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Mr J Widdowson
Principal and Chief Executive
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Dear Mr Widdowson

Ofsted 2010-11 survey inspection programme: numeracy - tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit from 24 to 26 May 2010 to look at your work in numeracy.

The visit provided valuable information which 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: interviews with senior staff, tutors and learners; scrutiny of relevant documents; analysis of learners' work; and observation of eight learning sessions.

Overall, New College Durham is outstanding at tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are outstanding. Success rates, on application of number courses, are improving and are significantly higher than the national average. Success rates on discrete numeracy courses at the college are also high and rising. In learning sessions, learners make very good progress. They discuss ideas and support each other well. Full-time learners develop numeracy skills, such as the ability to evaluate different fundraising activities, to help improve their social and economic well-being. Adult learners interviewed highlighted numerous situations where they had applied newly acquired numeracy skills in their everyday life, for example when ordering goods, negotiating price reductions and using weights and measures.

- Teaching was consistently good in all the learning sessions observed. Teachers provided very effective in-class support and took time to unpick misunderstandings before rebuilding learners' grasp of mathematical concepts. Learning sessions were sequenced well to enable learners to build and practise their skills very effectively. A good variety of tasks and resources engaged and motivated learners successfully. Overall, teachers use practical activities very well to introduce ideas and consolidate learning.
- Learning sessions for adults, observed during the visit, included a good balance of individual work and group activities that encouraged learners to share ideas and support each other. Teachers made good use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enable learners to work at their own pace on individual learning programmes. All staff were very skilled at establishing good working relationships with learners who were disaffected or lacked confidence. Learners interviewed said that the patience and understanding of staff were key factors in enabling them to learn so successfully.
- Procedures for identifying and tackling numeracy needs are very effective. Staff make very good use of the initial screening test and more detailed diagnostic testing. Take-up of the wide range of options for numeracy support is very high.
- Systems for monitoring learners' progress are very effective. Teachers of the application of number make good use of the weekly course team meetings to identify very quickly which learners are at risk of falling behind and to decide how to meet their needs. The procedures for monitoring the progress of adults who study part-time are thorough. The Skills for Life team meets regularly to monitor learners' progress.
- Numeracy is integrated well across the full-time curriculum with good examples of numeracy development in tutorials through topics, such as healthy lifestyles and money management. Enrichment activities also provide opportunities to practise and apply number skills.
- Application of number and vocational teachers, personal learning coaches and numeracy staff work extremely well together to support the numeracy development of individuals. Vocational teachers keep in close contact with both numeracy support and application of number teachers to make sure learners develop the specialist numeracy skills needed for each vocational unit at the most appropriate time in the course. Course teams recognise that a lack of literacy or problem-solving skills can be a barrier to numeracy development and specialist staff work together very effectively to remove any stumbling blocks.
- Major factors in the successful development of numeracy skills at the college are the vision and support provided by senior managers who prioritise learners' development in numeracy and literacy. They provide very good direction and resources for all aspects of the numeracy provision, including staff development, access to ICT and additional learning support, to help ensure that the college identifies and meets learners' numeracy needs very effectively.

There are no areas for improvement.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop numeracy at New College Durham.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and/or the Skills Funding Agency and will be published on the Ofsted website under the URN for your organisation. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jan Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector