

The Thomas Deacon Academy Peterborough

Case study



Principal

Dr Alan McMurdo

Chair of Governors

Dr Alan McMurdo

Sponsors

The Thomas Deacon
Trust, Perkins Engines

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Introduction

Peterborough's Thomas Deacon Academy opened its doors in September 2007 to more than 2,000 pupils. It replaced three schools – one that was doing very well, one that was doing OK, and one that was about to be placed under special measures.

Specialising in maths and science, the Academy is the largest in England, and is billed by principal Dr Alan McMurdo as "one of the most exciting learning environments in the world".

Raising aspirations

The Thomas Deacon Academy is housed in possibly one of the most written about school buildings of recent times. The £50m Foster and Partners built complex has been given nicknames including the Christmas tree and the spaceship.

The scale is vast. The school's enormous atrium is surrounded by sweeping stories of curved gantries and galleries. In the centre of the atrium is a huge, curved pod of a lecture theatre and drama studio, which has an open air art studio perched on top of it.

Classrooms are glass fronted, and corridors are wide and without corners. The design helps to reduce opportunities for poor behaviour or bullying.

Facilities include one computer for every two children, tennis courts, a fully equipped gym, science labs with attached computer rooms, a climbing wall, a lecture theatre, drama studios and a fully equipped theatre.

The atmosphere feels university-like and grown up, and there is no shouting or rowdiness.

Science teacher Caroline Jackson says: "We have quite high expectations of our students and that's a big change I've noticed from the three predecessor schools. Students are coming into lessons with the motivation to learn, and they were saying that they were really excited about school because I can actually learn in my lessons now. We have quite a business-like approach, and quite a lot of emphasis is put onto the students. We let them know what we think their minimum target is, but then we try and push them up to a higher level. We're always trying to show the students where they're working at now, and what they can try to do to improve. They all know exactly what grade they're working on, and that they should be aiming for higher than that. Trying to get that through in the lessons is really important."

"This school is all about giving students the confidence to say, yes, I've had a good education, I've done really well and I'm going to go out and do exactly what I want to do."

Doing things differently

The school day at the Thomas Deacon Academy runs from 8am to 6pm, and term times are slightly different from those in neighbouring maintained schools.

To give children a sense of belonging in such a large school, the Academy is broken down into separate colleges: arts, communications, humanities, maths, science, sports and technology.

Each college has a team of tutors, and tutor groups (vertical learning groups) where 16-20 students of different ages meet for form time, and to help one another out.

Lessons are an hour and a half long, which gives scope for more in-depth teaching and learning.

Science teacher Caroline Jackson says: "The variety of teaching is really important. Our students never really know what the teacher is going to do next – they could be going out to investigate rockets in the atrium or outside."

"In our BTECH curriculum, for students who seem to be at a risk of not achieving a grade C in the traditional science GCSEs, each unit is attached to a scenario. We will show science actually in the workplace. For example, we might look at how science is involved in the development of sports equipment. It shows that science isn't just about learning the facts and the figures and the theory, it's actually about work that students could end up doing. We've been working with Muller on an assignment to show how much science goes into developing and manufacturing one yoghurt product."

"This sort of thing helps the students who are less examination inclined, the students who would struggle; they can see that they're learning science, but they're learning it in a more practical based way."

The curriculum is different too, and after GCSE, students have the opportunity to study for either A Level or the International Baccalaureate.

The uniform

All students wear a black business suit with a black tie, flashed in the colour of the college. Ties are clip-on so they cannot be slung low or untidily worn.

Blazers carry the school's logo of a carbon atom, with six electrons whizzing around it, each representing one of the school's colleges.

Principal Alan McMurdo says: "We wanted the uniform to be different to the uniform in the three predecessor schools, and different to anything else in Peterborough. The students wear it with pride, and it gives a very distinct sense of belonging."

The results

	Percentage of students gaining five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including maths and English
2001 (Predecessor school results)	26.5
2002 (Predecessor school results)	32.1
2003 (Predecessor school results)	34.9
2004 (Predecessor school results)	35.1
2005 (Predecessor school results)	40.1
2006 (Predecessor school results)	41.4
2008 (Academy results)	28.9* /45
2009	36.8

* These results are skewed by the fact that the DCSF did not include the numbers of students passing the International GCSE (IGCSE) in its overall results. If it had, results would have been around 45%.

The people

Dr Alan McMurdo, Principal

We opened in September 2007. The original idea of becoming an Academy was generated by the governors of Deacon's School. I came on board after that decision had been made.

I started work on the project in April 2006, and it was a source of immense pride when the school opened.

Being an Academy has given us some freedoms around how we structure the curriculum, around the ways we work with staff – for example we have staff training days which are attended by children.

We also have slightly different term time arrangement and a slightly different school day. We start at 8am and we finish at 6pm. Because we are such a huge school, we are split into different colleges so that students are all well known and have a real sense of belonging.

