

Axia Solutions Limited

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 50579

Name of lead inspector: Harmesh Manghra HMI

Last day of inspection: 09 December 2011

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Information about the provider

1. Axia Solutions Ltd (Axia) is a privately owned limited company, established in 1999 and based in Stoke-on-Trent. Two directors assisted by 11 staff provide learning and support for learners. Most off-the-job training is delivered at the employers' premises and some at the newly-built training centre at the company's head office. Under contract to the Skills Funding Agency, Axia provides work-based learning in engineering and manufacturing technologies, business administration, retailing, customer service, warehousing and logistics as well as essential skills programmes in literacy and numeracy.
2. Axia's origins are in the ceramic industry which has declined significantly over the past decade. Since the previous inspection in 2006, the number of ceramic manufacturing companies in Stoke-on Trent has halved to approximately 100 and the number of employees working in them has decreased from 20,000 to 7,000. Axia now provides training in the West Midlands, the North West and the South West, mainly in the manufacturing and processing and the logistics sectors.
3. Stoke-on-Trent is the 16th most deprived area out of 354 districts in England according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2010. The rate of unemployment in March 2011 was 10.5% compared to 7.6% in England. According to the census of 2001, the percentage of people from minority ethnic groups in the city was 5% as compared to 9% in England. The percentage of young people achieving five GCSEs at a grade A* to C or above is slightly below the national average.
4. The following organisations provide training on behalf of the provider:
 - North Staffs Engineering Group Training Association (Engineering)
 - Stoke-on-Trent College (Engineering)
 - Newcastle-under-Lyme College (Engineering)

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2010/11
Employer provision:	
Train to Gain	551 learners
Apprenticeships	93 apprentices

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision		Grade 1
Capacity to improve		Grade 1
		Grade
Outcomes for learners		1
Quality of provision		1
Leadership and management		1
Safeguarding		2
Equality and diversity		2
Subject areas		Grade
Engineering and manufacturing technologies		1
Literacy and numeracy		1

Overall effectiveness

- Outstanding leadership and management of Axia has improved the quality of its training provision and support for learners to an excellent standard. Almost all learners achieve their qualifications, including vocational diplomas, literacy and numeracy certificates and apprenticeship programmes well within the planned period. Learners use their significantly improved knowledge of the ceramic industry and other manufacturing processes to become multi-skilled and highly valuable to employers. This secures their employment in the current challenging economic times. The standard of learners' work is very high. Most learners progress to higher level qualifications and are well aware of the next steps in their learning and career progression. Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices.
- The quality of teaching, training and assessment is excellent. Staff conduct extensive research into the business needs of employers and deliver bespoke programmes that link theory and practical work exceedingly well. Training is delivered flexibly to learners on various shifts in employers' premises, causing little disruption to the production schedules. Many employers make substantial savings by reducing wastage and producing better quality products through efficient and innovative working practices instigated by the learners. Partnerships with employers and trade unions are excellent. Care, guidance and

support, including individual help with literacy and numeracy, to enable learners to complete their assignments are excellent.

7. Training is managed exceptionally well. Quality improvement is highly effective and has led to significant improvements to an expanding range of provision often located in different parts of the country and new employment sectors. Axia has managed the change very well and demonstrates outstanding capacity to maintain and improve standards. It has a sound reputation with employers. Staff make good use of resources to provide outstanding value for money. Safeguarding arrangements and the promotion of equality and diversity are good.

Main findings

- Success rates are outstanding for Train to Gain learners and apprentices. These have continued to improve from consistently high levels in the previous three years. Almost all learners complete their qualifications in the planned timescale. These rates are well in excess of national averages. Most learners progress to higher level literacy and numeracy qualifications and to vocational diplomas.
- Learners develop high level technical skills in the ceramic industry and manufacturing technologies. They are highly effective at identifying and solving problems at work by simplifying work processes. Their confidence and skills in mathematics and English improves significantly. They use these skills in their everyday lives and at work extremely well to benefit themselves, their families and employers.
- Learners develop a sound understanding and knowledge of health and safety issues and safe working practices. They use this knowledge well to keep themselves, their colleagues and their work environment safe.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding. One-to-one coaching and training in the workplace is excellent. Tutors and assessors are highly skilled professionals from within the ceramic industry. Although well qualified, they benefit from extensive staff development that improves their skills and knowledge further. By using live learning resources from the workplace they integrate theory well with practice.
- The provision is perfectly matched to meet the needs of learners and employers. Axia helps employers to create a strong culture of learning in their workplaces. Classes are held at the most convenient times to coincide with the end of shifts creating minimum disruption to the businesses. Axia negotiates paid release from work for learners to attend classes.
- Partnership working is excellent with employers and trade unions, who have strong faith in the professionalism and integrity of Axia's staff and managers. Trade union representatives accompany Axia staff on the shop-floor to promote learning and conduct training needs analysis. Employers, including a few with no previous history of training, report significant benefits to their workforce and businesses.

