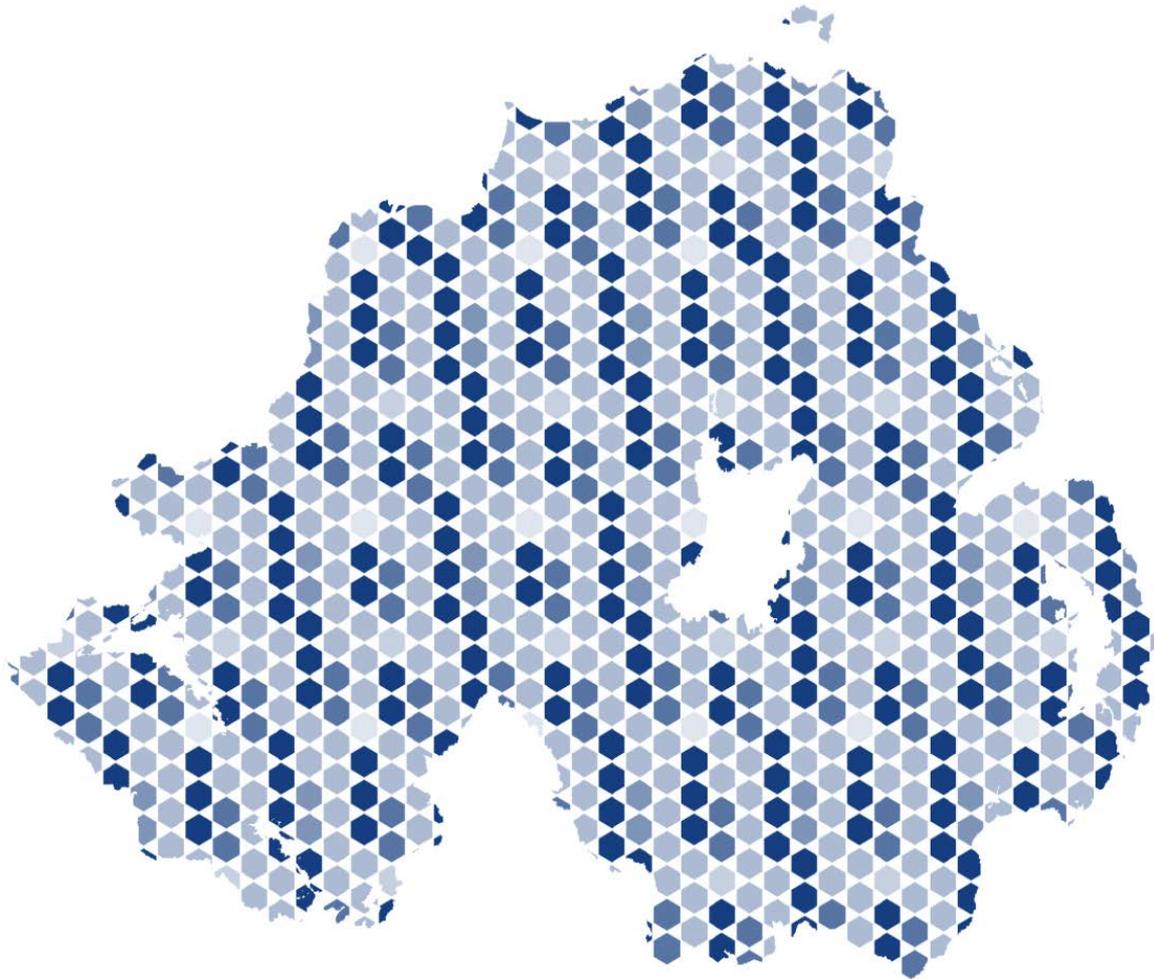


POST-PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Victoria College, Belfast

All Girls' Voluntary Grammar School

Report of an Inspection
in November 2015

eti

*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*

Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

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Quantitative terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels when reporting on Achievement and standards, on Provision for learning and on Leadership and management:

Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

Overall effectiveness

The ETI use one of the following inspection outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the school:

The school has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.
The school needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all learners. It requires external support to do so. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

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1. Inspection method and evidence base

The key questions and quality indicators which guide inspection and self-evaluation of post-primary schools, which were applied to this inspection, are available in the ETI publication *Together Towards Improvement: a process for self-evaluation* at: <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/together-towards-improvement/together-towards-improvement-post-primary.htm>.