It's all about improving the quality of teaching and learning, and improving opportunities for our young people.

We have two equal sponsors – The Deacon's School Trust, which has been involved with education in Peterborough for almost two centuries, and Perkins Engines, a local engineering company which is a major employer in our area.

We don't actually receive money from them any longer – their contribution was towards our capital build. But they do bring a lot of important thinking to the table. In terms of Perkins, they bring strategic planning and business planning, which in combination with my educational experience is immensely powerful. And The Deacon's School Trust brings an element of local accountability. They are both on the board of directors, and I enjoy a very productive relationship with them.

I think when we opened, many people expected us to fall flat on our face, but we had put in a lot of very hard work and we are making good progress in improving results and opportunities for young people.

We are a comprehensive school through and through. We operate a fair banding admissions policy, and are signed up for all the local authority protocols. This has meant that our intake of children who take free school meals has actually increased since we opened – from a 19% mean average across the three predecessor schools, to 22% this year.

I'm really proud of the way we have converged and transformed learning in this part of Peterborough.

Our facilities are fantastic. We use IT in innovative and successful ways. We are focused on enhancing learning to give kids a better deal. It's hugely rewarding. It's a great job.

Caroline Jackson, Science Teacher AST

I was at Deacons for four years before it became the Academy, so I saw it rise from the ground. It has changed slightly since it became an Academy, and the changes are for the better. They've kept some of the things that some of us were worried about, like behaviour management – but they've combined things from the other schools which has made it a lot better.

There is so much that goes on in the school that makes you proud to work here – when we do things in the atrium, when we have the Remembrance service – you realise just what a great bunch of kids we've got here. They've all come out of their classroom, they can all stand in absolute silence and show respect. But then on a Friday you've got a group of students doing a dance act down in the atrium. The students are really proud of the things they all do and they're happy to show that off, which is really nice.

I'm based in the science college and I have a tutor group within the science college. We're chemistry, physics, biology and health and social care.

We have a huge amount of resources – practical equipment and science kit that we can use in the lessons. But also, the set-up of the rooms – we have traditional labs, but we also have computer rooms. We also have the lecture theatre, we have outside spaces. We have a real opportunity within our hour and a half lesson to not stay in one room, but to actually be a bit more creative and say we're going to utilise the computers for half an hour, because that's going to enable us to then do our project work for the next bit of the lesson. So we're quite flexible with where we teach and I think that allows you to try new things. Quite often you'll see classes going outside just for 10 or 15 minutes to use that space. We've got huge amounts of practical and data logging equipment to really get students investigating.

Each year the students have an online CV with all the evidence of them setting themselves targets, achieving those targets, evidence of the stuff they do out of school, all in one place. It's the future of a CV really. If a student can go to an employer after Year 11 with all the evidence of the things they've been doing, it's a showcase of their many skills – including the ICT skills involved in building the portfolio.

The people (cont.)

Yannis Skertsis, Head Boy

I was voted Head Boy in May last year. I help out with Year 7 lessons and help out with science classes.

I take all three sciences. My GCSEs went really well. I got eight A's*, four A's and one B.

The teachers at this school are something else. They're prepared to give you time outside of lessons as well. It's not just developing you within your school subjects, but generally as a person, you're becoming more rounded. The teaching staff try to make you think and explore, so it's brilliant. I feel that they're my friends, I feel very relaxed with them.

Our lessons are an hour and a half long. We concentrate on the syllabus, but for a moment we might think slightly outside the syllabus. It always makes you think that if you can go that little bit further, then it makes you feel comfortable with what you're already studying. If you can anchor knowledge into something, then you get a much better grasp of it and it stays with you.

In biology we've recently been covering immunity and my teacher printed off a booklet from the internet, taken from a health website. He got us to read through it, and it went way beyond the exam requirements. We looked at a whole new array of different cells and learned their function within the immune system.

I want to study natural sciences and biological science at university. I'd like to study genetics and become a teacher. First I'd like to go into the research side of things because I think genetics is the foundation of all biology. To me, biology is a beautiful subject, it links physics and chemistry together so nicely – it gives them a place within the actual world that we see. The teaching bit has really stemmed from the inspirational teachers I've had here. We have science teachers of a really, really high standard here – really inspirational people.

This year I'm on track for As and I've had an interview at Cambridge. I'd been to the college before for a residential and I loved it there. If I don't get in there, I have a place at Leicester secured. There is a teacher here who helps students with Oxbridge applications, and my biology teacher helped me go through Cambridge applications. I really appreciate the amount of time and effort that she's put in to help me.

Our form times are run in vertical tutoring groups where the older students help the younger students. It gives you a little bit of authority and makes you feel you are your own person. You don't let that authority override anything, you just allow it to facilitate your experience and allow you to deliver things.