- Care, guidance and support are outstanding at all stages of learning. Initial assessment is very thorough and is used well to identify and plan support which meets the personal and study needs of learners. Learners are highly motivated and many continue to pursue further learning after receiving clear information, advice and guidance on progression opportunities.
- Leadership and management are outstanding. Axia has a clear vision and strategy to deliver high quality training and add value for employers. Staff training and development are good. Team working and communications are exemplary. Axia is outstanding at organising and delivering training to learners that fits in well with the highly complex shift patterns of their employers.
- Safeguarding arrangements are good and given a high priority. The processes and procedures are thorough and understood well by staff and learners. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks on staff and the health and safety vetting of employers' premises are thorough. Axia does not promote the safe use of computers and the internet, although it has plans to do so.
- Learners and staff have a good awareness of equality and diversity issues, policies and procedures. Learners are protected from harassment, bullying including cyber bullying and discrimination. Axia has taken successful action to increase the recruitment of males on business administration programmes. However, staff do not reinforce sufficiently learners' understanding of equality and diversity issues through lessons or progress reviews.
- Engagement with stakeholders is excellent. Axia has a well developed employer engagement strategy and has excellent links with employers and trade unions. It uses feedback from learners and employers highly effectively to make improvements. However, arrangements to seek learners' views and feedback to them on actions taken are informal.
- Quality improvement processes, including the self-assessment report and the development plan are outstanding and continue to improve the provision. Stakeholders' views are incorporated fully in the self-assessment process. The self-assessment report is accurate, comprehensive, self-critical and judgemental. Processes for observing teaching, training, assessment and reviews are thorough; however, support to tutors to improve further is informal.

What does Axia need to do to improve further?

- Implement a well-considered plan of action to develop learners' understanding, awareness and knowledge of e-safety issues, including use of the internet.
- Consistently reinforce and further develop learners' understanding of equality and diversity through discussion during progress reviews and lessons, where appropriate.
- Introduce a formal approach to seeking learners' views and feeding back the actions taken to ensure that learners understand that their views are taken seriously and acted upon.

- Further improve the professional practice of tutors and assessors through rigorous action planning following observations of teaching, training, assessment and reviews and monitor follow-up actions formally.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- gaining qualifications and improvements in skills that employers value
- the extremely knowledgeable, patient and helpful tutors and assessors
- learning at work and getting paid
- the learning that exceeds their expectations
- impartial advice and guidance to help them progress in their careers
- the excellent teaching including the very effective one-to-one coaching and training
- the frequent assessment visits from the very reliable and punctual assessors that help them to make good progress.

What learners would like to see improved:

- longer tuition time for some literacy and numeracy classes
- the excessive amount of paperwork and administration tasks.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the excellent understanding of the training needs of the businesses
- the outstanding benefits to the employees to improve their outlook, attitude, competences and knowledge
- the highly flexible approach to delivery of qualifications at a time suitable to the businesses
- the savings and efficiencies made by their employees after learning
- the highly professional approach and integrity of Axia tutors and managers.

What employers would like to see improved:

- no improvements suggested.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 1

8. Outcomes for learners are outstanding and have been high for the past three years. Inspection grades for all aspects of the provision have improved from good at the previous inspection in 2006 to outstanding. Teaching and learning have improved and are now outstanding. The training provision is led outstandingly well. Axia sets extremely high standards for its training and its staff. It has managed the diversification of its training into other regions of the country and new employment sectors exceedingly well. Staff are very well qualified, highly committed, extremely knowledgeable and take great pride in contributing to improvement targets. Staff development is very effective.
9. The self-assessment process is outstanding and includes fully the views of staff, learners and employers. The current self-assessment report is comprehensive, highly accurate and judgemental. Inspectors agree with almost all the grades proposed in the self-assessment report and awarded a higher grade for leadership and management. Staff monitor learners' progress extremely effectively. Quality improvement systems are embedded fully and are particularly effective in providing outstanding outcomes and quality of provision. The company's development plan is highly effective in making improvements.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 1

