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Principal
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Dear Mr Grix

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 10 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.

Features of good practice observed

■ The effective quality management that has led to improved success rates.

The overall success rates for apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships are good, having increased by 27% and 57% respectively in the past three years. This is in direct response to significant changes introduced by managers to tackle previous low performance. The college has appointed more occupationally experienced staff to support learners while they are at college and in the workplace. There is an improved focus on learners' targets combined with an effective progress monitoring system. Site visits to assess, review and support learners are now more frequent and effective. The management and delivery of key skills have been given greater emphasis. There has been substantial investment in physical resources such as premises, equipment and learning environments. The combined effect of improving staffing, resources, delivery structures and management information has yielded significant improvements in learners' achievements.

- The outstanding use of data to ensure learners are appropriately supported to stay on target.

Learners are set very clear targets that they understand and refer to. The college uses a simple spreadsheet to capture and monitor final and interim targets for every learner. Staff access these data frequently to review progress and to highlight potential areas of learner support. There is good sharing of information by staff to form an effective view of each learners' current status, drawing on a range of information relating to their qualification, work and personal situations. Appropriate action is agreed promptly, where required. Learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their own progress targets and to accelerate their achievements. Learners can easily access the progress monitoring system to check their own achievements against planned targets.

- The excellent physical resources that encourage learners to participate effectively in learning new skills.

The college has invested heavily in new buildings that offer state-of-the-art learning environments. Tools and equipment are of a high standard and there is some new machinery to ensure resources continue to reflect industry expectations. Learners are highly enthusiastic about the college and impressed by the facilities that are available to them. Learners feel a strong affinity to the college and cite the resources as a key reason for this. Similarly, there are very good relationships between staff and learners and there is clearly a strong mutual respect. Learners speak warmly about their college experience, enjoy their learning and are proud of the standards of work they produce.

- The effective arrangements to optimise work-based learning and assessment opportunities and to build good working relationships with employers.

The college has successfully changed its approach to employer engagement and work-based assessment. There is a dedicated team with responsibility for visiting learners and their managers in the workplace. This has led to improved communication between the college and employers and better individual support and guidance for learners. Moreover, it has helped employers to better understand their obligations to learners in terms of creating the right learning and assessment opportunities in the workplace. This has been particularly useful in removing some of the traditional barriers relating to limitations in the scope of a learner's work. Employer and college staff now identify these problems earlier and find solutions to help learners stay on target.

- The wide scope of initiatives designed to support learners during the current difficult economic climate.

Inevitably, some construction learners have been affected by the recession. Job losses and reduced workloads have put some learners at risk of not completing their apprenticeships. The economic climate also means that fewer young people are being offered employment and apprenticeships. The

college has responded well to market conditions by introducing a range of measures aimed at supporting learners in difficult situations. These include prioritising completion of learners facing redundancy; increasing sales and marketing activity to employers; absorbing the cost of switching learners' qualification components to reflect changes in the nature of their jobs; making good use of the apprenticeship vacancy service and offering learners opportunities to fill the temporary staff needs of other supportive employers, for example where another employer has an urgent order to fill but does not have enough staff to meet the demand. The college has also started to employ its own apprentices to help support the running and maintenance of college facilities. Overall, the college has made good efforts to combat negative economic conditions and to keep achievement opportunities open to apprentices.

Areas for development

There were no key areas for development identified during the visit.

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

Kevin Culver
Additional inspector