I have my i-Connect portfolio which I've been building on all year. It goes onto a memory stick and shows employers or universities a little of what you've done.

I feel a lot more confident because of the way I'm taught here. I can speak to people – even senior people – so it's been really helpful with interviews and when I'm out and about.

David Anderson, Parent

I have a son in the Lower Sixth and a daughter in Year 10 and a son who hopefully will be starting in Year 7 next year.

My children who are here are both really high achievers. My son is doing maths, further maths, physics and design and technology. We toyed with the idea of the International Baccalaureate, but we heard from the Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Cambridge that they preferred A Levels for engineering, which is what he wants to pursue. He wants to be a structural engineer, and he'd like to study at Cambridge.

He's also Managing Director of Young Enterprise, and he's going on the Gold Duke of Edinburgh to the base camp in the Himalayas, and he's going to a science convention to Chicago in February. Opportunities just abound here.

My daughter loves her sport, and played in first 11 hockey when she was in Year 9 and they went on a tournament to Amsterdam. She's also been to Barbados for a netball tour. She would like to be a PE teacher. She has sporting responsibilities and she has to get around her whole team letting them know what's going on.

They're both being really well catered for. The teachers are online most of the time. The teachers are very dedicated people. I think we'd have struggled elsewhere, and they'd have been sidelined. But here their achievement is celebrated. The whole culture underpinning this is achievement. That is made very clear. They're therefore able to aspire really high.

It's the calmest place you could imagine. It's like the atmosphere you would find in something like a hotel.

The ICT facilities are incredible – like nothing else in Peterborough.

The people (cont.)

Ruth Whittaker, Head Girl

I'm studying the International Baccalaureate. At higher level I'll be studying English, history and social anthropology, and at standard level I'm studying maths, Spanish and environmental systems. Then you have your three core subjects that all IB students have – theory of knowledge, an extended essay and creativity, action and service, which is volunteering.

I chose the International Baccalaureate because I enjoyed all the subjects I was doing at GCSE and I didn't want to let any of them slip. I think it's a much better grounding for university as well. You know how to cope with lots of work at once. What could have been stressful for me at GCSE is now just general work for me. It helps my organisation, and I genuinely believe it's a better qualification.

I want to study law at university and I believe with the range of subjects I've got I'll have a better grounding for that.

I study piano as well, which is great because even though I'm not a music student, the school doesn't mind me using their facilities. I also do karate and swimming.

I've had an interview with Cambridge University, and I have an offer from King's College, London.

Our teachers are very approachable and very, very helpful. We can email them from home.

It's really easy to contact them. If some of us have extra work to do, the site staff don't mind keeping the school open until about 8pm and having pizza nights for students who want to finish work.

I'm trying to establish a United Nations Youth and Student Association which will promote the ideals of the UN government and try to get younger children a bit more involved in current affairs, staging debates, maybe organising large events to promote awareness. I've put up adverts to see if anyone is interested in running it. I'm not providing it, the students are being given a chance to run it on their own. What I'm aiming to do before I leave is make sure that it's fully funded, fully student run, and get the wheels going and then just leave them to it. It's a good example of the kind of things the Academy offers, because there is funding when you need it.

There is a school newspaper called *Tom* which is almost entirely student run, and that's funded by the Academy as well. I was an editor there last year and now the younger years are taking over that as well.

Having two not so good schools combine with quite a successful school is a great boost for the two schools because now they can be brought up. The only con you have is that some parents worried that the successful school might be brought down, and that is a big issue. But as far as I know, that hasn't happened. In fact results seem to be going up all the while.

Geoff Haynes, Maths teacher

The first year at the Academy was my first year in teaching. I'd transferred from working in industry to being a teacher. My accounting qualification was equivalent to a UK masters, then I did a year's PGCE and started here. I was a governor at my daughter's primary school and part of the duties for that are to go in and observe, and I thought what a fantastic way to earn a living.

I teach maths up to GCSE and I'm going to do some more study to be able to teach up to A Level.

I wasn't a natural mathematician at school, but I had a very good teacher. She gave a number of students lessons after school which allowed me to get my O Level, and I think this gives me a bit of affinity with the children who are struggling.

I try to make sure what I teach is given context and meaning. I get students to think about things like the differences between costs for mobile phones for example, what's cheaper or more appropriate? A pay as you go phone, or a phone with a contract? I get students to draw a graph of what the reality of this decision is.

I love it when kids have persevered with something. They've persevered, I've persevered. You can tell when they've got it because the expression on their face changes. I feel satisfaction, and they feel satisfaction too – it's great. They know that I'm there to help.

I tell my students that if they get stuck they should ask, come and see me or send me an email. I've helped a lot of students by email.

OFSTED

At the date of writing, the Thomas Deacon Academy had yet to be visited by OFSTED inspectors.



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