

Alliance Learning

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		1–5 July 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory-3
Outcomes for learners		Good-2
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-2

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- Success rates are high for all learners and have improved over the last three years. A strong upward momentum has been achieved. Achievement across the provision is consistently above national rates. Good progress has been made to improve the few areas where learners do not succeed within their planned timeframe.
- Managers, teachers and assessors have improved teaching and learning so that it is now good and most learners make very good progress. They acquire skills and knowledge that benefit them and their employers. Mathematics skills are well developed and integrated into learning activities so that learners make good progress in further developing their understanding.
- The high quality of support successfully helps apprentices to remove barriers to their learning and gain new skills. Staff and employers ensure that learners know, understand and take responsibility for their own progress. Learners successfully learn the skills and gain the confidence to become independent learners.
- The promotion of equality and diversity in engineering is particularly strong and successful; as a result, apprentices understand the application of their knowledge very well.
- Highly effective operational management has resulted in significant improvements to the performance in success rates and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- A few areas of Alliance Learning's provision remain underperforming; not all learners complete their programme within the planned timeframe.
- Although teaching learning and assessment are good, too few learning activities are outstanding. Written feedback to learners is not at a consistently high level to enable all learners to improve their skills, particularly in spelling and grammar.
- The self-assessment and quality improvement process is well supported by detailed quality improvement plans. However, managers do not make full use of all the data and information available to identify clearly or measure success criteria within the quality improvement plan.
- Trustees have not yet fully aligned the impact of teaching and learning with their strategic direction or developed their confidence in challenging aspects of underperformance.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Accurately identify, through quality assurance procedures, the best practice across the provision so that all learners benefit from high quality aspirational teaching, coaching and learning. Ensure that all staff know and understand the characteristics of innovative, outstanding teaching and are confident in the use of feedback to learners to confirm that learning has taken place.
- Further improve the development of English skills by closer monitoring of learners' attention to spelling, grammar and punctuation in all areas of the provision.
- Maintain and improve success rates further and particularly in the small number of areas currently underperforming. Accelerate improvement by focussing on improving the completion of learners' frameworks within their planned timescale.
- Review and consolidate all aspects of the quality improvement process to enable rapid and effective identification of issues and trends in performance and subsequent monitoring of actions.
- More sharply align the leadership and strategic direction of the organisation with the impact of teaching and learning by ensuring that operational practices are supported and challenged through close scrutiny and monitoring by the trustees.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
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- Outcomes for learners are good. Overall success rates have continued to improve over the last three years and are above national rates, some significantly. The numbers of apprentices who complete their programme within the planned timeframe have also improved and are above national rates. Success rates for the small number of learners in workplace learning provision are also high, although the number of learners who complete within their planned timescale is low.
- In the few areas where learners do not always complete their programme within the planned timeframe, effective management action has resulted in significant improvement. The provider's monitoring of learners in the current year indicates that a majority of learners have already completed their programme on time.
- Few differences exist between the achievements of apprentices in diverse ethnic groups. Although the gaps are not significant, managers are working effectively to identify and reduce the achievement gap between the performance of males and females. Success rates for a small number of apprentices aged 16 to 18 are slightly lower than other age groups.
- Learners enjoy their studies and demonstrate that they have increased their personal confidence and motivation. Learners develop good skills in mathematics, although the development of English skills is insufficiently reinforced. Employers recognise the need to reinforce these skills and effectively encourage learners to improve further.
- Learners develop good work skills in all subject areas. Learners gain confidence in their skills and improve their employability. Many take on additional responsibilities at work, for example, in business administration, where learners move on to supervisory and junior management roles. Employers value the skills that they develop and can identify the positive impact for their company.
- Learners develop good specialist skills in areas such as defence engineering and aerospace. They perform interesting and demanding tasks in health and social care, childcare and administration. Learners make good progress and understand how the skills they acquire support their future success.