Inspectors observed learning and teaching, scrutinised documentation, data and the pupils' written work and held formal and informal discussions with pupils (individually and in groups), teachers and staff with specific responsibilities.

The arrangements for this inspection included a meeting with representatives from the governors and the opportunity for all parents, teaching and support staff to complete a confidential questionnaire.

Twenty-two percent of parents (172) responded to the online questionnaire, with 92 of them providing additional written comments. Most of the parents commented positively on: the high quality of the pastoral care provided by the teaching and non-teaching staff; the effective transition from primary school into year 8; the opportunities for the pupils to develop personal and social skills through their participation in a wide range of extra-curricular activities; and the effective leadership at all levels in the school. Forty-two percent of staff (54) responded to the questionnaires, with eight providing written comments. The staff commented positively on the mutual respect within the school, the pupil-centred ethos and the many opportunities for continuing professional development. A small number of concerns raised about aspects of the provision were discussed (maintaining the confidentiality of the respondents) with the governors and senior leaders.

2. Focus of inspection

In order to promote improvement in the interests of all pupils, the purpose of a post-primary inspection is, through effective linking of internal and external approaches, to:

- evaluate the quality of the provision and the outcomes for the pupils;
- evaluate the school's leadership and management and its capacity to effect and sustain improvement in its provision and standards; and
- inform the school's planning for improvement.

In addition to the focus on English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy, there was a supplementary subject focus on information and communication technology (ICT) in this inspection.

3. Context

Victoria College is a non-denominational all-girls' voluntary grammar school situated in South Belfast. It is oversubscribed at entry into year 8; just under one-half of the pupils come from the greater Belfast area. The school has a boarding provision with 39 pupils, just over one-half of whom are from international countries. The proportion of year 8 pupils who have achieved at or above the expected levels in literacy and numeracy on entry to the school is below the average for similar selective schools.

The proportion of pupils who require additional support with aspects of their learning has remained steady over the last three years at around 9%. Over the past four years, the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals has risen from 6% to 11%. The College holds the International Schools Award, the Investors in People Bronze award, the Green Flag Eco award and the Inclusion Quality Mark in recognition of the positive, diverse and inclusive ethos and practice that underpins all aspects of school life.

There have been significant changes to the structure of the senior leadership team (SLT) in the last two years.

Victoria College	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Year 8 Intake	134	132	130	131
Enrolment	874	900	897	874
% Attendance (NI Average)	94.3% (95.3%)	94.4% (95.8%)	94.5% (N/A)	N/A (/a)
FSME Percentage ¹	6.18	7.32	10.36	11.21
% and (Number) of pupils on SEN register	8.4% (73)	8.8% (79)	9.1% (82)	8.5% (75)
No. of pupils with statements of educational needs in the mainstream school	10	10	6	7
No. of newcomers	12	37	42	30
<i>Intake²:</i>				
% of Y8 pupils with L5 English	51	22	#	#
% of Y8 pupils with L5 mathematics	66	31	#	#
% of Y8 pupils with L4 and above in English	93	93	#	#
% of Y8 pupils with L4 and above in mathematics	96	94	#	#

Source: data as held by the school.

* fewer than 5

N/A not available

4. Overall findings of the inspection

Overall Effectiveness	Capacity to identify and bring about improvement
Achievements and standards	Good
Provision for learning	Good
Leadership and management	Good

¹ The term 'FSME Percentage' refers to the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals.

