



Assessment report: Stage 2: (Assessment Day)

School name and postcode:	Thornton College, Buckinghamshire MK17 0HJ
Assessment date:	Monday 17th March 2025
School Head Teacher:	Louise Shaw,
School More Able Coordinator:	Hayley Mallendane,
NACE Lead Assessor:	Heather Clements

School context

Thornton College is a non-selective independent Catholic day and boarding school for girls on the outskirts of Milton Keynes. The school was founded in 1917 and is part of an international family of schools of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (JM), which is a registered charity, managed by trustees who appoint the governing body. The school has a pre-prep, prep, senior school and sixth form. There are two boarding houses for pupils aged 7 and above.

There are 400 Pupils on roll aged 3-18 of whom 340 are day pupils and 60 are boarders. Pupils come for a wide range of backgrounds with up to 25 boarders from overseas. Approximately 10% of pupils are identified as having SEND and 10% have EAL. The school has identified 20% as being more able. The last ISI inspection in 2022 found that the school was outstanding in all areas as did the Catholic School's Inspection in 2024.

The school has an outstanding academic record with almost a quarter of students achieving the highest possible grades at GCSE 8-9 and well over a third of students achieving grades 9–7. At A level the pass rate for all Level 3 qualifications was 100%, with a third of all grades A*/A. 78% of all EPQ grades were awarded at A*-A.

Summary of strengths for provision and outcomes

Thornton College is an exceptional school that aims to enable its students to leave with a first class, education that becomes fully embedded and lays the foundations for success in their future lives.

The school's website shows a strong commitment to meeting the needs of the More Able. Expectations are made clear at the start of each academic year with a focus on 'Challenge for all' and the importance of embracing challenging work, which is communicated at INSET, during 'Moving Up' evenings, through the tutor and assembly programme and in communication with parents.

The governors have been fully involved in the development of the school's provision for MAT learners and have contributed to the self-evaluation.

Strong leadership from the Assistant Headteacher supported by the Deputy Head of Prep has ensured that the focus on MAT pupils has been sustained and embedded within the school's provision with an action plan for next steps. Their drive and enthusiasm have ensured that new initiatives are implemented and embedded effectively.

Commendations are awarded to learners for academic achievement in all subject areas, and learners work towards a Thrive Portfolio through their participation in the co-curricular programme, with key themes such as resilience and independent decision making.

In Prep, house points and house point certificates are awarded and there are learning for life passport awards; any significant awards for out of school achievements are celebrated in assemblies.

The detailed MAT policy document ensures that all staff have a clear understanding of the nature and specific needs of MAT pupils and how those needs should be met in school. Clear identification criteria and robust procedures for tracking attainment and progress, ensure that MAT pupils are known by all staff who work hard to ensure that their learning needs are met.

All staff have been engaged in defining and identifying who the MAT pupils are and developing a clear understanding of how their learning can be enhanced within an inclusive culture in the classroom. Across the whole school, there is regular moderation between teachers to ensure consistency of standards and criteria for identifying MAT pupils.

The MAT register is kept under review, using a combination of baseline standardised scores/assessment scores/teacher judgements, and revised where new evidence emerges of particular abilities. The school has analysed the register to ensure that it is representative of the whole school community including those with additional needs, SEND and summer born. It is notable that this analysis demonstrated that the school's identification criteria is highly inclusive, ensuring that additional needs are taken into account. This is in part due to the excellent support from the SEND team for more able students who have barriers to learning, and an increasing awareness of dual exceptionality, where additional needs and EAL may mask high ability

The teaching and learning policy provides guidance on meeting the needs of more able learners, with appropriate strategies to ensure their potential is achieved at all stages of their education.

The drive to ensure that MAT learners are challenged and supported to achieve their potential starts for the early years where girls are encouraged to take risks, be adventurous in their learning and play, and pursue their own interests as they move into more formal and structured learning.

Small class sizes, a focus on personalised support and mixed ability groupings in most classes reflects the needs of learners and also the importance of high expectations for all, to continue to raise achievement.

