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Dear Mr Garschke

Ofsted 2009-10 survey inspection programme: good practice in apprenticeship training

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 November 2009 to look at good practice in construction apprenticeship training.

The visit provided valuable information that 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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included discussions with key members of staff, learners and key partners, together with a review of documentation relating to the apprenticeship training programme and associated quality assurance material.

Features of good practice

- The good arrangements for initial advice and guidance to ensure learners are recruited to appropriate courses.

The provider has an inclusive approach to recruitment and monitors applications, initial assessment results, starters and completers by ethnicity, age, gender and disability. Initial assessment is well considered and involves literacy and numeracy testing as well as construction-related aptitude testing. Entry criteria are set for each of the different programmes of study offered and these are differentiated appropriately to match the complexity of the different qualifications offered. Data clearly show that the provider is increasingly more successful in ensuring that learners are enrolled on the correct course at the appropriate level.

- The use of a wide range of assessment methods to enable learners to gain the required evidence.

The provider ensures that every learner has a trained work-based recorder within the workplace. They are employed to enable evidence from work-based activities to be collected and used within evidence portfolios. Subcontractors are now required contractually to complete a minimum of one site-based assessment visit for each learner to further assist in collecting the evidence needed to prove competence. Apprenticeship officers frequently visit learners' workplaces and assist learners by collecting photographic evidence and by collecting testimonials from work-based recorders.

- The highly effective support provided by apprenticeship officers to aid learners' progress.

Apprenticeship officers provide good all-round support for learners. Each learner is assigned a named apprenticeship officer who is responsible for completing review documentation and providing the support necessary to help the learner achieve. Learners speak highly of the support they receive from apprenticeship officers and value the guidance they provide.

Apprenticeship officers visit subcontractor premises frequently liaising with college staff who teach the technical certificate aspect of the apprenticeship framework. They also link very effectively with learners' employers and assist in the coordination of on- and off-the-job training. Learners report that the reviews apprenticeship officers complete inform them about their progress and the targets set detail what they need to do to improve or to further progress. The provider has established an 'apprenticeship matching service' that assists learners that lose their apprenticeship placement by matching them with an alternative employer to enable them to complete their qualification.

- The excellent management of subcontractors that leads to improved performance and better outcomes for learners.

The contract between the provider and subcontractors is well considered and details clear expectations. Managers and providers' staff are in frequent contact with subcontractors and relationships between parties are generally good. Regular contract monitoring meetings are held where appropriate levels of challenge and support are provided to ensure the best interests of the learners are served. Contracting arrangements now specify a minimum of one site-based assessment visit to each learner each year to assist with the evidence-gathering requirements of the National Vocational Qualification aspect of the framework. Subcontractors' performance is monitored closely against the contract and especially against performance in relation to outcomes for learners. Records show that in many subcontractors, success rates improve year-on-year and, in many cases, success rates for learners from the provider are higher than success rates for the subcontractors' own provision.

- The strong focus on quality assurance and the beneficial impact of quality improvement actions.

The quality-assurance cycle is based on the learner journey and includes all aspects from initial advice and guidance through to framework completion.

Quality assurance monitoring of subcontractors is appropriate and is detailed within the contract. A comprehensive range of performance indicators is used to quality assure the work of provider managers, staff and the subcontractors involved. A dedicated 'standards team', which includes external representation by a practising additional inspector, monitors and evaluates the learners' experience and the quality of provision. The self-assessment report is produced using a wide range of evidence indicators and is written against the revised Common Inspection Framework. Actions identified from quality-assurance activity are followed up with quality-improvement work to tackle identified issues. The provider identifies that some of these actions have been slow and are tackling this.

- The significant investment in training and development that enables staff to perform their roles more effectively.

Staff at all levels within for the provider have undertaken a wide range of professional development activity that is linked closely to their job role. Training and development completed have better equipped staff to perform their duties and this benefits learners. Staff at the provider's in-house national college have undertaken teaching qualifications, and apprenticeship officers have received training in equality and diversity and effective target-setting in progress reviews. Managers have received appropriate training and development on performance management and on appraisal techniques and use these well to monitor and improve the performance of staff.

Areas for development

- Monitor the implementation of functional skills and share best practice.

As reflected during the piloting of functional skills, the teaching and assessment of these qualifications differ to that required by key-skill qualifications. Careful planning and very close monitoring of the performance of learners, and of subcontractors, where they are responsible for delivery, will be required to ensure that framework achievement rates do not decline as a result of functional skills being introduced to apprenticeship frameworks.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop apprenticeship training in your organisation.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Joyce
Her Majesty's Inspector