

ARC Academy

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of a series of monitoring visits to a sample of new apprenticeship training providers that are funded through the apprenticeship levy. Ofsted's intention to carry out monitoring visits to these new providers was first announced by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector in November 2017. The focus of these visits is on the three themes set out below.

ARC Academy (ARC) was formed in 2011 by two directors. In May 2017, ARC began training apprentices funded by the apprenticeship levy on behalf of companies operating in the rail engineering and construction sectors. ARC also operated as a subcontractor, training apprentices on behalf of two prime contractors until these subcontracting arrangements ceased at the end of 2017.

ARC currently has 221 apprentices enrolled and funded through the apprenticeship levy. All apprentices are on level 2 programmes. Around two thirds are enrolled on an apprenticeship framework programme in construction and the remainder on a standards apprenticeship in rail engineering.

Themes

How much progress have leaders made in ensuring that the provider is meeting all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision?

Reasonable progress

The two principal leaders responsible for ARC's apprenticeship programmes are committed and determined to deliver effective apprentice training. They communicate well and work together effectively. Leaders are demonstrably keen to manage and further improve the apprenticeship provision. ARC's leaders hold a realistic view of the quality of training currently being provided. From the end of 2017, improvements in the quality of training and assessors' practice are evident. Leaders recognise that there is always more work to be done and have plans in place that demonstrate the potential to bring about any improvements necessary.

Leaders routinely evaluate the provision's strengths and weaknesses and summarise their findings clearly in a regularly updated, focused and time-bound quality improvement plan. The plan is used well for action-planning and monitoring the impact of actions taken when areas for improvement are identified. Leaders scrutinise the quality and impact of assessors' visits to apprentices and formally observe training sessions; the outcomes of observations inform individual or group training and have led to improvements in specific aspects of teaching and learning.

Leaders use monthly quality and standardisation meetings to improve assessors' professional practice and apprentices' development. For example, effective training for assessors has improved the clarity and depth of their records following apprentices' progress reviews. As a result, apprentices now have a clearer idea of the progress they are making and their next steps in learning. Training is also improving assessors' support for apprentices' functional skills development in English and mathematics at level 2.

All staff have received training to update their knowledge of safeguarding practice and improve their skills in discussing aspects of equality, diversity and safeguarding with apprentices during reviews. Leaders recognise that it is too soon to fully evaluate the impact of some recent training initiatives but have plans in place to do so in the near future.

Employers comment very positively that ARC staff use their industry-specific expertise and insight very well to manage and develop the apprenticeship programmes. Learners respect and value how effectively ARC's assessors use their experience and knowledge to promote learning and provide useful informal careers advice and guidance.

ARC's managers and assessors maintain very effective, close working relationships with a range of large employers in the rail engineering and construction sectors.

Leaders' actions are improving the quality of provision for apprentices and identifying areas that require further attention. For example, leaders monitor and routinely record the amount of on- and off-the-job training that apprentices receive, using individuals' timesheet data. They recognise that this information needs to be audited more thoroughly. Last year, leaders realised that the management information system in use for the performance management of the apprenticeship programme was not providing them with the level of detailed data they needed. For example, while leaders monitor the progress apprentices make, they are unable to undertake a more penetrating analysis of the exact development of some of the skills needed by apprentices. Managers have invested in a new and more powerful system, which will be implemented fully by the end of May 2018.

ARC's leaders reacted quickly to improve their governance and oversight arrangements and ensure that the provision meets all the requirements of an apprenticeship programme. For example, ARC leaders now ensure that all apprentices are employed full time on a contract of employment that conforms to required apprenticeship standard. Leaders have worked tirelessly to ensure that contracts used by different employers do not limit the potential for apprentices to

complete their programme. The very great majority of apprentices have not been adversely affected by the terms in their contract. However, a very small minority of rail apprentices are concerned that their progress is being limited by a lack of work assignments.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices benefit from high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes for apprentices? Reasonable progress

Most apprentices, however well experienced, believe that completing their apprenticeship will enhance their future employment prospects in the industry. Most of ARC's younger and less-experienced construction apprentices describe confidently the new skills they are developing and explain how they now use them effectively. For example, construction apprentices gain the expertise to work in teams that analyse and monitor the consistency and make-up of concrete to ensure that it has the correct tensile strength. Young rail apprentices install and maintain fishplates, the safety-critical connector joining two sections of railway track confidently. Apprentices discuss the challenges and safety requirements of tasks well and easily connect the theoretical knowledge used with their practical experiences gained when working on track. Younger rail apprentices see the programme as an effective vehicle for gaining a foothold in the industry. Most are enjoying their programmes and making good progress towards completing their apprenticeship framework within the allocated time.

