

# Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd

## Independent learning provider

<b>Inspection dates</b>		11–14 March 2014
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b>	<b>Requires improvement-3</b>
	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory-3
Outcomes for learners		Requires improvement-3
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Requires improvement-3
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Requires improvement-3

### Summary of key findings for learners

#### This provider requires improvement because:

- Success rates for classroom-based learners are below those of similar learners nationally.
- Apprentices do not all have the opportunity to attend off-the-job learning sessions to help them develop their knowledge and understanding.
- The proportion of good or better learning sessions is not high enough.
- Assessors and tutors do not consistently plan learning to meet the needs of all learners, including the setting of measurable and specific targets to track progress.
- Not all apprentices are aware of their individual apprenticeship pathway requirements. Initial and on-going advice and guidance are insufficient to reinforce their understanding whilst they are on their training programmes.
- Too many adult apprentices are not benefitting from an apprenticeship programme to inspire and challenge them above their current level of competence. Assessors focus too much on assessment rather than learning and development.

#### This provider has the following strengths:

- Overall success rates and completion within the planned timescale on apprenticeship programmes have been above the national rate for the last three years.
- Learners develop good workplace and employability skills.
- Assessors, tutors and managers are highly effective in supporting learners to ensure they achieve their learning aims.
- Managers have improved strategic planning and quality assurance aspects well, resulting in improvements since the previous inspection.

## Full report

### What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve the rate at which classroom-based learners make progress and achieve by ensuring learners are completing appropriate courses that meets their needs and progression requirements.
- Increase the number of good or better learning sessions by providing effective, well-planned off-the-job learning for apprentices to enable them to share experiences with their peers and develop a deeper understanding of the subject.
- Further develop the use of information learning technology resources used in the classroom and with apprentices in the workplace. Rapidly increase the use and understanding of the recently introduced electronic portfolio.
- Improve the initial advice and guidance for adult apprentices to ensure they fully understand their course requirements. Ensure adult learners are on courses appropriate to their needs and also to the requirements of their employers.

### Inspection judgements

<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	Requires improvement
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- The proportion of apprentices who achieve their qualification has been above the national rate for the last three years. The majority of apprentices achieve well, however the few apprentices aged 19-24 do not achieve as well and success rates for this age group are below national rates.
- Both long and short classroom-based success rates declined in 2012/13 to below the national rate following good performance in 2011/12. Indications for in-year success rates for 2013/14 classroom based provision, following management interventions, are showing improvements. Where courses are provided by two subcontractors, success rates are above the national rate.
- Success rates for information communication and technology (ICT) learners and apprentices have been above the national rate for the last two years. However, success rates for learners on a teaching assistants programme fell in 2012/13 to below those of similar learners nationally. Actions to improve the success rate on this programme are having a positive impact on the outcomes of current learners.
- Significant achievement gaps exist between male and female learners and between 16–18 year olds and adult learners. Those learners who declare an additional learning need do not achieve as well as their peers. Management interventions to close achievement gaps are recent; therefore it is too early to judge the full impact.
- The proportion of learners who achieve qualifications in English and mathematics has improved marginally over time. Learners and apprentices appreciate the need for English and mathematics which enhance their employability skills and work-place opportunities. A few apprentices are encouraged to achieve functional skills qualifications at a higher level than required by their apprenticeship framework.
- Learners enjoy their learning experience and develop good employability skills valued by employers. Skill development enables apprentices to progress in their workplace. Good vocational partnerships with a wide range of employers and community groups help learners gain valuable practical and job related skills.
- Many apprentices work in good work environments with appropriate developmental opportunities. However, in too many cases assessors do not challenge apprentices sufficiently well to exploit these opportunities and develop their skills even further. Many apprentices are not fully aware of the requirements of their programmes. Too much concentration on

assessment outcomes does not enable them to develop individual understanding, personal and social skills, or make the progress they are capable of sufficiently.

- A large majority of apprentices who achieve have positive destinations and outcomes, and most continue or gain employment. The majority of learners who withdraw themselves from programmes have a positive destination and gain employment or carry out other training opportunities. However, of those learners that achieve on classroom-based qualifications, few find employment or continue with their studies. Staff are aware of the need to track the destinations of leavers more effectively.

