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Ms S Dicketts
Principal
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Dear Ms Dicketts

Ofsted 2009-10 good practice survey programme: the role of employers in work-related education and training

Thank you for the hospitality and cooperation shown to me by you and your staff during my visit on 26 February 2010. I am particularly grateful for the hard work involved in preparing for the visit and for those who gave up time during the visit to meet me. Please pass on my thanks once again to all those concerned.

The visit provided valuable information that will contribute to our national survey of good practice in the role that employers play in work-related education and training. Published reports are likely to list the names of contributing organisations but individual contributors will not be identified in the main text.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with 12 staff, six students and three employers. A range of documents and case studies were also reviewed.

I agreed to provide a summary of the good practice seen and outline the main findings below.

The main strengths

- The college has developed a very effective partnership-based relationship with a number of local and regional employers. The approach is typified by a joint perspective to long-term project working rather than a more dependent subcontractor relationship based on one-off, short-term contract delivery. The college has a clearly stated, and demonstrably effective, aim to work with employers or providers for mutual benefit.
- College staff have a good understanding of commercial realities. The college is confident in its response to new projects. It uses local and

regional labour market intelligence and sector skills data well. Staff have extensive knowledge of a range of sector-specific skills.

- The college adopts a flexible and tailored response to individual employer requirements in a range of business areas. For example, it has recently provided very good support to employers for the development of an apprenticeship programme in a major fashion retail outlet, including interviewing and assessing potential apprentices against agreed minimum criteria, and started new sports coaching apprenticeships in collaboration with a sports training specialist and Oxford City Football Club. A food manufacturing National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) was initially developed in collaboration with a large local food processing company which has now evolved into apprenticeship provision. Commercial driving qualifications are provided by a local specialist franchise provider to augment the college's warehousing and storage NVQ programme.
- The college has successfully implemented a sector-led, frequently niche approach, to working with employers. A prominent example is the Rycotewood furniture centre, based at the college's Oxford site, the only professional specialist centre of its kind in Britain offering qualifications from foundation to honours degree levels for the furniture industry. Students achieve well, and some win high-profile industry awards and competitions.
- Rycotewood is very strongly focused on teaching traditional and modern industry craft skills. It has developed and sustained strong working links with employers. The employers provide very good support to students' teaching and learning through work experience, the supply of professional equipment, tours of factories and design studios, master classes, demonstrations and, ultimately, employment to some students.
- Commercial partners are encouraged to become fully involved in curriculum development. Curriculum development is linked very closely to the college's business development strategy. The curriculum offer is being developed well to meet the business and skills needs of Oxfordshire employers. The college works very closely with several sector skills councils and professional bodies to ensure that it is responding well to filling sector skills gaps by devising appropriate new courses targeted at particular learner groups.

Areas for improvement

- No areas for improvement were identified during this visit.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website and will be available to the team for your next inspection.

Yours sincerely

Nick Crombie
Her Majesty's Inspector