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Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Maidstone Grammar School for Girls for the purpose of reaccreditation as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @ Exeter, School of Education, University of Exeter, UK.

Evidence base

The criteria for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School starts from the assumption that all the criteria for first level of accreditation by Thinking Schools@Exeter continue to be met within the ongoing practices within the school. The second level of evaluation further assumes that the original criteria for recognition as a 'Thinking School' have now become completely embedded in the school, and that staff and students have developed a deeper understanding of the principles of cognitive education and its impact on both their individual learning and its potential contribution to society. Much of the evidence referenced in this report reflects the significant and sustained progress the school has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditations as a level 1 and level 2 Thinking School.

The focus for this second level of evaluation turns towards the presentation of evidence as to how the school has moved forward in seeking to achieve those aims. Evidence has been sought on teaching and support staff's developing skills as practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the students beyond their technical skills in the use of thinking tools; and their continuing impact on the community of the whole school and beyond. As before, five key areas for re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School have been assessed: Dissemination of Practice; Evaluative Research; Professional Development; Differentiation; and Whole School Assessment.

The University of Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation as Advanced Thinking School from Maidstone Grammar School for Girls in the form of a proforma with links, extensively illustrating the continuing work the school is undertaking as Thinking school (level 1) and an Advanced Thinking School (level 2). Evidence includes school data, training plans, school-based research projects, staff surveys, parent evaluations and photographs of student work. From the evidence provided, it is clear that the school continues to exceed the Level 1 Thinking School criteria, and the focus of this report will be on the way in which the school has developed on the basis of the level 2 criteria.

The school context

Maidstone Grammar School for Girls is a selective grammar school for girls aged 11-18 in Maidstone, Kent, with boys admitted to the sixth form. It was accredited by OFSTED as an 'outstanding' school in 2009 and is also a British Council International School, with a clear focus on the school being part of a global community. The school is also a Google Leading Light school, which indicates the

implementation of Google for Education throughout the school. Maidstone Grammar School for Girls was first accredited as a Thinking School in 2012, after which Advanced Thinking School Accreditation followed in 2015, which was followed up with a re-accreditation in 2018.

The aims for development for the school, as stated in the previous accreditation report (2018) were to:

- expand outreach activities, focusing on the dissemination of best practice and CPD activities with other schools.
- provide a wider range of opportunities for the inclusion of student voice and student contribution to evaluation.
- consider how Thinking Skills can be systematically evaluated throughout the school, perhaps through a coordinated programme of school-based research.
- consider how technology can help to develop 'Digital Thinking' competencies across the school.

Maidstone Grammar School for Girls is clearly a school that prides itself in achieving and maintaining the highest educational standards. In addition, the school has a reputation for supporting students to ensure they all achieve their full potential, by providing high quality care and guidance and a wide variety of extra-curricular activities and clubs. These achievements reflect the school's drive for sustained holistic development, together with an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning for all students.

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are fully embedded within the school's overall culture and are a strong aspect of the school's ethos. This can for instance be seen on the website, where the school's ethos is described as 'a forward-thinking community with a tradition of excellence' developing young adults who are able to flourish as adults in today's society. There is a focus on students as 'individuals, fully engaging with the latest technology available' and progress measurements place the school in the top 2% of the country. The school has continued to develop their own Thinking School approach and their ethos as an Advanced Thinking School remains clearly displayed and explained on the school website and is captured by the curriculum philosophy for the various year.

Dissemination of practice

For this area of accreditation, we assess the way in which the school can demonstrate evidence of sharing their Thinking Schools practice and experiences across subject areas with others. There is much evidence of sharing practice within the school, across subject areas, to students, staff, and parents, with all sections of staff participating in formal and informal staff training events and programmes.

Students, including 6th Form students, receive an induction or refresher training in thinking skills at the start of the school year and thinking skills are regular foci of assemblies. Throughout the school year, students engage in activities to reinforce their thinking skills, while these are also front and centre in the schemes of work across subjects. In addition to the integrated approach, which firmly embeds Thinking Skills in the learning across year groups and subject areas, the school also invests

heavily in enrichment activities that focus specifically on guiding students to ways in which Thinking Skills can help them in their learning, for instance through revision guides and A-level mindset activities.

The staff engage in an extensive programme of CPD, which includes a formal programme, but also more informal (but organised) reflection on the use of Thinking Tools and exploration of new Thinking Tools and how they may be integrated within the school's curriculum and pedagogy through a series of working parties, peer observations and a library of resources to enable staff to reflect on and develop their own teaching practice. The school has been instrumental in developing new staff training materials for Thinking Matters this programme of training is now offered to new staff in the school. It is wonderful to see the school being active in developing new staff training approaches for external partners such as Thinking Matters, although it is important to recognise that one size does not fit all, and continuous reflective practice helps the school to ensure that the practices and training fits within their own strong school ethos.

