Report on the visit by Mrs Fiona Knapp to Barton Court Grammar School on 10th February 2015 for the purpose of accreditation as a Thinking School by Exeter University Cognitive Education Development Unit.

Barton Court Grammar School is an 11-18 selective co-educational school, situated on a World Heritage site close to the centre of Canterbury in Kent. The school was awarded Specialist Language School Status in 2005 and converted to academy status in September 2011. The school has a PAN of 120 and is usually over-subscribed. There are currently 864 students on roll, of whom approximately 55% are boys and 45% girls. There are some 200 in the Sixth Form, which offers both ‘A’ Levels and the International Baccalaureate Diploma; most of the BCGS students continue from Year 11 into the Sixth Form where external students join them, many of who are international students.

The school is a strategic partner in the New Horizons Teaching School Alliance, an alliance of schools in Kent, working together offering school-to-school support to aid school improvement. As a Specialist Language School, Barton Court also co-ordinates a group of MFL specialists and supports thirty three primary schools within the area.

The most recent Ofsted inspection in March 2014 rated Barton Court Grammar School as Outstanding in all categories. The school is committed to high standards for both staff and students, to enable them to achieve their full potential. It reflects an ambitious drive for improvement and has the highest academic expectations of all with a relentless focus on excellence. This is non-negotiable and is central to everything that the school believes is essential in developing as a thinking and learning-focused school,
and is summarised in this extract from the school Mission Statement:

‘At Barton Court Grammar school students are supported, inspired and challenged to achieve their very best in all that they do in order to reach their full potential and academic excellence. Students develop into independent, confident, open-minded, lifelong learners ready to take their place as leaders in the 21st Century. They will develop into well-balanced, articulate, principled and responsible global citizens, with cultural and international awareness, who positively contribute to our school and the wider community.’

The BCGS Tree of Learning captures this ethos and is widely displayed around the school.

Prior to my visit to the school, I had the opportunity to review the school’s journey towards becoming a Thinking School in great detail. This was presented in an exemplary and very comprehensive portfolio, compiled by Caroline Benard-Grosso, the Thinking Schools Co-ordinator, and available to view at the school.

The school’s positive and caring ethos was evident as soon as I arrived. I received a very warm welcome, the day was extremely well organised and staff, students, parents and governors were all aware of the purpose of my visit. Behaviour is excellent and staff and students are clearly happy and readily spoke about their school with warmth and enthusiasm, as did the governors and parents I met.

During my visit I met with the Headteacher, Ms Kirstin Cardus, and was taken on a tour of the school by two Y13 students. I also conducted ‘learning walks’ and observed a range of lessons across the school and across the curriculum where thinking tools and strategies were being used very effectively to engage students in the learning, challenge and deepen their thinking and generate some skilful higher-order questioning. I met with the Drive Team, which is responsible for driving forward the key developments, and also met separately with a group of teaching and support staff.
‘Student Voice’ is key in an accreditation visit and I was able to meet with the ‘Student Drive Team’ as well as with a representative group of students, from across the school to discuss their perceptions, experiences and reflections on the school’s approaches to cognitive education.

There is much evidence to indicate that Barton Court Grammar School is receptive to new developments and initiatives, and actively seeks out new opportunities to continuously drive improvements in learning and teaching year on year. Kirstin Cardus took up her post as Headteacher in September 2010, having had previous experience of the Thinking School approach at Rochester Grammar School and Invicta Grammar School. The rationale for promoting this at Barton Court was underpinned by her passion for teaching and learning, an ambitious drive for improvement and her recognition of the need both to raise expectations and to improve the quality of pedagogy and practice across the school.

In 2012, the school began its journey towards Thinking School accreditation. supported by a consultant from Kestrel Education. The original Drive Team was established and some key approaches were identified. The Headteacher and the Drive Team felt it was essential to establish a unified approach to the development of questioning and thinking skills across the school as well as to develop a common thinking language, and to share the rationale for each key strategy selected and identified in the long-term plan.

The ‘Thinking Maps were introduced first as they are very tangible and accessible and provide a visual toolkit for organising critical thought processes; Thinker’s Keys were selected to encourage creativity and innovative thought. The introduction of “Habits of Mind” (renamed Attributes for Success) raise awareness of intellectual behaviours that would help students accelerate their progress and become more independent thinkers and learners. Finally Edward de Bono’s Six Hat Thinking was selected to encourage students to look at a problem from different perspectives in order to come to a more balanced, well-rounded conclusion.
The Drive Team recognised the need to plan and structure the journey carefully and to adopt a clearly staged, developmental and invitational approach. There was to be a main focus each academic year, with the Drive Team piloting other approaches in their own lessons and in Tutor time.

