

Astute Minds Limited

Independent learning provider

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|--|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Inspection dates | | 24–27 March 2015 |
| Overall effectiveness | This inspection: | Good-2 |
| | Previous inspection: | Not previously inspected |
| Outcomes for learners | | Requires improvement-3 |
| Quality of teaching, learning and assessment | | Good-2 |
| Effectiveness of leadership and management | | Good-2 |

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- through their clear strategic vision, leaders and senior managers have developed a provision that very effectively meets the needs of learners who were not previously in education, employment or training
- learners develop very good employability and job skills, including their skills in English, mathematics and information technology managers very successfully work closely with employers to ensure their needs are met well across a wide range of subject areas
- tutors plan workplace learning particularly well, with good employer support, resulting in learners making good progress in their learning and skills development
- nearly all learners who achieve their apprenticeship qualification progress into permanent employment, with the vast majority remaining with the same employers
- learners receive good support from Astute Mind's staff, who set high expectations; as a result, learners are positive about learning and are highly motivated to make progress in their jobs
- learners receive very good initial information, advice and guidance, preparing them very well for their apprenticeships and employment
- arrangements for keeping learners safe are robust, and learners have a good understanding of equality and diversity gained from effective promotion by assessors in learning sessions.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- too many learners have made slow progress towards achieving their qualifications, owing to ineffective target setting and reviews of progress by assessors, and the late introduction of functional skills
- quality improvement arrangements do not focus sufficiently on improving the learners' progress and experience
- staff do not always provide sufficiently thorough planning to meet individual learning needs, for example in relation to personal skills and aspects of mathematics.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all learners complete their qualifications on time by training assessors to deliver more effective reviews of progress and target setting to support learners' progress, and by involving employers more formally in the assessment process. In addition, ensure that functional skills are always introduced at an early stage of an apprentice's programme.
- Improve quality improvement arrangements by thoroughly evaluating the learners' experience of their programmes, and by setting improvement targets for the organisation against which to measure learners' progress and outcomes.
- Use the results of initial assessments of learners' skills to plan ways of meeting individual learning needs more effectively, in order to ensure all learners receive appropriate learning and development opportunities and improve all relevant skills.

Inspection judgements

| Outcomes for learners | Requires improvement |
|--|----------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Astute Minds Ltd was acquired by MiddletonMurray in January 2013. The inspection focused on this apprenticeship contract, rather than the full MiddletonMurray provision. Currently, 305 apprentices are on programme, with two thirds following business administration apprenticeships. Other learners are following, in small numbers, apprenticeships in child care, railway engineering, warehousing, service enterprises, accountancy, management, customer service and recruitment. Most of these subjects were sampled by inspectors. ▪ Outcomes for learners require improvement. In the provider's first year of operation, the majority of learners made slow progress towards their apprenticeship qualification, and did not achieve in the planned time. However, the provider's data confirm that the large majority did eventually achieve in line with the overall success rates of other similar providers. A small minority of current apprentices continue to make slow progress in their qualification, owing to some ineffective practice by assessors and the late introduction of functional skills. Functional skills are now being introduced earlier for new apprentices. ▪ Differences in achievement between groups are closing significantly, although some still exist. In 2013/14, 60% of female learners achieved their framework, but only 17% of male learners did so. In the current year this gap has reduced considerably. The difference in achievement between older and younger learners is also reducing at a good rate. Learners aged 16 to 18 previously achieved at a far lower rate than those aged 19 or over, but this gap is closing well in the current year. ▪ Learners develop very good employability skills whilst on the pre-apprenticeship programme, learning more about the world of work, as well as interview skills, and these prepare them effectively for their apprenticeships. Once employed, learners develop their personal skills very well, become more mature and much more confident in their jobs, developing good teamwork and communication skills, and becoming reliable employees. ▪ Learners develop job skills very well. Business administration learners improve their customer service and communication skills, including telephone use; railway engineers develop rail track maintenance skills effectively; child care learners improve their skills in relation to child development; and all learners improve their understanding of safe working practice in their workplace. They make good progress in their jobs, taking on more variety of work tasks and responsibilities, with a small minority gaining promotion during their apprenticeship. ▪ Most learners develop their knowledge well, improving their understanding of relevant legislation. For example, those working in the recruitment industry learn about industry compliance regulations when placing medical staff into jobs. | |

- Most learners improve their English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) skills and apply these well in their job roles. They communicate better, and business administration learners, in particular, put their ICT skills to good use at work.
- Rates of progression into employment are good. Of those who complete their apprenticeship, nearly all progress to permanent employment, with the large majority of these staying with the same employer. Of the few who do not remain in employment, most progress to further education.

