

Mercia Partnership (UK) Limited

Independent learning provider

**Inspection dates:**

3–6 November 2015

Overall effectiveness**Good**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for learners	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- The managing director has a strong drive to improve the quality of provision. She has established a positive organisational culture and high expectations for learners which have been embraced by all managers.
- The good partnership working with stakeholders in Knowsley ensures that the company's strategic direction is aligned with local, regional and national priorities.
- The large majority of apprentices' and learners' work is of a good standard. Most learners and apprentices make good progress.
- Tutors provide good telephone and email support between tutorial and assessment visits.
- Learners and apprentices are positive about their course, and most are well behaved, attentive and participate enthusiastically in activities.
- Apprentices and learners on the teaching assistants' course develop good personal, social and employability skills that prepare them successfully for their intended job role.
- Learners and apprentices recognise and value the usefulness of their new skills and how these improve their job prospects. Skilled and motivated tutors use their subject expertise well to motivate and engage learners and develop learners' understanding, which enables them to make good progress.

It is not yet an outstanding provider

- Planning of learning for the few learners on employability programmes does not sufficiently develop their personal, social and broader skills, beyond their information technology qualification.
- Tutors' written feedback on learners' marked work often fails to support the development of their English skills. Learners' targets are insufficiently detailed and do not provide clear guidance on what they need to do to improve their English and mathematics skills.
- Quality improvement systems do not sufficiently focus on improving the quality of learners' progress reviews.
- Managers are not yet collating comprehensive data to monitor and reduce the achievement gaps between different apprenticeships or on learners' destinations when they complete their programme.
- Too few apprentices, completing their programme at the subcontractors, achieve in the planned time.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Mercia Partnership (UK) Limited (Mercia) operates from two centres, one in Prescot and one in Liverpool city centre. The head office at Prescot has a training facility; the Liverpool training centre has one training room which is also an information technology suite. Mercia offered a range of apprenticeships and employability programmes, funded by the Skills Funding Agency, to 415 adults in 2013/14, the vast majority of whom were apprentices. The majority of the apprenticeship delivery takes place in employer and community settings, with programmes for unemployed people currently based in Liverpool city centre. Mercia engages two subcontractors to provide apprenticeship programmes in Essex and Dorset. The largest programme is apprenticeships in administration.
- The unemployment rate across Merseyside is higher than the national rate and that for the north-west of England. The proportion of young people not in education or training in Knowsley is significantly higher than the north-west average. Fewer young people gain five grades A* to C at GCSE than the national average and that of the northwest.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Collate and analyse information on learners' progress and achievement so that managers can monitor the achievements of different groups and ensure that all performance gaps between different curriculum areas are closed.
- Set clear and challenging targets for apprentices at the subcontractors to ensure that they achieve their qualifications within expected timescales.
- Set a wider range of clear and challenging targets for learners on employability programmes to ensure that they develop personal, social and broader skills.
- Ensure that tutors' feedback to learners following the marking of submitted work is always detailed and developmental, including comments on how they can improve their skills in English and mathematics.
- Systematically gather complete and accurate information on the progression of learners into further and higher education and/or employment.
- Ensure the quality improvement policies and procedures are implemented well and include all aspects of learners' experiences.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The managing director has a strong drive to improve the quality of provision. She has embedded a positive organisational culture and high expectations for learners which have been embraced by all managers. The organisation now uses data well to monitor the progress of apprentices who are close to their completion date, and to hold staff and subcontractors to account. As a result, in 2014/15, success rates improved. However, the arrangements to gather information reliably and efficiently about learners' in-year progress and their progression to further education, training or employment are not yet robust.
- Managers set challenging performance targets and objectives for tutors which include improving the quality of their teaching and maintaining success rates at significantly above the national rates. Managers monitor tutors' performance against their targets closely, discuss these at appraisals and update tutors' action plans regularly. These measures have contributed significantly to the improvements since the last inspection.
- Mercia tackles under-performance of subcontractors well. For example, it stopped contracting with a subcontractor where only a small proportion of its apprentices achieved. Another subcontractor, where too many apprentices did not complete within the planned time, has been prevented from recruiting new apprentices since August 2015, and the progress of current learners is being monitored closely through monthly meetings with the subcontractor.
- The good partnership working with stakeholders in Knowsley ensures that the company's strategic direction is aligned with local, regional and national priorities. Managers and staff have a detailed knowledge of the training requirements of employers in Knowsley and Merseyside. Managers also have good links with employers and use these well to promote the advantages of training, especially apprenticeships, to learners and employers. Mercia often offers additional courses that benefit learners' employment prospects.
- Managers and staff have successfully eradicated almost all the weaknesses identified at the last inspection. They have an accurate understanding of the quality of the provision, although a few areas for improvement identified by inspectors are not included in their self-assessment report.
- The quality of pre-enrolment advice and guidance offered to apprentices has improved significantly. The proportion of apprentices who leave their programmes early has declined greatly as they now have a greater understanding about the requirements of the programme. Apprentices join a six-week trial period and during this time they make informed choices about their suitability to the programme.
- The quality improvement systems have been effective in improving the quality of provision since the previous inspection. Managers have effective arrangements for evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and assessment to gain an accurate picture of the main strengths and areas for improvement of tutors' skills. The process to improve the quality of progress reviews is not yet good enough.
- Managers recognise well the importance of promoting equality, diversity and living in a modern diverse British society. Tutors have received training to promote these essential aspects to learners. However, tutors are not sufficiently experienced or confident enough to expand learners' understanding of promoting and working with different cultures. Managers have successfully narrowed the performance gap between women and men, although some gaps remain between different programmes.
- Managers have increased the capacity of the company to improve learners' skills in English and mathematics. All staff are qualified to level 2 in English and mathematics; they have all received additional training on delivering GCSE English or mathematics. However, a few tutors do not prioritise the development of learners' skills in English or mathematics well enough.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - The directors have a strong focus and ambition on improving the experience of learners. They analyse the barriers to improved performance and take decisive actions. For example, to increase the time that tutors can spend with their apprentices, in 2013/14 they significantly reduced the number of apprentices allocated to each tutor.
 - The board of directors has a good understanding of the challenges Mercia is facing and has developed and agreed a sound strategic direction, which includes a reduction in the number of subcontractors.
 - The board supports and challenges the managing director well to deliver the company's strategic plan.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - The company meets its statutory safeguarding requirements. Mercia maintains an up-to-date record of all staff checks in relation to safeguarding concerns. The company has comprehensive policies and procedures covering safeguarding and in protecting learners from radicalisation and extremism. The managing director is the designated safeguarding officer and regularly reviews the company's policies