Apprentices have very good opportunities to gain additional qualifications during their apprenticeship such as site marshalling, as well as gaining industry-standard qualifications, for example in site and fire safety. The quality of work which apprentices produce for their NVQ portfolios is largely of a good standard.

Most apprentices who need to develop their functional skills in English and mathematics do so and a high proportion pass their functional skills examinations in these subjects at level 1. However, despite training to support assessors, a low proportion of current apprentices are currently gaining a functional skills qualification in English or mathematics at level 2. At times, assessors do not all provide enough guidance to improve spelling and grammar in apprentices' written work. Most rail learners develop and improve their mathematical skills in the course of performing work tasks on-the-job and during their off-the-job training.

Apprentices appreciate the assistance they received from ARC assessors. Visits to apprentices are regular and timed flexibly to match shift patterns, including night work. Two assessors are based permanently on site Monday to Thursday at Hinkley Point, providing apprentices with regular, consistent and reliable points of contact, and formal and informal training.

Assessors have prepared good-quality learning materials for rail apprentices to use when completing the competency-based qualification element of their apprenticeship standard. Assessors ensure that rail apprentices reflect industry-standard safety requirements routinely when answering technical questions.

Assessors use a good range of assessment practice to gather and record evidence towards the qualification, including photographs, videos, witness testimonies and continuous assessment. Assessors track their apprentices' progress and ensure that they complete work on time. However, a few assessors are not routinely using apprentices' starting points against which subsequent progress can be gauged.

Assessors liaise effectively with most apprentices' line managers on construction sites to ensure that learners get on-the-job experience specific to the apprenticeship. The majority of apprentices, particularly in construction, get the support they require from their employers to learn effectively in their workplaces. The proportion of construction apprentices who remain on their programme is very high, but it is currently low for rail apprentices. Leaders are exploring initiatives to tackle low retention rates on the rail engineering apprenticeship.

Most apprentices' understanding of the theoretical aspects of their day-to-day job is enhanced when they experience well-planned off-the-job training. However, some variation in the quality of off-the-job training is evident. When less effective, only general advice and guidance is offered during review sessions. A very small minority of the rail apprentices report the employer they work for places too little value on the apprenticeship or they do not have job roles that allow for wider learning opportunities. ARC leaders are determined to improve this situation and are reviewing whether to continue working with some rail employers or switch to new ones.

How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that effective safeguarding arrangements are in place? Reasonable progress

ARC leaders prioritised the establishment of effective safeguarding arrangements for apprentices from the outset of its current programme. ARC has two trained designated safeguarding officers in place and apprentices are aware of who they are and how to report any concerns. ARC staff are subject to appropriate, thorough and timely disclosure and barring vetting procedures. Assessors and other ARC staff have received appropriate update training in safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty, much of it very recently. On larger construction sites, employers provide an in situ safeguarding team.

Apprentices are and feel safe. All employers and apprentices have a very strong focus on implementing effective health and safety practice. Apprentices take thorough account of safe working practices when discussing how they will carry out

practical tasks. Risk assessments are thorough. For example, apprentices using power tools while wearing ear defenders are helped by assessors to understand that they can also protect co-workers without ear defenders by setting up an exclusion zone around work areas.

During progress reviews, assessors ask questions to challenge apprentices' understanding of safeguarding, fundamental British values and equality and diversity. However, these questions do not lead to further discussion and reflection to fully develop apprentices' knowledge and understanding. Most apprentices have at least a basic understanding of safeguarding but their understanding of the 'Prevent' duty is at best cursory.

The very few apprentices under the age of 18 understand that their working conditions are subject to limits and they cannot, for example, normally work longer than 40 hours a week. Too many of the small number of rail apprentices aged under 18 who have started the apprentice programme in the past year have already left the programme.

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