² From 2013, KS2 standards in English and mathematics are reported as Levels of Progression in Communication and Using Mathematics and cannot be compared directly with KS2 data from previous years

5. Achievements and standards

- Almost all of the pupils are confident, enthusiastic and highly motivated to learn. They show respect for, and sensitivity towards, the needs of others and listen keenly to the views of their peers in all learning activities. The pupils work well independently and engage maturely in discussions to inform and improve their progress. By the end of their time at school, most of the pupils can confidently apply their learning in contexts relevant to their life and work. The pupils have a clear sense of pride in their school and their behaviour, both in and out of the classroom, is exemplary.
- The pupils benefit significantly from the opportunities provided for participation in an extensive range of sporting, cultural and other additional enrichment activities, which further develop their personal and social skills. As they move through the school, the pupils have increasing access to experiences which develop to good effect their leadership skills, for example, through the school council, eco committee or in a mentoring capacity.
- Over the last three years, the attainment by the pupils in GCSE English language and English literature at grades A* to B has fluctuated, but has remained consistently below the Northern Ireland (NI) average for similar selective schools. Consequently, standards at GCSE are an important area for improvement. At GCE A level, the percentage of pupils attaining at grades A* to C has risen steadily over the same period and is above the three-year NI average.
- The majority of the pupils use confidently a wide range of analytical literary terms to articulate their views and judgments, orally and in writing. In order to raise further the standards attained by all of the pupils in oral and written communication, it will be important for the teachers to develop further consistently high quality talking and listening to underpin higher levels of attainment in the pupils' extended writing. While there is a clear vision for the development of literacy across the school, it will be timely to review the action plan in light of the inspection findings.
- Overall, the pupils attain good standards in mathematics. Over the last three years, the attainment by the pupils in GCSE mathematics at grades A* to B is just below the NI average for similar selective schools. The attainment by the pupils in GCSE further mathematics at grades A* to B has improved and is now above the NI average for similar selective schools. At GCE A level, over the last three years, the percentage of pupils attaining at grades A* to C is consistently above the NI average. The presentation of the pupils' work is of a high quality and they are precise and thorough.
- The standards attained by the pupils in ICT are good. They develop and apply a broad range of skills across the key stages, including coding skills. Over the last three years, while the standards attained by the pupils in public examinations at GCSE and GCE A level are broadly in line with the NI average for similar selective schools, the trend at grades A* to C has been downwards over recent years. The actions taken to promote improved standards in the pupils' attainment in public examinations in ICT need to be closely monitored.

- In two out of the last three years, the percentage of pupils attaining seven or more GCSE examinations or equivalent at grades A* to C has been in line with and now below the NI average for similar selective schools in the same free school meals band. The percentage of pupils attaining seven or more GCSEs, including English and mathematics, has declined over the last three years and is also below the NI average for similar schools.
- There is variation in the standards attained by the pupils in individual subjects at GCSE grades A* to B. While just over one-half of the subjects are broadly in line with the three-year NI average, almost two-thirds of them are below the average. Approximately one-fifth of the subjects are more than ten percentage points below the three-year NI average.
- Over the last three years, the percentage of pupils attaining three or more GCE A levels at grades A* to C has been consistently well above the NI average for similar selective schools. The performance of almost all of the individual subjects at GCE A level is in line with or above the respective three-year NI averages for similar selective schools at grades A* to C, with around one-fifth of the subjects performing at more than ten percentage points above the corresponding averages.
- The attainment of the small number of pupils entitled to free school meals has been an improving trend over the last three years, with all of them achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics last year. In the same period, almost all of the pupils who require additional support with their learning achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, with most achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics.
- Over the last three years, it is noteworthy that pupils from the school have been among the top candidates in GCSE art and design, biology, chemistry, geography, mathematics, history and religious studies; and in A level art and design, biology, further mathematics, German, and religious studies.
- The proportion of year 12 pupils who progress to year 13 is well below the NI average. The proportion of year 13 pupils who progress to year 14 is just below the NI average. The proportion of pupils who, on completion of GCE A2 level study, enter higher education is also below the NI average.
- The raising of pupil attainment at GCSE level, in particular at grades A* to B, is a key priority which has been identified appropriately by the school. Taking into account the prior level of achievement of the pupils, the school needs to continue to address the variation in standards across subject areas and improve the quality and rigour of departmental and whole-school target-setting to ensure there is timely and effective intervention to support those pupils at risk of low or underachievement.