and procedures in relation to safeguarding and raising learners' awareness of the risks from radicalisation and extremism.

- All staff have completed appropriate safeguarding training and professional development to alert them to learners' risks associated with radicalisation and extremism, and to help tutors promote the values of democracy, tolerance, mutual respect and individual liberty.
- Staff have received information about online safety to promote the safe usage of electronic and social media.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Apprentices benefit from highly individualised programmes, designed in consultation with employers, to fit around apprentices' shift patterns and workplace demands. Employers and assessors work closely together to select relevant and challenging optional units and review progress so that programmes are well matched to employers' and apprentices' needs.
- Most apprentices know how to keep themselves and each other safe and are able to demonstrate a good understanding of online safety and security when using social media and working online. Most apprentices articulate well the potential dangers of internet grooming, cyberbullying and radicalisation. However, in a minority of cases, tutors do not pay sufficient attention to the importance of helping computer users work safely, particularly in relation to the ergonomics of workplace design. Tutors are experienced and knowledgeable; they use their subject expertise well to plan individual coaching sessions that motivate and interest apprentices and drive good progress. Tutors provide good one-to-one coaching to trainee teaching assistants which helps them to develop quickly their understanding of the teaching assistant's role. Additionally, tutors offer good telephone and email support between tutorial and assessment visits if learners require additional advice or guidance to continue their learning. Tutors use on- and off-the-job training well to enable apprentices to continually develop their skills and knowledge to industry standards.
- The large majority of apprentices' and learners' work is of a good standard. Workplace assessment is thorough and frequent. Assessors question apprentices skilfully and provide good verbal feedback on how to improve. Apprentices are encouraged to participate in professional dialogue to explain and add detail to their assessed work to provide more substantial answers. As a result, most apprentices extend their knowledge and skills well. Employability learners and teaching assistants receive good oral and written feedback about the accuracy of their answers and the extent to which they fulfil the requirements of the awarding organisations. However, assessors do not routinely identify and correct learners' spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.
- Teachers make good use of initial assessments in English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) to identify learners' strengths and areas for improvement. Assessment of apprentices' skills in English and mathematics at the start of their apprenticeship is thorough and leads to learners receiving detailed and specific areas to improve. Apprentices benefit from the strong emphasis tutors place on challenging them to achieve higher levels of English and mathematics. However, too few learners receive tuition in English and mathematics from the start of their course. Tutors place insufficient importance on the need to link English and mathematics with learners' vocational studies. Tutors' written feedback on learners' work often fails to provide them with a clear understanding of what they need to do to improve their English and mathematics skills.
- The quality of planning for learning is not yet good on employability programmes as it focuses on the requirements of the ICT qualification and does not give sufficient consideration to learners' personal and social development and other training needs. Employability learners' targets are too general and this limits the effectiveness of the monitoring of their progress. Not enough use is made of available learning resources, including online resources, to promote independent learning.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