Transition activities with cross-curricular links are planned to ensure that all learners begin at the right starting point, especially between Key Stages. There are discussions between HOY11 and Head of Sixth Form, day visits to prepare for prep transition and option evenings and Sixth Form open evenings which facilitate this.

Pupils are identified on entry through CATs and MidYIS and their progress is monitored to ensure they make good progress. A number of pupils start their education at Thornton at other than at normal entry points so they also use teacher identification as a key indicator.

SLT and HODs make use of baseline data to set aspirational targets for learners. Targets are in place for all subjects and for all year groups and are based on robust self-evaluation. There is evidence of within-year progress towards the targets and refinements as expectations are increased, as set out in the School SEF/ More Able action plan. Pupils value these targets and consistently aim to exceed them.

An intervention log is held by the assessment co-ordinator and regularly updated at least half-termly with all interventions in place for any learner who is not on track based on flightpath and assessment data.

The staff know pupils well and tailor their teaching and provision effectively so issues are addressed through the normal teaching and learning processes and pastoral support systems.

There is a warm collegiate atmosphere, with a sense of shared endeavour, where students and teachers work together with a common goal to achieve the best possible outcomes while supporting and valuing each other.

Challenge and high expectations are evident and staff work exceptionally hard with their lesson planning and delivery in order to cater for all needs. As an all through school, younger pupils benefit from the excellent role model of senior girls who, in turn, expressed their sense of being a part of a community where different year groups participated in many extra-curricular opportunities.

The school's curriculum policy is developed to ensure that all students receive a rich provision of classroom and extra-curricular activities that develop a range of character attributes. The Thrive portfolio concept ensures that students also have many opportunities to develop talents outside of the curriculum, focused on enterprise, challenge, resilience, decision making, spirituality, and mental and physical wellbeing.

The Firefly enrichment pages include information on opportunities for learners to develop their knowledge and skills in a variety of curricular and co-curricular programmes.

EPQ and HPQ – learners are required to select, synthesise and analyse research from a range of sources, including an assessment of their credibility. Students then present work at a marketplace attended by the whole school including pre-prep, to demonstrate the value of scholarship.

Subject leaders seek to ensure that there are challenging opportunities for those with talents in the arts. For example, in music many learners learn at least one instrument from prep school onwards and have the opportunity to attend at music clubs, sing in a choir and play in orchestras and ensembles.

There is a comprehensive schedule of KS4 support and revision sessions across lunchtimes and after school which offers opportunities for bespoke support, 1:1 or within small groups. For example, in English, one group is tailored to support learners with target grades of 7+.

Careers events for senior school students include external visitors. By KS4, every pupil has the opportunity to learn how STEM subjects help gain entry to a wide range of careers. The STEM event involves a number of high-profile organisations and provides students with the opportunity to network and develop their understanding of career paths and there is specialist support for learners wishing to apply to Oxford, Cambridge, International universities, apprenticeship programmes, Medicine and Law. The school is constantly seeking to identify new pathways for girls to consider – for example, a robotics engineer introduced his robot, and this led to a number of girls researching courses in this field.

There are many opportunities for learners to join groups based on their interests including in prep, for example House Captain and Vice-captain, senior, equalities committee, faith ambassadors, and school council which enables the development of important leadership skills. The Sixth Form student leadership team is in place to ensure that there are opportunities for development of leadership skills in a variety of areas including marketing and development prefect and ethos prefect. An exceptional example of student leadership was a student on the School Council who took on the Global Ambassador role and organised a Virtual International Choir - involving 10 schools and leading to a videoed performance in assembly.

The school invests in its staff - recognising that this enables them to recruit and retain high quality teachers - and works consistently to develop teachers' knowledge and skills to ensure that their teaching challenges and extends learning for the most able. Staff embrace new ideas and put them into practice effectively – it is noteworthy to see the extent to which CPD delivered in January is already being applied to increase challenge using SOLO Taxonomy.