- Learners with additional learning needs achieve as well as their more-able counterparts. Support effectively enables them to work at a similar pace, or catch up where needed. These learners benefit from the good attention to developing their English and mathematics skills. They have a good understanding of the application of these skills within their chosen career and how these might improve their job prospects and overall success.
- Where appropriate, learners make suitable progress from intermediate to advanced apprenticeships, particularly in engineering. Learners' progress to higher-level apprenticeships and on to higher education in engineering is particularly good.
- Attendance at training sessions is generally good. Absences are followed up and appropriate action taken. However, analyses of trends in attendance are not monitored to gain an overview. During the inspection, attendance rates at the training centre were good.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, which is reflected in the good outcomes for learners. The standard of learners' work is high and many progress to higher-level qualifications.
- Engineering learners are challenged to achieve demanding targets. Many engineering learners progress to higher-level courses. Apprentices develop good skills through knowledgeable and skilled teachers and assessors. Teachers use their vocational experience effectively, sharing their knowledge of current manufacturing technologies. Business administration learners develop good employability skills.
- Engineering, health and social care and childcare learners develop good independent learning skills. Engineering learners are confident in the use of specialist information technology to develop their knowledge and understanding and make good use of online learning resources to extend their learning.
- Group and individual coaching sessions are planned well. Learners' individual learning styles are matched to a range of learning activities. For example, in one session, apprentices watched a video rather than read text to gain an understanding of the topic. Learners relate their knowledge and skills to workplace situations very effectively.
- Questioning is used skillfully in most sessions to check and extend learners' understanding. However, in a few sessions, teachers allow more confident learners to dominate discussions. In the best sessions, learners are actively engaged in confirming their knowledge and understanding with good use of interactive whiteboards.
- Learners benefit from frequent visits by their assessors in the workplace at times to suit business' and learners' needs, which helps them progress. Learners requiring additional support receive more frequent visits, which enable them to maintain good progress.
- Reviews of progress and target-setting are both good. Learners and employers are actively involved in setting learners' targets. Learners and their employers have a good understanding of the progress they are making towards achieving all parts of their apprenticeship.
- Individual coaching to develop learners' confidence and skills in mathematics is good. Learners benefit from good contextual teaching. Apprentices recognize the improvements they have made, such as the gain in confidence by engineering learners. They develop a good understanding of using formulae and equations to calculate the length of material needed for a task.
- Learners receive good verbal feedback during learning and assessment sessions, which motivates and helps them improve. The quality of written feedback following assessment is too varied. Some learners receive detailed constructive feedback but others receive insufficient written feedback to help them improve. Business administration and engineering learners' spelling and grammar are not always corrected.
- The recording and monitoring of learners' progress is good. Most learners make good use of the information available in the electronic portfolio to monitor their progress. However, the

recording of progress learners make towards the development of their English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) skills is less well developed.

- Some health and social care learners are challenged to achieve English and mathematics qualifications at a level higher than required by the apprenticeship framework. Overall, learners' development of mathematics skills is particularly good. In learning sessions learners are encouraged to use and improve their mathematics skills, through well-chosen activities. For example, in one session a dental nursing learner demonstrated a good understanding of quantities and volumes when mixing materials.
- The initial identification of learners' additional support needs requires improvement. All learners complete an initial assessment of their English, mathematics and ICT skills at the start of their programme. Not all learners complete diagnostic assessments to identify their precise development needs. Initial assessments do not fully meet the requirements of learners studying functional skills.
- Learners benefit from good, timely career advice and guidance. Learners are given good information detailing career progression opportunities when they start their learning. While on programme they are given good advice by their tutors and assessors, ensuring they continue to work towards the most appropriate qualifications or make timely applications to higher education providers.
- Equality and diversity are promoted well, particularly in engineering. For example, in one learning session engineering learners identified the strengths of prominent figures in society and discussed their learning difficulties or disabilities. Learners develop a good understanding of equality and diversity; they respect each other and have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities. However, in health and social care and childcare, learners' knowledge is not always sufficiently well extended.

