

Merit Skills Limited

Monitoring visit report

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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 the Education and Skills Funding Agency 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 themes set out below.

Merit Skills Limited (Merit Skills) is based in Yaxley, Cambridgeshire, and gained a direct contract in October 2017. It provides apprenticeships for the water industry. At the time of the inspection, 110 apprentices are on programme, of whom 50 are at level 2 and 60 at level 3. About half of the apprentices are on frameworks and the rest are on standards-based apprenticeships. Merit Skills provides apprenticeship training for large water companies across the country.

Themes

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

Reasonable progress

Leaders have a clear and well-thought-out strategy for their provision. They have effectively used their knowledge of the water industry and provided apprenticeships in subjects where there are skills shortages. As a result, employers and apprentices are confident that apprentices will continue in employment after completing their apprenticeship.

Leaders work effectively to ensure that the provision meets the requirements of an apprenticeship. In addition to using their experience of providing commercial training for the water industry, leaders won subcontracts to ensure that they gained good experience of providing apprenticeship training. Leaders work closely and continuously with employers to check whether apprentices receive the required proportion of their work time for off-the-job training.

Leaders work closely with employers to ensure that they recruit apprentices who are able to develop new skills, knowledge and behaviours. Apprentices are either new to their jobs or have just worked for a short period in the water industry. Leaders have taken swift and effective action in the occasional cases when it would not have been appropriate for an employee to be an apprentice.

Because of the well-designed programme of activities, employers and apprentices clearly understand the arrangements for end-point assessments. Trainers monitor apprentices' progress towards these assessments in detail. This includes scrutinising their portfolios and checking their development of knowledge and skills to ensure that they are ready for their end-point assessment.

Leaders ensure that staff have the required skills to deliver high-quality training. Staff use their extensive industrial experience effectively to give context and practical examples to apprentices. Staff development is appropriate. However, in a few cases, observations of teaching, learning and assessment are too descriptive. The improvement actions do not focus sufficiently on the impact they will have on apprentices' progress.

Leaders have a good knowledge of the quality of the provision. They accurately identify all its strengths and weaknesses. Managers closely monitor progress towards completing improvement actions. However, in a few cases, actions in the quality improvement plan lack detail and specific target completion dates. As a result, leaders do not steer improvements in the quality of provision as quickly as they could.

Leaders ensure that staff monitor the progress of apprentices adequately and hold staff frequently to account for the progress their apprentices are making. Leaders have established the use of an electronic portfolio system. Trainers, apprentices and employers use this to track the development of apprentices' skills, knowledge and behaviours.

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**

Apprentices develop good skills, knowledge and behaviours that benefit their workplace. For example, one group of apprentices gave a good explanation of how they were using equipment to detect underground pipes and cables to enable them to dig a trench safely. Employers recognise the benefit of these skills.

As a result of their programmes, apprentices develop a range of employability skills and increase their confidence. They are articulate and can explain in detail the work they are carrying out and the theory behind the practical activities.

Trainers use a range of effective methods to help apprentices develop their skills, knowledge and understanding. These methods include probing questions to check apprentices' understanding and challenge the depth of their knowledge, and good use of diagrams to help apprentices understand complex topics.

Apprentices develop the skills to become independent learners. They research topics on their own and work well together in small groups. They share their different experiences knowledgeably with their fellow students. As a result, apprentices develop a wider understanding of the water industry.

Staff accurately assess apprentices' starting points. They use this information usefully to help apprentices develop their skills, including English and mathematical skills. As a result, apprentices develop good skills, and the quality of their written English is high.

Trainers have a good knowledge of the progress being made by apprentices and the challenges each faces. However, in a few cases, trainers do not use the information on starting points to plan the timescale of apprentices' programmes. As a result, not all learners develop at the pace of which they are capable.

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

Leaders have worked extremely well to establish a culture of safeguarding. As a result, apprentices are safe. They know how to keep themselves safe, both in the training environment and the workplace. Staff receive a range of relevant training and leaders ensure that they update this frequently. Because of this, trainers cover safeguarding topics thoroughly at induction and during each training event.

Leaders have established rigorous processes to deal with any safeguarding issues that occur. Staff take swift and effective action when issues arise. Leaders have established a post of designated safeguarding officer, who has had detailed training, and a deputy, who is about to undertake the same training. Although not a statutory requirement, leaders have followed best practice and carried out Disclosure and Barring Service checks on all staff. Leaders keep detailed records of these checks.

Leaders have focused effectively on ensuring that apprentices are fully aware of mental health issues. These feature strongly in induction and training events. Apprentices discuss mental health openly. For example, one apprentice discussed with his trainer the fact that the delay in marking his assessment made him anxious.

Leaders have been highly effective in implementing the 'Prevent' duty. Apprentices receive very good training that results in them having a detailed knowledge of topics such as the risks of extremism and radicalisation. Apprentices apply this knowledge well in the context of their jobs. Apprentices talk eloquently about the fact that water services are a vital resource that needs to be protected.

Apprentices have a good focus on health and safety in the workplace. They complete a significant amount of training to make sure they work safely in a range of challenging environments. They demonstrate safe working practices.

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