

Aspire Achieve Advance Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		20 – 24 October 2014
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:

- the vast majority of apprentices make excellent progress which leads to high success rates, outstanding contributions and early positions of responsibility in the work place, and sustainable employment
- information, advice and guidance are outstanding. Specialist staff work skilfully with applicants to develop their employability skills and match them with apprenticeships identified through excellent working relationships with local employers
- apprentices learn well in a highly motivational environment, benefitting from excellent teaching and a strong support culture
- assessment is rigorous, feedback productive and apprentices' progress is monitored closely
- resources and training equipment are excellent. Trainers and assessors are highly skilled and experienced and make teaching relevant to the workplace
- quality assurance of the academies is consistent and robust and leads to effective improvement in the quality of provision
- equality and diversity are promoted effectively with apprentices and employers and this has led to an increase in the participation of under-represented groups, particularly young women into technology apprenticeships
- extremely well-maintained partnerships with employers and stakeholders ensure that the company consistently meets needs both locally and nationally
- performance management is very strong and, linked with excellent communications and robust quality assurance, enables managers to pursue improvement relentlessly.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Continue to improve teaching and learning by further developing the documentation used for lesson observations so that the focus is on apprentices and their progress. Ensure that written action plans following lesson observations match the verbal feedback given and that actions for improvement are specific and measurable.
- Ensure that local and national self-assessment reports reflect the excellent knowledge that managers have of the academies in order to further improve the evaluation of the provision.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Outstanding
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- Aspire Achieve Advance Limited (3aaa) has 808 apprentices. Most are aged between 16-18 and are studying on advanced and higher level apprenticeships. The large majority follow the apprenticeship in IT, software, web and telecoms professionals (IT). About a quarter of apprentices are following the apprenticeship in accounting and finance (accounting), a minority are on the new social media and digital marketing (social media) apprenticeship and a few are on apprenticeships in administration. 3aaa has recently produced the first social media advanced apprenticeship nationally.
- Outcomes for apprentices are outstanding. The proportion of apprentices who succeed is high. The proportion of apprentices who succeed within the planned period is extremely high and well above the national rate. A significant proportion of accountancy apprentices progress from advanced to higher level apprenticeships. Although only a small proportion of IT apprentices progress from advanced to higher level apprenticeships, this progression route has only recently been introduced and it is planned to increase significantly the numbers studying higher level apprenticeships in 2014/15. Retention rates on all apprenticeships are very high.
- The vast majority of apprentices make outstanding progress. They are in demanding and important job roles within their chosen careers. They are highly motivated and keen to learn. Considerable time and effort is taken to match apprentices to suitable jobs and employers.
- Most apprentices occupy key roles within their work place and become pivotal to their businesses very quickly. For example, a social media apprentice who joined the programme in June 2014 is already entrusted with the entire social media development for his employer. An IT apprentice, who joined a few months earlier, develops and maintains the IT infrastructure for a professional football club. Apprentices are highly valued and almost all become permanent members of staff. The vast majority stay or intend to stay with their initial employer. The small minority who do not, progress to higher education or find suitable alternative employment.
- Apprentices produce work of a very high standard, particularly in the workplace. They gain very well-developed communications skills and exceedingly high levels of confidence through working on important projects in the workplace. English and mathematical skills are integrated effectively throughout the apprenticeship programmes; mathematics are particularly well developed by IT and accounting apprentices both in the classroom and the workplace. Most apprentices have a very good understanding of progression opportunities available to them and they are well aware that they are on career paths that meet local and national needs.
- Managers are rigorous in monitoring the performance of different groups and there are no significant differences between them. They have ambitious targets to improve the participation of under-represented groups and have successfully increased the participation of young women into technology apprenticeships. In 2014/15, the target for increasing female participation on

