

Optimum 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 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 themes set out below.

Optimum Skills Limited (OSL) currently has 98 apprentices in a range of subject areas. Business administration, management and engineering are the largest subject areas. Other areas include butchery, construction, warehousing and child development. The majority of apprentices are on standards-based apprenticeships, with a fifth following apprenticeship frameworks. Just over half of the apprentices study at level 3, just under half study at level 2 and a few study at level 5. Around a third of apprentices are aged 16 to 18. OSL gained a contract to deliver adult learning courses in January 2018. Courses focus on preparing learners for employment. At the time of the inspection, there were eight adult learners completing a short course in preparing to work in adult social care.

Themes

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

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers are successfully implementing a strategy to provide apprenticeships in a range of subject areas in which employment opportunities exist in the local area. They have appointed staff with appropriate vocational experience and qualifications in each of the subject areas in which they offer apprenticeships. Managers have organised additional training for a small number of staff to ensure that they are fully able to deliver all aspects of the apprenticeship to the required standard.

Managers work with employers to ensure that identified job roles are suitable for apprentices and that all apprentices are able to learn significant new knowledge, skills and behaviours. OSL staff help employers to recruit the most appropriate candidates for their apprenticeships, and employers rightly value this collaborative approach. All apprentices are employed on permanent contracts of employment, and leaders do not work with employers if this is not the case. Almost all apprentices receive their entitlement to off-the-job training, and staff intervene swiftly if employers do not fulfil their obligations.

Leaders are creating a culture of continuous improvement, and they take effective action when improvements are needed. For example, when managers highlight that assessment practice is not good enough. They work closely with tutors to outline their expectations, and they support tutors to improve.

Leaders have very recently developed a useful management report that enables them to monitor effectively the progress of apprentices and the quality of the provision. It is too soon to identify the full impact of this new management tool.

Senior leaders have created a board of non-executive directors to undertake a governance role in the organisation. The board members have a range of expertise, including in safeguarding, and are beginning to hold senior leaders to account for the quality of the training that they provide.

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

Staff provide apprentices with helpful advice and guidance before they enrol. This ensures that apprentices join the most appropriate programme to meet their needs and that they quickly begin to develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours. For example, new butchery apprentices rapidly develop their skills in boning and rolling a sirloin, curing meat and making back bacon.

Tutors provide a comprehensive introduction to the apprenticeship for new apprentices. This includes ensuring that apprentices understand fully what they need to do to be successful at work and on their programme. Tutors also cover important information, including safeguarding and the dangers of radicalisation and extremism, in this introductory period.

Tutors work well with employers to plan carefully off-the-job training for apprentices. Consequently, apprentices develop their confidence and their understanding of their job roles quickly. For example, warehousing apprentices benefit from valuable opportunities to shadow delivery drivers and staff who work with customers. Tutors ensure that bricklaying apprentices develop their accuracy well in using wall ties and measuring window sizes.

Apprentices benefit from regular reviews of their progress with their tutors. Most apprentices are making expected progress. Tutors provide extra support for apprentices who fall behind. However, for a minority of apprentices this does not enable them to catch up quickly, and their progress continues to be slow.

A few tutors do not provide sufficiently precise or helpful feedback on the work that apprentices complete. Consequently, a minority of apprentices do not produce work or develop their knowledge, skills and behaviour as quickly as they could.

Staff do not provide helpful enough careers advice for apprentices who are approaching the end of their programme. As a result, too many apprentices are unclear about the future opportunities available to them in order to plan their next steps.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring 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 successfully provide short courses to adult learners who aim to enter the local labour market. Managers focus on training learners who face significant barriers to learning and employment.

Managers have established a wide range of useful partnerships with external organisations to help them identify learners who would benefit from training. All staff work effectively together to encourage learners to take their first steps back into education.

Learners receive a high level of support from their tutors in lessons. Tutors use their extensive vocational experience to provide learning activities that enable learners to gain new knowledge and skills. For example, learners discuss a wide range of mental ill-health issues confidently.

Learners develop their skills in writing curriculum vitae and preparing for job interviews. Many produce written work of a high standard. However, a minority of tutors do not provide helpful enough feedback on work, which means that a few learners do not develop their knowledge and skills quickly enough.

Tutors create a safe and welcoming learning environment that enables learners to develop their self-esteem and self-confidence. They provide useful information and guidance to learners about seeking employment. As a result, many learners secure relevant jobs.

Leaders recognise that they do not analyse the effectiveness of the training well enough. They do not fully evaluate the success of the programmes that they offer in moving learners into sustained employment.

Tutors do not use information about learners' starting points fully to provide learning activities that build on learners' previous experience or areas of weakness. For example, tutors do not make sufficient use of this information to enable learners to develop literacy and numeracy skills that would benefit them in the workplace.

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

Managers carry out appropriate pre-employment checks when they recruit staff. All staff receive helpful and regular safeguarding training, including on their responsibilities in meeting the 'Prevent' duty. Managers have produced a 'Prevent' duty action plan and risk assessment that enables them to manage the risk that their learners face.

Senior leaders place a high priority on supporting learners to overcome any welfare issues that may impact on their learning. They have recruited a welfare officer to oversee the welfare of all learners and apprentices. The welfare officer visits all younger apprentices within two weeks of them starting their training to ensure that they are settling in to their apprenticeship. Staff respond appropriately to any concerns that learners raise.

Tutors reinforce apprentices' understanding of key safeguarding issues frequently, but they do not do enough to ensure that apprentices develop a deep knowledge of the risks they may face from extremist views.

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