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Mr P Head
The Principal
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Dear Mr Head

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

Thank you for your hospitality and warm welcome, and that of your staff, during my visit on 05 November 2008 to look at the college's work in literacy and numeracy. I appreciate the time and care taken to prepare for my visit, especially by Jane O'Neill.

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/organisation to support learning English as an additional language.

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. 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 senior directors and managers, tutors, students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of student's work and achievements and observation of three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the college 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

Achievement in literacy and numeracy is outstanding. Standards are high. The achievement of young people and adults with skills below a functional level is particularly good.

- Datasets indicate steadily improving success rates over the last three years and consistently higher success rates than national benchmarks.
- Students receiving additional learning support (ALS) perform particularly well and success rates for this group of students are higher than for non-ALS students.
- Provision of additional learning support is raising the levels of students' self-esteem and motivation.
- Progression by students on skills for life support programmes to mainstream programmes is good.
- Observed students were diligent and well motivated and completed set tasks well and with enjoyment.
- The quality of work in students' files is of a standard commensurate with achieving successful learning outcomes.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

The quality of observed teaching and learning was very good.

- Sessions were well planned with clear identification of learning aims and objectives.
- Tutor management of sessions was first-rate; well structured sessions with good rapport with students; a firm, but friendly and supportive approach adopted.
- Students' involvement levels in observed sessions were very high. They showed keen interest and a willingness to be involved and related well to the tutors.
- Students demonstrated a good understanding of the topics and concepts under discussion.
- Teaching sessions were well planned to include attention to the needs of individual students. Differentiated activities suited to each student's needs and abilities were combined well with group activity to create a keen sense of belonging and effective teamwork.
- Tutors paid good attention to contextualising literacy and numeracy concepts within the requirements of mainstream vocational programmes.
- Well-resourced sessions and good use of interactive whiteboards effectively involved students.
- Demonstrable learning took place in all sessions and students benefited from being there.

Quality of the provision

The quality of provision for young people and adults with skills for life below a functional level is very good.

- The college strategies for skills for life support a whole-college approach in order to provide students with a complete skills set for home and work. Students are enabled to progress in their learning with the support of a range of skills for life interventions suited to meet the needs of diverse groups of students.
- Induction programmes are well-planned and arrangements for initial diagnoses and assessment of individual learner's needs are thorough.
- Information gathered during induction is used well to identify learning support needs and develop individual learning plans.
- Good investment has been made in additional learning support as part of the college's strategy and commitment to full skills support for students; for example, double staffing and classroom assistants.
- A responsive range of support interventions, at the college and in students' workplaces, full-time and part-time at times to fit with students' domestic and work commitments.
- Good standards of teaching; focusing on learners' needs.
- Teaching staff have high levels of understanding for individual student's learning needs, as demonstrated in detailed student profiles.
- A well-resourced study skills centre is much valued by students.
- Students' achievements form a strong foundation for raising self-esteem.
- Student peer mentor systems provide effective support and guidance.
- All staff are supportive whether in class or in the learning resources centre.
- Enrichment activities motivate students to learn.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The leadership and management of provision for young people and adults with skills for life below a functional level are outstanding.

- Clear strategic positioning with detailed and cohesive strategies, policies and procedures prioritise skills for life as a central thread running through all learning.
- Clear management responsibilities for skills for life and inter-divisional working provide whole-college support.
- The workforce is united in its support for the skills for life strategy.
- Employers are strongly engaged and involved in students' learning.
- Strategies for widening learners' participation using workplace delivery and Train to Gain programmes are effective.
- Effective use of outreach work in community venues widens participation.
- Focus and investment on staff training to support literacy/numeracy.
- Close liaison and partnerships with local schools.

- Acknowledge of diversity and measures to support vulnerability within learning.
- Effective quality improvement strategies using self-evaluation and action planning and routine use of stakeholder feedback.
- Good use of considerable investment for in-service training of staff to raise awareness and support for the college's policies and procedures.
- Good improvements in arrangements for observation of teaching and learning, including the introduction of peer observations.

English as an additional language

The level of expertise within the college/organisation to support young people and adults with learning English as an additional language is good. This has been achieved by:

- dedicated courses to support those with skills for life needs
- embedded ESOL/EAL support into vocational programmes
- focused investment on staff training to support English speakers of other languages.

Inclusion

The college is particularly effective in targeting learners from disadvantaged groups and non-traditional learners, for example, mothers returning to learn.

- Students receiving additional learning support perform particularly well and success rates for this group of students are higher than for non-ALS students.
- Provision of additional learning support is raising the levels of students' self-esteem and motivation.
- Good support is provided for learners with disabilities, for example additional communicators for students for hearing impairment.
- Curriculum design incorporates flexibility; learning modes, venues, timings to raise accessibility and meet students' requirements.
- Improved access to courses provide a wide range of learning pathways.
- Students worked particularly well together; across cultural and social backgrounds.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improvement in attendance and punctuality on some programmes
- complete the process of achieving a fully integrated, cross-college skills for life provision
- continuing the process to fully embed skills for life teaching into all vocational areas
- expand the Train to Gain programme
- complete staff training for skills for life

- complete implementation of arrangements for observation of teaching and learning and raise the OTL findings profile
- more refined use of data to demonstrate the impact of skills for life measures.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop your cross-college skills for life provision.

As I explained in the pre-visit letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority/local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next college inspection.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Boughton
Her Majesty's Inspector