Thinking Skills are integrated within the annual School Develop Plan and staff use Thinking Skills as an indicator of success in the staff observation programme. In addition, members of staff are actively encouraged to use key Thinking Skills in their own planning activities and each member of staff receives clear guidance about the role Thinking Skills within the school. It is good to see thinking skills firmly embedded in communication between and to staff, including in the staff planner for the academic year ahead. Similarly, it is wonderful to see the extent to which staff is learning about the various approaches to thinking, but ensuring criticality around the ways in which the tools and approaches are used and why is key. For instance, with regard to Habits of Mind, ensuring that staff can engage in regular, open and inclusive discussions around the usefulness of particular habits of mind (in specific learning contexts, for particular students within their learning journeys) is very important (the current staff training materials would be an excellent starting point). Thinking approaches should not be used religiously, but purposefully, critically, and reflectively, which is why regular, critical and open evaluations of both processes and outcomes is so important.

The school provides parents with clear and helpful information relating to the thinking curriculum through the school website and other social media, and information evenings and clear guidance and displays throughout the school are all aimed at informing parents and other visitors of the important place of Thinking Skills within the school's ethos. In addition, parents' views on Thinking Skills are actively sought throughout the year and Governors receive regular guidance and updates on the Thinking Skills approaches used in the school. The Headteacher runs joint meetings for the entire parent community, and these are used to introduce new Thinking School developments, while at the same time reinforcing established practice. Schools in the local area have been invited to the Thinking School Hub Day to share good practice and explore new ideas and opportunities for developing Thinking Skills and it is hoped that these sharing practices can help to develop a local climate of mutual support, in which MGS can lead the way for other schools to develop their own Thinking-based pedagogies.

Throughout the school, staff are invited to share their best practice with colleagues, for instance by sharing and peer-reviewing resources within their department and through the yearly Festival of

Thinking. Dissemination of best practice is done via the Thinking Matters hub-school organisation and conference and there are links with other schools locally and internationally.

Evaluative research

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff is seeking evidence of positive outcomes of the Thinking Schools approach and how this evidence is used to develop whole-school learning. Based on the evidence of Level 1 criteria, there is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school. The school continues to consider the process and impact of specific thinking approaches the learning and development of students, and evaluative research is embedded in the working practices throughout the school. A range of data collection tools is used, including staff surveys and student evaluations. The annual staff survey was changed to ensure clear data was collected around Thinking Skills and the outcomes are used to plan the way forward for the school, including CPD provision.

The school has recently introduced MALS as a way of supporting Year 12 students to help them to become independent learners and students are asked to evaluate the enrichment programme, which indicates the focus on including student voice in the evaluations of Thinking Practices. In addition, the Drive Team continues to play an important role in coordinating evaluative research, collecting data and subsequent analyses. Lesson-study type projects are regularly completed and evaluated by the Thinking Coordinator and outcomes are discussed in Drive Team meetings to help support forward planning and implementation of new thinking routines and practices. The Drive Team is thus instrumental in feeding forward the outcomes of their evaluations and in supporting staff throughout the school by sharing their reflections and best practices.

Formal evaluative research also takes place through NQT development and the Middle Leadership Development Programme. Through these programmes of work, structured and systematic evaluations of Thinking Practice take place in a range of subjects and results of these evaluations are shared both within the school and more widely to the wider education community in the form of papers and guidance. In addition, school data tracking reviews are used to evaluate student performance, and while year on year improvement can be seen, a point of development for the school could be to evaluate this data more systematically and attach clear targets around the development of Thinking Skills practices in relation to this data.

Professional development

Evidence of professional development concerns two key issues: technical, in the practical application of a range of thinking tools; and qualitative, demonstrated by the quality of staff as mediators. In terms of technical development, that new members of staff are routinely and extensively trained in Thinking Skills. Similarly, there is a strong programme of work around the induction and development of new staff to ensure that new staff is immersed in the School's Thinking ethos from Day 1. Staff engaged in observation and reflection sessions and there is a strong ethos of collaborative practice through which concerns can be shared and practice can be reflected upon. The school has begun a formal programme of training staff in feeder schools and have contributed to the new staff training materials for Thinking Matter. Both clearly demonstrate the school's strength in professional development practices. Medium- and long-term plans for the school include further expansion of staff professional development opportunities and include a more prominent role for the Drive Team and

further development of outreach and formal training of staff in local schools, further cementing the school's status as a Hub School.