### The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is inconsistent across courses and this reflects the variable success rates for learners. Learners and apprentices make steady progress, and tutors and assessors respond promptly to give good support to learners who fall behind on their planned times for achievement. Learners develop good employability and work skills. However, some courses, such as teaching assistants, have poor retention rates.
- For subcontracted courses teaching and learning are mostly good and learners are supported well. For example, learners with social problems receive good support to succeed at 5 Stars Recruitment.
- Tutors and assessors challenge and support learners very effectively to ensure they achieve their qualification or equip themselves better for work. They give their time generously and facilitate the good support from employers. Assessors encourage learners to achieve a qualification in English or mathematics that is above the level required for their apprenticeship. Learners on employability courses are greatly encouraged and motivated by the availability of a training grant on completion of their course which leads to a recognised qualification for specific jobs.
- The better classroom sessions are very stimulating and interesting and meet the needs of a diverse range of learners. Tutors use questioning well to challenge learners. Tutors bring English, ICT and employability skills together well so learners can transfer and use these skills in a work or everyday life setting. In less effective sessions, tutors' questioning is not sufficiently probing to develop learners' thinking. Tutors do not always use resources effectively to meet the needs of learners.
- Apprentice programmes, particularly for adults, are not focused sufficiently on developing apprentices' learning and skills beyond what is required for assessment purposes. Apprentices are not always encouraged to build on the skills they already have from working with their employer for many years and they are not sufficiently encouraged to go beyond their current level of competence. Assessors do not make use of the many opportunities for peer and group learning where there are several apprentices with an employer. Some apprentices have to rely on online resources for their planned learning and find it difficult to learn effectively in this way.
- The majority of apprentices have received the recent introduction of electronic portfolios well, benefitting from immediate feedback and a better understanding of progress towards their qualification. However, staff and apprentices have not sufficiently developed the skills and understanding to make full use of the recently introduced system.
- Assessors make good use of the assessment of learners' starting points to plan learning, assessment and set targets. In classroom teaching, some tutors make good use of learning styles assessment to plan learning. However, in English and mathematics, although tutors have a good understanding of learners' individual needs, they do not convert this into sufficiently detailed action plans to track learners' progress. Apprentices relying on paper-based portfolios are not clear about where they are in their progress towards their qualification.
- Apprentices receive appropriate frequent assessment and feedback from their assessors to ensure they know if they have met the required standards for their qualification. Some assessors mark apprentices' written work very well, correcting for spelling and grammar, so learners are

clear on how they can improve their skills and knowledge. However, not all tutors consistently do this for all learners or apprentices.

- Learners develop English skills well on ICT courses and in some family learning. However, in classroom teaching, tutors are not sufficiently effective at supporting learners to develop their mathematics to help them achieve their goals. Not all tutors and assessors are skilled or experienced enough to effectively challenge and develop the functional skills of learners. For some apprentices, assessors leave the development of their functional skills to the end of the programme and so do not effectively integrate these with their learning in the work place.
- Information, advice and guidance require improvement to ensure all apprentices understand what their programme involves, the progression routes open to them and alternative courses that could meet their needs better. Some adult apprentices do not fully understand the elements of the programme or that they are on an apprenticeship programme.
- There are some good examples of equality and diversity in classroom teaching but this is not consistently the case in all teaching. In spite of some excellent resources, tutors do not always effectively develop learners’ understanding and appreciation of equality and diversity. In a very small minority of cases apprentices’ understanding of safeguarding is weak. Tutors do not always effectively plan to meet the diverse needs of learners.

<b>ICT for users</b>	
<b>Apprenticeships</b>	Good
<b>Employability</b>	

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, which is reflected in the high success rates for apprenticeship programmes that have improved over the last three years and are now well above national rates for completion within planned end dates. Success rates for short programmes for classroom-based learners on employability courses in 2012/13 were at the national rate.
- Apprentices are developing new ICT skills which they are able to transfer to the workplace. For example, in one workshop session adult apprentices were learning how to use the mail merge facility in word processing to enable them to reply to automated processes in their job role. Classroom-based learning is highly effectively in developing learners’ word processing skills to improve employability through production of curriculum vitae (CV) and letters.
- In the better sessions, apprentices are encouraged and challenged to link new learning and skills to improving their own performance in their job roles. In a small minority of sessions, questioning does not sufficiently challenge learners to enable them to extend their knowledge.
- Support for learners is good. Assessors develop good, caring and supportive relationships with apprentices to help them achieve their goals. Additional support for apprentices between planned visits via email and telephone is good and helps to keep progress on track.
- Planning for learning is inconsistent. In classroom-based learning, planning is highly effective with activities and exercises developing learners’ employability, English and team building skills, in addition to their ICT skills, well.
- For most apprentices there is regular structured off-the-job training through the delivery of planned workshop activities. However, the lack of off-the-job structured group training for some apprentices is slowing progress. A few apprentices find elements of the apprenticeship programme difficult using independent learning resources.
- Assessment of learners’ starting points is effective and used appropriately to ensure they have the prerequisite skills to complete successfully the programme they undertake. Short-term learning goals that are used well as part of the review process and updated regularly help most apprentices achieve their qualifications in a timely manner. However, a few apprentices are not

always aware of their overall performance on programme, as summary tracking documentation is not effectively completed.