Health and social care and early years and playwork

Apprenticeships Other work based learning

Good

- Teaching learning and assessment are good as reflected in the good overall outcomes for learners. In previous years, not enough learners completed their programme within the planned timescale; however, significant improvements are evident in the current year. A minority are due to complete early. The standard of learners' work is good. Learners enjoy their studies and take ownership of their learning and progress through independent research and effective target-setting.
- Learners gain in self-confidence and make good use of training in the workplace. Apprentices develop employability skills through additional courses such as dementia awareness and safe handling of medication. Progression to the next level of study is good, including progress to higher education for nursing, social work or foundation degrees in early years.
- Assessors use their qualifications and vocational experience very effectively to motivate learners. Learners benefit from clear communication of key learning points. Tutors help learners consolidate and extend their learning. Employers are fully involved in monitoring learners' progress and comment on the positive impact of training and the improved professional practice.
- Well-planned coaching sessions provide an interesting variety of activities to engage, motivate and meet individual learners' needs. For example, a learner with dyslexia benefited from card-sorting exercises and illustrations to demonstrate the appropriate storage of information in the care setting.

- The timing of coaching sessions and reviews is flexible to meet individual needs; weekly sessions support those who are at risk of falling behind. Employers appreciate the reliability and flexibility of assessors who visit learners at work during unsociable hours.
- Professional discussions which follow observations of practice provide good evidence of learning. Assessors use questions well, enabling learners to demonstrate the breadth and depth of their understanding. For example, an assessor skilfully enabled a male learner to explain the importance of identifying and respecting a vulnerable service user's wishes while also respecting cultural differences.
- Good use of information and ICT during coaching sessions motivates learners to explore topics and implications for professional practice. For example, a video clip of a recent high-profile case of abuse was used sensitively to promote an in-depth discussion on rights and responsibilities in the caring profession. The majority of learners benefit from using electronic portfolios.
- Good development of functional skills enables learners to value their importance for their work role. For example, mathematics developed through use of a tally chart to identify the range of ethnic groups at a nursery, with different ways to present the findings. The development of English and ICT is good throughout the programme. Tutors routinely indicate learners' spelling and grammatical errors.
- Improvements to initial advice and guidance include helpful reference to a care specialist. As a result learners know that they are on the correct level of programme and potential progression routes. Childcare learners complete a series of case studies during initial assessment to identify very effectively their understanding and experience. Not all learners are set targets to improve their personal, social and career development.
- Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practice. They have a thorough understanding of safeguarding and those for whom they care. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Assessors do not always take advantage of naturally occurring opportunities to extend awareness and the implications for practice during coaching sessions.

Engineering and manufacturing technologies

Apprenticeships

Other work based learning

Good

- Teaching, coaching and learning are good and relate well to the outcomes for learners, which are also good. Tutors have high and realistic expectations for their apprentices and encourage them to develop independent learning techniques. Tutors use a range of engineering software and information and learning technology skilfully to support learning. Apprentices benefit from realistic and achievable aims and objectives and the good range of learning activities.
- Knowledgeable and experienced staff set challenging targets for learners and support them well to achieve. Tutors very effectively encourage peer group support, which encourages apprentices who are making slower progress. Apprentices who complete their tasks early help those that are still completing them. For the most-able apprentices there are opportunities for them to extend their learning through more advanced work. For example, one apprentice manufactured a welding table to use in the fabrication and welding workshop.
- Insufficient use is made of directed questioning during some classroom sessions. Some apprentices dominate question and answer sessions and less-confident learners do not participate sufficiently. Occasionally, lessons do not start promptly because teachers reorganise groups when lower attendance than expected disrupts planned activity.
- Assessment practice is generally good. Verbal feedback to apprentices in practical sessions is accurate, clear and supports learning. However, the quality of feedback and assessment of

portfolio work is less helpful. Some assessors' comments indicate how performance could be improved while in other cases they provide no written feedback at all. Assessors do not routinely check and correct spelling and grammar mistakes.

