

QA Ltd

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		21–25 October 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Outstanding-1
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
Outcomes for learners		Outstanding-1
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Outstanding-1
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Outstanding-1

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is outstanding because:

- Apprentices develop outstanding levels of skills in systems, networking, software and web development, sales, customer service and project management for their own benefit and that of their employers. Young apprentices develop exceptional personal, social and employability skills to secure their careers in new industries of the future.
- Excellent information, advice and guidance help, guide and support apprentices to engage, enjoy, and progress from the very first contact to the end of their programme and beyond. Many apprentices have chosen apprenticeships in preference to university education, knowing that they have the option to use these skills as a stepping stone to university education.
- Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment, both in theory lessons and at work, support apprentices in making effective use of their academic skills to acquire high level vocational skills. In a few cases the quality of support from workplace mentors requires improvement and not all apprentices have a high-quality learning experience.
- Exceptionally well qualified, experienced and enthusiastic staff motivate and support apprentices to acquire skills and employment in a growing industry. Through exceptional partnerships with employers, QA Ltd (QA) designs and delivers a model of excellence in apprenticeship training that has brought significant benefits to the United Kingdom economy by creating over 3,000 new jobs. QA is at the forefront of developing apprenticeships with employers, including Microsoft, in the digital media sector.
- Leadership and management of QA are outstanding, with a highly successful track record of over 30 years providing learning in the commercial sector. QA treats apprentices on a par with its professional fee-paying customers and offers them highly professional training in world-class apprentice programmes.
- QA is relentless in its focus on quality improvement. Feedback from lesson observation is highly effective in helping tutors to improve their practice. Assessors improve their practice through self-reflection and after detailed feedback from managers. However the feedback is not sufficiently focussed on improving assessors' teaching skills.
- Apprentices use their sound knowledge of equality and diversity to design programmes, projects and processes to meet the needs of diverse communities in society.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Further extend outstanding teaching, learning and assessment into all subject areas, particularly in administration, by:
 - improving the skills and qualification levels of buddies and mentors at work
 - providing assessors with the same detailed feedback and support, and develop them, as well as the tutors, after observations
 - better sharing of best practice within QA.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for apprentices	Outstanding
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- Outcomes for apprentices are outstanding. Almost all apprentices develop excellent levels of personal, social and employability skills and make strong progress. Apprentices make rapid progress in theory lessons and apply their knowledge well to benefit their employers, for example in developing websites and answering calls to resolve technical problems for customers and employers. Higher apprentices use their excellent knowledge and skills confidently to manage complex projects for multi-national employers in the energy and airline industries.
- Advanced and higher level apprentices develop excellent knowledge and skills in programming, configuring networks, trouble-shooting hardware and software problems for the users. Software apprentices develop high-quality webpages for the customers in the very early stages of their programme. Apprentices on bespoke programmes with large multi-national employers make very strong progress from their starting points. Their work exceeds the requirements of the apprenticeship framework.
- Advanced and higher apprentices in sales, customer services and project management make excellent progress. Current apprentices on administration programmes are making expected or better progress, often gaining valuable additional qualifications that enhance their skills further and improve their employment prospects. However, a small minority of apprentices in administration have made slow progress because of frequent staff changes in the past.
- Apprentices enjoy learning immensely. They fully appreciate the value of studying science, mathematics and English at school to acquire first rate vocational skills. QA has placed high numbers of apprentices successfully into new jobs. Almost all apprentices gain permanent employment with their employers and many get promotions.
- Young apprentices develop personal learning and thinking skills very well. All apprentices are well aware of the importance of skills in English and mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT). They use these skills very well in their daily work to present a professional image. As part of their involvement in the community, apprentices take their social responsibility seriously and promote apprenticeship, for example in an all-girls school or to particular groups.
- Almost all apprentices stay on their programmes, attend their work and training courses promptly and complete their qualifications in the planned period. They take pride in their work and always present a professional and business-like image to their customers, treating them with courtesy and respect. Qualification success rates are high and well above the national rates for advanced and higher apprentices in systems and networking; they are good, and improving rapidly, for apprentices on software development and for bespoke programmes.
- Most apprentices deliver a high standard of work for their employers and exceed expectations, often finding better ways of working and reducing costs. Apprentices become more versatile and are able to command higher salaries and better conditions in the employment market.

