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Dear Tony

Ofsted Good Practice Survey Programme 2008/09

An evaluation of adult progression in learning

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation during my visit on the 15th of December 2008. I am particularly grateful to you and all your staff for the hard work involved in preparing for the visit and for giving up a great deal of time during the visit to meet with me. Please pass on my thanks to all those concerned.

The visit provided much useful evidence, which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting for the Adult Progression survey, as well as a wider survey we are carrying out on progression, titled 'Moving Through The System'. It was particularly interesting to see provision in accounting.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made on this one-day visit included: interviews with staff, partners and learners and scrutiny of the examples of good practice provided. I reviewed a range of documents.

Overall, the progression rates and arrangements to facilitate adult progression provided by System Group Ltd are outstanding. I agreed to provide a summary of the good practice seen and to identify some areas for development, and I outline the main findings as bulleted points below.

The main strengths are:

- Good development of skills:

Learners quickly develop skills in finance and accountancy concepts and practice. They demonstrate good development of knowledge and understanding, building on skills learned at each stage of their programme.

- Good application of learning:

Learners gain in confidence and the new learning is used effectively in their work roles. The training they receive in the taught sessions complements well their work-

place learning and training. Learners contribute very effectively to the work of their organisations. Many quickly take on increasing responsibility and some gain promotion.

- Good success rates:

Overall success rates for 2007-08 are 81%, an increase of 4% from 2006-07 and are significantly above the national rates. Timely success rates for 2006-07 are above the national rate, having doubled since 2006-07.

- Good progression rates:

Learners progress well through the levels of the AAT qualification. In 2007-08, 24 learners (75%) from the level 2 programme progressed to the level 3; 29 level 3 learners (74%) progressed onto level 4. In addition, in 2007-08, six learners progressed onto a Chartered Accountancy programme, and one to the CIMA course.

- Good progression opportunities:

System Group Ltd provides very clear progression routes for learners. Learners can enrol onto a short programme of introductory taster sessions on a range of accounting topics which are offered during July and August each year to new prospective learners and those who wish to progress onto the next stage of AAT in September. Several sessions are offered for the Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced levels of the AAT qualification. Learners can also study for the taxation and payroll administration courses. The training manager is working with a consortium of Carlisle schools on the Diploma in Business and Finance, and with the University of Cumbria to develop a foundation degree.

- Creation of a learning environment which encourages learners to take responsibility for their learning. Tutors set high expectations and learners rise to the challenge. The professionalism of the tutors mirrors that of the workplaces. Competent and experienced tutors have excellent vocational experience and substantial industrial credibility. Professionals from the sector, who have a good knowledge of current practices, are employed to teach specialist modules of the programmes. Learners are well-prepared for the examinations and skills tests, and pass rates are high.

- Good support to encourage learners:

Staff have well-established, strong and effective links with employers, and both employers and tutors work well together to benefit learners and help them to progress. This is noticeable in the frequency in which existing employers are referring new learners to the programmes. One company with branches in the north of England and south west Scotland, pays for learners to stay overnight to attend the sessions at the training centre. Tutors use their knowledge of the sector to encourage learners to enter for national competitions, for example the WorldSkills UK competition, for which three learners won the Gold award in November 2008.

- Learning programmes are motivational and challenging, and encourage learners to succeed. The sessions meet the needs of individual learners and their employers. Sessions are planned with different start dates, day-time and evening sessions and with regular contact to support progression. In addition, the programmes meet the needs of learners who want to gain a broader knowledge of specialist aspects of accountancy and gain exemptions for the Chartered Accountancy programme. Level 3 learners can fast track to complete within eight months.

Areas for further development

- Insufficient development of skills for life support

For a few learners who enrol on the programmes, English is not their first language. System Group is aware of the need to develop the provision for additional support to help them develop their language skills in order for them to progress well. All learners undergo an assessment for literacy and numeracy levels at induction and most learners are working at a level appropriate for the course. However, System Group does not have a formal procedure in place that clearly identifies the support available to those learners who may need to access this support.

- Obtain and evaluate learners' progression data

The MIS holds data on progression onto and through the levels of the qualification, which staff analyse well. However, they do not hold sufficient information to identify learners' progression beyond the completion of the qualifications, and to identify the career opportunities available following the training programmes.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop your adult provision. If there are any points or aspects of the visit you wish to discuss, please contact me. As we will be evaluating the survey, you may be contacted in the future to find out your views. I hope you will contribute to this evaluation.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted Website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Gallacher
Additional Inspector