10. Success rates for all groups of learners are outstanding. Success rates for qualifications are excellent and have improved for apprentices, advanced apprentices, literacy and numeracy learners and Train to Gain learners. All groups of learners achieve equally well. Nearly all learners complete their qualifications in the allocated time. They apply their skills extremely well in their workplaces and in their personal lives.
11. Learners develop excellent personal skills. Their confidence and self-esteem improves considerably. As well as gaining valuable qualifications, they develop a passion for learning. Many learners have had poor learning experiences and few opportunities to do any formal learning in recent years. For many of them this is their first achievement of which they are very proud. Employers and learners alike celebrate their success enthusiastically. This improves their motivation even further. Many learners use their newly-acquired skills to help their children with their school work. They become good role models for learning and enhance aspirations within their families.
12. Learners develop higher level skills in numeracy, literacy, the ceramic industry and business improvement techniques. Their knowledge of work processes, the business, their customers and the quality standards is improved considerably. Learners' understanding of team briefings, worksheets, work flow processes and performance charts is much improved. Learners take a prominent role in

championing quality and offer suggestions that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the businesses. This level of commitment consolidates their position in the companies and enhances their employability. Learners feel safe in their workplaces and improve their work practices to promote safety of all their colleagues.

The quality of provision

Grade 1

13. Teaching, training and assessment are outstanding. Tutors and assessors are well qualified and experienced with detailed knowledge of the ceramic sector. They focus strongly on improving their own skills and expertise even further. Tutors spend considerable time on the shop-floor to understand the work processes and the challenges facing businesses. They design a valuable programme of learning that contextualises on- and off-the-job training. Initial assessment is thorough and used well to develop individual learning plans including support for all learners. The quality of training, delivered in well-equipped and pleasant learning environments, is extremely high with learners participating well in lessons. Learners carry out live projects that simplify and improve the quality of workplace notices, complex standard operating procedures and manuals. The quality of assessment is excellent with ongoing feedback to learners that confirms their progress, offers them guidance and challenges them to improve further. The speed and effectiveness of the response from assessors to resolve problems is exemplary.
14. Employers appreciate the value of training that has developed a culture of lifelong learning among their employees. Bespoke training is particularly effective in meeting the needs of learners and employers. The linking of theory to practice is done exceptionally well as literacy and numeracy is made highly relevant to their work environment. Assessors and tutors are extremely flexible and provide learning and assessment at times convenient for learners and businesses. In many businesses mathematics and English are taught alongside business improvement techniques providing an excellent match of training to meet the long-term training needs of employers.
15. Partnerships are excellent with employers and trade unions. Many highly-satisfied employers and partners refer their employees to Axia for training. Subsequent support from all parties ensures that the training programmes are run smoothly. Axia has worked well with awarding bodies to develop a valuable diploma in ceramics. The company has developed a strong working relationship with Jobcentre Plus to meet the needs of employees facing redundancy. In partnership with awarding bodies, Axia has developed units of qualifications to make it possible for learners to undertake short qualifications.
16. Support for learners is excellent. This includes pastoral support, study support and information, advice and guidance to help learners progress. Learners are well informed about their career options and progression opportunities. They benefit from extensive in-class support and can easily access one-to-one literacy and/or numeracy tuition. Learners who are unable to attend the centre

due to infrequent and inaccessible public transport are offered free transport. Axia works closely with employers and trade unions, negotiating paid release from work for training thus ensuring that their learners are not disadvantaged while learning.

Leadership and management

Grade 1

17. Axia has a clear vision and strategy for the future development of its provision that is informed well by both local and national priorities. All staff have a thorough awareness of the strategic direction and key objectives of the company and their role within it. All learners are trained in a supportive and open culture that has a clear focus on the delivery of high quality training. Staff training and development are good. Operational management is highly effective in providing learners with good progression opportunities and very good success rates. External communications are excellent. Internal communications are highly effective but are informal. Axia uses data very well to monitor learners' progress and the quality of provision.
18. Safeguarding arrangements are good. Appropriate policy and procedures are in place. The company maintains and monitors a detailed central record of CRB checks. All staff, including the designated safety officer, have undertaken appropriate training. Staff and learners have a good awareness of safeguarding policies and procedures and know who to contact if they need to raise a concern. Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices. Health and safety vetting of employers' premises is thorough. The health and safety of learners has a high priority and is reinforced well throughout the programme. Safeguarding awareness for employers is under further development as is the safe use of information and communication technology.
19. Axia has introduced a single equality scheme and a satisfactory equality action plan. The impact assessment of all policies and procedures is comprehensive. For example, Axia has identified the initial assessment of partially sighted learners as an area for improvement. All staff have undertaken recent, relevant equality and diversity training. Learners receive useful support materials during induction that help them develop an adequate understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Learners are well aware of the robust arrangements to protect them from harassment, bullying and discrimination. Axia conducts a thorough analysis of data to monitor learner recruitment and the progress of different groups. Axia makes strong attempts to increase recruitment from under-represented groups onto the apprenticeship programmes on behalf of the employers. It successfully recruits males onto business administration programmes. The promotion and reinforcement of learners' understanding of equality and diversity, particularly during progress reviews and in lessons, is inconsistent.
20. Axia engages very well with employers during formal and informal meetings. Feedback from these meetings is used promptly to improve the provision. Relationships with employers and unions are excellent. This helps to provide

