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15 January 2010

Ms L MacCormack
The Nova Partnership
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Dear Ms MacCormack

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of different provider staff, during our visits to look at good practice in apprenticeship training during the weeks beginning 5 October and 9 November 2009.

The visit included the Nova Partnership itself and the following members of the Partnership:

- Vocational Training Services – Care
- Eden Training – Children's care
- Crown College - Retail
- Thurrock and Basildon College - Motor Vehicle
- Prospects College - Construction

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 employers, examination of documentation and the observation of training activities.

Features of good practice

- The strong quality improvement culture ensuring good and continuously improving overall success rates.

Partners have been successful in improving overall success rates continuously over a three-year period to well above national averages. For example, in

retail and construction, success rates improved by 33 and 25 percentage points respectively. Key factors in raising success rates include improvements in the use of management information, learning support and employer engagement, together with clearer assessment information for learners and earlier completion of key skills and technical certificates.

- The increased focus on engaging employers in the apprenticeship programme helping learners to meet their targets by increasing assessment opportunities in the workplace.

Employers have been fully engaged in the apprenticeship programme. The key factor in helping learners to meet their targets is the regular and frequent contact between partner staff and employers focused on providing work-based evidence. Employers understand the need to help their learners undertake specific jobs and tasks at work, providing witness statements to ensure tasks not observed by assessors contribute to assessment evidence. Motor vehicle and retail employers agree to a service level agreement to support their learners. Small construction employers network through 'builders' breakfast' meetings, helping to create opportunities for learners to gain experience with other employers if required. Active participation by employers in the learner review process is helping improve timely success rates. Some teaching on children's care is delivered on employers' premises where learners from other employers are also invited to attend.

- The particularly effective use of support for learners with additional learning needs in care, children's care, construction and retail helping them to complete frameworks.

Introducing initial assessment and targeted support early in the programme has been key in helping those learners with additional learning needs perform as well or better than those without such needs. Learners with dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or hearing impairments have been successfully supported through to completion of advanced apprenticeships. In construction, well-qualified and experienced specialist support staff work alongside learners in class and provide support during testing and assessment. Retail learners with dyslexia have been able to record much of their evidence rather than writing in their portfolios. There are many examples of support provided to learners outside of normal office hours including meetings, emails, telephone calls and text messages.

- The adaptations made to assessment paperwork to make it clearer to learners and employers, improving understanding and completion of assessment.

A key part of raising success rates through improving assessment has been the rewriting of training-related paperwork into simpler, more accessible language. Many learners and employers find the language used in the National Vocational Qualification standards particularly difficult to interpret and understand. They have found the amended paperwork easier to use when planning and recording assessment evidence. Good guidance on writing witness testimonies for employers has helped improve both the quantity and quality of evidence for assessment from the workplace.

- The good management of training programmes that gives clear direction to staff and promotes effective teamwork.

Programmes are managed very well within a supportive culture that encourages communication and teamwork. Provider staff are encouraged to be open and honest, even if underperforming, helping target extra resources to those learners who need them. During expansion in retail provision, the creation of the role of team leader better supported assessors to meet the needs of their learners. All staff know their learners well, planning good training and assessment opportunities in the workplace. The recruitment of skilled, well-qualified and experienced assessors, together with continual professional development, gives current knowledge of working practices in the vocational areas and helps ensure credibility with learners and employers.

- The excellent use of management information to help focus on individual learners' progress, driving improvements to assessment and framework completion.

Management information is used well by partners to monitor learners' progress on a monthly basis and to help drive framework completion. The care partner, in particular, collects and makes good use of extensive data to help improve performance. Monthly individual assessor reports show exactly what each learner has achieved to date and what is left to be completed. Discussed by all assessors, the monthly reports show which learners are ahead of, or behind, their target completion dates. Together with annual planners that show which learners should be completing in each quarter, reports help to prioritise and achieve timely completion. The use of information learning technology and online assessment is being continually developed and is viewed positively by learners and employers, particularly for key skills.

Areas for development

- Sharing good practice identified in individual partners to benefit all partnership learners.

Good practice in retail, with high identical overall and timely success rates at 80% in 2008/09, is not seen in other areas where there are still some significant differences between overall and timely success rates. There is significant best practice in improving gender imbalance by the hairdressing partners, where over 25% of apprentices are now men. There are still significant imbalances in recruitment by gender in four areas (females in construction and motor vehicle, and males in children's care and retail). Reviews in most areas reinforce learners' understanding of equality and diversity and health and safety well, using set questions. Motor vehicle learners would also benefit from this approach.

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

Phil Hatton and Margaret Swift
Her Majesty's Inspectors