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Mr M Currie
Chief Executive
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Dear Mr Currie

Ofsted 2011–12 survey inspection programme: employability - the impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment

This survey evaluates providers' response to initiatives launched on 1 August 2011 to use Skills Funding Agency funds flexibly to support people on benefits.

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and participants, during my visits on 1 and 2 November 2011 and 23 February 2012 to look at your work in employability provision.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with staff, participants and employers; scrutiny of relevant documents; and observation of one learning session and one guidance interview.

Key findings

- Mantra Learning (Mantra) uses the flexibility in government funding for learning and skills well to design employability provision that has a very good focus on meeting the needs of people on benefits and those of employers in the logistics industry. The provider has developed a brand known as 'Job Gym' that helps to give this provision status and make it easily recognisable by its users. This work links in well with the development of two new sites based in community locations to attract more people to careers in logistics and to make the programmes more accessible.

- Mantra uses its own facilities as an employer to enable participants to practise their skills in a real work environment. The specialist resources are outstanding and the participants interviewed said that using such up-to-date equipment prepared them well for a good range of jobs in the industry. The vocational courses are well designed and they include good opportunities to develop participants' employability skills. However, participants do not receive sufficient feedback on their progress in developing these skills, such as team building and problem solving.
- The specialist advice and guidance on retuning to work is highly effective and focuses well on ensuring that participants' CVs summarise accurately all their relevant experience and expertise. However, the individual learning plans do not include sufficient information on participants' personal barriers to employment and the training and support needed to overcome them.
- Mantra's managers and staff understand the job market and the different recruitment procedures in this industry very well. They use their excellent links with employers effectively to promote purposeful work experience for people who have completed the employability programmes. Mantra has recently introduced a comprehensive computerised system to monitor participants' progress from the time they are referred from Jobcentre Plus. It has an excellent facility that disseminates job vacancies to participants by carefully matching the jobs to their previous experience, their achievements on the programmes and their personal circumstances.
- Participants make good progress in improving their chances of employment. Their achievement of job-focused qualifications is good and they develop specialist vocational skills to a high standard. Learndirect and group sessions support participants' development of generic literacy and numeracy skills, but these are not linked enough to the English and mathematics needed to work in the industry.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- recording in more detail participants' barriers to employment and their progress in developing employability skills
- ensuring that participants develop the ability to apply literacy and numeracy skills in the contexts of the types of jobs they hope to gain.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop employability provision at Mantra Learning.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to the Skills Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Karen Adriaanse
Her Majesty's Inspector