learners with a good range of training and development opportunities in the workplace. Axia recognises accurately that it does not collect users' views effectively at all key stages of the training programme. Actions resulting from feedback received are not effectively communicated to users.

21. All staff are very clear about the value of an effective self-assessment report. This awareness is enhanced further through valuable training. All staff have developed a good ability to evaluate their provision and understand how to improve further. Learners and employers are involved very well in the self-assessment process. The development plan is used effectively to make improvements that link clearly to the achievement of strategic and operational objectives. Data are used effectively to provide detailed supporting evidence. Quality assurance and improvement processes are embedded very well across the provision. Observations of teaching, training, assessment, reviews and guidance are accurate and lead to improvements. However, action planning to continue to improve these processes is under internal review.
22. Axia provides outstanding value for money. Success rates for learners are outstanding and have been very high for the previous three years. Accommodation and learning resources within employers' premises and at Axia are of good quality and used very well to support learners. Axia has introduced a sustainability policy and an action plan to re-use and re-cycle resources. This has improved the learners' awareness of sustainability and recycling issues.

Subject areas

Engineering and manufacturing technologies

Grade 1

Context

23. Currently 168 learners are working towards qualifications in engineering or manufacturing technologies. Subjects include engineering, fabrication and welding, electrical and electronics, business improvement techniques and manufacturing including ceramics, textiles and paper. Nineteen learners are advanced apprentices and 26 are intermediate apprentices. One learner is on a level 3 Train to Gain programme and the remaining 122 Train to Gain learners are studying level 2 courses. All learners, of whom 27 are women, are employed.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are outstanding. Success rates for advanced apprentices and Train to Gain learners are excellent. Success rates and completion of qualifications in the allocated time are excellent and are consistently above national rates. For a small number of intermediate apprentices success rates are satisfactory. Early leavers have left due to redundancies or changes in personal circumstances.
- Learners develop an outstanding range of skills that reinforce their excellent knowledge of ceramic manufacturing or engineering. They demonstrate exceptional skills in artwork and piercing in the ceramic industry. Learners develop high-level skills in communications, presentation and team working and improve their self-confidence and employability. Progression rates to higher level programmes are excellent.
- All learners have a very good understanding of safe working practices and adopt them in learning and at work. They feel safe and through their studies, particularly in business improvement techniques, they enhance the health and safety of their own working environment and that of their colleagues in the workplace.
- Teaching and training are outstanding. Training accommodation is excellent both at Axia's offices and at employers' sites. Highly knowledgeable staff use their excellent practical experience during lessons to challenge learners. They plan and deliver training sessions extremely well and the activities are made relevant to learners' workplace activities. On- and off-the-job training is integrated particularly well and reinforces the development of literacy and numeracy skills.
- Assessment is thorough, flexible and planned at times to suit learners and their employers. Progress reviews are productive and frequent. Feedback to learners from assessors is particularly helpful, clear and concise. Learners benefit from good target setting after assessment activities which help them to progress

rapidly. Learners' portfolios include a wide range of evidence and the accompanying written explanations by the learners are very good.

- Axia fulfils the training needs of learners and their employers exceptionally well. It delivers an outstanding range of engineering and specialist ceramic based awards. These meet employers' skills needs and provide excellent employability and progression opportunities for learners. Axia has developed a highly responsive relationship with key partners, working closely with industry, employers and trade unions.
- Partnership working and communication with employers and national organisations are outstanding. Employers value their relationship with Axia staff and managers and provide excellent support for learners, helping them to succeed. Employers particularly value the help, support and training from Axia that has helped develop a very strong culture for learning in the workplaces.
- Information, advice, guidance and support are excellent and are key factors in the high success rates for all learners. Learners receive strong individual support from Axia and their employers to develop their key skills and to acquire relevant knowledge.
- Management of training is excellent. Teamwork is outstanding. Staff and managers make very good use of management information to track learners' progress and achievement. However Axia's observations of assessment activities do not lead to effective action planning to improve assessor performance.
- Arrangements for monitoring health, safety and safeguarding are very good. Staff benefit from highly relevant training in safeguarding. In reviews, learners respond very well to discussions around equality, diversity and safeguarding. Learners' knowledge of equality and diversity is good.
- Self-assessment is excellent. The process is inclusive of all staff, employers and partners. Axia makes good use of performance data to inform its judgements. The current self-assessment report is comprehensive and strengths and areas for improvement match those identified by inspectors. Quality improvement arrangements are strong and have improved success rates and the quality of training.