6. Provision for learning

- Most of the lessons observed during the inspection were effective in promoting and progressing the pupils' learning. Just under nine-tenths (89%) of the lessons were good or better, with just under one-half of these lessons being very good or better. In these more effective lessons: the pupils work purposefully in paired and group situations; regular opportunities are provided for the pupils to reflect on their learning and to provide feedback to peers; skilful questioning is used to develop understanding, critical thinking and extended oral responses; and effective plenary sessions, often using emerging technologies, are implemented to consolidate and confirm learning.
- In the less effective practice (important areas for improvement), in just over one-tenth (11%) of the lessons observed, the planning for learning is insufficiently detailed or differentiated to meet the needs of all of the pupils. As a result, the pupils do not make sufficient progress in their learning and there are missed opportunities to consolidate and assess the pupils' skills and understanding of key concepts.
- While there is a coherent structure and approach to short-term planning across the school, the quality of the medium and long-term planning for learning across the subjects is too variable. At key stage (KS) 4 and post-16 there is too much reliance on examination specifications. Across all of the planning, more needs to be done to outline the specific learning and teaching strategies to guide the provision to ensure it meets effectively the needs of all pupils.
- Appropriate assessment strategies, including effective marking for improvement, are used well to support the pupils' learning in the classroom. The use of assessment data at whole-school level, however, to set appropriate targets and to robustly track the progress of individual pupils, and the impact of any intervention strategies, needs to be strengthened to affect improvement in attainment.
- The provision for learning in English is good. All of the teaching observed in English was good or better, with around three-fifths of it being highly effective (very good or outstanding). In these lessons, the teachers' sound knowledge is complemented by an enthusiasm for the subject and by their use of a variety of effective strategies for learning and teaching. While the planning for KS 3 has recently been updated and helpful resources for KS 4 and post-16 have been created, the planning across the key stages lacks sufficient detail on the learning and teaching strategies, including differentiation, which will meet the needs and abilities of all of the pupils.
- Literacy is a high priority for school improvement and is promoted well through English and an increasing range of subjects across the curriculum. Arising from discussions with the heads of the subject departments, the literacy team has implemented practical initiatives which help raise further the standards attained by the pupils in writing for a range of purposes.

- The provision for learning in mathematics is good. In the more effective practice, in just over two-thirds of the lessons observed, the pupils actively participate in well-planned paired and group activities and strategies to promote mathematical oracy and build confidence are employed appropriately. In addition, assessment for learning strategies and skilful questioning are used to evaluate the level of understanding and to extend the pupils' mathematical thinking. In the less effective provision, in just under one-third of the lessons observed, the pupils do not engage sufficiently in their learning. In these lessons, there is an over emphasis on whole-class teaching with too little time given to plenary sessions. There is a need for the mathematics teachers to broaden the range of learning and teaching strategies to improve the quality of the learning experiences for the pupils in mathematics.
- Numeracy is notable across the school through displays, the pupils' participation in mathematical competitions and cross-curricular numeracy tasks. The pupils are provided with opportunities to use their numeracy skills accurately and effectively during some well-planned and subject-specific tasks across the curriculum. The opportunities, however, for the pupils to develop and apply their numeracy skills are inconsistent across the subject departments. Appropriately, the school has identified the need to develop further and implement consistently throughout the school arrangements to more robustly monitor the acquisition and application of numeracy skills by pupils across the curriculum.
- The provision for learning in the timetabled KS 3 and examination ICT provision is good. In the most effective practice, in just under one-half of the lessons observed, the pupils benefit from a good range of learning and teaching approaches, with good pace and appropriate levels of challenge. Effective use is made of technology to enhance the learning experiences for the pupils to record and present the outcomes of small group discussions and to further develop their analytical and evaluation skills. The curriculum offer has been broadened appropriately through the introduction of software systems and development. The planning for learning is dominated by the examination specifications and needs to take more account of the range of abilities.
- Work is ongoing to further embed the use of ICT to extend and enhance the pupils' learning across the curriculum. In timetabled lessons at KS 3, the pupils acquire a broad range of contemporary ICT skills, including the opportunity to learn coding from year 8. While a few subjects use ICT to good effect to enhance the pupils' learning, this is inconsistent across the school and the use of the school's virtual learning environment is underdeveloped.
- The care and support of each pupil is afforded a high priority by the school and is very effective in supporting the pupils' learning and achievement. All members of the school community work collegially to create a respectful, inclusive and nurturing environment where the pupils are empowered to believe in themselves. A particular strength of the school is the emphasis placed on listening to the pupils and developing their values, attitudes and dispositions; as a consequence, the pupils display high levels of confidence, independence and resilience.