2012-13  
Main focus: Thinking Maps, with additional foci on Thinker's Keys and Thinking Hats  
A P4C Club was launched for Y7

2013-14  
Main focus: Six Hat Thinking with a continued focus on Thinker’s Keys, Thinking Maps and the Frame of Reference and an additional focus on Habits of Mind led by the Drive Team

2014-15  
Main focus: Habits of Mind, with a review of Thinking Maps and Six Hat Thinking, a focus on blending Hats and Maps, and further development of Thinker’s Keys.

Running alongside these developments, there has also been a sharp focus on developing higher order questioning across the curriculum through clear reference to Bloom’s Taxonomy and the use of the Q Matrix.

The tools are also incorporated within meetings, and documentation for agendas and meeting minutes have been redesigned to incorporate the tools. The Incident Report Form has been redesigned to reflect Six Hat Thinking, and I also saw a very powerful use of Six Hat Thinking to guide students through the UCAS application process. This was on display in the Sixth Form Learning Centre.

The Thinking Schools Co-ordinator has attended a range of conferences and courses to develop her own understanding and professional expertise and there is a carefully planned on-going programme of CPD to support the development of cognitive
approaches across the school. The Drive Team is committed to delivering appropriate and relevant CPD, creating a range of resources and regularly reflecting, evaluating and feeding back their findings.

The school’s approach to cognitive education is clearly referenced in the application pack for prospective staff, and there is an Induction Programme for those who are newly appointed. The staff I spoke to expressed their appreciation of the range of opportunities for them to engage in on going learning-focused professional development and share good practice as an integral part of their day-to-day work, as well as more formal on-going whole staff INSET, which is part of the annual planned programme of school development. Barton Court Grammar School has further focused on the on-going development of thinking tools and strategies by including clear targets for development as objectives in the Performance Management process.

The school has also introduced an induction programme for Year 7 and Year 12 to actively and explicitly teach the tools and strategies to new students, and the process has been kept alive by maintaining a high focus on the importance of using the strategies for example through ‘Enrichment Days, the development of the use of tools for revision, the inclusion of relevant information in Teachers’ and Student Planners and explicitly building the thinking tools and strategies into Schemes of Work and the ‘Thinking School Gallery’ which is attached to the Notebook Software and accessible to all. Students have also been involved in reviewing and evaluating the tools and strategies through the ‘Student Drive Team’. This comprises a group of students from Year 8 - Year 13, selected by staff as ‘ambassadors for thinking’, and who had prepared a very informative presentation showcasing the Thinking School approach from their perspective. They told me that they meet once a term with a member of the Staff Drive Team to share ideas, seek opinion, consider feedback and discuss their ideas for development.

The staff I met with were very positive about the school’s cognitive approach. They value the whole school focus on learning and thinking, say that it has had a positive
impact in terms of teaching, planning and delivery and that thinking and questioning are now at the forefront of learning. They feel there is increased challenge and excitement in the learning and a drive for greater collaboration and more independent learning. They have noticed that the tools help to ‘slow down the thinking’ and students are more reflective, their thinking is more structured, they are more able to think creatively and flexibly, and more likely to question and adapt and change their thinking. The approaches also contribute to the success of the IB Diploma and the development of the IB Learner Profile. They feel that the focus on consistency and the development of a common thinking language has made it easier for both staff and students to take ownership, and access and use the tools and strategies across the curriculum. However, it was apparent that some teachers are not using all the tools and this may be partly because the focus still tends to be on the name of the tool rather than on the purpose and the thought process(es) each one supports, which can impact on the extent to which the tools are seen as supporting transferable thinking skills.

The focus on thinking has also had an impact on teachers’ planning as staff are challenging themselves to include and embed higher-order thinking and questioning in their lessons. They value the fact that the agreed tools and strategies are revisited and reviewed regularly with opportunities to plan collaboratively, discuss the use of the tools and share successful practice.