Staff across the school are members of NACE and utilise the resources and the CPD opportunities. SLT attend NACE CPD including conferences and annual meetings/virtual CPD.

Appraisal target for teaching staff includes a focus on embedding the principles of the NACE Challenge Development programme as a Teaching and Learning priority. All department SEFs have a focus on Challenge development targets. Staff value the excellent resources that enable them to adapt the curriculum and extend learning for the most able.

School Council meetings include a regular focus on teaching and learning in order to ensure that throughout the prep and senior school, the views and ideas of all learners are taken into account and shared regularly with staff and students through the tutor programme.

Pupils value the fact that the school seeks their opinions through pupil voice surveys, which include a focus on the extent to which they are challenged in class. They appreciate that their teachers go the extra mile to tailor learning to meet their needs, adapting lessons where pupils make particularly good progress and planning a range of independent and collaborative opportunities to extend their learning further. Most notably, senior pupils understood that they were encouraged to develop a learning disposition seeking to improve on their own performance rather than competing with others. This creates a culture of openness and a willingness to collaborate and critique each other's work.

The school has developed many partnerships with other schools, including the JM School in Lebanon for virtual debating and St Louis Visitation Academy in the US, in order to further understand and appreciate a variety of cultures whilst continuing to promote educational ambition in all learners.

The school prioritises good communication with parents in terms of progress reviews, parents' evening and newsletters; as a result, relationships are very good with clear lines of reporting and a highly responsive attitude to parents' concerns and suggestions. Parents noted how the school had identified their children's' particular abilities and challenged them to achieve their potential without applying undue pressure.

The school has many partnerships with schools and other organisations in the local area and look for opportunities for their students to participate in activities at a local and national level.

A clear and highly focussed approach to self-evaluation and robust procedures for monitoring progress against action plans ensure the school is on a path of continuous improvement

Case Study

The aim of the project was to see if a small group of Sixth Form MAT learners could encourage the development and celebration of creativity amongst pupils with talents such as dance and music performance. The school sought to facilitate more opportunities for learners with creative talents to be involved in co-curricular activities beyond the traditional offerings, as they had identified from pupil voice that there were pupils with special talents and interests in areas that were not offered as part of the programme – including contemporary/street dance, contemporary instruments and performing in a band.

The Sixth Form group decided to implement two co-curricular clubs from the beginning of the academic year: a street dance club for prep pupils and a rock band club for senior pupils. In the Lent term, the band continued until February and the street dance switched to senior pupils.

There was consistent attendance of prep and senior pupils across Key Stages 2-3 in particular, with some KS4 pupils also attending. Verbal feedback from the audience at the Christmas concert was overwhelmingly positive. Excerpts of the performance were posted on social media channels and these were very well received, with many likes and positive comments.

The key factor that has led to the success of this initiative is student ownership and an awareness that there may have been some MAT pupils with particular talents that were not catered for who may feel that their talents were less valued, than 'traditional' types of performance. This will be mitigated in future by plans to develop the programme, so that part of Sixth Form MAT group's

focus on service will involve a commitment to contribute to the co-curricular programme, with a focus on adding an 'additional dimension'.

The key learning points from the case study include:

- a. the importance of 'buy-in' from both the students leading and participating. Clubs therefore must be relevant to the interests of both groups in order to ensure high levels of engagement.
- b. The need for programmes to be carefully planned to ensure they are timetabled to avoid adding any additional stress to the sixth form leaders.

The school's next step is to consider with the club leaders the rewards/recognition for top-performing pupils, this will likely form part of the Thrive portfolio and be awarded in the Trinity term, as part of the celebration assemblies, and during Prep chapel assemblies where achievement is regularly recognised.

Summary of strengths for teaching and learning

On the audit day, 4 lessons were observed across a range of departments and age groups and a number of lessons in prep and pre-prep were observed on the pre-assessment day to give a broad perspective across the whole school.

