

Interlearn Limited

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

Unique reference number: 58814

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Inspection date(s): 15 November 2019

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Interlearn Limited was inspected in January 2019. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision and the single provision type of apprenticeships to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

The company delivers the majority of its apprenticeship programmes in the West Midlands, London and the South East, and works with three subcontractors. At the time of the monitoring visit, the company has 760 apprentices in learning at levels 2 through to 5, of which most are adults. Approximately one third of the apprentices study with the subcontractors. The majority are working towards a range of standards-based apprenticeships in business management, transportation, and health and social care. All other apprentices are on frameworks in health and social care and manufacturing, mostly at level 2.

Themes

What progress have leaders and managers made in increasing the rigour and consistency of quality assurance arrangements related to their oversight of subcontracted provision? Insufficient progress

Following the last inspection, management intervention with poor-performing subcontractors was too slow. Senior leaders focused too much on contract compliance and were not quick or decisive enough in holding subcontractors to account to secure rapid improvement for the delivery of high-quality learning and apprenticeship performance. Consequently, the quality of the provision and apprentices' achievements declined significantly. This resulted in too few apprentices achieving their qualifications or completing their course in the planned timescale.

In summer 2019, leaders took the strategic decision to reduce the number of subcontractors from six to three. Leaders developed and introduced a new subcontractor agreement that more clearly defined the contractual relationship and delivery expectations of these external delivery partners. The newly developed subcontractor agreements set out a range of suitably challenging operational and delivery standards. However, they do not set out any performance expectation that subcontractors must ensure that apprentices receive at least a minimum entitlement to off-the-job training.

Leaders have introduced a revised quality framework as part of the revised subcontractor contract management and oversight arrangements. The framework includes a more detailed set of key performance indicators that leaders use to review and hold subcontractors to more challenging account. Leaders track and monitor more closely subcontractors' performance and use a 'traffic-light' system to escalate and risk-rate concerns. However, some of the reported actions detailed in the management reports still focus too much on the completion of tasks rather than on evaluating the impact of actions taken. In addition, the quality management framework does not report on the extent to which current apprentices are receiving their entitlement to off-the-job training.

What progress has the board made in ensuring it is fully aware of apprentices' performance and in holding senior managers to account against challenging improvement targets? Reasonable progress

The chief executive officer has made well-considered changes to the board membership. This includes the recruitment of two new non-executive directors. These have a broader range of expertise and skills better aligned to shaping and supporting the strategic direction of the organisation. The revised membership of the board means that members now have an appropriate range of experience, expertise and capacity to enable them to fulfil their governance role effectively. The refreshed board is beginning to be more effective in providing independent oversight of the senior management team. The board has started to raise expectations and has begun to be more challenging of leaders and managers about their decisions and actions to improve the quality of provision. However, in the initial phase following the inspection, the board did not have sufficient influence or move speedily enough in addressing the areas that required improvement.

The board and the leadership team now work closely together and have introduced much-needed changes to strengthen internal systems and processes. These include the introduction of a progress-tracking system to enable them to improve their understanding of in-year performance of the apprenticeship programme, including the parts being delivered by the remaining subcontractors. In addition, the board has strengthened performance management so that all leaders and managers are subject to more robust challenge on progress in delivering agreed improvement actions. All staff now have appropriate targets relating to the progress and achievements of apprentices.

The board now receives a range of increasingly detailed and more informative reports at its monthly meetings. These aid board members' understanding and oversight on many aspects of performance, including apprentices' progress and the quality of training they receive. As a result, board members have an improving level of knowledge and understanding of all parts of the delivery of training, and of which aspects need to improve further.

What progress have managers made in improving their use and analysis of management information to inform their understanding of apprenticeship performance?

Reasonable progress

Since August 2019, senior leaders have undertaken a wide-ranging review and have substantially revised the way in which data relating to apprenticeships is collected and used. As a result, leaders and managers are now better informed and have a heightened level of understanding of the quality of the provision.

Leaders and managers have made several effective changes to support their use and analysis of management information. For example, they have substantially reduced the number of freelance trainers involved in the apprenticeship programme and have ensured that full-time coaches now have heightened responsibility and accountability for allocated apprenticeship performance and standards. In addition, coaches have also benefited from intensive training and support to improve their confidence and use of apprenticeship data-recording systems. As a result, they are becoming more skilled in inputting data accurately and in using the resulting information analysis to identify apprentices who are making slow progress and who would benefit from targeted support. Managers now hold coaches to more rigorous and challenging account for the overall experience of the group of apprentices allocated to them through monthly caseload reviews.

Leaders and managers now have a deeper and more informed understanding of the current performance of apprentices, including by subject area, by learning coaches and by subcontractor. They closely scrutinise a wide range of operational and delivery performance reports. Where performance is not in line with their high expectations, they take appropriate action. However, coaches and managers continue to report on apprentices' progress on a unit-by-unit basis, which does not reflect well enough their acquisition of knowledge, skills and behaviours, or their increasing value to their employers. Leaders have suitable plans to introduce a vocational skills-scan to identify and measure gains in apprentices' knowledge, skills and behaviours from the start of their programme, but this initiative has yet to be implemented.

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