

Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Ltd

Focused monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 54643

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Last day of inspection: 12 October 2011

Type of provider: Independent training provider

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Ltd (STS) was formed in 1998. Its head office and hairdressing training school are in Mansfield town centre. It has recently moved its administrative office to Edwinstowe. STS provides level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships in retail, warehousing and distribution, business administration, customer service, management, learning and development, and information and communication technology. Since the last inspection, apprenticeships in horticulture and hairdressing are now funded through South Nottinghamshire College which also holds a contract for national vocational qualifications (NVQ) in the workplace that is, in part, subcontracted to STS. All apprentices are employed. One hundred and thirty-three learners are undertaking apprenticeships at level 2 or level 3. Twenty are foundation learners.

Fifty-six learners are male and 97 are female. Eleven learners have additional social and/or learning needs and six are from minority ethnic groups. At the last inspection STL was judged to be satisfactory overall, as was its capacity to improve. Customer service was judged to be good and the other provision inspected was satisfactory.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has STS made in improving self-assessment and development planning to strengthen its provision?	Reasonable progress
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At the last inspection self-assessment and quality improvement planning were satisfactory. Staff involvement in the quality improvement process was good. However, some aspects of quality improvement were underdeveloped. In particular, the collection and use of employers' feedback, and some improvement actions required more precise specifications to allow progress to be measured. The latest self-assessment report, produced in May 2011, clearly uses employers' views as part of the evidence collection process. Formal questionnaires are sent to employers and the resulting feedback provides good evidence to support judgements made in the self-assessment report. Informal feedback is collected frequently from employers through regular phone calls and visits. This is used effectively to help improve the provision. The latest quality improvement plan identifies improvement actions from the self-assessment report well. However, the improvement plan does not identify STS's strengths to ensure that they are maintained or further improved. Feedback to learners and employers from STS about actions and improvements resulting from their input is underdeveloped.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in order to improve success rates within planned timescales? **Reasonable progress**

At the last inspection, outcomes for learners based on success rates up to and including 2008/09, were satisfactory. However, the overall success rate, and success rate for learners completing within agreed timescales for 2009/10, were both well below the national average. The overall success rate for 2010/11 has improved to close to the national average and is now satisfactory. The success rate for learners completing within agreed timescales has improved by nearly 10 percentage points but is still below the national average. Data management, analysis and evaluation have improved. Assessors and managers make good use of learner data at monthly team meetings. Percentage completion rates are monitored systematically and are used effectively to identify learners who are at risk of not completing within agreed timescales. Management of the programme has improved. Strategies to support learners at risk of not completing have recently been introduced but it is too early to judge their effectiveness. A recent move to new premises has improved general communications and provided managers, administration staff and assessors with a clearer daily focus on learners' progress.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in revising the teaching and learning observation process to better support staff? **Reasonable progress**

The teaching and learning observation process has been reorganised successfully to provide staff with more focused feedback and support. The planning of teaching, training and assessment observations is comprehensive and systematic. Planned observations are supplemented by additional unannounced observations that are recorded separately and used effectively to enhance performance. A small team of observers use new standard documentation well to record observations of teaching, training and assessment. Feedback to tutors is comprehensive and informative. Actions identified during observations are recorded and monitored frequently. Clear and relevant improvement targets are set with tutors and discussed at subsequent sessions. All relevant observation documents are reviewed thoroughly to ensure their quality. Good practice is identified well through the observation system and is shared effectively at regular assessor forums. Observed sessions are currently not graded but this is under review. The new observation documentation allows learners and employers to provide feedback on observed sessions but this is not always recorded. Areas for improvement identified through the observation system are not recorded in the overall quality improvement plan.

How much progress has been made to ensure that learners are provided with more detailed information on their performance and that short-term targets are set and effectively monitored?**Reasonable progress**

Tutors have received additional training on how to write effective short-term targets for learners' progress reviews and clear objectives for learners' activity plans. Short-term targets and objectives recorded in progress reviews and activity plans are quality assured systematically by administrators and managers. Comments from the checks are used constructively as feedback to tutors for quality improvement purposes. Progress reviews are observed regularly by the training manager as part of STS's quality improvement system to ensure that the process and content meet company quality standards. Regular quality checks, additional training and feedback to tutors have led to demonstrable improvements in the quality of the short-term targets and learning objectives. Learners now have achievable short-term targets and learning objectives that break down a large task into smaller, more manageable targets or objectives.

What progress has been made to ensure that employers are more effectively involved in their learners' training?**Reasonable progress**

Since the last inspection the training manager has introduced a standard approach for evidence gathering during initial employer visits which is used well to design programmes and provide employers with timely, relevant and constructive feedback on learners' progress. Training programmes are now more flexible and are designed to meet employers' and learners' needs. The timing of assessors' visits is flexible to suit the required activity. Employers contacted during this monitoring visit reported that they were involved well in planning and reviewing their learners' training and assessment and were kept well informed of their progress. The further development of witness testimony for assessment has been effective in facilitating greater employer involvement in learner training but this is not yet fully implemented. Employers reported that they received useful information about the apprenticeship programmes through the good communications they had with STS staff. Some employers reported that they were kept well informed of learners' progress by frequently accessing STS's on-line NVQ recording system.

How much progress has been made in developing assessment practice which is sufficiently judgmental to enable clear assessment decisions to be made?**Significant progress**

At the last inspection, assessment in the workplace was thorough. However, the length of some voice recordings used for assessment purposes was too long and insufficiently judgmental to enable clear assessment decisions to be made. The use of voice recordings for assessment purposes has improved and increased. Assessors and learners are now more confident and more comfortable with the process. Voice recordings are recognised by learners and assessors as being one of the preferred

methods for assessing competence. Assessors plan and prepare voice recording assessments well. They ensure learners and witnesses are focussed on specific task performance criteria and guide conversations through targeted questions effectively during assessments. The additional focus on clear, relevant evidence allows assessors to provide instant feedback to learners about assessment decisions. Learners have a good appreciation of their performance and progress. Internal verifiers give useful feedback to assessors on the effective use of voice recordings during assessments. Learners speak positively about this form of assessment as it reduces reliance on written portfolio evidence and enhances their progress.

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