- For a few apprentices in the current year there have been changes in assessors, where apprentices have fallen behind target. Remedial action to get apprentices back on target, with extra assessment visits and individual schemes of work, has increased progress. A new electronic portfolio, introduced recently to address the tracking and monitoring of apprentices' progress, is not yet fully effective.
- Feedback to learners is good. Learners receive regular feedback, both verbally and written, which informs them of their progress and how to improve. Annotated assessed work identifies spelling and grammatical errors well and helps apprentices' understand how they have met the assessment criteria.
- Learners develop their English skills well, for example using complex sentences in letter writing and checking spelling and grammar in their CVs. Apprentices use mathematics well in the collection of work-based evidence through use of spreadsheet activities. However, classroom-based learners do not develop their use of mathematics as an integral part of their studies.
- Information, advice and guidance for adult apprenticeships require improvement. Adult apprentices are not always aware they are undertaking an apprenticeship programme and do not always understand the different elements of the framework. Apprentices are not always aware of alternative programmes or progression opportunities available to them. Classroom-based learning advice and guidance are good and learners are clear on the skills they will learn and how those skills will improve their future employment opportunities.
- Equality and diversity are good and promoted well in classroom-based learning, workshop sessions and in individual visits. Opportunities to foster good relationships between learners, through the use of peer support in workshop and classroom-based sessions, work well.

**Administration and business management**

**Apprenticeships**

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement. The large majority of apprentices are progressing in line with their agreed goals, but a minority have yet to complete within agreed timescales. Managers and assessors have high expectations of apprentices consistent with the demands of the qualifications they are working towards completing. Support, assessment and resources promote good levels of progress for the large majority of learners.
- Apprentices are very well motivated, enjoy their courses and engage particularly well with the independent study and assessment elements of the apprenticeship. A large majority of apprentices, mostly adults, reflect carefully on and refine their workplace skills during their training. In particular, this group of apprentices gain considerable personal skills such as confidence in public speaking and dealing assertively with colleagues and managers. A minority of apprentices are behind target in the recording of their workplace evidence.
- Younger apprentices gain employment through Mercia's links with employers and are assisted by Mercia's staff in quickly settling in to their work roles. They learn about important aspects such as their rights and responsibilities and health and safety. Adult apprentices productively refresh their English and mathematics skills and gain new learning in information technology, some of them for the first time. Younger apprentices appreciate the opportunity to upgrade their English and mathematics qualifications in a workplace setting at a pace that suits them.
- Apprentices undergo frequent assessment sessions with their assessors at work, during which they receive comprehensive and detailed updates on their progress and achievements. Assessors are very supportive during these sessions and respond effectively to apprentices' concerns, for example regarding use of the electronic portfolio, or preparing for presentations.

Assessors provide apprentices with valuable guidance on the use of a variety of learning resources to improve their functional skills.

- For a minority of apprentices, the pace is too fast and too much is covered in their individual sessions. Assessors do not use enough of the available time to provide creative or inspiring subject-specific coaching or teaching with apprentices and rely too much on sign-posting learners to other resources. There are too few group-learning opportunities for apprentices, despite learners sharing common training needs such as preparing and delivering presentations.
- Managers and staff have very effectively implemented on-line assessment, available to all new apprentices. The use of tablet computers for assessors to use in individual sessions is helping apprentices progress. Apprentices welcome the increased access to assessment and rapid feedback that the technology has provided. However, managers and staff recognise that information technology resources and the effective use of them need further development.
- Assessors use information regarding apprentices' prior learning and experience, preferred learning styles and functional skills levels to plan assessment well. Apprentices have a good understanding of their learning priorities. However, at the beginning of apprenticeship programmes, the more demanding functional skills needs of some apprentices are not sufficiently developed.
- Assessors provide good information, advice and guidance to apprentices on what is required. Staff have arranged with one large employer to provide end-of-programme guidance sessions to employees on progression opportunities and next steps.
- Apprentices overall have an adequate understanding of equality and diversity, and the large majority are conversant with the concepts of fair treatment. Apprentices are less well-informed about safeguarding issues, their understanding being limited to the workplace.