- The school is responsive to the needs of individual pupils and extensive work takes place to support those with additional learning needs. Good use is made of information about the pupils' needs, interests and aptitudes and the effective links with parents, support staff and external agencies support the pupils well and they make good progress in their learning.
- The curriculum offer at KS 3 is both broad and balanced. At KS 4 and post-16, while the school is meeting the requirements of the Entitlement Framework, collaborative learning through the area learning community is underdeveloped. At post-16, the school has reviewed its curriculum offer and is expanding its range of subject choices. There is further work to be done, however, on the development and expansion of the overall curriculum at KS 4 to facilitate a broader range of curriculum pathways and to raise the pupils' attainment.
- The pupils benefit from a well structured taught programme for careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) at all key stages, but in particular at the key transition points. The taught provision is complemented by a range of careers-related events, visiting speakers and access by the pupils to work-related learning. Effective links have been established with a range of higher education institutions. The work-related learning opportunities at post-16 are effective and the pupils benefit from relevant workplace experiences which are appropriately matched to their aspirations and interests, regularly reviewed and well-monitored. At KS 4, the work-related learning opportunities for the pupils are too limited.

7. Leadership and management

- Through the school development plan³ and associated action plans, the senior leaders identify appropriate priorities for school improvement and the strategies to effect the planned improvements. Comprehensive consultation with parents, staff and governors informs the identification of the priorities. The well planned programme of staff development supports to good effect the specific training needs of the staff and is linked closely to the whole-school priorities for development and improvement.
- The make-up of the senior leadership team (SLT) has undergone significant change over the last two years. These strategic changes have resulted in an appropriate re-structuring of roles and responsibilities, which include closer links between the SLT, subject departments and school improvement teams in order to guide, support and monitor the improvement work. The SLT has forged strong links with the community and other schools, locally and globally, for which they have attained awards. They have also established to good effect, through focused learning walks, a culture that facilitates the sharing of best practice with a view to enhancing learning and teaching across the school. In addition, and appropriately, the school is developing further the quality assurance arrangements in order to address the variation in the impact of the monitoring and evaluation and departmental target-setting processes.

³ The school development plan meets the requirements of the School Development Planning Regulations (NI) 2010

- Most of the middle managers provide clear curricular and pastoral leadership within their areas of responsibility. They have a shared, whole-school vision for improvement, which is aligned well to the priorities in the school development plan, and are receptive to the opportunities to develop as self-evaluating leaders. There is variation in the extent to which the middle leaders monitor, evaluate and review the key aspects of the work in their areas of responsibility. In going forward, the middle leaders need to monitor and evaluate more rigorously and consistently the quality of all of the pupils' learning experiences and the standards they attain.
- The governors are highly supportive of the life and work of the school. They are well informed about the standards attained by the pupils, are consulted effectively on the priorities in the school development plan and they play an active, challenging role in supporting school improvement. On the basis of the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the ETI evaluation is that the school and wider community can have a high degree of confidence in the aspects of governance evaluated.
- On the basis of the evidence available at the time of inspection, the school's arrangements for safeguarding young people are comprehensive. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education. The pupils reported that they feel safe in school and know what to do if they are concerned about their safety or well-being.

8. Overall effectiveness

The school demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement in:

- addressing the significant variation in the standards attained by the pupils across the subject departments at GCSE grades A* to B; and
- further developing the planning for learning, in particular differentiation, to better meet the needs and abilities of all the pupils.

Examination performance and other statistical data

GCSE and equivalent examination results from 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS⁴ and verified with ETI, the table below compares the percentage of year 12 pupils in Victoria College achieving seven or more GCSEs at grades A* to C and equivalent subjects, and the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals, with the NI average for selective schools in the same free school meals category⁵.

