

Education and Skills Partnership Ltd

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of a series of monitoring visits to a sample of new apprenticeship training providers that are funded through the apprenticeship levy. Ofsted's intention to carry out monitoring visits to these new providers was first announced by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector in November 2017. The focus of these visits is on the four themes set out below.

The Education and Skills Partnership Ltd (ESP) was founded in 2015. Originally, the organisation provided adult education under subcontracting arrangements from several further education colleges. In 2017, it began to receive public funding directly and was listed on the register of recognised apprenticeship training providers. In the 2017/18 academic year, a total of 585 adult learners and 175 apprentices enrolled with ESP. Adults mainly study short courses of up to two weeks in work skills and construction at level 1 and warehousing and storage at level 2. Apprentices study at levels 2, 3, 4 and 5, primarily in leadership and management, team leading, retail, customer service, and business administration. Around three quarters of apprentices are on the new apprenticeship standards and the remainder are on frameworks.

ESP operates from several locations in England, including Ashford, Dover, Margate, London, Bishop's Stortford, Newark, Cambridge and Worksop. For apprenticeships, ESP works closely with several high-profile employers. The significant majority of adult learners are referred to ESP courses by Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service, The Prince's Trust and the probation service.

Themes

How much progress have leaders made in ensuring that the provider is meeting all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision?

Insufficient progress

Leaders and managers do not give sufficient consideration to apprentices' prior knowledge and experience and existing qualifications during the recruitment process. They do not give enough attention to the skills and behaviours that apprentices wish to develop or to their longer term career goals.

Most newly recruited apprentices are already working for their employer, with a small minority being employed by their company for up to 16 years. While a proportion of learners are developing their expertise, too many are accomplishing little more than accrediting pre-existing knowledge and skills.

A minority of learners who have already achieved qualifications at levels 2 or 3 have been recruited onto programmes at too low a level. As a result, their apprenticeship does not provide them with sufficient opportunities to acquire new knowledge, skills and behaviours or other developmental opportunities.

Managers have not ensured that employers provide sufficient time for apprentices to complete the off-the-job training component of their apprenticeship. As a result, too many apprentices make slow progress. For example, management apprentices are often not able to find time to complete activities due to their business priorities of managing a retail store. Similarly, apprentices on rail-services and team-leading programmes often find it difficult to complete their learning due to work pressures.

Leaders and managers have been slow to implement the English and mathematics requirements of the apprenticeship programme. For example, team-leading apprentices have not yet undertaken the initial assessments after eight months on the programme. Rail-services apprentices have undertaken the diagnostic assessment, but have made little progress in developing their knowledge and skills in English.

Leaders have developed effective partnerships with a range of national employers to help them access the apprenticeship levy. However, they do not respond decisively to local and regional priorities because the apprentices and employers are so geographically dispersed. In addition, the vocational subjects in which the organisation provides apprenticeships are wide relative to the numbers of apprentices currently on programme. As a result, leaders have not yet developed the business focus for ESP sufficiently sharply to enable the organisation to develop a unique identity in a particular region or job sector.

Leaders and managers are in the latter stages of putting quality assurance and quality improvement processes in place. These already include an effective lesson observation process, suitable systems for collecting detailed feedback from learners, and a structure of regular management meetings to review progress against key performance indicators. As the organisation approaches the end of its first full year of delivering apprenticeships, it is at the early stages of embedding the quality review cycle, self-assessment and quality improvement plan.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices benefit from high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes for apprentices?

Insufficient progress

Assessors' targets for apprentices are largely task focused, rather than identifying the knowledge, skills and behaviours that apprentices need to develop. As a result, apprentices are not always clear about the steps they need to take to make the progress of which they are capable.

Too many apprentices on standards apprenticeships are not aware of their full entitlement to off-the-job training. The employer is not providing sufficient time for apprentices to complete this element of their programme. In addition, a minority of apprentices receive insufficiently frequent visits from assessors, and managers have been slow to implement the English and mathematics requirements of the apprenticeship programme. Feedback on apprentices' work is often too brief and does not provide enough detail to support apprentices to improve. As a result, too many apprentices make slow progress and are behind where they should be relative to the length of time they have been on programme.

