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Mr A Basi
Principal and Chief Executive
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Dear Mr Basi

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation during my visit on 2 December 2009. I am particularly grateful to you and all your staff for the hard work involved in preparing for the visit and for giving up time during the visit to meet me. Please pass on my thanks to all those concerned.

The visit provided valuable information which 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 organisations will not be identified in the main text.

The evidence used to help form the judgements included interviews with a range of staff and learners. Relevant documents and data were also reviewed. At the time of the visit the college's high success rate data for learners on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) programmes since 2007/08 differed from published data, and was subject to a Learning and Skills Council review.

I agreed to provide a summary of the good practice seen and to identify some areas for development. I outline the main findings below.

The main strengths

- Overall success rates in hairdressing and beauty therapy between 2005/06 and 2006/07 were generally good and in some cases excellent, with most at least at or exceeding national rates. During this period, there was little significant difference in the success rates of learners aged 19 or above or 16 to 18 at any level of learning.
- Walsall College has developed very strong working links with a good range of employers. These links are integral to the achievement of the college's strategy for the delivery of an effective, wholly vocational curriculum

which supports and reflects local priorities for regeneration and development. The college's vocational provision is mapped clearly against key job sectors.

- The college's strategy is underpinned by a purposeful vision and clearly stated aims and purpose, each of which is understood and shared by the employers with which the college works.
- The employers with the most productive and long-standing college links are regionally and nationally successful. Each employer is strongly committed to training and development generally, and specifically for its own staff in its area of operation.
- Employers supply the college with a very good range of industry-standard equipment for use by college learners. This includes an employer's own online management information and scheduling systems which are used in the hairdressing salon. These facilities are in addition to the equipment provided by the college itself. Through employers and the college, learners have very good access to master classes and advice from practitioners and other industry professionals.
- In addition to designated training rooms in the college, hair and beauty learners train in a large, extremely busy and very popular, purpose-built hairdressing salon and beauty therapy unit on the college premises. The college has been particularly successful in creating a realistic working environment for training all hairdressing and beauty students; it is also a workplace for level 3 learners. The level 3 learners train in the salon for 19 hours a week, and most choose to work extra hours on a commercial, waged basis thereafter.
- The salon is instrumental in helping the college achieve its aim of producing vocational learners with industry-sponsored skill sets and hands-on commercial experience. The salon provides a commercial environment for the delivery of NVOs. It is open 48 weeks of the year, operating to normal salon working hours over a five-day week. Training and assessment for learners is planned well and coordinated carefully against clients' requirements. Clients receive a high-quality service. All hairdressing learners are able to work with a very broad range of clients, under close supervision and tuition.
- Learners are carefully selected for the level 3 course through stringent testing and portfolios. They are well motivated and have appropriate skills to meet the challenges of working in a professional salon and to achieve the standards set by the employer. Level 3 learners are expected to meet typical hairdressing salon targets, such as the level of repeat business generated. Level 3 learners have a very strong personal sense of ownership of and pride in the salon as their place of work.
- Employers' involvement in the curriculum and curriculum development is dynamic. Working in partnership with the college, employers help develop, direct and support the commercially based focus for learning exemplified by the college's training salon. Employers play a key role in the development and delivery of an appropriate curriculum which prepares learners very well for work. This includes the development of high standard, practical skills, direct experience of customer-relations practice,

experience of how work is scheduled and the quality reviewed, and the confidence to put this knowledge into practice.

- Employers and the college set, and maintain, high standards of training delivery. Systematic, employer-led training for teaching staff sets a consistent standard for training delivery and ensures that teaching staff are aware of all current industry trends and techniques. Most hairdressing learners at level 3 have progressed through successive levels of learning at the college, each of which has further developed and consolidated learners' industry-standard practice and understanding.
- The college is highly responsive to employers' needs, for example through gaining awarding organisation accreditation for niche areas of learning, such as large-format printing and all-over vehicle sign 'wrapping'.
- Employers working with the college are able to recruit from its best learners. Some employers charge the college a consultancy fee as part of their professional involvement with the college. Industry standards are taught and maintained at a high level. Employers' brand and brand awareness are maintained and further embedded with practitioners and consumers. New techniques and technologies are piloted and developed with the college and its learners.
- Around 95% of level 3 hairdressing learners are now in relevant employment. However, the college has insufficient information on the destination or outcomes of other learners once they complete their vocational college courses.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that all learners on all hair and beauty programmes are able to achieve and succeed
- improving the monitoring of learners' outcomes following their graduation.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the provision. If there are any points you wish to discuss, please contact me. We gather information on the impact of our visits. To this end, you may be contacted by telephone or sent a questionnaire to complete six to 12 months after the visit.

As I explained in my previous letter, 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