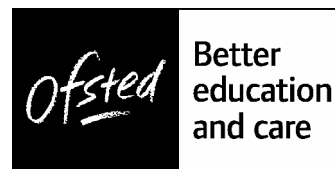


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16 January 2007

Ms Sarah Robinson  
Principal  
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Dear Ms Robinson

Ofsted Survey Programme 2006/07

Aspect: The contribution made by CoVEs to the development of vocational work, including preparation for the specialised 14-19 diplomas, in schools.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation during my visit on 13 December 2006. I am particularly grateful to Sue Harris, Eric Walsh, Nigel Smiles, Lisa Voss, Sue Campbell, Angela Shaw and Karen Wilson for their hard work in preparing the programme and background documentation and giving up their time during the visit. Please pass on my thanks to other staff, including those colleagues from schools, the local authority and the sixth form college who gave up their time to talk to me.

The visit provided much useful evidence for the good practice survey into CoVEs' work with schools. Where published reports cite specific aspects of good practice it is usual practice to name the colleges involved. However, where reports identify common issues which represent barriers to progress, individual colleges will not be named.

I agreed to provide a summary of my observations of good practice seen and to suggest some areas for development.

Good practice observed

How well do learners achieve?

- Success rates within the two CoVEs are consistently high. Success rates in digital media are significantly above national averages on most courses. Success rates in catering are above average at levels 1 and 2 and around the average at level 3.

- For students aged 14 to 16 taking courses at the college, retention overall was about 65% last year; a reflection both of changes in attitudes by some students and the college's application of its disciplinary procedures for this age group. Pass rates were high, at 86% overall. In catering, attendance and achievement by 14 to 16 year olds on the Skills Plus programme and in junior apprenticeships are high.

How effective are teaching, training and learning?

- Both CoVEs are part of curriculum areas in which the quality of provision was judged to be good in the college's last inspection. The college's own self assessment indicates that catering continues to be good provision and that provision in digital media is now outstanding. The lesson observation system uses a team of external observers and, in both CoVE areas, the proportion of good or better teaching and learning in 2005/06 was judged to be high.
- Students aged 14 to 16 enjoy, and are motivated by, the practical nature of many of their lessons and their school teachers are very positive about the ability of college teachers to effectively manage groups of 14 to 16 year old learners and keep the learners engaged.

How well do programmes and activities meet the needs and interests of learners?

- Through the provision of a good range of vocational options, the college makes a strong contribution to broadening curriculum choice for students aged 14 to 16 in Darlington. This range includes applied GCSEs and other vocational courses through the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP), full cost courses to meet specific curriculum requirements of schools and the Skills Plus programme. Junior apprenticeships were also previously provided.
- The Skills Plus programme provides a model of engagement with more disaffected 14 to 16 year olds on a full-time basis, which has features transferable to the diploma setting.
- What the CoVEs bring to diploma development:
  - high quality, specialist accommodation and resources in digital media and catering
  - vocational expertise of staff, current industry knowledge and credibility in the world of work
  - experience of working successfully across the 14 to 19 spectrum
  - a high degree of responsiveness and flexibility in their engagement with employers. Good links with employers are used to provide reliable feedback on the appropriateness of CoVE provision, a valuable source of curriculum enrichment activities and a pool of potential work experience placements, although sufficiency of placements is potentially challenging in digital media
  - expertise in developing and using successful teaching and learning strategies on vocational courses, particularly practical teaching

- experience and expertise in designing, implementing and marking real and/or realistic work-based assignments, often involving current industry practitioners
- reliable understanding of occupational skills required by employers; coupled with the whole college's comprehensive understanding and use of quality assurance procedures.

These factors mean that both CoVEs are well-placed to make a significant and leading contribution to the development, implementation and quality assurance of the creative and media and hospitality and catering diplomas.

How well are learners guided and supported?

- There are extensive and well-developed arrangements for the recruitment and selection of students aged 14 to 16 for college courses. The college provides a programme of 'taster' sessions across vocational area as part of its overall marketing strategy. Recruitment and selection of learners prior to them starting Key Stage 4, includes information evenings which parents are invited to attend. Initial assessment is used to determine existing competence in literacy and numeracy.

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?

- The Darlington 14 to 19 Trust is well established and is leading 14 to 19 developments across the town. Its curriculum sub-group leads on the specialised diploma developments. The equivalent 14 to 19 Curriculum Task Group for the college's area of North Yorkshire is not as well developed at this stage. At this stage, meetings have been limited to exploring the diploma curricula, determining the level of involvement of different providers and developing the Gateway submissions.
- A good range of groups meet regularly to co-ordinate and evaluate provision for students aged 14 to 16. They include an area pre-16 review group, the college pre-16 group and the college Skills Plus group.
- The college is well positioned to play a pivotal role in relation to all the specialised diplomas and to lead on several, possibly many, diploma lines. The college's strengths in staff expertise, links with the world of work, resources and quality assurance are widely recognised by other local providers and the local authority, who accept that the central involvement of the college is vital to successful implementation of the specialised diplomas locally. The value of collaboration in relationships between providers has also become widely accepted.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- There are currently inconsistencies between the policies for behaviour management in the college and the schools. At present, the schools allow more latitude than the college, which seeks to promote an inclusive

learning environment which requires more mature attitudes to attendance and behaviour. Consequently, poor behaviour at the college by students aged 14 to 16 has more serious implications for them. There may be value in harmonising or linking school and college disciplinary policies for students who attend both.

- It is recognised that there is much more progress yet to be made within Darlington and across the North Yorkshire 14 to 19 consortium of which the college is a member in:
  - the development of an informative and reliable area-wide prospectus to support equality of access to qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds
  - identifying and securing the transport arrangements which will be needed to support access to the specialised diplomas and the full 14 to 19 curriculum
  - securing the degree of common timetabling across participating schools and colleges needed to enable the constituent elements of the diplomas to be delivered at the most appropriate locations.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the ways in which your CoVEs support 14 to 19 curriculum development in the area.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your LLSC and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

John Evans  
Her Majesty's Inspector