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Ms Jenny Shepherd
Managing Director
Astute Minds Ltd
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Dear Ms Shepherd

Short inspection of Astute Minds Ltd

Following the short inspection on 12 and 13 July 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in March 2015.

This provider continues to be good.

Since your previous inspection, leaders and managers have worked effectively to ensure that your staff continue to offer a good standard of training and education for young people. Staff are strongly committed to maintaining the quality of the programmes. There have been a number of significant changes to the leadership, management and structure of the organisation since the previous inspection. Astute Minds Ltd is now a wholly-owned subsidiary of MiddletonMurray. As a result, the provision of Astute Minds Ltd is managed and delivered very closely with the parent organisation.

The organisation has expanded since the previous inspection and is now delivering more apprenticeships and significantly more traineeships. Managers have used staff expertise from the parent organisation successfully to help Astute Minds Ltd deliver an effective traineeship programme. Managers have also maintained a close watch on changes to apprenticeships to ensure that the organisation continues to meet the new regulations for apprenticeship delivery.

Leaders have developed the vision of the organisation so that it focuses on people of all ages being encouraged to learn, under the strapline 'Zero2Degree'. Staff are strongly committed to supporting learners to have a clear idea of what they will do on completing their course. They provide suitable advice and support so that learners gain the training and education they need to progress successfully to the next stage of their careers.

Leaders and managers maintain strong and effective links with employers. This helps to ensure that learners on traineeships acquire suitable work-related skills. As a result, a high proportion of trainees successfully progress to apprenticeships or employment. Strong employer links for apprentices also help to ensure that employers are fully involved in the development of their apprentices. This helps apprentices develop the necessary work skills to succeed in their jobs.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have maintained effective safeguarding policies and procedures since the previous inspection, to help ensure the safety and well-being of learners. Trainees and apprentices feel safe in classrooms and at work. Senior staff carry out suitable pre-employment checks on new staff. In the event of any safeguarding concerns, staff provide suitable support to the learners and maintain accurate records of any issues. All staff have received training on 'Prevent' duty since the last inspection. Most learners and apprentices are aware of the risks associated with 'Prevent' duty and know how to keep themselves safe online. Staff have suitable strategies in place to help broaden learners' and apprentices' knowledge and understanding of extremism and radicalisation.

Inspection findings

- Since the previous inspection, leaders have extended the range of apprenticeships and have also significantly expanded the number of learners on traineeship programmes. To manage this growth, leaders have restructured the organisation, with three teams that oversee quality assurance, sales and client services across all centres. Managers are now utilising significantly more detailed feedback from learners and employers about the quality and impact of the traineeship and apprenticeship programmes. The new structure has helped assure consistency in the overall quality of provision across the eight regional centres.
- Leaders have managed changes to the funding, structure, accreditation and teaching of apprenticeships successfully. Managers have introduced new apprenticeship standards. They have also worked closely with employers to provide suitable support on how to benefit from the new apprenticeship levy. The organisation is also running a trailblazer apprenticeship programme in recruitment. Managers have reviewed the delivery model for apprenticeships to ensure that apprentices are receiving their full entitlement to 20% of their time training away from day-to-day work commitments. Despite these significant changes, the quality of the apprenticeship programme remains high.
- In 2016, the majority of learners successfully achieved their qualifications. In the current academic year, both apprentices and trainees are making good progress towards completing and achieving their learning programmes. A very high proportion of learners on traineeship programmes progress successfully on to apprenticeships.
- At the previous inspection, one of the key areas for improvement related to

ineffective target setting and progress reviewing by assessors on apprenticeships. Since the previous inspection, managers have made modest progress in addressing this weakness. All tutors and trainers now set and review more thorough performance targets. This helps learners to have a greater insight into the progress they are making. In most instances, these targets are well conceived and provide suitable challenge to help the learners make good progress. However, in a few instances, targets still lack detail and occasionally do not provide enough information to learners on how they can improve.

- Another area for improvement identified at the last inspection related to the need for staff to plan training to meet the individual needs of learners more thoroughly. The majority of teaching meets the needs of learners, often linking closely to the workplace and building on learners' knowledge and skills. However, tutors and trainers are still not making sufficient use of the information they collect at the beginning of the programme on the specific needs of individual learners. For example, teachers often do not take sufficient account of any additional support learners might need to help them develop their English and mathematical skills.
- Since the previous inspection, achievement rates on functional skills English and information and communication technology qualifications have risen markedly, while functional skills mathematics results show a more modest improvement. Managers have developed staff successfully to act as functional skills tutors on the traineeship programme. On the apprenticeship programmes, trainers teach most of the functional skills. Leaders recognise that the specialist tutors on the traineeship programme are more effective at teaching functional skills and are currently exploring strategies for sharing their expertise more with the apprenticeship trainers.
- Quality assurance processes are thorough. Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have made a number of significant changes across the organisation, including to the curriculum, management structure and responsibilities, and staffing. In particular, they have increased the size of the assessor team and introduced new procedures for monitoring the performance of tutors and trainers. They have also introduced more frequent quality-review meetings in which managers accurately track and monitor the progress of learners. Leaders and managers identify accurately those areas where the quality of the apprenticeships and traineeships has improved since the last inspection, as well as those areas which still require further action. Managers have put a suitable range of strategies in place to continue to raise standards and all staff are committed to maintaining and raising the overall quality of traineeships and apprenticeships.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders should ensure that:

- staff continue to improve the impact and effectiveness of target setting and progress reviewing
- staff provide a suitable level of detail and guidance when they formally review

and record the progress made by learners

- after initially identifying learners' needs, staff make better use of the information they obtain when planning teaching and learning activities; in particular, they should consider how additional support to develop learners' English and mathematical skills will enable learners to make better progress with their main programme of learning
- managers use those tutors who are most effective at delivering functional skills to help develop the skills of apprenticeship trainers, particularly to raise the achievement rates in functional skills English and mathematics.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will also be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Peter Nelson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Ofsted Inspectors visited the provider for two days. The managing director, as nominee, assisted inspectors. Inspectors met with the managing director and a number of key senior leaders and managers, as well as with a number of tutors and trainer/assessors. They also met a range of apprentices and spoke to employers. Inspectors visited several centres in south east London and met with learners. Inspectors observed teaching, learning and assessment, and reviewed learners' written work and lesson planning documentation. They reviewed important policies and documents, including those related to self-assessment, quality improvement, performance management, and safeguarding. They also considered the views of learners and employers.