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Mr Malcolm Wharton
Principal
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Dear Mr Wharton

Ofsted Subject Survey Programme 2006/07

Sector Skills Area 3: Agriculture, horticulture and animal care

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation during my visit on 9 November 2006. I am particularly grateful to the teaching staff for all their hard work in preparing the programme and background documentation and giving up a great deal of their time during the visit. Please pass on my thanks to other staff and learners who gave up their time to talk to me.

The visit provided much useful evidence for the good practice subject survey in agriculture, horticulture and animal care. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but should we wish to include specific aspects of practice we will contact the college first. All college letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform judgements included: interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation and observation of good practice examples.

I agreed to provide a summary of my observations of good practice seen in agriculture, countryside and animal care and to suggest some areas for development.

Good practice observed included:

- a clear management focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning which underpins the development of good practice in lessons

- a very strong focus on practical skill development, valued by learners, including through effective use of the college estate and productive industrial partnerships
- classrooms based close to the farm and animal unit to readily enable an effective combination of theory and practical learning
- very good links with the farming company running the dairy unit with regular input into farm diary sessions by the dairy manager and good access to data from the dairy unit
- small practical groups with increased technician/instructor support and the use of a useful workbook to record the development of practical skills linked to module outcomes
- a strong focus on the development of learners' employability skills for the land-based sector including access to a wide range of useful skills-based short courses available at a discounted rate to full time learners
- the provision of comprehensive information to tutors about each learner, based on a detailed analysis of individual learning needs by specialist learning support staff
- the provision of much valued learning support by specialist staff including those now deployed and based within academic departments and specialist units such as the farm, making access to support easier and more immediate for learners
- good development of peer support between learners including through promotion of this aspect of support by teachers and learning support assistants
- the use of stretching targets set for learners to encourage them to achieve their full potential, particularly at level 3 where monitoring accumulation of UCAS points through achievement of course units is used to motivate learners not only to pass, but to produce the additional work required to achieve higher grades
- high added value on national diploma courses shown by the college's own value added measures as well as data from the pilot phase of the New Measures of Success
- well organised key skills sessions which enable a much higher proportion of learners to achieve key skills than the national average at a level appropriate to their ability based on diagnostic assessment
- embedding of delivery and assessment of key skills into vocational work, supported by a qualified key skills vocational champion in each department as well as specialist key skills staff and intensive workshop sessions prior to taking external tests resulting in above average success rates.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- wider use of the college intranet to support learning and further development of a virtual learning environment
- further development of the use of information and learning technology particularly to enhance learning in theory lessons

- the provision of more objective feedback on skills development and progress to animal care learners following animal unit practicals.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop land-based courses in the college.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your LLSC and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Peter Brook
Adult Learning Inspector