technology programmes is double the sector skills council national average. Black, Asian and minority ethnic participation is well above the Skills Funding Agency national average. Though most apprentices have five GCSEs at grade A*-C when they enrol with 3aaa, those that have lower GCSE attainment also perform well, make good progress and become valued employees.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding which reflects the excellent outcomes for apprentices. The vast majority of teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding or good and apprentices enjoy learning on their programmes. Staff are particularly knowledgeable and teach innovatively and effectively so that apprentices learn rapidly and make excellent progress. The programmes graded represent 88% of all current apprentices.
- Managers, trainers and assessors provide a highly motivational environment, culture and ethos which nurtures and develops apprentices' aspirations, ambitions and confidence. Apprentices demonstrate outstanding professional attitudes. They wear business dress in academy sessions and display excellent standards of respect and behaviour. Staff and employers actively encourage apprentices to progress onto higher level apprenticeships.
- Trainers and assessors skilfully use a multitude of engaging activities to generate pertinent discussion, develop effective practical skills and deepen apprentices' understanding. In most lessons trainers use technology very effectively. For example, trainers of IT apprentices use video to trigger lively and effective technical and business related discussions.
- Trainers and assessors use feedback very effectively so that apprentices understand clearly how to improve. Staff accurately and promptly mark written assessments for IT apprentices and these are available online enabling apprentices to access them quickly. In progress reviews, apprentices and assessors negotiate challenging targets for improvement and development which leads to excellent progress and completion within the planned timescale.
- Trainers and assessors have highly relevant industry experience and make constant links between theory and the workplace so that apprentices understand how to use their skills and knowledge more effectively. Apprentices receive high quality training at work that develops sophisticated skills and most work on projects well above their level of study. All apprentices benefit from trainers and assessors with particularly good commercial expertise.
- All staff offer extremely high levels of personal, pastoral and professional support to apprentices and employers. Assessors make very frequent visits to apprentices' workplaces, exceeding contractual obligations. All staff, including managers, constantly monitor progress, well-being and safety, enabling them to work closely with employers to implement successful interventions to support apprentices. For example, a manager regularly checked on the health of an ill apprentice and organised a new placement to ensure the apprentice progressed.
- Staff communicate exceptionally well with employers. Employers are fully informed of what apprentices are learning and use this information well to provide excellent opportunities for them to practice and consolidate skills in the workplace. Apprentices rapidly develop their skills and quickly become useful, valued and confident staff undertaking crucial roles. For example, an accountancy apprentice manages an entire franchise for their employer.
- All apprentices benefit from excellent resources and facilities. Classrooms are bright and well-equipped. Motivational and informative posters are ubiquitous and promote a range of thought-provoking issues including equality and diversity, e-safety and forced marriage.
- Initial advice and guidance are outstanding. Employers are involved effectively in the selection of apprentices and in the choice of relevant programme units. This highly collaborative process often leads to additional apprentices being employed and very high retention and success. 3aaa has well-developed partnerships with professional football and cricket clubs and uses the 'power of sport' to engage local businesses and to provide apprentices with inspirational role models in

the early stages of their careers. Specialist recruitment staff develop applicants' employability skills very well. The results of initial and diagnostic assessments are used particularly effectively to inform individual learning plans.

- Trainers and assessors are very skilled at developing English and mathematics in a relevant context in learning sessions and workplace activities. Apprentices develop excellent functional skills that they utilise well in the workplace. Apprentices who have already achieved GCSE grades A* to C maintain their skills and are challenged to improve them. Apprentices who need extra support with functional skills attend bespoke workshops and as a result achieve their qualifications.
- Trainers and assessors expertly explore equality and diversity issues with apprentices to develop their understanding of how these affect them in modern Britain. For example, IT apprentices discuss how different languages spoken by colleagues in international workplaces could be a barrier to communication for helpdesk technicians and ways in which this could be overcome. Cultural diversity is promoted well in each academy using a good range of information posters, for example apprentices and staff were well aware of Diwali celebrations taking place during the inspection week.