- Learners attend well, are positive about their course and its impact on improving their job prospects, particularly those on the teaching assistants' course. Employability learners' behaviour in classes is mostly good but in a few lessons tutors do not reinforce positive attitudes quickly enough at the start. Apprentices are attentive and participate enthusiastically in activities. Mercia and employers celebrate learners' achievements well and this motivates them to succeed.

- Most adult learners on employability courses are aged 24 and over and are developing valuable skills in time management and prioritising workloads. As their knowledge increases and their skills develop, they become more self-confident and are better prepared for work.
- Apprentices develop good workplace skills including dealing with customers and clients on the phone, organising and conducting meetings, and creating posters and presentations to promote the business. They use their newly acquired skills outside work, for example writing formal emails, organising diary events, and organising and budgeting for their own birthday party.
- Learners and apprentices benefit from the safe learning environment promoted by Mercia. They feel safe and have a good awareness of the 'Prevent' agenda which is covered well at induction and reinforced through online training. Tutors promote e-safety and the safe use of social media well. Employability learners feel safe in the learning centre and trainee teaching assistants feel safe on school premises. Learners recognise the arrangements in place to protect them from harm, and have a good awareness of the different forms of abuse and how to protect themselves and stay safe. Apprentices have a good awareness of their roles and responsibilities regarding health and safety and safeguarding, and are aware of what is expected of them in the workplace.
- The quality of independent advice and guidance is good. Tutors and specialist external organisations provide learners and apprentices with immediate high-quality advice on future career and education options. Most apprentices are successful in gaining employment following completion of their programmes. The majority of learners on classroom-based courses are successful: for example, teaching assistants gain employment in schools and a few voluntary workers have obtained jobs as youth workers.
- Learners have good opportunities to obtain nationally recognised qualifications that improve their chances of gaining employment. Mercia supports many learners in achieving an additional work-related qualification to improve their job prospects.
- Trainee teaching assistants participate in purposeful work experience that is relevant to their future career plans. They quickly become assets to the schools in which they work, and make highly valued contributions to pupils' learning, development and welfare.
- Feedback on learners' written work requires improvement; tutors do not routinely highlight spelling, grammar and punctuation errors in learners' submitted work to help them improve. A few apprentices use English and mathematics skills well in the workplace, for example to analyse data and create charts and graphs, create flyers and posters, and undertake detailed report writing.
- Learners develop a reasonable understanding of equality and diversity during their induction. However, tutors do not adequately reinforce equality and diversity topics in the context of the apprentices' workplaces during their reviews. Tutors challenge the use of unacceptable language by learners and alert them to the importance of using respectful language.