- QA has been very effective at increasing the proportion of female apprentices in ICT for practitioners, an employment sector that has very few women. Currently, almost 20% of the overall apprentices are women, including a very high percentage of women of Pakistani heritage.
- Women apprentices perform better than their male counterparts and young apprentices aged 16 to 18 perform better than their older counterparts do. QA is fully aware of these differences and is taking well-considered and effective action to narrow these small achievement gaps. The very small numbers of apprentices who need additional support make equally good progress to other apprentices.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding. Assessors, tutors and workplace supervisors have very high expectations of their apprentices, reflected in the outstanding outcomes for learners and high success rates across the provision. Apprentices make very rapid progress towards completing their planned qualifications, while demonstrating very high levels of professional performance in work.
- Assessors and tutors use high levels of skills to deliver outstanding theory sessions as a foundation for learning at work. Carefully designed training combines theory and practice very well and accommodates learners' work priorities very effectively. QA delivers highly regarded bespoke programmes well, including commercially-demanded Microsoft Technical Associates qualifications from which apprentices benefit.
- Training in the workplace is exceptionally good. Workplace supervisors provide good support to apprentices; however, in a few cases, the quality of this support requires improvement as currently the supervisors do not have any formal training or qualifications for their role to provide a consistently high-quality experience.
- Assessors and tutors are highly qualified and use their substantial industrial experience well to support apprentices during teaching sessions and progress reviews. Assessors visit apprentices frequently and progress reviews are thorough. They use good questioning techniques to challenge apprentices to reflect on their experience and develop, refine and apply their skills in the workplace.
- Workplace supervisors routinely contribute to apprentices' reviews, providing constructive feedback on their performance and progress, helpfully blending on- and off-the-job training. Apprentices find the feedback they receive highly motivating, make rapid progress and seek to improve their performance further.
- The use of initial assessment overall is good. Staff make excellent use of the findings of the broad range of initial assessments to plan to meet individual apprentices' needs. The tests are completed over an extended period to thoroughly assess apprentices' aptitude and skills for the vocational area. The introduction of apprentices to their learning programme over an extended period is beneficial. Having identified the additional needs of apprentices very quickly, assessors support them well to ensure they make rapid progress in their learning.
- Assessment practices are very good. Portfolios contain a wide variety of diverse evidence of apprentices' skills. Assessors give prompt, constructive feedback on assessed work, with clear guidance on how apprentices can improve their performance. Assessors expect all apprentices to complete a large number of challenging tasks prior to their next review, regardless of competing demands. Despite the very good guidance provided during reviews, a minority of staff, particularly in business administration, do not record the targets precisely.
- The standard of apprentices' work is outstanding. For example, one learner successfully project-managed filming on a flight from Heathrow to Los Angeles, including adhering to the complex health and safety and disability requirements.
- All staff reinforce the importance of English, mathematics and ICT skills well throughout each apprentice's programme. They identify spelling and punctuation errors in learners' work well and

require apprentices to correct these in detailed progress reviews. The very few apprentices who need to gain qualifications in functional skills obtain useful support and guidance to practise using online materials and check their written work. QA has introduced further consolidation of these skills through a new initial assessment system to diagnose apprentices' functional skills.

- Apprentices receive excellent advice and guidance. Staff work exceptionally well with apprentices and employers to match and place apprentices with the right employer. Apprentices develop highly effective curriculum vitae and first rate interview skills that help them succeed in securing employment with their selected employer and a very confident start to their working life. Staff support all apprentices exceptionally well to gain additional qualifications that enhance their performance in work and equip them to quickly secure promoted roles with their employers.
- Most apprentices demonstrate a good, and often outstanding, understanding of equality and diversity. They apply their understanding exceptionally well within the projects they complete at work. However, assessors use a limited range of strategies to encourage apprentices to consider the implications of equality and diversity within work roles during progress reviews.

