

Whitbread Group PLC

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Whitbread Group PLC is a major hospitality company which operates across the country and abroad. Whitbread has held a contract with the National Employer Service of the Skills Funding Agency since 2006 and currently offers four hospitality apprenticeships and Skills for Life programmes. All apprenticeship programmes are delivered using an alternative assessment strategy approved by the awarding body. The Skills for Life programme is subcontracted to a specialist organisation, Third Force.

The inspection in July 2009 judged all areas to be good except the subject area of hospitality and catering, which was outstanding. The focus of this monitoring visit was to identify progress made following a decline since then in achievement on the apprenticeship programme, and the impact of quality improvement activities in halting the decline and in developing the provision.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has Whitbread made in further developing the particularly effective quality improvement arrangements?	Reasonable progress
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The 2009 inspection identified the quality improvement strategy as thorough, with managers having particularly effective arrangements to improve the quality of provision. However, the arrangements were insufficiently flexible and robust to meet the subsequent challenges faced by Whitbread as the apprenticeship programme expanded and the quality and performance of the programme declined. The major review of learning and development undertaken during 2010 emphasised the strategic role of learning and development within the company and is reinforced by some key actions.

The quality improvement action plan clearly sets objectives to raise success rates, develop the strategic engagement with operations directors and regional managers, and build on the successful practices used by other national employers. Actions are clear, sequential and focused on improving the achievement and experience of learners. The current management information system is overly complex and not fit for purpose. Following some detailed research, Whitbread made a significant investment in a new system that has a much greater focus on managing learning and will enable performance to be monitored at national, regional and group level, with individual learner's progress monitored and scrutinised regularly.

Operational staff and learners value the good support and guidance provided by the quality team. In particular, the use of a weekly conference call enables concerns or areas requiring clarification to be dealt with quickly and efficiently. Regional managers now take greater responsibility for learning and the introduction of regional achievement league tables is beginning to raise overall performance. Key

performance measures cover a range of activities that support the achievement of qualifications.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving the success rates for the apprenticeships? Insufficient progress

At the last inspection the success rates were judged to be very high for work-based learning at 63.7%, but since then performance suffered a significant drop and in 2009/10 overall success rates were 43.3%, just under 30% below the national average. Following this decline in performance Whitbread staff took decisive action to identify the causes of the poor achievement and are now implementing an improvement strategy. One of the identified causes was the lack of experience of managers in supporting learners. Additional guidance and support are now in place and are becoming increasingly effective in improving the confidence of general managers in supporting learners.

The learning and skills team members have all achieved a level 4 qualification in training in adult learning and are making good use of the skills developed to guide managers and concentrate on enabling learners to complete their key skills. The systematic approach to supporting achievement is increasing the proportion of learners completing their programme and over 100 learners are now close to achieving their qualification. Qualification success rates appear to be improving: 32 learners achieved their qualification in the first few months of the new contract year, more than in the whole of 2009/10.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in maintaining and further improving the good teaching, training and learning, in particular in developing systematic arrangements to observe the quality of learning? Reasonable progress

Learning through workbooks, which continues to be meticulously matched to National Vocational Qualification units, develops learners' employability skills extremely well. Workbooks are very well designed to meet the needs of each particular brand across the company. The general managers provide regular feedback to build learners' confidence and encourage learners to improve further their skills and knowledge. The learning and skills team improved induction training for general managers to ensure a consistency of approach with apprentices across all brands. Third Force now complete systematic formal observations of learning and reviews on Skills for Life provision, but their reports are too descriptive. The focus of the reports is on quantity rather than quality, and judgments are not related to the impact of teaching/coaching on learning. Whitbread managers do not know the outcomes of these observations. Regular meetings between Whitbread and Third Force staff provide useful feedback on learners' progress. Whitbread's quality manager visits regularly to check how effectively e-learning and workbook completion is developing learners' knowledge and skills. Particular support is

provided to ensure general managers are correctly introducing the key skills project with their learners. However, Whitbread has not carried out any formal routine monitoring of their training and learning.

How effective are the developments in improving the vocationally related literacy and numeracy?

Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection Third Force has effectively developed the literacy and numeracy programmes to ensure that additional training and workshops, provided by the learning and support managers, use vocationally-related tasks and activities. Learners' use of mathematics and English when they complete their key skills project is good. Outcomes on Skills for Life provision for Train to Gain learners are good and significantly better than the national averages. For other learners, who complete Skills for Life qualifications before they begin their key skills project, outcomes are broadly satisfactory at level 1 and good at level 2. The learning and skills team has recently introduced an extremely relevant vocational key skills project. This is improving learners' application of their key skills to real business practice within their specific work role, and has improved aspects of the business such as a reduction in the number of customer complaints.

How effective are the plans to accredit English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision and develop level 3 accredited training?

Reasonable progress

Following the last inspection Whitbread trialled an ESOL project with one of its brands, using an online programme provided by a specialist subcontractor. As a result of evaluating the project the company decided not to extend this approach and is now developing local solutions for language support. Diagnostic test information is used by learning and skills staff to agree appropriate language support with branch managers. Learners are guided to relevant local providers that have been approved by learning and skills staff. Formal guidance for branch managers is under development to ensure all relevant staff receive appropriate support and guidance and have good access to appropriate local provision. Many new staff improve their spoken English through the effective New Starter Champions and Buddy systems. Whitbread does not yet record the value added by these informal activities.

The previous inspection identified the lack of hospitality and catering training at level 3 as an area for improvement. Clear plans are now in place to introduce a level 3 qualification. Relevant team members are identified and arrangements complement Whitbread's commitment to developing staff and encouraging internal promotions. Learners are enthusiastic about opportunities to gain further qualifications and enhance their career opportunities within the company.

What progress has Whitbread made in ensuring that all relevant managers are fully involved in influencing and monitoring training activities?

Insufficient progress

Importantly, restructuring within the company has placed the general managers in a more pivotal assessor role. General managers remain positive and enthusiastic about the benefits and value of the training to both employees and the business outcomes. The restructuring has further contributed to their understanding about how training contributes to the company's core values.

Induction training for all new managers included what is expected of them in their role as assessor and in providing support for their team members who are apprentices. Refresher training has recently included an online induction assessor module. Not all general managers have taken the assessor qualifications yet.

Despite very clear explanations about the way the company plans and delivers apprenticeship training, managers are not always clear about what is included in an overall framework and this therefore limits their ability to influence and monitor the training. As a result, managers are not pushing apprentices sufficiently well to achieve all aspects of their programme. The general managers' use of accurate data, that represents overall performance of their apprenticeships, is insufficient. Managers have a more positive view of learners' outcomes than the true picture.

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