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Dear Mr Otley

Ofsted Subject and Survey Inspection Programme 2006/07

Sector Skills Area 04: Engineering and manufacturing technology

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation during my visit on 11 and 12 December. I am particularly grateful to teachers and other staff for all their hard work in preparing the programme and background documentation and giving up a great deal of their time during the visit. Please pass on my thanks to staff and students who gave up their time to talk to me.

The visit provided much useful evidence for the good practice survey. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but should we cite specific aspects of practice and attribute them to particular colleges we will contact those colleges prior to publication. College letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term and copied to the LSC. The letters will also be available to the next inspection team to visit the college and to inform your AAV visits.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, observation of four lessons, and general observation of resources.

I said I would provide a summary of my observations and of the good practice seen and suggest areas for development.

Good practice observed included:

- Data provided by the college during the inspection shows that apprenticeship framework completion rates are high, particularly so on the Ford apprenticeship scheme managed by the college.
- Success rates for learners aged 16-18 on motor vehicle servicing and body repair courses were high in 2006.

- The standard of practical work achieved by learners on the level 1 motor vehicle body repair course is high. Many learners are given the opportunity to extend their skills beyond those required of the syllabus and produce excellent examples of fabricated motor vehicle body components and specialist tools using different materials and finishes. The quality of much of the work seen during the visit was outstanding.
- All the lessons observed were of good quality. Strengths included:
 - high attendance
 - enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers who planned their teaching carefully; they have a good rapport with learners and are patient and clear in their explanations
 - the pace of most lessons was appropriate to all the learners; teachers' specialist knowledge is used well to interest the learners who respond positively to the teaching
 - the lessons were well structured and included an appropriate variety of learning activity, making teaching interesting and promoting learning; for example, in the motor vehicle workshop, learners' progress with practical tasks is monitored and recorded carefully by teachers
 - teachers use 'take stock' sessions to check on learners' understanding and to extend their knowledge by considering more complex applications
 - in the classroom, teachers make good use of demonstrations, engineering artefacts, practical exercises and case studies to motivate and maintain the interest of learners; in an engineering science lesson students worked in pairs to apply electromagnetic principles to a practical task; a competitive, but friendly spirit was engendered during the testing of each of the groups' prototype electromagnets; learners thoroughly enjoyed the lesson and all made progress in checking and reinforcing their understanding of the theoretical principles.
- There are particularly strong and productive links with industry; the department responds well to employers' needs by offering flexible and bespoke provision; these links help to develop and maintain the resource base and inform further development of the curriculum.
- The 'taster' courses arranged in the July preceding the start of the academic year in the Motor Vehicle section are very effective in ensuring learners are enrolled on a course which is suited to them; in engineering, the additional learning support provided during a computer-aided drafting lesson was outstanding; the teacher and learning support assistant worked well together to ensure the learner was given very effective support.

- Both engineering and motor vehicle sections have developed very comprehensive and effective electronic learner progress monitoring and recording systems, including the use of predicted grades on some courses; the motor vehicle tracking system uses electronic portfolios and encourages learners to produce high standards of work.
- The robust arrangements made between the college and employers to monitor the progress of apprentices are outstanding.
- The 'Thames Gateway College' is an exemplar of good practice in partnership and collaboration between colleges and industry. The vision and commitment of leaders and managers from each partner college have led to an established and thriving contemporary and well resourced manufacturing engineering education and training centre
- The centre provides learners, including apprentices with access to extensive, well equipped engineering workshops and classrooms; managers and teachers who have relevant industrial experience; and productive partnerships with manufacturing and engineering companies; the centre encourages greater participation in manufacturing and engineering education and training by young people and adults from both the local and regional communities.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- success rates for learners aged 16-18 on BTEC engineering courses remained low in 2006
- with regard to teaching and learning, ensuring that learners understand what is expected of them by the end of the lesson; greater use of directed questioning; improved availability of extension tasks to stretch the more able learners
- lack of curriculum enrichment programmes for full-time 16-18 learners on motor vehicle courses
- insufficient work placement opportunities for full-time BTEC engineering learners
- noise from the vehicle body repair areas occasionally impacts adversely on work in the motor vehicle servicing workshop
- a sparsely resourced and poorly presented learning resource centre
- centre managers are able to access both partner college's management information systems; however, they do not have access to a management information system which provides data solely about those learners attending 'Thames Gateway College'.

Please note that these findings do not constitute a full evaluation of the quality of the department and are based on a short visit.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop engineering and manufacturing courses.

Colin Evans

Bob Avery
Additional Inspector