Data on Year 12 (Key Stage 4) performance:

GCSE and GCSE equivalent subjects - *following permitted exclusions	2013	2014	2015
*Percentage of Year 12 taking GCSE & Equivalents in at least seven subjects	96	93	97
*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least seven subjects	94.2	90.8	85
<i>The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</i>	<i>93.6</i>	<i>93.1</i>	N/A
*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least seven subjects including GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics	92.8	90.8	84.3
<i>The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</i>	<i>92.8</i>	<i>92.2</i>	N/A
*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least five subjects	99.3	96.9	94.8
Percentage of Year 12 entitled to free school meals achieving five or more GCSEs Grades A* to C or equivalent (including GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics)	90.6	97	100

Other examination results: key stage 4

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with ETI, the table below shows the percentage of year 12 pupils in Victoria College achieving grades A* to C in vocational/applied courses equivalent to GCSE level. No average is available from the examining boards for the subjects in this table to facilitate comparison.

Other [level 2] courses taken in at least two of the last three years.

Level 2	2013	2014	2015	Total entry over 3 years
	<i>% pass</i>	<i>% pass</i>	<i>% pass</i>	
Learning for Life and Work	100	100	100	317

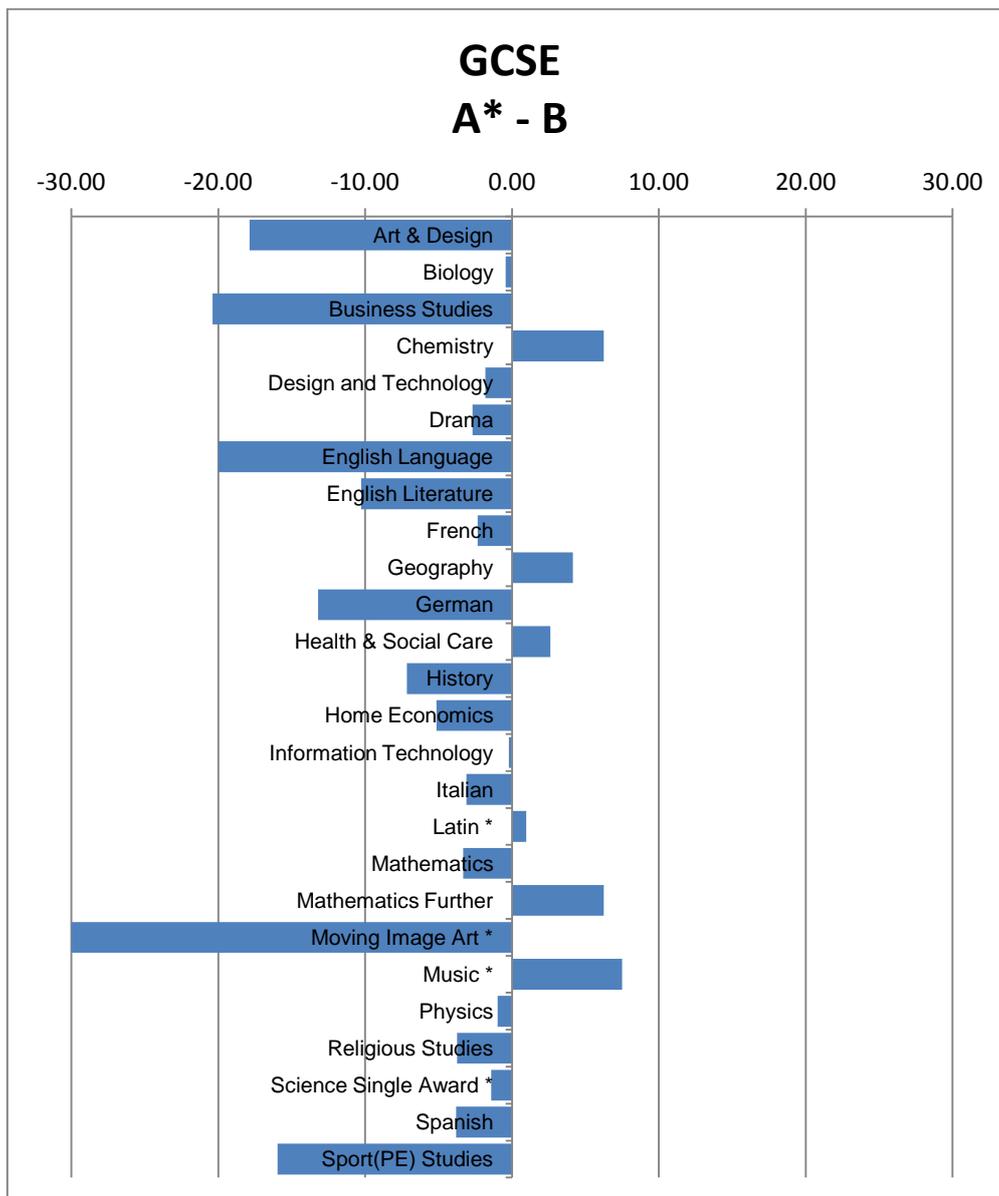
⁴ SIMS: School Information Management System

