

A4e Skills

Focused monitoring visit report

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

A4e is a national training provider specialising in public and private sector training. Its government funded training programmes are delivered by A4e Skills (A4e). The provider's headquarters are in Sheffield. Since the inspection, A4e has had a major restructure, delivering apprenticeships from fewer regional offices and has less consortium partners and smaller numbers of Train to Gain learners. There are 1642 apprentices, 549 Train to Gain learners and 23 foundation learning learners. Consortium partners deliver the training for 912 of these learners.

At A4e's last inspection in August 2010, overall effectiveness was graded as satisfactory, as was outcomes for learners, the quality of provision, leadership and management, capacity to improve, safeguarding and equality and diversity. All subject areas that were graded, social care, early years, literacy and numeracy, and, business administration and law, were satisfactory apart from construction crafts which was good. This report focuses on the themes explored during the monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How effectively is A4e making improvements, including to the self-assessment process?	Reasonable progress
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The self-assessment process was satisfactory at the last inspection. It was inclusive and effectively incorporated stakeholders' views but the amalgamated central report failed to capture and reflect regional or subject area issues and differences. It was not sufficiently critical of performance related to the outcomes for learners. Since inspection, A4e has reviewed and improved its self-assessment process placing a greater emphasis on subject area teams' analysis of the provision and judgements. Managers now incorporate subject area strengths and areas for improvement, including in learners' outcomes, effectively within the central report. They appropriately recognise trends and areas needing improvement. Some subject area reports are insufficiently detailed.

Subject area teams now take an increased responsibility for implementing quality improvement initiatives. They enthusiastically and swiftly make changes to the provision which have positively improved the experience of learners. During meetings, staff teams regularly discuss the progress they are making with quality improvement plans. However, the overall coordination of the quality improvement plan is informal and does not always assess the impact of actions. The impact of some management improvements has been slower due to restructuring and changes in quality improvement roles and responsibilities.

Outcomes for learners

What improvements have there been to apprentices' overall and timely success rates since the inspection? **Insufficient progress**

At the last inspection, intermediate-level apprenticeship success rates were improving but were low and below national rates. Advanced-level apprenticeship success rates were declining. Timely success rates were consistently very low. Since the inspection, A4e has prioritised actions to improve success rates but these have yet to result in sustained improvement to success rates. Learner recruitment procedures have been revised to ensure learners are on the most suitable programmes. A4e has invested significantly in a management information system but this has yet to have a significant impact. In 2011, the company ceased its Skills Funding Agency contracts in some of the underperforming regions and focused delivery in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside which had better success rates.

These initiatives have improved success rates in a few subject areas and regions, but overall success rates declined in 2010/11. Timely success rates continued to improve in 2010/11 but remain well below the national rate. A4e's own data for the last nine months show improving overall success rates but declining timely success rates.

How well has A4e increased the progression rates from foundation learning programmes into further training, education or employment? **Reasonable progress**

A4e was offering Entry to Employment (E2E) at the time of the last inspection but it was not inspected and reported upon. A4e has increased learners' progression rates during the transition from E2E to foundation learning. Staff consulted extensively with learners and used this feedback to shape the new programme. They introduced advice and guidance about progression routes and different options available to learners at a much earlier stage in their programme. Staff are suitably qualified and trained in advice and guidance and most learners are clear about their future progression opportunities. Learners can now choose from a wider range of vocational options which are relevant to their chosen career routes. They enjoy their learning and current learners make satisfactory progress towards achieving qualifications.

Progression rates are currently satisfactory, especially when set in the context of high levels of deprivation and unemployment in the two areas where the programme is delivered. Most of those who progress go into further education. In 2011, A4e ran a pilot programme in the North East to more closely align its foundation and work-based learning programmes, but this has not yet increased the number of learners progressing onto apprenticeships.

Quality of provision

How effectively is A4e improving the timely additional help for learners' literacy, numeracy and language skills?

Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, learners completed an initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills but did not always get timely help to support their further development. A4e has greatly improved the timeliness of initial assessment as learners now complete online tests during recruitment. This provides immediate results and a clear picture of their skills development and additional support needs enabling help for literacy, numeracy and language to be given earlier, either by an additional learning support specialist tutor or vocational assessors. Since the last inspection, assessors have been trained in functional skills, and all but three have completed a level 2 qualification in mathematics. This has increased their confidence in supporting and assessing learners' functional and key skills. More recently, assessors have developed key skills assignments which are vocationally relevant to help learners understand and apply to their learning. The published data show that success rates by learners with learning difficulties and disabilities have increased significantly by 10 percentage points in the last year but managers do not sufficiently analyse the specific impact of additional help for literacy, numeracy and language skills on success rates for this group of learners.

To what extent has A4e improved progress reviews and target setting with learners?

Reasonable progress

Reviews of learners' progress were satisfactory at the last inspection and particularly effective in health and social care. In other subject areas, some learners' targets were insufficiently specific to give them a clear understanding of what they needed to do to improve. Since the last inspection, A4e has effectively revised and improved its paperwork and processes for individual learning plans, progress reviews and records of assessor visits. Assessors have received training to improve the quality of the targets they set which is resulting in most learners having specific and measurable targets. A4e recognises some target setting is still variable and has suitable actions for improvement.

Learners' progress reviews now provide a comprehensive overview of their progress towards achievement and a clear record of feedback on their learning. This is starting to show an increase in timely success rates and the rate that learners achieve their qualifications. The introduction of electronic assessment has given assessors and internal verifiers a more holistic and immediate picture of learners' progress through 'pie charts' for each component of the apprenticeship framework enabling them to intervene where appropriate. Progress reviews for the few foundation learners at one centre, which are paper based, are inadequate. Scheduled reviews are frequently missed and often poorly recorded with vague target setting.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made with strategies to improve performance by different groups?

Insufficient progress

A4e was appropriately monitoring the performance by different groups of learners at the last inspection, but specific strategies for targeting improvement had not yet shown any impact. Since then, managers continued this analysis and set suitable targets for increasing success rates by underperforming groups. Assessors have received training to help them use a more diverse range of teaching and learning strategies with learners. These strategies may have contributed towards some improvement in success rates by men and learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. However, managers' ability to monitor the ongoing success of initiatives and achievement of targets has been greatly restricted by the introduction of a new management information system which is yet to produce reliable reports of success rates by different groups. They have not yet identified the reasons why some groups do not achieve as well as others or if there are specific trends by subject area, employer or assessor. Some groups of learners, like male and black apprentices, continue to have much lower success rates than all A4e's apprentices.

What progress has been made to increase staff and learner awareness of equality and diversity and safeguarding?

Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, A4e had several initiatives focusing on improving staff and learner awareness of equality and diversity, but these were either relatively new or implementation had been slow. Most, but not all, staff had received safeguarding training. Since then, A4e has implemented a particularly successful range of initiatives that has raised awareness of staff and learners. The equality and diversity coordinator plays an increasingly pivotal role in championing the topic. A4e has delivered substantial staff training giving them confidence to discuss and question safeguarding, equality and diversity with learners. These topics are now widely promoted through posters at centres, an 'everyone matters' calendar, learning resources and on A4e's intranet. Assessors recently developed learning activities based on the Equality Act 2010 and assignments linking key skills with safeguarding, equality and diversity. Learners demonstrate a good understanding of equality and diversity and articulate soundly about how their learning mentors ensure they are safeguarded. Learners' and employers' surveys have been updated to include health and safety, equality and diversity, and safeguarding questions. However, the employers' survey does not sufficiently check their understanding of their responsibilities.

What progress has been made in quality assuring the work of consortium partners? Insufficient progress

A4e made satisfactory use of an appropriate variety of processes to monitor and evaluate performance in the consortium partners' programmes at the last inspection. Since then the company has made changes to quality improvement roles and responsibilities. Currently A4e's monitoring of consortium partners' delivery, which accounts for a quarter of all apprentices, is poor. Monitoring activities focus too heavily on contract compliance and the correct completion of paperwork rather than the quality of the learners' experience. A4e places too strong an emphasis on consortium partners declaring their own areas for improvement either through discussion, their self-assessment reports or position statements. Managers do not have a reliable assessment of the quality of consortium partners' delivery. Where consortium partners identify areas for improvement, A4e is not adequately monitoring the progress they make. Managers have not sufficiently investigated the reasons why timely success rates are lower for learners with consortium partners or set suitable actions for improvement. They do not routinely collect or use data from consortium partners about success rates by different groups.

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