The school is committed to strong partnerships between all stakeholders, and the governors I met spoke of feeling included and well informed. They had an introduction to the rationale, and although they challenged and questioned the approach initially, recognised the head’s experience in cognitive education and are fully supportive of the “Thinking School’ approach. They are ambitious for the school and value the fact that this approach is now embedded in the culture and ethos, recognising that it has an enormous impact on student achievement and lifelong learning, and is a significant factor in the school’s success. They feel that they continue to be kept informed by the Assistant Headteacher, Heads of Year and Lead Practitioners, who report formally to
the whole Governing Body, as well as through the regular Headteacher’s reports and further opportunities for their own training and development.

I also spoke to a small group of parents during the visit; they feel parents are well informed about the school’s cognitive approaches through the school prospectus, school magazine, emails, letters and information, student planners, the school website and Parent Portal, Focus Days, Thinking Challenges, Parents’ Evenings, and reports relating to their child’s achievement and progress. They could see the value of the tools and strategies for their own children although they recognised that there was some initial resistance from some students who felt that the tools were ‘childish’. However, they quickly found the tools very helpful in supporting and structuring their thinking and they have readily adopted them as an integral part of their learning. It was interesting to hear that some grandparents are also accessing and using the tools via the students!

The students I met spoke of how much they value their school and the wide range of opportunities it offers. They spoke of the school as a learning community with a clear focus on improvement, high expectations and excellence that encourages them to develop as independent learners and thinkers. They feel and that they have benefited from the change from three to five lessons a day, that the learning is now more focused, that they are given autonomy to choose their own pathway and that teachers ‘go above and beyond to unlock potential’. They readily talked about the thinking tools and strategies they use and how they now use them automatically. They are very familiar with the Attributes for Success and described them as the things you could do to help you be a better learner. They are also familiar with the Thinking Maps and Six Hat Thinking, but said they do not use the Brace and Bridge Maps as much as the others. They feel that the approaches make them more aware of how and what they are thinking and learning. One commented that, ‘thinking processes have always existed, but now they have a name and a visual tool!’ Another told me that he always has the tools in the back of his mind and had suggested to his mother that she could use them as part of her preparation for a job interview!
They told me that lessons are interesting and that the curriculum has been enriched with the introduction of a cognitive approach and that thinking strategies are incorporated into lessons in such a way that students not only know about the tools but also have the opportunities and the confidence to access and use them. Students also value the Enrichment Days when they follow a collapsed timetable and participate in a range of alternative activities focused on a theme. They enjoy the opportunity to explore ideas together, use a range of thinking tools and strategies and develop independence and ownership of their own learning. They have high aspirations with ambitions ranging from careers in medicine, psychology, law, engineering and computer science to forensic science and marine biology.

Barton Court Grammar School has made very good progress in developing as a Thinking School over the last three years. The evidence suggests that a range of thinking tools and strategies are used across the school, and the school could now focus on extending and embedding this further through more focused and explicit use of key thinking language in planning and delivery, increased independence in the use of a range of tools for different thinking purposes and developing the use of the tools in combination.

Other possibilities for future development might include:

- To revisit, refine and develop David Hyerle’s Thinking Maps, focusing on the thinking process rather than the name of the Map,
- To develop the use of the metacognitive Frame of Reference for all Thinking Maps
- To consider the work of Professor Philip Cam in developing Communities of Enquiry at KS3
- To consider current research such as that from Project Zero at Harvard to further develop a culture of thinking, and the use of a range of structures and routines to ‘make thinking visible.’
• To consider training groups of students as resident experts in each of the key thinking strategies
• To consider inviting a governor to become a member of the Drive Team
• To develop partnerships and transition work with local primary schools
• To further develop Action Research initiatives (staff and students) as part of the journey towards Advanced Thinking School Recognition
• To continue to capture and share existing best practice, and work towards Advanced Thinking School Recognition

In conclusion, Barton Court Grammar School meets all the criteria set by Exeter University’s Cognitive Education Development Unit as a Thinking School. This is reflected through the wide range of evidence in the portfolio, displays around the school, observation of planning, and classroom practice, the students’ application of the tools to enrich and enhance their learning, and discussions with the headteacher, the Drive Team, students, parents, governors and a range of staff. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until February 2018.

Fiona Knapp B.Ed (Hons)
Honorary University Fellow
Cognitive Education Development Unit
Graduate School of Education
College of Social Sciences and International Studies
University of Exeter

On behalf of Professor Rupert Wegerif, Director, Cognitive Education Development Unit