

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: A4e Skills
Date of visit: 18 November 2008

Context

Action for Employment Limited (A4e) is a national training provider. The A4e Skills division is part of the A4e group and was formed in 2005. It delivers government funded vocational training programmes. Currently around 10,500 learners are enrolled, of whom 1,800 are apprentices and approximately 9,700 are on Train to Gain programmes. A4e provides training across most sector subject areas and holds direct apprenticeship contracts with nine area Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs). A4e's Train to Gain contracts, again with nine LSC areas, are delivered by 35 subcontracting partner organisations. The company presently employs 161 staff to manage and deliver the programmes.

At the previous inspection in August 2007, the overall effectiveness of provision was satisfactory and capacity to improve was good. Achievement and standards, the quality of provision and leadership and management, including equality of opportunity, were all satisfactory. Of the five sector subject areas inspected, three were satisfactory and two were good.

Achievement and standards

How effective are strategies for improving overall and timely success rates on apprenticeship programmes?	Insufficient progress
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Overall and timely success rates have been consistently very low for the last three years. Despite modest improvements during this period success rates have been significantly and consistently below national averages. In 2004/05, the provider framework rate for advanced apprenticeships was 11% rising to 26% in 2005/06 and 39% in 2006/07. These rates were below the national averages by 23%, 18% and 19% respectively. The overall success rate for apprenticeships was similarly low. In 2004/05, the rate was 19% below the national rate, in 2005/06 it was 7% below and in 2006/07 it was 13% below the national average. Timely success rates are particularly poor. Further modest improvements have occurred in 2007/08, but the success rates for all apprenticeships are not improving fast enough or by a sufficiently large margin.

A4e have introduced appropriate measures to bring about improvements. These include more and improved staff training, recruitment of more assessors and the

improvement of quality assurance systems. However, none of these measures have had sufficient time to bring about the improvements necessary in success rates.

How effective are strategies for improving the overall and timely success rates of delivery partners on Train to Gain programmes?	Significant progress
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The overall success rates on Train to Gain programmes are good. In 2006/07, overall success rates were exceptionally good but declined to good in 2007/08. A4e identified the cause of the decline as the number of delivery partners falling into financial difficulty and ceasing trading. This had an adverse affect on success rates and presented organisational problems for A4e in managing the programmes of those learners affected.

A4e have acted quickly to introduce new measures for forming delivery partnerships with other providers. The new measures include relevant and useful checks on financial health and on the partner provider's capacity to deal with the increased number of learners that the successful partnership would bring. Early indications are that these measures have been successful. The current overall in-year success rate for Train to Gain programmes stands at 91%.

What actions have been taken to improve the slow achievement of qualifications in some areas?	Reasonable progress
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Actions taken to improve slow achievement of qualifications in some areas include suspending recruitment in health and social care and better monitoring of learner progress. As well as general improvement to reviews, A4E has produced useful guidance for staff on the process. The guidance clearly sets out the actions required at every stage of the learning process. Assessors find this useful. However, the guidance has not been in place long enough to make a significant affect on success rates.

Quality of provision

What actions have been implemented to improve assessment, reviews and target-setting?	Reasonable progress
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Several initiatives have been introduced to improve assessment, reviews and target setting. Assessors are now observed regularly carrying out different tasks with the learner; for example, inductions, assessments and reviews. Areas for staff development arising out of observations are well summarised and tackled either through individual coaching and support or staff training sessions. Recent staff training has focused on key skills integration, assessment, the development of an e-portfolio and reviews and target-setting. Thorough arrangements are in place to ensure the paperwork to support progress reviews is completed consistently.

Target-setting is more focused on challenging and timely targets for learners to achieve. A4e has invested significantly during the last 12 months, and a significant number of new assessors have now been appointed. Several positive actions have been implemented to develop their skills and standardise their practice. For example, observations of practice, opportunities to shadow other assessors and share best practice, small caseloads that are gradually increased, and effective performance management. However, many of these initiatives have not had sufficient time to impact positively on learner success rates.

Leadership and management

What are the key initiatives introduced to improve quality and its consistency?	Reasonable progress
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Key initiatives to improve quality and consistency have been focused on action planning following self-assessment and closer integration of sales and operations. The new management groups now formally and effectively oversee the self-assessment action plan and check that all parties are playing a full part in achieving improvements. Marketing and sales staff have been successful in forming links and engaging employers in the Train to Gain provision. Sales staff have a good understanding of operations and work with staff effectively to ensure that learners are on appropriate programmes, and that employers are fully aware of training requirements and are able to support their learners. The system is currently being extended to apprenticeship programmes. Both initiatives are relatively new and under development, and as such have not yet impacted on success rates.

How effectively does the action/development plan and self-assessment process contribute to raising achievement and supporting learners?	Reasonable progress
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The self-assessment process has been improved and is now inclusive of a wider range of staff. It now leads to a single self-assessment report, which replaces the previous centrally written report. Each region writes and manages its own quality improvement plan. The self-assessment report is critical and self evaluative, but the evidence presented does not support the grades awarded in all areas. Use of data is limited and insufficient weight is given to the poor success rates on apprenticeship programmes. Too much emphasis is placed on the modest improvements in success rates.