⁵ See benchmarking data and guidance contained in the annual DE Circulars on: 'School Development Planning and Target-Setting'.

Attainment of pupils in individual subjects at GCSE level at grades A* to B from 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with ETI, the average over three years of the percentage of pupils achieving at GCSE level at grades A* to B in individual subjects in Victoria College is compared with the three-year NI average for similar selective schools.

A positive value (to the right) shows that the average individual subject performance is above the NI average. The number of entries to each subject will vary considerably and therefore comparisons between subjects should be treated with caution.



*Indicates fewer than 30 entries over 3 years.

GCE A level examination results at grades A* to C from 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with ETI, the table below shows the percentage of year 14 pupils in Victoria College achieving three or more GCE A levels at grades A* to C, and two or more GCE A levels at grades A* to E. The table compares the percentage of achieving three or more GCEs at grades A* to C with the NI average for selective schools in the same free school meals category⁶.

Data on Year 14 (A2) performance:

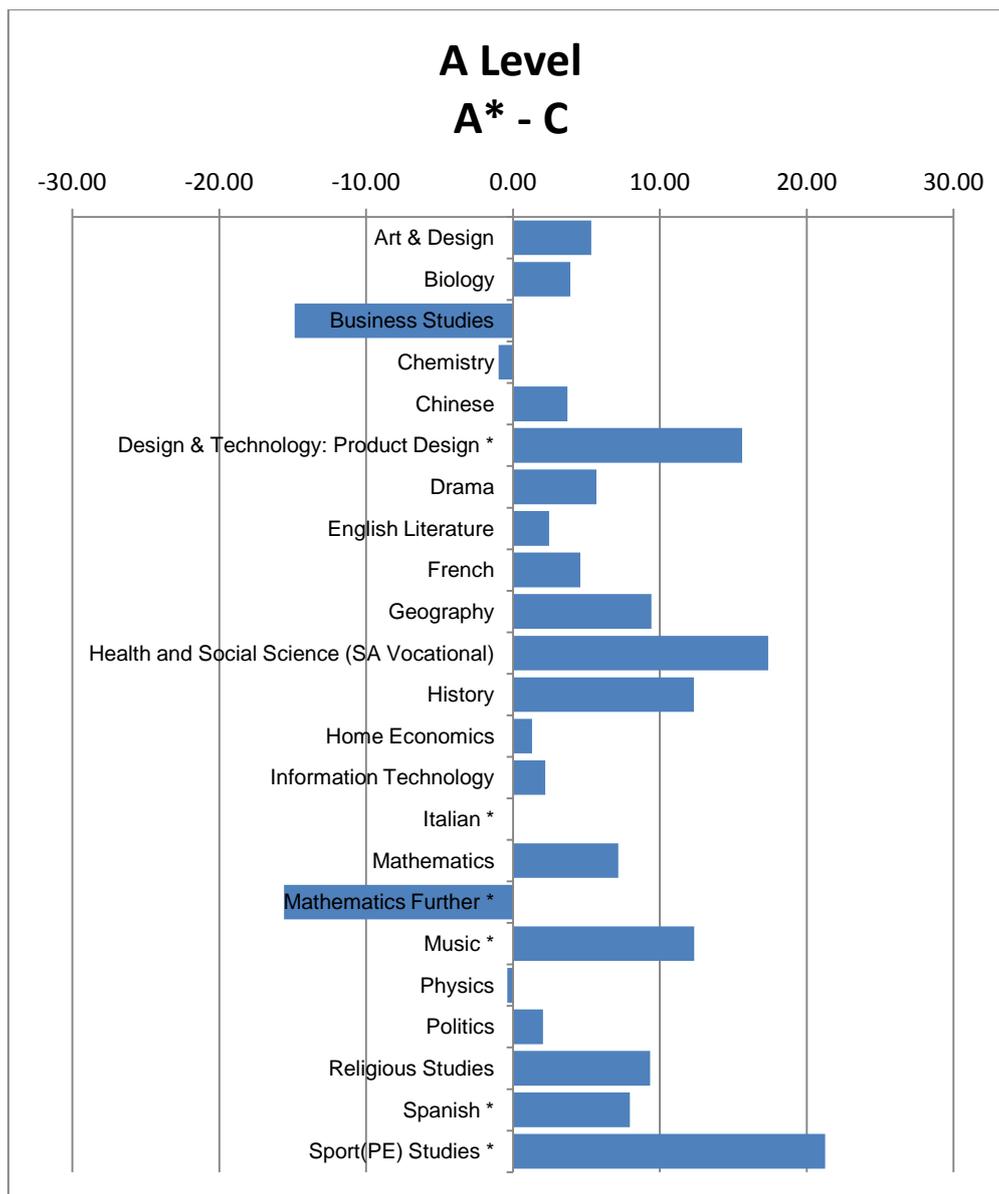
GCE A Level or equivalent	2013	2014	2015
Percentage of Year 14 taking A2 levels & Equivalentents in at least 3 subjects	95.4	90.8	93.3
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 3 A2 levels	87.9	79.6	83.5
<i>The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</i>	72.9	74.3	N/A

⁶ See benchmarking data and guidance contained in the annual DE Circulars on: 'School Development Planning and Target-Setting'.

Attainment of pupils in individual subjects at GCE A level at grades A* to C from 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with ETI, the average over three years of the percentage of pupils achieving at GCE level at grades A* to C in individual subjects in Victoria College is compared with the three-year NI average for similar selective schools.