ICT for practitioners	
Apprenticeships	Outstanding

- The outstanding quality of teaching, learning and assessment leads to outstanding outcomes for apprentices. Apprentices gain highly desirable qualifications in a challenging timescale and develop and apply new high level skills in national and multi-national companies. Tutors are very knowledgeable and experienced within the information technology industry. They use their knowledge very well to relate their classroom teaching to real life situations. Tutors have a good rapport with apprentices, using humour well to teach very abstract topics.
- QA staff and employers have very high expectations of apprentices and they treat them as professionals. Apprentices rise to the challenge and behave as accomplished, dependable and confident professionals. Apprentices are fully appreciative of the highly effective care and support they receive from their employers and staff. Although workplace mentors do not have formal qualifications, most carry out these duties willingly, often inspiring and motivating apprentices.
- In the classroom sessions, apprentices make good progress against the identified objectives. Apprentices develop skills in, for example, programming and software development, configuring networks and web development, and enjoy the challenging tasks they are set. Classroom-based sessions have a good balance of theoretical and practical activity. Peer assessment and peer support are very effective.
- Tutors are well aware of learners' individual needs and they plan lessons using carefully chosen activities and questioning techniques. Inspirational teaching, learning and assessment engage apprentices exceptionally well and lead to excellent attainment. Tutors are skilled at helping apprentices to develop personal, learning, and thinking skills well, although not all tutors make apprentices aware of these valuable skills. A very small minority of tutors use a narrow range of teaching methods that result in the loss of concentration and limited attainment.
- Teaching, learning, and assessment highlight the importance of spelling and grammar. Tutors reinforce skilfully to the apprentices the importance of using grammatically correct English by producing assignments and handouts with errors for apprentices to correct. QA has recently introduced an online package to develop further apprentices' skills in English and mathematics, although it is too early to judge its effectiveness.
- Assessment practices are outstanding. Assessors make excellent use of questioning techniques to enable apprentices to demonstrate their very high levels of knowledge and skills. This also

supports development of independent learning skills. Apprentices are able to link on- and off-the-job training well through the development of technical terms and understanding of theoretical aspects.

- Tutors and assessors provide good written and verbal feedback on assessments promptly, which helps apprentices to improve the standards of their work. The marking of assessed work provides constructive feedback to support further development of knowledge and skills. Verbal feedback during lessons is highly effective.
- Initial advice and guidance are outstanding, helping apprentices through all stages of their stay with QA. The induction provides very good information on qualifications and employers’ requirements that makes apprentices aware of the standards they need to reach. Staff identify the apprentices’ starting points promptly, after a thorough initial assessment of their aptitude and skills in English, ICT and mathematics. Apprentices receive highly effective support to devise an individual learning plan and support to ensure timely completion of qualifications.
- Apprentices demonstrate good understanding of equality and diversity. Their portfolios include various scenarios to encourage them to develop their knowledge of equality and diversity. Almost all assessors routinely integrate equality and diversity in assessment and reviews. Examples include how to tackle bullying, harassment, discrimination, and consideration of accessibility for wheelchair users as part of writing software packages to control automatic doors.

