreciate) termly opportunities to offer feedback on their learning/teaching experiences. This good practice can be built upon. Increased involvement of the students is an agreed next stage in sharing decisions about learning and developing more independence and responsibility from 8-18.

3. How does the school ensure the needs of all learners are fully met?

The school has comprehensive arrangements to identify and support the learning needs of individuals from 8 to 18, within an inclusive definition of 'support for learning'.

- Support is provided in classes and within the 'Harvey Hub', which, among other support, also provides the location for ESOL provision. Boys spoke positively of the nature and extent of the support, including arrangements for 'catch-up', and 'drop-in'. They identified particular areas of performance such as accuracy in reading or presentation, or aspects of personal effectiveness, which they felt were improving as a result.
- Close attention is paid to each boy's individual needs. Processes of identifying needs are embedded at each stage from 8 to 18. Small class sizes allow more individual attention and support. At each stage, arrangements are rigorous and most effective to support boys whenever required. Such support includes tutor engagement, one-to-one and catch-up lessons, 'clinics' for extra help and tutor support in each house. Able pupils are offered challenge and extended learning. The STEP mathematical group exemplifies how students' skills are deepened who have ability and enjoyment in taking Maths beyond A Level. The STEP lesson observed by HMI demonstrated most clearly how students with exceptional mathematical ability are supported by outstanding teaching, and how they can apply their skills at a very high order of thinking and problem solving. Further enhancement is evident through provision such as the Cecil Stagg Society, Olympiads, Debating Society, and in input from key note speakers.
- The school recognises the scope to continue to support boys' learning through its upcoming work within its learning and teaching agenda. Professional dialogue during the visit explored the extent to which all boys are supported to develop 'learning behaviours' that allow them to engage fully in collaborative learning (roles in groups, progressive development of listening and talking skills to include higher order thinking skills).

4. How does the curriculum meet the aims and values of the school and meet the needs of all learners?

Merchiston offers an extensive academic and co-curricular experience for boys – boys first. It monitors continuously the subject development, balance and

appropriateness to students needs. In keeping with the school's commitment to 'Boys First', curriculum planning has responded to 'learner voice':

- Examples of resulting change include Science department change to single subject course, especially for more able sets, to equip students fully in their future careers. Staff have provided courses and programmes in several areas of the curriculum in response to boys' feedback on their learning experience (cf IT courses, discontinuation of ECDL as a provision for all). The school aims to support and challenge boys to achieve academic excellence and cultivate enthusiasm for learning.
- Curriculum planning also sets out to meet the needs of learners in the 21st century, by providing courses and learning experiences which aim to develop skills as well as knowledge and understanding (cf the Modern Languages curriculum which includes Mandarin).
- The school is highly committed to, and provides an extensive programme of, co-curricular activities and pursuits covering sport, the expressive arts, and other progressive opportunities for personal development. Through such programmes, activities and pursuits, boys are encouraged to fulfil the aim of the school to promote sporting achievement and enjoyment.
- The school recognises scope to review the complementary nature of its academic and co-curricular provision to ensure that boys continue to derive maximum benefit from their increasing awareness of how they may themselves take an active role in identifying and addressing areas for improvement in their learning, in whatever context that learning takes place.

5. How does the school ensure the health and wellbeing of all?

The school has very well developed and detailed approaches to ensuring the health and wellbeing of each and every student.

- The school's approach to health and wellbeing of boys is embedded across the academic and co-curricular programmes and in the House structures. Personal development underpins the school's aims and objectives. Particular opportunities are built into the boys' activities for developing personal aspects such as leadership, teamwork, community work, peer mentoring and taking part in national competitions and awards. Equality and diversity is exemplified through inclusion for all. Boys are very comfortable about the positive attitudes to their stage of progress and ability and the acknowledgement by peers that they can have different strengths.
- The school counsellor plays a positive role in offering additional pastoral care to students in a confidential and supportive environment. Other staff, such as House staff, school nurses, librarian, chef, play particular roles in the picture of the boys' wellbeing and pastoral care.

6. How does the school ensure continuous improvement?

HMIE fully endorse the school's self-evaluation procedures.

- In all discussions with staff and students, a clear picture emerged of a whole school involved in professional reflection, commitment to continuous improvement, and involvement of all in the school's journey to sustain and build on the excellence already achieved.
- An open atmosphere allows for response to needs and ideas, 'taking a chance' and being honest when initiatives need to change direction or where, on occasion, they are less successful.
- The significant role of the school's leadership teams steers this process most effectively whereby the solid foundation of the Merchiston reputation and quality of academic and co-curricular provision can thrive and grow and respond creatively and flexibly to changing times and needs.

Section 3: Areas suggested by HMI and agreed with the school for continuing improvement.

- Build on the academic and co-curricular synergies in transferable skills.
- Build on the success of using external and internal monitoring arrangements of attainment data. Develop with teaching staff the use of assessment information in their planning and teaching to give even more consistency and continuity 8-18.
- Involve students further in the ownership of their learning.

Section 4: Capacity for Improvement

We are very confident the school has the necessary arrangements and procedures in place to ensure continued improvement in the quality of education provided. The school and board of governors will inform parents about the school's progress as part of its arrangements for reporting to parents on the life and work of the school.