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Mrs K Passant
Principal
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Dear Mrs Passant

Ofsted survey inspection programme – narrowing the gap in literacy and numeracy

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation and that of your staff, during my visit on 04 November 2008 to look at work in literacy and numeracy.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of literacy and numeracy, my visit had a particular focus on how effectively your college is narrowing the gap for young people and adults by enabling them to learn and improve their literacy and numeracy skills to a functional level. The visit also evaluated the level of expertise within your college to support learning English as an additional language.

The valuable information gained during the visit will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of all institutions visited but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with staff, employers and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of two lessons and a target skills session.

The overall effectiveness in narrowing the gap for young people and adults by enabling them to learn and improve their literacy and numeracy skills was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievements in literacy and numeracy are outstanding. Standards are high and the achievement of young people and adults is also outstanding.

- Excellent efforts are made to identify, and respond to, students' literacy and numeracy needs. Thorough and comprehensive initial assessment is used effectively by tutors to identify students' learning needs. The students are aware of their literacy and numeracy areas for development and what they need to do to improve.
- Overall, success rates for students are outstanding, showing a year-on-year increase. Success rates for key skills are high. Staff are very committed to exploiting students' potential and removing barriers to progress created by lower levels of literacy and numeracy.
- Very effective action is taken to support students and to improve their literacy and numeracy knowledge/skills. Much emphasis is placed on embedding related skills for life and key skills into vocational contexts, thereby increasing their appeal and increasing students' motivation to learn.
- Raising the relevance of literacy and numeracy within mainstream programmes is helping to bring about successful outcomes and maintain high success rates.

Quality of the provision

The quality of the provision is outstanding. Innovative marketing of the skills for life support provision has been particularly successful in increasing student numbers and enabling them to access the provision.

- As highlighted in the recent inspection report, teaching and learning are excellent. The provision is highly responsive to students' needs and a positive approach is adopted towards skills for life.
- Excellent opportunities to improve their personal effectiveness, employment prospects and educational/training opportunities are afforded to young people and adults with skills below a functional level. Particularly effective is the widespread use of differentiated learning activities within teaching to enable each learner achieve their potential.
- Courses aimed at young people and adults with low skills levels, both in the college and in the community, are highly valued by them.
- Staff are extremely supportive, understanding and skilled in delivering skills for life support. A major strength of the provision is the co-ordination of key skills with relevant occupational areas and the simultaneous development of these competencies alongside NVQs. For example, the integration of literacy support with defined occupational training in counselling and child care has made a major contribution to student retention and successful outcomes in those areas.
- There is very good tracking of students' progress through the management information system. Where required, additional learning support is readily made available and this is very effective in helping students to remain on their courses, make progress and succeed.
- Excellent provision is available to support students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to improve their literacy and numeracy as they develop good occupational skills.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The college has adopted an outstanding strategic approach and whole organisation approach to skills for life and key skills. The overarching strategy has resulted in skills for life provision being embedded throughout the college at every level, for every cohort of students and for every student with skills for life needs.

- Staff development opportunities are excellent. The further need to continue developing and accrediting staff skills for life competencies in order that every member of staff can fully support student learning is recognised by managers.
- Excellent partnerships have been formed with local schools and these are proving extremely beneficial to learners, many of whom have previously achieved well below their potential.
- Similarly, very good links have been formed with local employers who are sponsoring their employees through skills for life training to bring them up to functional levels. Employers have found the expertise within the college invaluable.
- The 'Skills Pledge' that was signed earlier this year demonstrates the college's and the employers' public commitment to pursuing the skills for life agenda.

English as an additional language

- The level of expertise within the college to support young people and adults with learning English as an additional language is outstanding.
- Students referred, or self-referred, for additional learning support, especially those where English is not spoken in their homes, make very good progress and their retention on programme is excellent.
- In-service training sessions for mainstream tutors and education support workers are particularly effective in raising awareness of cultural and linguistic issues affecting learning. Sessions are used to highlight practical ways in which students can be supported in their studies.

Inclusion

Outstanding efforts are made to ensure that learning programmes are accessible to hard to reach and disadvantaged groups of students.

- The college has a range of very effective strategies for engaging disadvantaged groups and aiding their progress in learning.
- Arrangements to identify students with skills for life needs are excellent and ready, accessible support provision is available for them.
- Throughout the college there is excellent collaborative working to ensure that students make good progress and succeed with their skills for life learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to use differentiated learning activities to extract each learner's potential
- continuing to develop and accredit staff skills for life competencies.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the skills for life and key skills provision in your college.

As explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local Learning and Skills Council and it will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next college inspection.

Yours sincerely

Ken Fisher
Additional Inspector