

The West Midlands Creative Alliance Limited

Monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Martin Ward HMI

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

From October 2018, Ofsted undertook to carry out monitoring visits to all newly directly funded providers of apprenticeship training provision which began to be funded from April 2017 or after by ESFA and/or the apprenticeship levy. This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of those arrangements and as outlined in the 'Further education and skills inspection handbook', especially the sections entitled 'Providers newly directly funded to deliver apprenticeship training provision' and 'Monitoring visits'. The focus of these visits is on the three themes set out below.

The West Midlands Creative Alliance Limited was established in 2005. In April 2017, it became a prime-contract independent training provider; before that it operated as a subcontractor. Through a mixture of apprenticeship levy and ESFA funding, the provider has enrolled 102 apprentices as a prime contractor. It continues to deliver apprenticeships as a subcontractor. Currently, under the prime contracts, 79 apprentices are in learning, 10 apprentices have withdrawn from the programme, and 13 apprentices have completed and achieved their qualification. Most apprentices are at level 3, with slightly more apprentices on frameworks than standards. Most apprentices are aged 19 and above and are on apprenticeships which develop creative and digital skills. The provider currently works with more than 50 employers, mainly across the Midlands region.

Themes

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

Reasonable progress

Senior leaders have developed a clear strategy for the company. They are building on their positive relationships with, and specialist knowledge of, the creative industries. They offer high-quality apprenticeships which meet the needs of this sector. Successful collaboration with other providers also means that managers advise apprentices on the most appropriate provider in the region. They work in the interests of apprentices.

Senior leaders have grown the business slowly with a focus on providing quality and maintaining the trust of employers. For example, they have successfully introduced apprenticeships for venue technicians. Specialist coaches with recent industrial experience support apprentices well to develop stagecraft techniques, such as lighting and sound.

At the time of the inspection, senior leaders demonstrated an accurate understanding of the key strengths and areas for improvement. Through regular team meetings, managers take effective actions to address the key areas for

improvement for the benefit of apprentices. Senior leaders produced a self-assessment report that is too descriptive and lacks evaluative judgements. Senior leaders' actions for improvement in the written plan are not specific enough.

Leaders have taken decisive and appropriate action to support growth, while maintaining quality. In response to becoming a prime contractor – and delivering more standards-based apprenticeships – senior managers have appointed a new quality manager, and new development coaches. They have recruited coaches who have the experience and skills to support apprentices in the development of the appropriate behaviours, knowledge and skills. Senior leaders employ coaches with strong teaching backgrounds as well as experience in assessment. Where existing coaches do not have a teaching background, managers ensure that they have access to appropriate staff development. This is improving the performance of coaches.

Senior leaders have made highly effective links with employers. Employers are clear about the purpose of the apprenticeships and their responsibilities. Leaders have developed the programme to meet the needs of employers and to reflect the nature of their business. In most cases the apprentice's line manager attends the review. As a result, employers are aware of the progress that their apprentices are making and are involved in the development of the required behaviours and skills. Employers can see their apprentices developing new skills, behaviours and confidence as result of the programme. Apprentices make a positive contribution to their businesses.

Senior leaders and employers have a clear understanding of the requirements of on- and off-the-job training. Most apprentices log their off-the-job training systematically. Senior leaders monitor this and take effective action in the rare cases where it is a concern.

Senior managers monitor achievement, retention, attendance and progress regularly and effectively. The large majority of current apprentices are making expected progress. Managers' monitoring of apprentices' progress towards the achievement of higher grades within the standards-based apprenticeships requires improvement. Managers have been slow to produce summary reports of apprentices' progress for the scrutiny of the board.

Senior leaders have developed effective internal quality assurance systems that have ensured that apprentices produce consistently high standards of work across all apprenticeships.

Senior leaders manage the performance of coaches well. Leaders meet with coaches regularly to review apprentices' progress, the feedback from apprentices and employers, and to agree actions for improvement. Senior leaders have been prompt and effective in taking action to improve the performance of coaches. Where managers' support has not produced the expected improvement in performance, a few coaches and managers have left the organisation.

Managers respond promptly and appropriately to individual feedback from apprentices and employers. An apprentice attends every other board meeting. As a result, members have a good understanding of apprentices' experience.

Senior leaders have established a board which includes non-executive directors. They bring a wealth of experience both from creative industries and education and

training. They use this experience to help senior leaders set the strategic direction of the company. They are clear about their role in challenging senior leaders and holding them to account. They do not currently receive summary reports on the progress of apprentices, or the quality of teaching learning and assessment. This limits the effectiveness of the challenge they are able to offer.