Where apprentices do identify areas with which they would like more support, for example study skills, it is not clear from the feedback and course documentation how assessors are addressing these needs. Comments from assessors are too general and the same comments appear on many progress reviews.

Most apprentices speak positively about how they recognise the commitment of their employers to investing in their development by enabling them to take part in the apprenticeship programme. They state how the programme provides them with increased confidence, enabling them to consolidate and extend their knowledge and skills. For example, apprentices in retail management develop new knowledge and skills, such as improved brand awareness. This helps them expand their understanding of the context in which they work. Similarly, apprentices in rail services develop their confidence in using information technology, which enables them to use the new rail investigation systems more effectively. Team-leading apprentices working at an airport have learned how their language and communication skills influence customers, for example when dealing with angry or frustrated members of the public. A small minority of apprentices are less confident about the skills they are developing and are not able to explain how the programme will improve their career prospects within their employing organisation.

Assessors are suitably skilled and experienced in their respective vocational areas. They are trained and qualified assessors, with some working towards additional assessor qualifications. As a result, assessors have the insight and knowledge they require to support apprentices.

What progress have leaders and managers made to ensure that learners benefit from high-quality adult education that prepares them well for their intended job role, career aims and/or personal goals?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have developed strong local links with Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and The Prince's Trust, from which they receive the vast majority of referrals. In response, leaders have implemented several suitable short courses that help and support adults back into work.

For example, a significant proportion of learners study for, and successfully achieve, their construction skills certification scheme (CSCS) card, which is a mandatory requirement for those who wish to work in the construction industry.

Leaders respond quickly and innovatively to demand for these courses, for example from Jobcentre Plus, by establishing 'pop-up' classrooms in a range of venues including local hotels, conference centres and sports clubs. This helps to ensure that the provision is located precisely where there is a demand. Learners recognise and appreciate how convenient it is to attend these courses near to where they live.

Teachers and assessors structure the adult courses carefully to ensure that they engage learners. Teachers use a suitable variety of techniques to achieve this, including question and answer, discussion groups, video clips and frequent opportunities to test and consolidate learning. Assessors also structure the course very skilfully to help learners prepare for their final assessment. Teachers make good use of computer tablets to allow learners to complete online mock assessments, track their progress, and identify where they are less confident, and to direct them to suitable revision topics. The technology supports those learners who have weaker English knowledge and skills particularly successfully as they can use headphones to listen to the questions rather than having to read them.

Teachers and assessors have suitable vocational knowledge, skills and experience. For example, those assessors involved in delivering the CSCS course are qualified teachers and they also have first-hand experience of working in the construction industry. They have very good knowledge of the subject, which in turn helps instil confidence in the learners.

Under the current arrangements, teachers do not provide much advice and guidance to learners on the next steps available to them or on job opportunities. On completion of their courses, they generally refer learners back, for example to Jobcentre Plus, for ongoing advice and guidance.

How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that effective safeguarding arrangements are in place?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have ensured that ESP has effective safeguarding policies and procedures in place. These cover a suitable range of topics including, for example, bullying and online safety. They also ensure that all staff are aware of and promote apprentices' understanding of how to stay safe in the workplace. For example, learners on the CSCS programme fully understand the importance of wearing personal protective equipment and the dangers associated with taking mobile calls while working on a building site.

Managers have suitable pre-employment checks in place for newly recruited staff, and follow appropriate safer recruitment practices.

The designated safeguarding lead within ESP has received suitable training and maintains a thorough overview of managers' approaches to assuring the safety and welfare of all learners.

Leaders maintain effective links in the Kent area with the local authority designated officer, the local Kent safeguarding board and the local police. This helps provide suitable support to managers on safeguarding issues as well as enabling them to access any intelligence relating to radicalisation and extremist threats in the region. Given the broad geographical spread of ESP's provision, the organisation does not have the same network of links to local support or intelligence in other regions.

Managers induct staff, learners and apprentices appropriately at the beginning of their programme to ensure that they understand ESP's safeguarding policies and procedures as well as its approach to British values and the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. While assessors and teachers cover the full range of themes at induction, they do not find sufficient opportunities during lessons, assessments or evaluations to reinforce and extend apprentices' understanding of these subjects. As a result, at times, apprentices' understanding and recall of these subjects are too superficial.

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