Outcomes for learners

are good

- The proportion of apprentices achieving their frameworks rose significantly in 2014/15 to well above the national rate, following a decline the previous year. Similarly, the proportion of apprentices completing their programmes within expected timescales increased significantly in 2014/15 to well above the national rate. Within subcontracted provision, the overall apprenticeship success rate improved slightly in 2014/15 to be above the national rate but the proportion who completed in the planned time was low. Mercia's managers have analysed the reasons for the decline and have taken appropriate actions to improve.
- The proportion of learners successfully achieving on classroom-based employability courses is consistently high. The success rate and the proportion of learners achieving in workplace learning for classroom assistants improved significantly in 2014/15 to well above the national rate. Success rates on functional skills qualifications are high.
- Most learners and apprentices make good progress and demonstrate good gains in skills and knowledge. They develop good personal, social and employability skills that successfully prepare them for their intended job role. Teaching assistants and teachers work together effectively to the benefit of the pupils in their primary school classes. Teaching assistants learn about primary school pupils' stages of development, and the importance of safeguarding and the actions to take if safeguarding issues arise. Learners on employability courses develop good ICT skills, for example they learn how to save text, check for online viruses and understand the need for firewalls. Learners recognise the usefulness of their new skills and how they improve job performance or their potential for advancement. Learners adapt and use their new skills well in their personal lives.
- Learners' progress monitoring requires improvement. Although the progress of individual learners is tracked closely and discussed at tutors' monthly caseload review meetings, managers do not have information arranged in a way that enables them to identify how groups of learners are progressing

throughout their programmes. Managers receive informative reports on which learners are close to their expected completion date and ensure that learners are supported well to achieve within their target dates. Mercia does not monitor sufficiently the progression of learners on completion of their courses and there are too many unknown destinations.

- Learners have good opportunities to obtain nationally recognised qualifications to improve their chances of gaining employment. Mercia supports learners in achieving an additional work-related qualification to improve their job prospects. A very effective financial incentive is offered to learners on the employability course to enable them to continue with their learning and obtain a recognised vocational qualification in, for example, first aid, health and safety, or fork-lift truck driving; most learners make good use of this additional training and assessment opportunity to increase their chances of employment.
- Mercia has taken effective action to reduce the achievement gap between men and women. However, achievement gaps exist between apprenticeship programmes and these are not yet monitored sufficiently.

Types of provision

Adult learning programmes

are good

- Currently, there are 37 learners on adult learning programmes. Ten unemployed learners are enrolled on an eight-day employability and ICT users' course. This course is repeated at approximately two-weekly intervals throughout the year. Four learners are working for functional skills qualifications and 23 learners are working towards a certificate in supporting learning and teaching in schools at level 2.
- Employability learners have been unemployed for varying lengths of time and they value the opportunity the short course gives them in acquiring a range of ICT skills, for example creating and saving text, producing a spreadsheet and accessing the internet. They realise these skills will considerably increase their chances of obtaining employment in addition to being of benefit in their personal lives. Mercia makes good provision for employability learners and for trainee teaching assistants to work towards nationally recognised qualifications.
- Tutors give good one-to-one coaching to trainee teaching assistants. Additionally, they provide good opportunities to learners to email and telephone them between tutorial and assessment visits if they require additional advice or guidance.
- The planning of individual learning for employability learners focuses on the requirements of the ICT qualification and does not identify how the course will develop learners' personal, social and other training needs. These learners make good progress in developing their ICT skills but they do not have clearly defined targets to guide their learning and development of broader employability skills. Tutors do not make enough use of the available learning resources, including online resources, to promote individual learning and develop independence.
- Trainee teaching assistants quickly develop their understanding of the teaching assistant's role by participating in purposeful work experience. They quickly become assets to the schools in which they work and make highly valued contributions to pupils' learning, development and welfare.
- Tutors make good use of the information from assessments of learners' skills in English, mathematics and ICT to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. However, too few learners receive tuition in English and mathematics from the start of their course. Tutors place insufficient importance on the need to link English and mathematics with learners' vocational studies.
- Tutors provide good oral and written feedback to learners about the accuracy of their answers and the extent to which they fulfil the requirements of the awarding organisations. However, they do not routinely identify and correct spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors made by learners in their written and electronic work.
- Tutors do not give sufficient attention to the importance of helping computer users to become more aware of healthy and safe working practices. For example, chair heights and back rests are not systematically checked and adjusted; the importance of correctly positioning the keyboard and visual display unit is overlooked by tutors and insufficient attention is subsequently given by tutors to correcting learners' poorly developed inputting techniques.