A positive value (to the right) shows that the average individual subject performance is above the NI average. The number of entries to each subject will vary considerably and therefore comparisons between subjects should be treated with caution.



*indicates fewer than 20 entries over 3 years

Staying on rate

Based on data held in SIMS by the school and verified with ETI, the table below shows the percentage of the pupils who stay on at this school from year 12 to year 13 and then from year 13 to year 14, compared with the NI average for selective schools from school census returns to the Department of Education for the most recent year for which data is available.

	NI Average	School
% Yr 12 staying on to Yr 13	95.6	79.1
% Yr 13 staying on to Yr 14	94.1	92.0

Leavers' destinations

Based on data held by the school and verified with ETI, the table below shows the percentage of all of the pupils from Victoria College who leave school to enter further education, higher education or employment, or are seeking employment compared with the average for selective schools.

	2013/14 NI %	2013/14 School %	2013/14 School Nos.	Level 2 (No.)	Level 3 (No.)	Level 4 (No.)
Total number of leavers			122			
Employment	4.2	0.0				
Further Education	20.6	32.7	40		40	
Higher Education	70.6	65.6	80			80
Work-based learning (Training)	1.4	0.0				
Unemployed	1.1	0.0				
Unknown	2.1	1.6	2			

Health and safety

1. There are significant deficiencies in the facilities and storage areas for almost all subjects resulting in some limitations to the pupils' learning experiences.
2. The entrance to the Richmond Campus is not obvious to visitors and the school would benefit from a clearly identified reception area.

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