ICT for practitioners

Apprenticeships

Outstanding

- Teaching learning and assessment are outstanding. The overall success rate is high and the success rate for completion within the expected timescale is extremely high. Apprentices make outstanding progress in the workplace, rapidly undertaking more complex tasks as their skills develop. The apprenticeship is closely matched to individual employer needs and provides a suitably challenging programme for each apprentice. Apprentices enjoy their training and retention throughout the apprenticeship programme is very high.
- Trainers and assessors have excellent industry experience which they use well to ensure training has a strong focus on industry standards and best practice. Apprentices benefit from highly interesting and motivational training in superb educational environments, equipped with industry standard computers and networks. In one training session, apprentices used role play effectively to simulate a typical help desk, developing very good communications skills such as dealing successfully with customers and providing accurate technical support to rectify problems. In another session, apprentices accurately assessed computer performance and correctly identified appropriate upgrades and actions to speed up processing time.
- The vast majority of learning sessions progress at a brisk pace, with apprentices fully participating in all activities. Skills and knowledge gained by apprentices in the workplace are used particularly well to develop learning and understanding. Trainers and assessors encourage apprentices to reflect on their actions rather than simply providing solutions, thereby helping to develop very good problem solving skills. Trainers and assessors skilfully use question and answer techniques to check apprentices' understanding, for example in developing bespoke information and communication technology (ICT) systems such as e-learning software and diagnosing faults in remote systems.
- Apprentices benefit from excellent advice at the start of the course and undertake thorough diagnostic testing to identify their starting point and support needs. Assessors set clear and useful learning targets to provide excellent continuity between workplace visits. Trainers and assessors closely monitor apprentices' progress through the use of a colour-coded system to clearly identify any possible apprentices at risk of not achieving. Trainers and assessors have a very good understanding of apprentices and tailor support to meet individual needs in both the classroom and workplace. For example, support for a profoundly deaf apprentice enables him to integrate effectively into the main learning programme.

- Assessment is rigorous, fair, accurate and timely. Trainers and assessors return marked work promptly, providing excellent developmental feedback to apprentices to help ensure continuous improvement. In the workplace, assessors work very closely with employers to ensure assessments are relevant to the apprentices' work activity. Trainers and assessors prioritise the importance of a good standard of written English and rigorously highlight spelling and grammatical errors, helping to develop crucial employability skills. Mathematics is very well embedded in the vocational training through for example the teaching of binary, hexadecimal and spreadsheet formulae developing in context the mathematical skills needed in apprentices' chosen careers.
- Apprentices collaborate extremely well with others sharing ideas, helping each other and integrating well with colleagues in the workplace. They have a good understanding of equality and recognise and appreciate the diverse needs of the customers they encounter in the workplace. Trainers and assessors have a strong focus on safeguarding learners that includes incorporating comprehensive guidance regarding e-safety, health and safety and personal well-being into lessons.

Accounting and finance

Apprenticeships

Outstanding

- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding which is consistent with outcomes for apprentices. Staff are very good role models and strongly motivate apprentices to reach their full potential and make valuable contributions in the workplace. Apprentices regularly achieve their challenging targets within short timescales. They receive excellent support from staff and their employers that develops their subject knowledge to particularly high levels. They enjoy a very productive relationship with trainers and assessors that enhances their enjoyment of learning. Retention on the programme is high.
- Staff have particularly high expectations of apprentices' professional behaviour and their attitudes to learning. Tutors use a wide, stimulating and highly engaging range of activities to assess learning. For example, an entertaining card exercise was used in one session to assess apprentices' knowledge of the definitions of credit and debit and learners have lively debates about accounting terms such as 'receivables' and 'payables'.
- Apprentices learn quickly that trainers have high expectations and that they need to complete independent research and develop skills in their own time. They respond well, so that they gain higher level skills than those required by the awarding body and develop further their ability to be self-reliant in the workplace. Staff monitor progress very carefully through weekly on-line reports that provide them with an excellent understanding of how well apprentices are performing against their agreed targets.
- Assessment of learning is outstanding. The checking of previous learning by trainers and assessors is highly effective and, for example, reinforces apprentices' understanding of terminology such as definitions of profit and loss. Apprentices set challenging personal learning goals for each session and accurately evaluate their success in meeting them, motivating them to make excellent progress. Additional support needs are identified and met promptly. Assessment of apprentices' performance in the workplace is extremely thorough and very well documented through audio and written records so that apprentices' competency is very efficiently measured. All apprentices respond and participate with enthusiasm to the excellent directed questions assessors ask.
- Skilled and experienced staff plan highly effective sessions that meet individual apprentices' needs very well. Trainers make very good connections between theoretical concepts such as related costs in accountancy and how these are applied in the workplace using current

