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Mr M Corden
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Dear Mr Corden

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 9 November 2009 to look at good practice in retail 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 employers, the observation of training in the workplace and examination of learners' records.

Features of good practice

- Highly effective partnership working with employers that benefits both employers and their learners.

Orient staff have established very productive working arrangements with employers that benefit learners significantly. Store training programmes are mapped carefully to the frameworks to ensure that both learners and employers see how apprenticeships help to develop the skills and knowledge that the company values. Assessors refer regularly to individual store training programmes, avoiding unnecessary duplication of work. Assessors have developed strong links with store staff and managers are routinely involved in discussions each time the assessor visits a store. Together they help identify assessment and development opportunities and contribute effectively to learners' progress reviews. Assessors are well aware of the demands of busy retailing environments and plan visits to stores accordingly. Their flexible

approach is valued by managers who can identify clear improvements in their business as a result of training received by learners.

At a strategic level, Orient staff have engaged well with key employers. Employer representatives attend Orient staff team meetings to ensure that assessors understand their products and priorities. Opportunities for assessors to complete work-placements in stores further develop their product knowledge and allow them to complete their professional updating.

- Very good planning enhances successful delivery of apprenticeship programmes.

Apprenticeships are planned very well. Comprehensive initial assessment ensures that learners' training and support needs are identified. Discussions identify prior skills and knowledge that are taken into account when determining how the qualification will be delivered. Work roles are analysed to ensure that appropriate programmes are selected. Assessors work with learners to identify their career ambitions and personal aspirations. Where possible, this information is used to identify optional units within the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) that may facilitate progression to higher-level or complementary programmes at the end of the apprenticeship. The opportunity to work towards higher-level key skills is routinely offered to learners where appropriate. While learners complete their awards, assessors are careful to note evidence that may be used to gain additional units that could support progression to other awards.

Goals and targets are agreed with both learners and employers to ensure that they are realistic but offer sufficient challenge. All learners are targeted to complete their key skills and technical certificate within four months of starting their programmes. The knowledge and skills developed during the early stage of the apprenticeship provide a good foundation for completion of the NVQ. Learners are motivated by the early recognition of success, brought by gaining externally accredited certificates at this point in their programmes.

- Good focus on monitoring of learners' progress to improve timely success.

An electronic monitoring system is used effectively to capture information about learners' progress. Key documents, including visit reports and learners' progress reviews, are stored electronically allowing managers and assessors to monitor learners' progress and to ensure that agreed deadlines are met. Monthly discussions between assessors and their managers ensure a regular focus on identifying and tackling possible barriers that the learner or their assessor may be facing. Learners' progress is analysed and compared against agreed milestones. Charts are produced electronically that show how far the learner is through their award. The charts are discussed with learners and their employers who find the diagrams produced easy to understand, useful and highly motivating.

- Particularly focused approach to delivering Skills for Life support in a retail environment.

All learners complete assessments of their literacy and numeracy skills during their induction. Support is planned to meet all identified needs. Wherever possible, assessors provide the support to the learners themselves. However, additional specialist support is available in the workplace where this is appropriate. A comprehensive bank of resources is available to support Skills for Life delivery through the company's intranet. Some materials are commercially available. However, many have been developed by Orient staff to meet specific development needs. Materials developed by the company are designed to be simple, jargon free and easy to use. Wherever possible, materials are contextualised for retail to better engage the learners. Materials to meet broader support needs have been developed. For example, resource packs providing information and worksheets tackling issues such as budgeting and healthy living are available for assessors to use with learners where these needs are identified.

Areas for development

- Records of some progress reviews lack detail and fail to set effective targets.

Some records of progress reviews completed by assessors lack sufficient details of discussions that have taken place with learners and employers to review progress and set short- and long-term measurable targets. Records are too brief and it is difficult to establish how well learners' understanding of areas, such as health and safety or equality and diversity, has been tested. They often fail to provide sufficient guidance as to what the learner is expected to achieve before the next review.

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

Judith Hamer
Additional Inspector