- Mathematics, skilfully integrated into teaching sessions, ensures apprentices understand the importance of developing their mathematical skills. For example, the matching and pairing of simultaneous equations and their answers on flash cards is particularly good. In functional skills mathematics sessions, apprentices develop understanding and confidence that clearly sets mathematics into context with engineering applications. For example, the use of bend allowances to calculate material length.
- Employers are caring and supportive; they have high expectations of their apprentices, and take an active part in progress reviews. Employers help learners to plan their learning and support apprentices with guidance that speeds their progress. Very effective use of resources promotes learning and skills development. Apprentices make good use of their employers' modern engineering technology to develop highly relevant vocational and employability skills.
- Progress reviews are detailed and thorough. Progress is summarised thoroughly and short-term, relevant and measurable targets are set. Employers, apprentices and reviewers work closely together to agree and ensure all involved know clearly what needs to be completed. For those apprentices using the electronic portfolio, tracking and monitoring is particularly thorough.
- Frequent advice and guidance sessions effectively support planning the next steps in apprentices' training programmes. For example, the careful advice and matching of additional units of study effectively supported an apprentice who changed job role. Encouragement and support for apprentices who are making slow progress successfully removes barriers to learning.
- Apprentices feel safe and are encouraged to adopt safe working practices. The reinforcement of equality and diversity during reviews is particularly good. The detailed recording of apprentices' knowledge of a range of aspects that are relevant to them and their workplace demonstrates a high standard of understanding by the apprentices.

Business administration and customer service

Apprenticeships

Other work based learning

Good

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good, which is reflected in the overall outcomes which are also good and well above the national rates. The performance of advanced apprentices is outstanding. However, for current learners the overall success rates are declining but remain above the national rate.
- Assessors engage, motivate and set expectations for learners very well. They use a relevant range of activities to further their knowledge and understanding. Some learners attend day-release workshops and develop a broader understanding of topics for the technical certificate and workplace practices as well as for functional skills. However, guided discussion sessions are less effective as assessors do not sufficiently question learners to check their level of understanding.
- Learners enjoy their learning and are enthusiastic. Learners develop self-confidence and improve their workplace skills. The good range of administrative tasks they complete enables them to be much more proficient administrators. Learners' improved communication skills support customer service requirements more precisely.
- Assessors are qualified and experienced and use their skills very effectively to support learners. Learners know their expectations, negotiate their own objectives and make good progress. Assessors carry out frequent and very effective assessment visits convenient to learners' and employers' work commitments. Assessors use a range of appropriate methods. Employers participate in setting objectives, planning tasks and monitoring learners' progress.