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| The quality of teaching, learning and assessment | Good |
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- Good teaching, learning and assessment successfully promote the good progress which learners make in developing workplace skills, the reduction of gaps in achievement between different groups, and learners' progression into permanent jobs.
- Administration learners make good progress in developing and using workplace skills, such as good communication and leadership skills in their office environments. Learners across all subjects become more confident and supportive to others; employers recognise the positive impact that learners are making to their businesses. Apprentices demonstrate very good motivation and aspire to achieve the 'apprentice of the month' award. Some are nominated for national awards, motivating them to excel and continuously improve their performance in the workplace.
- Assessors encourage and support learners well. They demonstrate good commitment to seeing learners make progress in their jobs, are very reliable and make frequent visits to support learners in the workplace. They provide useful guidance to learners based on their extensive industry experience. They also have a good understanding of individual employers' procedures which they are able to include in questioning and assignments.
- Assessors plan workplace learning sessions well with good coordination with employers. Examples include planned work shadowing to enable learners to acquire new skills, devised by assessors after discussion with employers of an increased range of responsibilities. Tutors provide good, well planned coaching and mentoring sessions, for example on the use of body language in a receptionist role, the place of confidentiality in the workplace, and the professional use of spreadsheets. Assessors identify and plan for future learning aims well, mostly with good collaboration from employers. Assessors use technology well; for example, recently introduced tablet computers facilitate training and assessment sessions effectively.
- Classroom workshops are of a good standard. Assessors have good knowledge and set clear learning objectives. Learners are involved fully in interesting activities, developing good online research skills. For example, child care learners work well in pairs to research safeguarding legislation and successfully improved their knowledge.
- Planning for individual learning needs is insufficiently thorough. Staff do not sufficiently use results from the initial assessment of learners' skills to plan individual personal goals. As a result, learners do not have tailor-made opportunities to develop areas of weakness, relating, for example, to confidence building or to aspects of mathematical and other skills, including for learners who are exempt from functional skills qualifications.
- Initial advice and guidance are good, with a thorough pre-apprenticeship introductory programme for learners not in employment, education and training (NEET) that prepares them very effectively for the apprenticeship programme. The programme includes employers and other visiting speakers, and gives learners a good insight into working practice as well as the wide range of jobs available. Learners are asked about their aims and aspirations and these are discussed. Learners are in work placements that meet job goals and lead on to full apprenticeships. The induction programme introduces learners into a positive work culture that includes professional behaviour and appropriate dress code.
- The development of skills in English, mathematics and ICT is mostly good. Assessors work well with learners to improve their standard of work and make corrections where necessary. English

and mathematics tasks are integrated well in coaching sessions and set assignments. A few assessors do not routinely correct spelling and grammar, and functional skills qualifications have previously been introduced too late, resulting in delays in achievement.

- Assessors use a good variety of assessment methods and learners receive very good developmental oral feedback to understand what they need to do to improve. The recently introduced electronic portfolios are enabling learners to demonstrate a wide range of evidence and receive feedback between assessment visits. Coordination between assessors, workplace supervisors and learners is improving. However, assessors sometimes miss opportunities in the workplace to gather as much timely evidence as possible of achievement, for example by regularly asking employers, resulting in slow progress for some learners towards their qualifications.
- In progress reviews, assessors insufficiently monitor learners' progress and too often set targets which are too general, such as requiring the learner to complete specific units, without sufficient detail on what the learner needs to do. Learners receive insufficient written feedback to ensure that they understand what they need to do to improve.
- Assessors promote equality and an awareness of diversity very effectively, and learners improve their understanding. Learners are aware of the need to be sensitive to the needs of a diverse range of customers, for example making sure they consider dietary needs and physical accessibility requirements. Assessors stimulate interesting discussions and questioning on equality and diversity. For example, one assessor encouraged learners to discuss the contributions made by famous people of different backgrounds, to demonstrate the benefits of a diverse workforce with varied talents. Learners feel safe, are appropriately aware of health and safety in the workplace and have a good understanding of safeguarding concerns.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders and managers consistently communicate high expectations and ambition to staff and learners. They demonstrate a clear commitment to meeting national priorities, through the opportunities offered by the employability programme, from which most learners progress to apprenticeships, and through the improved planning and management of the apprenticeship programme. They have successfully developed a coherent strategic plan and a strong corporate ethos in which all staff commit to the high standards of training needed to improve quality. They use their wealth of experience as a recruitment agency, combined with a helpful pre-apprenticeship programme, to prepare, place and support learners into sustainable long term employment. By developing the skills and capabilities of both assessors and learners, they are improving learners employment prospects in a competitive work environment.
- Astute Minds is meeting the needs of unemployed young people, the longer-term unemployed and employers well. Senior managers value apprenticeships highly and offer a broad range of provision. Links with the recruitment sector are very strong, with the company leading the development of an industry training quality standard. They offer apprenticeships to their own staff and take on, as employees, apprentices in business administration and recruitment. This arrangement is working well for the apprentices. Senior managers have opened new centres in Romford and Sandwich, which are responding well to the needs of these localities. An additional centre is opening in Canterbury in April 2015.
- Managers have a clear understanding of the overall strengths and areas for improvement of their provision. The quality improvement plan is ambitious and managers monitor progress closely. For example, they frequently review the performance of assessors, and take prompt actions to improve weaker aspects. Formal quality improvement processes have been overhauled; they are now well developed and understood by staff. Managers and staff at all levels are rapidly held to account if performance falls below company expectations. However, quality improvement arrangements do not always measure impact sufficiently in terms of improvements to outcomes, or to the experience of learners. For example, the quality and impact of progress reviews have not been monitored sufficiently well.

