

Access to Music

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

Access to Music Limited (AtM) is an independent music company that provides training for the music industry at all levels from eight centres. In addition, it offers functional skills in English and mathematics as well as teacher education programmes to music learners. Level 3 courses are of two-year duration and the others last for one year. The qualifications are accredited by Rock School, the United Kingdom's rock and pop awarding body. Courses are funded by the Young People's Learning Agency and the Skills Funding Agency.

In 2010/11, AtM delivered training to 1,159 learners, of whom 82% were male and 51% were aged 16 to 18. The company had changed ownership in February 2009. The new owners have made many changes since the last inspection in November 2009. AtM has closed two centres; relocated the head office to Birmingham; upgraded centre facilities in Birmingham, Bristol and Lincoln; and, has appointed several new staff, including four new senior managers. The funding for the pilot advanced freelance music apprenticeship programme for the self-employed has ended.

At the last inspection, AtM was judged satisfactory for overall effectiveness, outcomes for learners, leadership and management including equality and diversity and for the provision in performing arts. The quality of provision and arrangements for safeguarding were good. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has AtM made in maintaining an effective self-assessment process and in improvement planning to maintain strengths and deal with the areas for improvements?

Significant progress

At the last inspection, the process of self-assessment was inclusive and satisfactory. The self-assessment report was broadly accurate. However, inspectors judged that development planning was not effective as some areas for improvement from the previous inspection had not been rectified. Inspectors downgraded the company's grade for equality and diversity to satisfactory.

AtM has conducted a thorough analysis of its provision through a wider review process. Development plans are highly effective. AtM has improved almost all areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and has maintained the identified strengths. The focus on improving teaching and learning is strong. AtM has made significant investment in upgrading facilities and resources in several centres. It has

appointed highly experienced managers who provide strong challenge and support to staff through extensive staff development.

The current self-assessment report is based on a broad variety of sound evidence and presents a clear picture of the provision. Inspectors agreed with most judgements in the report. The development plans are sharp and the monitoring arrangements are extremely thorough. The self-assessment takes much greater account of learners' and staff views. This has led to many improvements to the provision in all centres. However, AtM does not seek employers' views on the self-assessment report.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has AtM made in improving outcomes for all learners, particularly retention rates, key skills and progression into employment and further/higher education? **Reasonable progress**

In November 2009, success rates for musical programmes were satisfactory except for learners aged 19+ on level 2 arts and media courses. Success rates on key skills in information and communication technology (ICT), communication and application of number were consistently low. Retention rates were declining on most programmes.

AtM has made significant progress in improving functional skills in English and mathematics. It does not offer functional skills in ICT. Greater numbers of learners are staying in learning. Retention rates are now satisfactory on most programmes. Success rates for level 2 learners are satisfactory and above the national averages and are good for a small number of learners on the pilot level 1 programme. AtM has maintained high success rates for learners on higher level programmes in music and education and training. Success rates for learners on advanced freelance apprenticeship have also improved satisfactorily.

Learners' attendance is satisfactory and improving. No significant differences exist between the achievements of different groups. AtM has maintained the levels of progression for learners through the programmes and into further/higher education. However, progression into employment has declined. Retention and success rates for a substantial number of learners aged 19+ on level 3 programmes have suffered a decline, although 40% of early leavers achieve partial qualifications.

Quality of provision

What progress has AtM made in improving the planning of learning, particularly for the increasing number of learners with low prior attainment?

Reasonable progress

AtM offers open access to qualifications for all learners regardless of their prior achievements. Since November 2009, AtM has made significant changes to improve the planning of learning for all learners. Learners on the recently introduced level 1 programme develop both their academic and practical skills. To improve retention rates on level 3 programmes, AtM has developed a new one-year programme that is sharply focused on meeting the needs of learners who wish to enter employment rather than go to a university. The programme now has a greater number of core units and fewer optional ones. This has meant that the centres will work to a common course format compared with a very fluid course structure for each centre at the last inspection. Learners are now able to move more easily between programme levels and types as they have a clearer view of the progression routes.

AtM has also improved access to a significant range of online learning resources, including those secured through outstanding partnerships with other providers. Learners speak very highly of the significant improvements to the centres that have enhanced their learning experience and enjoyment.

What progress has the provider made in improving the learners' understanding of equality and diversity, particularly through lessons?

Reasonable progress

Inspectors judged the promotion of equality and diversity as satisfactory at the last inspection. The ethos of equality was good between learners and staff. However, the tutors failed to develop learners' understanding of equality and diversity through lessons.

AtM has taken much effective action to rectify this area for improvement. It has appointed a national adviser to give prominence to the issues of equality and diversity. All staff have undertaken thought-provoking training to improve their understanding as well as skills in embedding equality and diversity effectively into teaching and learning sessions. This is particularly effective in the recently introduced project-based learning. The schemes of work clearly highlight different genres of music. Many external speakers make extensive use of the contributions of artists from different cultures to deepen the learners' understanding of the universal nature of music that transcends all cultures and religions. AtM has well-considered plans to reinforce this further through the support and guidance of the newly appointed advanced teaching practitioners. Most of these actions have taken place in recent months. The impact of these initiatives is not yet fully established within the lessons across all centres.

Leadership and management

What progress has AtM made in further improving quality assurance at centre level, including sharing of good practice and improvement planning?

Significant progress

At the last inspection, quality improvement arrangements were not fully developed across the organisation. The centre-based self-assessment reports were brief and did not include sufficient evidence. The performance of several centres was weak and outcomes for learners varied widely between centres. Centres had a great deal of flexibility in the way they structured their curriculum. Staff did not share good practice with each other sufficiently.

Quality improvement arrangements are now uniform across the organisation. AtM has produced a comprehensive quality planning and review calendar to evaluate the learners' progress through their course. All staff are clear about their centre's objectives, outcome targets, wider reviews and review weeks for the learners. AtM publicises the relative performance of the centres and this enables staff to benchmark their performance. Staff share good practice through many formal and informal channels. All managers have undertaken valuable training on devising the self-assessment report. They have been highly critical of their performance. Managers have developed challenging development plans for each centre that are monitored vigorously. Performance in most centres has improved. An increasing number of staff, such as progression tutors and advanced teaching practitioners, are working across centres. They meet regularly to review their performance and share good practice.

What progress has AtM made in further developing the use of management information to improve the provision?

Significant progress

In November 2009, AtM managers did not use management information sufficiently to develop the self-assessment report and inform centres of key areas for improvement.

Since then, AtM has substantially increased the range of data and other management information that the staff at all levels use to make improvements. They have a much improved understanding of data and of the potential of using management information to improve all aspects of learners' experience. All staff work well to ensure that accurate data are available for analysis and action. Accurate data at centre, programme and level are available instantaneously. This has enabled local managers and staff to see their performance promptly and take effective action. Managers make highly effective use of electronic registers to monitor performance and identify at-risk learners. Once identified, such learners are given effective and timely support. Learners' punctuality, attendance, retention and achievement have improved. The information from annual wider review quarterly performance management and reviews is used extensively to instigate improvements.

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