What does Axia need to do to improve further?

- Further improve the professional skills of assessors through a detailed programme of action planning following observations of assessments and effective monitoring of agreed actions.

Literacy and numeracy

Grade 1

Context

24. Currently 68 learners are undertaking literacy and numeracy courses from entry level to level 2 on employers' premises. Of these, 26 learners are on literacy and the remainder are on numeracy courses. Some learners attend these programmes alongside vocational courses. Four learners aged 16 to 24, on engineering and business administration apprenticeship programmes are working towards key skills qualifications.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are outstanding. They are consistently high and well above the national averages. Learners complete their qualifications in a very short timescale. Success rates for learners on literacy courses at levels 1 and 2 and numeracy courses at level 2 are excellent.
- Learners' progression onto higher level literacy, numeracy and vocational courses is outstanding. Learners become highly motivated to continue learning. The rate of progression to higher level courses has continued to improve over the last three years and is currently 85%.
- Learners develop a high level of confidence as well as highly effective literacy and numeracy skills that they apply with enthusiasm in their workplaces. They are very keen to progress further in their jobs and to apply for promotion. Many learners use these skills confidently to support their children with homework and to manage their finances better.
- Teaching and learning are good. Tutors engage learners very skilfully and motivate them to study independently by creating a purposeful atmosphere in the classroom. Tutors give clear explanations of fractions and percentages, and prepare learners well for tests. However, tutors rely too heavily on paper-based learning materials and do not make effective use of information and learning technology (ILT) and work-related materials.
- Tutors conduct rigorous initial assessment to identify learners' needs clearly. Learning plans are negotiated effectively. Learners' progress is reviewed regularly and this helps them progress rapidly.
- The provision meets the needs of learners and employers extremely well. Learners with few or no formal qualifications benefit from accredited learning opportunities in their workplaces at convenient times. They appreciate studying in safe and familiar environments. Employers appreciate the benefits of a better qualified and more confident workforce.
- Axia has outstanding partnerships with a wide range of employers and trade unions. With their help Axia has very effectively promoted and established classes in the workplace. Tutors organise classes skilfully to meet the needs of employers and employees.

- Support for learners is outstanding. Tutors and employers make flexible arrangements for learners to attend in small groups or individually, to work around their specific needs or shift patterns. In lessons, tutors give much individual attention to learners. Tutors and employers work well together to support learners with personal problems.
- Leadership and management are outstanding. Internal communication is very good but is informal. Team work is excellent and operational management is very effective. Staff are well qualified and have highly relevant industrial experience. They attend many programmes and courses to further their professional development.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Axia recruits learners with no previous qualifications very effectively, and motivates them well to achieve. Tutors have a high awareness of equality issues and discuss these with learners during induction. However, tutors do not use lessons effectively to deepen learners' understanding of equality and diversity issues.
- The self-assessment report is inclusive and evaluative. The process for the observation of teaching and learning is sufficiently robust and records of the observations identify appropriate actions for improvement. However, follow-up action is not monitored or reviewed to ascertain whether improvements have been made.

What does Axia need to do to improve further?

- Extend the range and quality of learning materials by making greater use of work-related materials and ILT.
- Increase the impact of the observation of teaching and learning process by ensuring that agreed follow-up action is monitored and reviewed rigorously.

Information about the inspection

25. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by one of the provider's directors as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local Skills Funding Agency, the previous inspection report, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
26. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed on behalf of the provider. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)**Axia Solutions Limited**

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners		
Full-time learners	0	0
Part-time learners	251	251
Overall effectiveness	1	1
Capacity to improve	1	
Outcomes for learners	1	1
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	1	
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	1	
How well do learners progress?	1	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	1	
How safe do learners feel?	1	
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	n/a	
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	n/a	
Quality of provision	1	1
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	1	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	1	
Leadership and management	1	1
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	1	
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	n/a	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	1	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	1	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	1	

*where applicable to the type of provision

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