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

Managers ensure that apprentices receive high-quality initial advice and guidance. Managers place apprentices on the right apprenticeship for their current job role and ensure that they are acquiring new skills, knowledge and behaviours. Apprentices understand the requirements of the apprenticeship well.

Coaches are improving their use of the initial information on apprentices to plan learning. Most coaches set challenging individual targets and plan the development of behaviours and skills, so that apprentices can make good progress. However, coaches do not clearly link the skills development on standards-based apprenticeships to the criteria for the achievement of distinction and merit grades. As a result, apprentices are not clear about what they need to improve to achieve the highest grades.

Coaches guide, assess and monitor apprentices' progress through the apprenticeship thoroughly. Coaches plan the courses appropriately and have established key assessments at regular points throughout the course. In close collaboration with employers, coaches provide appropriate learning resources and assessments, which reflect current business practice.

Most apprentices rightly value the support and guidance they receive from their coaches. Coaches meet with apprentices frequently to review progress in relation to the completion and setting of assignments, and the development of behaviours and skills. Coaches use questioning effectively to check on, and deepen, apprentices' understanding.

Apprentices gain new knowledge of the creative industry, and they deepen their understanding of their role. For example, one apprentice produced a detailed plan for a social media campaign.

Apprentices produce work at least at the standard expected for the level of programme. Some apprentices produce work of a very high standard. For example, on the digital marketing standards-based apprenticeship, an apprentice produced a detailed analysis of different customer profiles and how the company could adapt their digital marketing strategy to meet the needs of each group.

Most apprentices receive good support from their line managers and receive sufficient time and training activities to enable them to make good progress on the apprenticeship while at work.

After a slow start, managers have significantly improved their understanding of the progress apprentices make. After the introduction of regular monthly quality

meetings, they have taken action to enable apprentices to be back on track when they have fallen behind.

The large majority of apprentices are on target to complete their apprenticeship by the planned end date. The small number of apprentices who completed the course have achieved their apprenticeship. Managers have developed very detailed improvement actions for those apprentices who are currently making slow progress.

Most coaches provide detailed feedback to apprentices, which provides them with an accurate view of the progress they are making on their programmes and what they need to do to improve their work. In a few cases the feedback is too general, insufficiently evaluative and does not encourage the apprentice to improve even further.

Initially managers prioritised the development of English and mathematics skills for apprentices who did not already possess a level 2 qualification. Managers now plan the development of English and mathematical skills for all apprentices. Managers and coaches ensure that all apprentices undertake a thorough initial and diagnostic assessment to establish their starting points and gaps in learning. Each apprentice receives individual targets for improvement. Coaches support all apprentices effectively in the development of English and mathematical skills. Apprentices benefit from a combination of face-to-face tutorials, online learning materials and well-crafted workbooks. Coaches provide detailed feedback on marked work. Apprentices develop their English and mathematical skills well.

Most apprentices are clear about the opportunities for their next steps in their careers following the completion of their apprenticeship. For most apprentices, coaches signpost impartial advice and guidance on their next steps only towards the end of the apprenticeship. This is too late for some apprentices to formulate a considered plan for their next steps.

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

Senior leaders and managers ensure that safeguarding arrangements are effective.

Appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures contain clear statements about the responsibilities and duties of managers and staff in safeguarding their apprentices. Staff understand how to identify and report any concerns they have. Staff report general welfare concerns about apprentices in addition to any serious safeguarding issues. This demonstrates a positive culture. All staff have received appropriate online training in safeguarding and 'Prevent' duties.

Most apprentices demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding and the dangers of radicalisation and extremism. Most apprentices understand how these issues relate to their roles and how they should act. Apprentices feel safe and know how to report concerns.

Senior leaders and managers carry out safe recruitment and selection procedures when employing staff.

The appointed designated safeguarding officer has completed appropriate training, has good links with external agencies, and has positive contact with the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Managers ensure that apprentices are safe online and that employers have appropriate systems for monitoring online activities. Apprentices have a good understanding of the importance of health and safety in the workplace. For example, apprentices at one employer demonstrated their understanding of the importance of the safe movement of lighting and large equipment.

Coaches include reference to safeguarding, British values and the threats presented by radicalisation and extremism into their reviews. Apprentices at one employer spoke confidently about dealing with a range of customers and meeting the needs of customers with dementia after having completed a 'dementia friends' course. However, coaches do not always clearly relate British values to the apprentices' job role. Not all apprentices see the relevance of what they are learning in this topic.

Senior managers and the board do not yet receive regular reports on safeguarding, or any safeguarding-related incidents, to assure themselves that they comply with their legislative duties.

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