Overall, the quality of teaching and learning is very good with much exceptional practice, in line with the school's clear expectations and commitment to supporting all pupils to achieve well.

- The curriculum has been designed to engage and motivate learners and deepen knowledge and understanding, seeking to build the skills of independent and collaborative learning and positive pupil engagement. This was evident in all the lessons observed.
- There is a cohesiveness across the whole school, with skills, knowledge and values being developed and nurtured from the Early Years through to the 6th Form so that pupils feel part of a learning community.
- Relationships are warm and mutually respectful, so pupils are confident to express their ideas and opinions and value the contributions of their peers.
- Teachers in the senior school work hard to ensure that students understand exam criteria and grade boundaries and seek to build pupils' knowledge and skills incrementally to achieve good outcomes.
- Pupils are diligent and engaged in their learning and want to do well.
- When given the opportunity, pupils are able to express their ideas and opinions clearly.
- Feedback and marking, including verbal feedback, enable pupils to improve and refine their work and, where appropriate, they are given time to respond to marking and amend or adapt their work.
- Teachers make specific reference to prior learning helping pupils to apply this to new learning where relevant.
- Pupils are encouraged to work collaboratively and undertake complex problem solving.
- Pupils are able to articulate the success criteria, what level they were aiming for in their work and to explain their reasoning when giving their views.
- Learners are confident to ask questions to improve their work but are not teacher dependent.
- Teachers use higher order and follow-up questioning to encourage pupils to fully articulate their ideas.
- Lesson planning documents include a section on adaptive teaching strategies – including provision for the more able.

In the best lessons there is evidence of:

- Risk, challenge and the opportunity for pupils to fully verbalise their thinking.

- Independent and collaborative learning where pupils are encouraged to speculate and justify their ideas.
- The use of challenging concepts with pupils confident to ask questions and investigate for themselves.
- Pupils and teachers taking account of the opinions and ideas of others but also willing to challenge and debate.
- Teachers using flipped learning so that pupils carry out their research and reading prior to the lesson and are then able to discuss and debate content in greater depth.

Areas for development in Teaching and Learning

To improve further, the school should now ensure that the best practice observed in many lessons is disseminated and universally applied including:

- The consistent use of higher order and probing supplementary questioning – with students being given time to respond fully, using formal and structured language to lay the foundations for exam style responses.
- Ensuring that when giving feedback from discussions pupils are encouraged to plan how they present their ideas and create opportunities for other pupils to ask questions, add ideas or suggest alternative viewpoints.
- Continue to promote higher order thinking using questioning to encourage MAT pupils to think beyond the immediate area of learning to generalise, theorise and apply ideas to other aspects of their learning. Pupils should be encouraged to speculate, hypothesise, evaluate and justify their views.
- Ensure that within mixed ability classes, more able pupils have the opportunity to undertake investigative and researched based work at the outset with the opportunity to share their learning with their peers.

General areas for development

- Provide opportunities for staff to share their innovative practice in a manageable format, for example in 20-minute workshops.
- Continue to develop new co-curricular opportunities beyond the traditional subjects in consultation with pupils.
- Continue to develop pupils' Personal Achievement discussions and records to encourage more able pupils to be confident to talk about their particular abilities.

Key issues (key action points to be included on the school's Key Issues Matrix)

- Ensure the consistent use of higher order and probing supplementary questioning – with students being given time to respond fully, using formal and structured language to lay the foundations for exam style responses.
- Ensure that within mixed ability classes, more able pupils have the opportunity to undertake investigative and research-based work at the outset, with the opportunity to share their learning with their peers.
- Provide opportunities for staff to share their innovative practice in a manageable format, for example in 20-minute workshops, so that new ways of working can be trialled and evaluated before being embedded in practice across the school.
- Continue to develop pupils' Personal Achievement discussions and records to encourage more able pupils to be confident to talk about their particular abilities.

Challenge check-in due

September 2026

Reaccreditation application deadline

March 2028

Lead assessor's signature:

Neuther Clements