illustrations from national companies. For example they use news articles of failing companies to reinforce the impact of fixed costs on overall profit. Learner feedback is effective in influencing curriculum design. For example, additional units in tax and business skills have been introduced so that the curriculum is even more closely aligned to apprentices' careers aspirations.

- Progress towards achievement of short term targets is very good; targets are often achieved well in advance of the formal review of progress. Staff are highly skilled at identifying interventions to resolve issues for apprentices who need support and in planning additional activities for those exceeding expectations.
- Apprentices demonstrate high levels of functional skills in English, mathematics and ICT that contribute effectively to their excellent progress. Staff stress the importance of developing these skills to meet apprentices' future career aspirations, particularly for their progression to level 4. Strong emphasis is placed on improving English in all written activities and mathematical and ICT skills are developed effectively in the use of accounting formulas and in calculations of costs and revenues.
- Information, advice and guidance are excellent and ensure that apprentices are matched to the most appropriate employers. Staff provide highly effective support to help apprentices write curricula vitae and improve their interview techniques and these employability skills are developed to a very good standard. Pre-course support is outstanding in preparing potential apprentices for the demands and expectations required of them during the accountancy apprenticeship. During this period, employers are also very well prepared to support their apprentices so that they make good progress to full employment.
- The development of equality and diversity awareness and understanding are integral to the programme and promoted very well. Apprentices have an in-depth knowledge of equality and diversity, particularly of those issues relevant to the workplace and staff promote understanding very well using industry relevant information that, for example, promotes organisations that support women to develop careers in accountancy.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Leaders and managers are fully committed to their ambitious vision to be the best provider of advanced apprenticeships in a small number of programmes in order to meet the needs of micro, small and medium sized employers and some large employers. Although their direct contract is quite new, they have already grown apprenticeship numbers significantly.
- All staff have exceedingly high expectations of each other and of apprentices. This is manifested in their diligence and enthusiasm to do well and improve continuously. Employers have very high expectations of their apprentices, often giving them vital roles in their companies. Apprentices rise to this challenge and a very large proportion gain full-time employment with their existing employers at the end of their programmes.
- Performance management is very strong. Managers conduct detailed individual reviews with staff on a monthly basis. Success is rewarded and celebrated, and robust action plans established to remedy poor performance. Managers plan relevant and frequent activities to meet staff development needs identified through lesson observations and in monthly reviews.
- Arrangements to improve teaching and learning through observation are robust. All trainers and assessors are observed twice a year and more often when performance requires improvement. Stringent standardisation meetings and external observers monitor carefully the quality of observations. Staff benefit from a very thorough quality assurance process that provides a systematic analysis of how they may improve their teaching and assessment practices to ensure high quality learning for apprentices. Most judgements are accurate, but observation records are too often focused on what trainers and assessors do and not enough on the progress being

made by apprentices. Verbal feedback to trainers and assessors is detailed and helpful but too many written action plans are insufficiently specific.