Apprenticeships

are good

- Mercia has 160 apprentices in five subject areas; the majority are enrolled on business administration and health and social care programmes. Small numbers of apprentices are completing programmes in child

development and well-being, ICT for users and direct learning support. Most are intermediate apprentices with 28 studying at advanced level.

- The proportion of learners completing apprenticeships is high and the number completing their apprenticeships in the planned time is well above national rates. Leaders and managers have a determined focus on improving and delivering high-quality provision. They have very high expectations of all staff and apprentices as reflected in apprentices' good progress and their successful outcomes; the majority of apprentices gain sustained employment opportunities or progress to higher-level apprenticeships.
- Apprentices benefit from effective employer involvement and valuable working partnerships with tutors who work together well to select relevant and challenging optional units that are well matched to employers' and learners' needs. Apprentices benefit from programmes that fit around their shift patterns and workplace demands; as a result, employers gain well-skilled and knowledgeable staff who become valued employees who contribute well to business performance.
- Skilled and motivated tutors use their subject expertise well to plan individual coaching sessions that motivate and interest apprentices effectively and help them to make good progress. On- and off-the-job training is used well to enable apprentices to develop their skills and knowledge to industry standards. The large majority of apprentices' work is of a good standard and matches employers' expectations. For example, apprentices on health and social care programmes attend training on allergy awareness and are able to administer an epi-pen to safeguard residents. Child development and well-being apprentices acquire useful skills and knowledge in dealing with medical emergencies, including broken bones and head injuries, and administering medication.
- Workplace assessment, undertaken by experienced tutors, is thorough and frequent. During assessments, tutors question apprentices skilfully and give them useful improvement points. Apprentices benefit from detailed and helpful verbal feedback and are encouraged to explain and expand on assessed work to provide better and more substantial answers. For example, business administration apprentices are asked to explain the difference between fixed and indirect costs. Most apprentices extend their knowledge and skills and make a valuable contribution to their workplaces.
- Apprentices develop good, relevant skills that enhance their employability, for example in analysing data. Apprentices in business administration develop skills in dealing with customers on the phone and understanding telephone protocols. Apprentices develop their communication and time management skills well and improve their ability to create reports, posters and flyers. Apprentices speak positively of how they use the skills gained in the workplace in their personal lives. For example, apprentices in team leading develop skills in using an online diary that enables them to manage their time more effectively.
- The development of apprentices' English and mathematics skills is good. Assessment of apprentices' skills in English and mathematics at the start of their programme is thorough. Apprentices use effective online resources and complete independent activity which is supported well by effective tutor coaching that uses a good range of work-related activities during individual workplace sessions. Apprentices benefit from the strong emphasis placed on challenging them to achieve higher levels of English and mathematics qualifications.
- In contrast to the good development of English and mathematics in the workplace, marked work and written feedback to apprentices does not identify what they need to do to improve their written English. Target setting is insufficiently detailed to provide apprentices with a clear understanding of exactly what English and mathematics skills require improvement.
- Apprentices receive a thorough workplace induction and this helps them to prepare well for the demands of the apprenticeship programme. Tutors include relevant equality, diversity and safeguarding topics during induction, coaching and review sessions. This helps apprentices to understand how these topics relate to their work. For example, apprentices in early years effectively describe how to recognise young children at risk of abuse and possible removal from the country; consequently, if such incidents arise swift action and intervention can be taken to safeguard the children.
- Trainer assessors provide impartial information, advice and guidance about apprentices' future learning and career aspirations, which encourages them at an early stage to plan for the next step in their learning. Apprentices are successful in gaining good employment opportunities following completion of their programmes.
- Most apprentices know how to keep themselves and each other safe, and are able to demonstrate a good understanding of online safety and security when using social media and working online. Most apprentices articulate well the potential dangers of internet grooming, cyberbullying and radicalisation.

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	415
Principal/CEO	Laura Cahill
Website address	

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	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	N/A	4	1	40	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+	16–18	19+
	2	66	3	56	N/A		28	
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		N/A			
Number of learners aged 14–16	N/A							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Affinity Training ■ 5 Star Recruitment Ltd. 							

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Bob Busby, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Shahram Safavi	Her Majesty's Inspector
Karen Tucker	Ofsted Inspector
Ken Fisher	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the general manager, as nominee, and carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners, apprentices and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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