- The system to improve teaching, learning and assessment through observations has been recently improved; it now identifies more effectively key areas for improvement. Observers now pay closer attention to assessing the impact of training, planning and assessment. Managers have ensured all learners receive consistently good teaching; however, too little is outstanding.
- Continuing professional development for staff is good and is closely linked to improving assessors' performance. Assessors benefit from attending company 'away days', which include advice from outstanding providers and guidance from external consultants which make them more effective in their work. Managers give good support and encouragement and help assessors gain appropriate teaching qualifications. Managers' appraisals of staff performance are well planned and frequent. Assessors' skills are better as a result; although, their ability to plan assessment to improve the rate of learners' progress in their qualifications has not yet improved enough.
- Managers successfully promote mutual respect among the learners and workforce and take suitable actions to reinforce expectations and commitment to equality of opportunity. However, differences in achievement between particular groups, while reducing, have not yet been fully eradicated.
- The safeguarding of all learners is good. Astute Minds has clear strategies and actions for safeguarding its most vulnerable learners. Leaders and managers have created a culture where staff and learners are strongly safety aware and learners feel safe in all aspects, including in the workplace and when using the internet. They are aware of potential threats of radicalisation and what to do if this should arise. Managers keep robust and up-to-date records. Assessors and managers receive effective updating training to understand better the indicators that may suggest a learner is at risk or suffering harm. The attention of managers and staff to health and safety is good, across varied settings in business administration, warehousing, care and engineering.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Astute Minds 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 | 2 | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | - | - |
| Outcomes for learners | 3 | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | - | - |
| The quality of teaching, learning and assessment | 2 | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | - | - |
| The effectiveness of leadership and management | 2 | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | - | - |

| Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment | Grade |
|--|--------------|
| Administration | 2 |

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|---|---|-----|-----------------|-----|----------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|--|
| Type of provider | Independent learning provider | | | | | | | | |
| Age range of learners | 16-18, 19+ | | | | | | | | |
| Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year | 45 | | | | | | | | |
| Principal/CEO | Ms Angela Middleton | | | | | | | | |
| Date of previous inspection | n/a | | | | | | | | |
| Website address | www.middletonmurray.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 learners (excluding apprenticeships) | 16-18 | 19+ | 16-18 | 19+ | 16-18 | 19+ | 16-18 | 19+ | |
| | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | |
| Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age | Intermediate | | Advanced | | Higher | | | | |
| | 16-18 | 19+ | 16-18 | 19+ | 16-18 | | 19+ | | |
| | 174 | 83 | 18 | 28 | - | | 2 | | |
| Number of traineeships | 16-19 | | 19+ | | Total | | | | |
| | - | | - | | - | | | | |
| Number of learners aged 14-16 | | | | | | | | | |
| Full-time | N/A | | | | | | | | |
| Part-time | N/A | | | | | | | | |
| Number of community learners | N/A | | | | | | | | |
| Number of employability learners | 0 | | | | | | | | |
| Funding received from | Skills Funding Agency | | | | | | | | |
| At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A | | | | | | | | |

Contextual information

MiddletonMurray was established in 2002, primarily as a recruitment agency serving Sidcup and the surrounding areas. In 2008, the organisation diversified into the training sector, primarily offering employability programmes, and later as a subcontractor for apprenticeship programmes. Astute Minds Limited was acquired in January 2013, resulting in a directly funded apprentice contract with the Skills Funding Agency for MiddletonMurray. MiddletonMurray continues to offer employability funded programmes, including a study programme for those not in education, employment or training. This latter programme is planned as a pre-apprentice training programme for learners to progress on to apprenticeships and subsequent employment.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Gary Adkins

The lead inspector and three additional inspectors, assisted by the associate director and executive assistant to the chief executive officer 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 area 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:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/handbook-for-the-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-from-september-2012

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