- An outstanding focus on continuous quality improvement characterises leaders and managers at all levels of the organisation. For example the weekly report on each apprentice's progress leads to prompt action if any risk falling behind. These reports are sent to senior managers who monitor the progress and ensure that actions are effective. As a result the vast majority of apprentices remain on programme and achieve within their planned period of learning.
- Assessment practice is very good. Managers carefully pilot strategies to address underperformance to check their effectiveness. For example, more trainers were getting higher grades in session observations than assessors. They piloted ways to increase the skills of two assessors successfully and then extended this strategy to all academies.
- Leaders and managers know the company extremely well, and maintain a national consistency through comprehensive quality control arrangements including regular reporting, consistent management structures at national, regional, and academy level, clear lines of accountability and consistent documentation. These, linked with a very responsive small decision-making team of senior managers, enable academy staff to work flexibly and respond very quickly to changing circumstances in their localities. The self-assessment report does not reflect the high level of understanding of the differences in quality between academies that managers actually have. Currently this is not impacting adversely on the quality of apprenticeships.
- The extent to which the curriculum meets the needs of apprentices, employers and local and national priorities is outstanding. For example, the development of level 4 apprenticeships is, in part, a response to local enterprise partnership priorities. Staff responsible for initial advice and guidance are particularly skilled in identifying the aptitude and aspirations of candidates and those responsible for recruiting employers are equally skilful in understanding the specific needs of each. By working closely together, these teams are extremely successful in matching apprentices to employers and as a result, retention, success and progression rates are very high. For example, apprentice engagement staff selected candidates for interview by an employer who needed 10 apprentices covering a range of IT functions. All 10 completed level 3 in one year and all are now beginning similarly tailor-made level 4 programmes.
- Progression opportunities are excellent. Managers diligently seek out good providers of foundation and intermediate provision near their academies, so that applicants who are not yet ready for their apprenticeships are directed to providers who can prepare them. They are also creating progression routes into more level 4 and 5 programmes and are very well supported in this work by a board member with extensive experience of, and connections with, higher education.
- Both equality and diversity are particularly well promoted. Very effective strategies, including improved marketing and women-only open days, result in young women forming almost a quarter of apprentices on IT programmes. Managers are careful to find employers within reach of apprentices from rural areas. Staff help employers to understand how best to work with apprentices with disabilities such as Aspergers so that they make good progress. All staff receive regular updates on equality and diversity issues.
- Safeguarding is good overall with some outstanding features. The company exceeds its statutory safeguarding responsibilities. All academies have very close links with local safeguarding boards. Safe recruitment practice is consistent across the company. Safeguarding and health and safety are primary considerations. Staff are made very aware of how to identify signs which could indicate apprentices are in danger of, for example, forced marriage. They are particularly diligent in ensuring health and safety and e-safety. For example, an assessor removed an apprentice from a workplace and found safer employment for him when he identified potential dangers which were not promptly rectified.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Aspire Achieve Advance Limited

Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	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	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
Accounting and Finance	1

Type of provider	Independent learning provider							
Age range of learners	16+							
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	780							
Chief Executive/Principal	Mrs Di McEvoy-Robinson and Mr Peter Marples							
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected							
Website address	www.3aaa.co.uk							
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 learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	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+		
	0	1	568	158	25	56		
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		N/A			
Number of learners aged 14-16	N/A							
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:	■ N/A.							

Contextual information

Aspire Achieve Advance Limited has its head office in Derby and offers apprenticeships in IT, accountancy and social media at advanced and higher levels. A managing director and a board of directors are supported by a team of senior managers. It holds an SFA contract for the delivery of apprenticeships awarded in 2012/13, and has 28 academies, employing 219 staff, who are involved in training young people aged 16-23, across England. Eight of the academies operate under subcontracts with large further education colleges for whom it has delivered apprenticeships since 2010/11. Academies operate a uniform model that recruits and trains apprentices for local small to medium sized enterprises and some large employers. They are each run by a manager who is responsible for teaching, learning and assessment of apprentices who are supported by trainers and assessors who work locally and/or nationally.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector	Robert Hamp HMI
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One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), an Ofsted associate inspector and five additional inspectors, assisted by the Director of Operations and Quality as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements 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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