- Learners receive good feedback, with helpful advice on how to progress and improve. Extension tasks enable apprentices to continue developing their learning. Assessors use appropriate technology to enable them to support the assessment process. The use of the electronic portfolio provides good tracking and monitoring of progress. However, this is not fully utilised by learners to enable them to track their own progress and become more independent learners.
- The development of apprentices' English and mathematics skills is effective and they use these skills well in their working environments. Learners develop good communication skills by constant reading, writing and composing documents such as reports and letters. Apprentices' mathematics skills improve by dealing with calculations of value added tax and discounts. However, assessors do not routinely correct spelling, punctuation and grammar in written assignments.
- Initial and diagnostic assessments ensure apprentices are on the correct level for functional skills. Well-integrated functional skills support learners' understanding. Specialist staff provide good support for learners should they require it to help them achieve their qualifications.
- Learners receive good information, advice and guidance at induction and during progress reviews to enable them to make informed choices about progression opportunities. They are clear about what is available to them and their next steps.
- Learners have a good understanding of equality and diversity and treat others with respect. Learners clearly understand who to approach if they have any safeguarding issues.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leadership and management are good with particularly strong operational management. Managers have effectively implemented a number of successful actions that have resulted in significant improvements in success rates and the quality of provision. Trustees, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and managers are ambitious to improve the provision further. Recent appointments to improve the challenge for teaching and learning and quality in health and care demonstrate this. However, there is too little staff capacity for the delegation of responsibility for key aspects of provision across subject areas to support senior managers.
- Senior managers and staff at all levels clearly understand the company's key priorities. The CEO and board have extensive links with local employers, training groups and other stakeholders. Good use of these links has raised the company's profile for the benefit of learners, such as participation in the World Skills Challenge. Managers and staff have a good understanding of the needs of employers and apprentices and respond effectively to meet the training needs of local employers by adapting qualifications appropriately.
- The level of challenge and support from the board of trustees has increased in the last year but does not have a sharp enough focus on the impact of teaching and learning and underperformance. Detailed reports on the performance of training programmes and the quality of teaching and learning are now produced regularly but there is little written evidence of leaders' responses. Recently, three board members have taken on the role of champions for teaching and learning, safeguarding and equality and diversity and begun to work with managers.
- Alliance Learning has successfully improved the quality of teaching and learning through significant investment in staff training and information and learning technology infrastructure. The observation of teaching and learning is effective and covers all key areas of learning and assessment. Some observation grades are still overgenerous and feedback does not always precisely identify the elements of good or outstanding teaching or make enough reference to learning.
- A highly rigorous approach to performance management, particularly in health and social care, has resulted in rapid improvements to success rates. Managers and staff make good use of data to monitor performance against the key targets of overall success rates and those gained within planned timescales. Managers effectively challenge staff in individual monthly meetings held to

review the progress of learners but in a minority of cases the actions are unclear and insufficiently monitored.

- Managers have a very clear understanding of the quality of provision through a range of measures including the use of data, internal quality reviews, team meetings and feedback from learners and employers. Detailed quality improvement plans for each area and aspect of learning are very effective in promoting action in specific areas for improvement. Quality improvement tools are not always used to ensure that identified trends in performance are monitored. As a result the sharing of good practice or implementation of wider reaching actions is sometimes limited.
- Self-assessment is now more evaluative but makes insufficient use of intelligence from quality assurance measures. References to teaching and learning are not fully developed. Reported strengths are often normal practice and the report does not reflect the in-depth understanding of the quality of provision that managers clearly have.
- Alliance Learning meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. All learners are risk assessed at the start of their programmes and any potential problems are identified, learners supported and details recorded. The recording and monitoring of any incidents is thorough; however, no overview or analysis of these reports is carried out to identify emerging trends. All staff, including the trustees, receive regular training in safeguarding but the trustees do not routinely monitor reports on safeguarding issues.
- Alliance promotes equality and diversity effectively and has a number of initiatives to improve the recruitment of underrepresented groups including working with a local school for Muslim girls and events to encourage females into engineering. Regular and frequent updating and training provide staff with a good level of awareness. Learners have a good awareness of equality and diversity and most can apply their understanding effectively at work.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)**Alliance learning Limited**

Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	Apprenticeships	Other work- based learning
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2
Outcomes for learners	2	2	2
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	2	2

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Health and social care	2
Early years and playwork	2
Engineering	2
Manufacturing technologies	2
Administration	2
Customer Service	2

Additional socio-economic information

Alliance Learning is a private training provider, limited by guarantee, and a registered charity, managed by a group of member companies. A board of 10 members support the strategic direction of the organisation. Alliance Learning's head office and main training centre is situated in Horwich near Bolton. In the North West region in 2001, people from black and minority ethnic groups comprised 11% of the local population. The Indian community is the largest ethnic group. The number of young people achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including mathematics and English, was 59.6% in 2011 compared to the national average of 58.9%. The proportion of people with a National Vocational Qualification at level 3 or above is 46.4%, which is below the national rate.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector	Ian Smith HMI
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Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the Operations Executive as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all of the provision at the provider. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject areas listed in the report above.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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