Administration	
Apprenticeships	Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, reflecting the greater majority of apprentices who make the expected or better progress towards achievement of their learning goals and qualifications. Apprentices benefit from good training, shadowing and support from experienced assessors and their highly committed employers.
- Apprentices make good use of high-quality external online training materials to develop independent learning and research skills. This helps them to achieve additional valuable qualifications, such as Microsoft software packages, and to become multi-skilled. Assessors provide apprentices with good informal coaching to develop their knowledge for technical aspects of business.
- The quality of on-the-job training from employers is high. Apprentices become highly proficient in their job roles and assume greater responsibility in their workplaces. In only a few months, one apprentice has expanded work responsibilities into customer-facing sales and marketing from a basic administration role. Apprentices pay due attention to using English, mathematics and ICT skills well to produce high-quality work.
- Employers are very closely involved in designing the programmes, including choosing units from the higher level apprenticeship programme. They contribute well to the progress reviews of apprentices, validating their successes and identifying opportunities for them to display their skills.
- Assessors use skilful questioning and good observations to provide good assessment for apprentices. Verbal feedback to apprentices is detailed and developmental, helping them to improve their work. By following useful guidance on evidence gathering, apprentices demonstrate their competence well across a range of units, criteria and assessment outcomes.
- Apprentices produce a broad range of evidence, including training logs or independent learning activities, and this helps them to progress well. Portfolios contain good quality evidence that demonstrates good levels of skill development. Apprentices suffered delays in assessment and training because of frequent staff changes in the past. QA has since appointed two well-qualified

and highly experienced assessors who have been instrumental in improving assessment planning and practice.

- All apprentices are progressing well through their qualifications and expect to complete their framework in the planned time. However, target setting and, in some cases, the recording of targets require improvement for a small number of apprentices. Apprentices would benefit from setting precise short-term and interim targets that will create a sense of urgency, achievement and reinforce the real-work environment.
- Apprentices receive very good pre-apprentice support and guidance to help place them with the right employers. The apprentices develop high-quality curriculum vitae. The highly effective employment preparation training gives apprentices the skills to prepare for, and excel, at interviews. Apprentices receive a thorough work-based induction that introduces them well to the workplace, although a few apprentices did not receive timely induction to their qualifications.
- Apprentices develop a good awareness of their rights and responsibilities at work, including wider aspects of equality and diversity. Assessors reinforce this awareness through assessment review visits. Apprentices further develop their understanding by engaging in thought-provoking discussions.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Leadership and management are outstanding. QA has used its 30 years of experience of providing commercial training exceptionally well to develop new qualifications that fill skills gaps in the labour market. The ICT for practitioners apprenticeship is the world's first programme of this kind and on this scale. Through their pioneering work, QA has created exceptional opportunities in employment for their apprentices.
- Partnerships with world-leading employers and organisations are a model of excellence. QA works exceptionally closely with them to provide first class on- and off-the-job training and work experience. Working with vendors, including Microsoft, HP and Cisco, QA apprentices provide specialist skills and support to small and large employers in the information technology field. Some of the large-scale and high-profile employers include customers such as Capgemini, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and other prominent government departments, British Gas and Atos.
- Managers have invested heavily to employ a highly experienced 'resourcer' team that prepares apprentices well for employment and matches them very carefully to employers. The highly valued team of youth engagement and information, advice and guidance workers supports the apprentices throughout their stay on the programme and beyond. They work exceptionally well to develop community responsibility programmes, involving apprentices to promote apprenticeship in schools and to employers.
- QA has a robust and systematic management and support structure, with sufficient numbers of well-qualified tutors and assessors who provide excellent help and support to apprentices to achieve outstanding outcomes. Communications throughout the provider and with the employers are good, with effective formal and informal meetings and reports. Apprentices enjoy learning from well-resourced centres and benefit from using very high quality learning resources.
- QA successfully equips and supports staff with the up-to-date skills and knowledge to provide high-quality learning for the apprentices. Managers provide specific training to deal with the findings of the observations of teaching and learning to improve tutors' skills. Staff benefit from highly beneficial continuous professional development, and supportive and rigorous appraisals. Managers support their staff admirably, often reducing their workload to give them space to hone their skills before assuming their full responsibilities.
- Observations of teaching and learning focus appropriately on learning; they are rigorous and are highly effective at assisting the improvement of the provision. The judgements are accurate, but observers have tended to grade too harshly. Inspectors gave a greater number of higher grades to reflect the provision realistically. Feedback to tutors is detailed and they use it well to improve

their teaching. Assessors take it upon themselves to improve their practice. However, managers have not applied rigour in the assessors' observation to the same extent as tutors.