### **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

### **Requires improvement**

- Managers and staff at Mercia Partnership have a clear and ambitious vision linked to a well-developed strategic plan. A recently restructured management team, with clear roles and responsibilities, is implementing a well-planned and detailed change process. There is a strong concentration from all staff on improving the quality of provision for learners.
- Elements of routine management are very good, but recently introduced initiatives and interventions have not yet had time to have the desired impact for learners. Work continues to implement these initiatives and procedures, with the intention to make leadership and management good overall.
- Performance management and staff development process are comprehensive and effective. Staff appraisals take place on an annual basis and are reviewed well throughout the year at planned intervals. All staff are set targets based on outcomes for their learners and quality improvement initiatives. Clear signposting to professional development opportunities, through peer support and external training where appropriate, supports the development of staff effectively.
- Assessors and tutors are, in the very large majority, well qualified to carry out their role. However, staff delivering English and mathematics are not currently sufficiently qualified at an appropriate level and there is an over-reliance on a software-based skill development tool to promote the completion of functional skills for learners. The introduction of an electronic portfolio for some apprentices has not yet had an impact, as staff and apprentices need more instruction in its use.
- The processes to increase the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment, including in subcontracted provision, have improved and arrangements with local partners to train managers in the observation process have been carried out and are starting to take effect. Well-thought-out and appropriate judgements on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment lead to staff development opportunities.

- The previous inspection report identified a need to improve the self-assessment process and quality improvement arrangements. Self-assessment and the resulting quality improvement plans are much improved, self-critical and clearly highlight key areas for improvement and realistic targets for achievement. However, it is too early to judge the full impact of implemented initiatives.
- Communication is good, with routine formal and informal contact between all managers and staff with whom they work closely. Managers use information and data and discuss the progress of individual learners with their teams. The management of subcontractors is highly effective. Managers' regular monthly meetings, to discuss each learner, enables them to monitor progress against contractual requirements well and outcomes are positive.
- Mercia Partnership is a significant partner for many agencies and employers in the area, in terms of helping to develop the wider approach to training apprentices across the region. Programmes that meet employer and learner needs enable learners across the provision to develop valuable employability skills and improve their English and mathematical abilities.
- Mercia Partnership provides a wide range of provision with courses in health and social care, child development and well-being, ICT, direct learning support, teaching and lecturing, foundation learning, administration and employability. English and mathematics are an integral part of apprenticeship provision and also used effectively to support unemployed learners and family learning.
- Equality of opportunity and respect underpin Mercia's work, and a manager with responsibility for equality and diversity provides good information for assessors to use with apprentices in the workplace. However, not all assessors do so.
- Work to identify and close achievement gaps is on-going across all areas of provision. However, the use and integration of equality and diversity information does not permeate through the organisation to develop learners' understanding of wider issues.
- The provision at Mercia Partnership meets statutory requirements for safeguarding. Safeguarding procedures are very good and managers focus well on this aspect. Managers deal promptly and effectively with any incidents that occur and involve the relevant agencies when appropriate.

## Record of Main Findings (RMF)

### Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd

<p>Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance:</p> <p>1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate</p>	Overall	14-16 part-time provision	14-16 full-time provision	16-19 study programmes	Traineeships	19+ Learning programmes	Apprenticeships	Employability	Community learning
Overall effectiveness	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A
Outcomes for learners	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A
The effectiveness of leadership and management	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
<b>ICT for users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Administration</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Business management</b>	<b>3</b>



## Provider details

<b>Type of provider</b>	Independent learning provider							
<b>Age range of learners</b>	16+							
<b>Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year</b>	Full-time: 337							
	Part-time: 436							
<b>Principal/CEO</b>	Mrs Laura Cahill							
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	March 2012							
<b>Website address</b>	www.merciapartnership.com							
<b>Provider information at the time of the inspection</b>								
<b>Main course or learning programme level</b>	<b>Level 1 or below</b>		<b>Level 2</b>		<b>Level 3</b>		<b>Level 4 and above</b>	
<b>Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)</b>	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
<b>Full-time</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Part-time</b>	N/A	9	N/A	55	N/A	6	N/A	N/A
<b>Number of traineeships</b>	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		N/A			
<b>Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age</b>	<b>Intermediate</b>		<b>Advanced</b>		<b>Higher</b>			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	10	125	2	80	N/A	56		
<b>Number of learners aged 14-16</b>	N/A							
<b>Full-time</b>	N/A							
<b>Part-time</b>	N/A							
<b>Number of community learners</b>	N/A							
<b>Number of employability learners</b>	9							
<b>Funding received from</b>	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
<b>At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ 5 Stars Recruitment Ltd</li> <li>■ Elite Learning Solutions</li> </ul>							

## Contextual information

Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd operates from two centres, the head office based in Prescot, Merseyside and a central city location in Liverpool. Apprentices are employed across the North West region, with smaller cohorts nationally with sub-contractors. Merseyside contains a significant concentration of some of the most deprived wards in the country. Low levels of educational success in the Liverpool City region for many years have resulted in large numbers of adults with no qualifications at 13 per cent compared with 9.7 per cent nationally. Attainment of qualifications to level 2 and above has improved in the region but all levels still remain below the national average. The local unemployment rate is significantly above the national average.

## Information about this inspection

**Lead inspector**

Stephen Hunsley HMI

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors, assisted by the Managing Director 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 relevant 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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