Differentiation

This area of accreditation includes the value of thinking tools in the education of specific individuals and groups. This includes a sensitivity to the individual needs of all the children in lessons, and a focus on developing autonomy and individuality in students' approaches to problem-solving. Evidence of this can be seen in the ways in which Thinking Skills and Mindset guidance is given to students to help develop individual learning practices at A-level. What is particularly interesting to see is how the school aims to support students in the long term by developing a strong Thinking Skills based foundation with the aim of supporting students not only during their school years at MGS but well beyond. To support further differentiation strategies, evaluations of Myself as a Learner data can be used to target specific support for students who struggle. In addition, the further development and integration of student voice within the planning and evaluation of Thinking Skills practices and pedagogy around the school will enable the school to enhance the inclusive ethos around Thinking Skills.

Whole School Assessment and Development Planning

This aspect of the accreditation relates to pupils' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' performance, peer formative assessment procedures, and critical reflection on the Thinking Approaches used in the school. It also focusses on the ways in which the school continues to plan for their development as an Advanced Thinking School. For this reason, the proforma includes a Spare Wheel, which can help to identify contributing or hindering factors in relation to potential change and development. Even with the recent challenges stemming from a global pandemic, it is clear that the school continues to actively reflect on their practices and continues with their ambitious plans for the future. Based on regular formal and informal reflective evaluations of practice, a clear set of priorities for the school have been identified, which includes the further integration of the MALS scale within the school's evaluative practice, which should be instrumental in identifying students who need further support.

A second pillar in the school's future development can be seen in the continuing evaluation of, and planning around, the development of staff knowledge and skills around Teaching Thinking. Clear plans around continuing staff development are identified using the Spare Wheel methodology and directly relate to whole school assessment outcomes. Further planning in relation to staff development could perhaps include a formal evaluation of the annual staff survey, which could feed into the systematic planning of areas of development around needs identified by staff, for example in relation to the development of a shared language for thinking in the school, which was one of the aspects identified in the staff survey as a potential area of further development.

Another area in which the school actively develops their Thinking Practice is dissemination of best practice and guidance for other teachers outside of the immediate school community. It would be good to ensure these training practices are evaluated, both in terms of their impact on other schools, as well as an opportunity for staff undertaking the training to reflect on their own practice. After all, the best learning can happen when trying to teach something to others. Capitalising on the opportunities for developing new insight and ideas that are created by the sharing of practice and

ideas with others, and allowing staff who engage in sharing their practice to reflect on their experiences, will be key in moving the school forward to will help the school not only to reach out, but also for new ideas to 'reach in'.

Points for further consideration

The submitted evidence has enabled the accreditor to identify the following areas for further consideration during the 3-year period of accreditation. Thinking Schools @Exeter would welcome your response to these points and whether they might provide the focus of the moderation and support visit from a member of our team at a time to be mutually agreed. It is clear that the global pandemic has disrupted the school's future planning somewhat, but it has been great to see how the school has managed to develop since then and how it was able to use their approaches to thinking effectively to support staff and students during the pandemic. The future development plans for the school with regard to thinking skills as presented in the proforma, are strong and ambitious, both in terms of in-school development and in terms of the support and outreach to the wider education community.

In addition to the plans presented by the school, I would like to conclude my evaluation with some suggestions about how the school might continue their development and journey as an Advanced Thinking School. This may include:

- Further develop systematic evaluations and reviews of staff and student surveys and use the outcomes to plan school development. Including students in this process could be one way of enhancing the role of student voice in the school and help develop an inclusive thinking ethos.
- Further integrate Thinking Skills with dialogue, not only in terms of classroom dialogue (which includes questioning, collaborative and exploratory talk, etc) but also in terms of developing real dialogue between staff and between staff and students.
- To explore more underlying aspects of Thinking Skills, including for instance the role of metacognition and motivation, but also reflect on ways in which approaches to thinking may be used to support (or perhaps how they may hinder?) dialogues around (in)equality, diversity, and inclusion.
- To consider how technology can help to develop Thinking Skills across the school and, in tandem, reflect on the ways in which technology is used for teaching and learning from a Thinking Schools perspective. This will help to develop a pedagogy-driven, rather than technology driven use of technologies. One of the things that I think will become increasingly important, in particular with the advent of Artificial Intelligence-based technologies in education, is to help develop critically reflective staff and students. As an Advanced Thinking School, Maidstone Grammar School for Girls should be in an excellent position to support staff and students to engage with these technologies critically, ethically, and responsibly.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that Maidstone Grammar School for Girls fully meets the criteria set out by Thinking Schools @Exeter as an Advanced Thinking School. The evidence

provided demonstrates a strong commitment to the continuing development of the school as an Advanced Thinking School and I thus recommend that the accreditation is awarded until June 2026. The integration of Thinking Skills across the school, not only in the teaching practice, but in all the ways in which the school operates as a Thinking School, is exemplary and the Thinking School ethos remains at the very heart of Maidstone Grammar School for Girls. It has been a privilege to undertake this evaluation and I would like to congratulate the whole school community for an outstanding achievement!



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