- Curriculum management is outstanding. Outstanding pre-apprenticeship support, administrative processes to monitor and measure apprentices' progress, and actions to deal with problems are swift, strong and very effective. QA has taken strong action to deal with the previously high staff turnover of assessors in administration. Attendance and punctuality are very good.
- QA is exemplary in involving employers in assessment and curriculum planning to deliver exceptionally high quality apprenticeship programmes. Progression opportunities are good, with a suitable range and breadth of levels to enhance apprentices' further development. QA provides its commercial training at highly discounted rates for their users to enhance their career or business aspirations to drive future business and boost the economy.
- QA understands businesses very well and is responsive to their needs. For example, it has correctly identified the need to offer formal qualifications to work-based mentors so they can better support apprentices. At the request of employers, it expanded its provision in business administration. QA is fully aware of the limited availability for apprentices at intermediate level. The provider has plans to develop their offer of apprenticeship education and employment to learners on employability study programmes, traineeships and apprenticeships at intermediate level.
- The self-assessment report is analytical and evaluative but unduly self-critical. Managers use a broad range of reliable information including performance data, observations of teaching and learning, the learners' voice and employers' views to produce a succinct and accurate account of its provision. The quality improvement plan is comprehensive. Managers use it very well to set, monitor and achieve challenging improvements targets. QA has made significant improvements to the provision since its previous inspection as a subcontractor.
- QA meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. Safeguarding policies are comprehensive and cover all activities. QA diligently checks the backgrounds of all staff. Staff have a good understanding of matters relating to the protection of children, young people and vulnerable adults. They recognise and deal with problems promptly. Staff deal effectively with any matter related to safeguarding of apprentices and know the referral arrangements should the need arise.
- Apprentices are safe and protected well from bullying and harassment. QA makes good arrangements for apprentices with complex problems to participate in learning. They provide exceptional support where appropriate, for example in referral to counselling services, and with respect to other social and domestic problems encountered by young people.
- Staff and apprentices have a very good awareness and knowledge of equality and diversity and they demonstrate respect for their tutors, assessors, employers, peers and customers. QA conducts a very effective analysis of engagement and achievement levels by different groups of apprentices in order to identify and tackle underachievement by particular groups.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

QA Ltd

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

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
ICT for practitioners	1
Administration	2

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider							
Age range of learners	16-18							
Approximate number of all apprentices over the previous full contract year	Full-time: 717							
	Part-time: 0							
Principal/CEO	Mr Ben Pike							
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected							
Website address	http://www.qa.com/							
Provider information at the time of the inspection								
Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
Total number of apprentices(excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Full-time	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Part-time	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		N/A			
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	N/A	N/A	603	272	237	247		
Number of apprentices aged 14-16	3							
Full-time	N/A							
Part-time	N/A							
Number of community learners	N/A							
Number of employability learners	N/A							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	None							

Contextual information

QA provides commercially-funded learning services of 500,000 delegate days each year to over 6,000 customers, including 80% of the FTSE 100 companies, from 25 training centres in England, Scotland and Ireland. QA has been providing technical training to industry for over 30 years.

In 2008, QA diversified its provision to provide publicly-funded apprenticeship programmes as a subcontractor of Redwood Education and Skills Ltd. QA secured a direct contract in February 2012. Apprenticeship programmes constitute 10% of the overall provision of QA. All apprentices are employed. Apprentices on ICT for practitioners programmes, that constitute 81% of the provision, access off-the-job training from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Leeds, Stockport, Birmingham, Reading, alough and London; whilst apprentices on other provision benefit from training on their employers' premises.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Harmesh Manghra HMI

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the apprenticeship quality manager as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and the quality improvement plan, and the previous inspection report as a subcontractor of Redwood Education and Skills Ltd. 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 apprentices 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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