

Elms Associates Ltd

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

10–12 July 2018

Overall effectiveness		Inadequate	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Inadequate	Adult learning programmes	Inadequate
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Inadequate		
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement		
Outcomes for learners	Inadequate		
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Not previously inspected	

Summary of key findings

This is an inadequate provider

- Leaders, managers and staff do not have high enough expectations of learners. Consequently, too many learners make slow progress or leave their courses early, and only a minority of learners achieve their qualifications.
- Leaders and managers do not use data well to inform their understanding of the quality of adult learning programmes. They have an insufficient understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision, which limits their ability to make necessary improvements.
- Leaders' and managers' evaluation of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is too positive. As a result, they do not take effective actions to help assessors to improve their professional practice.
- Those exercising the functions of governance do not offer effective support and challenge to improve the poor quality of the provision.
- Too many learners do not produce work of a good standard because assessors have an insufficient focus on developing learners' knowledge and understanding. In a few cases, assessors do not have appropriate subject knowledge to help learners to improve their work.
- Teaching, learning and assessment rely too heavily on undirected online searches to find information, or on assessors providing answers for learners to rewrite in their own words. As a result, too many learners do not fulfil their potential.
- Assessors fail to improve learners' English and mathematical skills effectively.

The provider has the following strengths

- Directors, leaders and managers have strong relationships with employers, who value the sector-specific skills that learners who complete their courses develop.
- Learners enjoy their courses and feel well cared for and valued. They speak highly of the positive working relationships that they have with staff.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Elms Associates Ltd is based in Darlington and has learners dispersed across the north east of England. Adult learning programmes make up a small part of the provider's overall offer. The provider's main activity is the delivery of apprenticeships through subcontracting from other organisations; this provision was out of scope for this inspection. Most of the adult learning programmes are at level 3 in health and social care. The provider also offers a smaller number of level 4 and 5 programmes in management for care sector employees who are progressing to management positions. At the time of the inspection, there were 27 learners on adult learning programmes, all of which were funded through advanced learner loans.
- The proportion of people in employment in Darlington is higher than the regional average. However, much employment is part time and average earnings are relatively low. The largest employment sector is health and social care. The percentage of the population qualified at level 3 and above is slightly higher than in the rest of the region, but much lower than the national average.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that leaders and managers develop a more accurate view of the quality of adult learning programmes, including the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, so that they can identify and implement effective actions to improve the provision.
- Increase the proportion of learners who stay on their courses and achieve their qualifications by ensuring that all staff have high expectations of what learners can achieve.
- Ensure that learners produce work of a good standard by providing staff training so that assessors:
 - provide useful feedback to learners to help them to develop new knowledge and understanding
 - have appropriate subject knowledge to inform their teaching, especially on higher-level courses
 - use appropriate resources and activities to enable learners to reach their potential.
- Improve the development of learners' English and mathematical skills, so that learners develop these skills to a good professional standard, by ensuring that assessors provide relevant and challenging opportunities for learners to practise and extend these skills.
- Improve governance by increasing directors' capacity to offer strategic direction, support and challenge in relation to adult learning programmes.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- Leaders and managers have been too slow to plan and take action to increase the proportion of learners who achieve their qualifications within planned timescales. As a result, the impact of their actions to improve provision, following very low achievement rates in 2016/17, has been limited.
- Leaders and managers' expectations of learners' achievements are too low. For example, managers attribute low achievement rates to the mobility of employees in the health and social care sector rather than to deficiencies in teaching and resources. These low expectations have led to a culture where staff accept too readily high numbers of learners leaving their courses early.
- Leaders and managers do not use data effectively to assess the quality of the provision. Their self-assessment of adult learning programmes lacks validity as the evaluation is conflated with that of the subcontracted apprenticeship provision. As a result, leaders and managers do not have an accurate understanding of the quality of their provision.
- Leaders and managers do not take effective action to support assessors to improve teaching, learning and assessment. For instance, reports from lesson observations and staff appraisals are too positive and do not indicate effectively what assessors need to do to improve learners' achievement rates and standards of work. Most staff training focuses on compliance with statutory requirements, such as the 'Prevent' duty, rather than on improving teaching, learning and assessment or on developing staff subject knowledge to appropriate levels. Consequently, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is inadequate and too few learners are challenged to reach their full potential.
- Leaders and managers have an insufficient strategic focus on the development of learners' English and mathematics skills. They do not hold assessors to account for these aspects of provision which, as a result, are ineffective. Assessors have now undertaken training in relation to integrating the development of English and mathematics skills in teaching, learning and assessment. However, this training is so recent that it has not yet had an impact on learners' skills, which remain underdeveloped.
- Leaders and managers do not focus sufficiently on managing the provision for the small cohort of learners on adult learning programmes. Their attention is mostly absorbed by the apprenticeships that they deliver as a subcontractor for other providers. Leaders and managers have recently made a strategic business decision to prioritise adult learning programmes rather than apprenticeships, but management processes are not yet fit for purpose for this provision.
- Leaders and managers do not ensure that adult learning programmes are well resourced. Learning materials, including those online, are too limited. Learning materials consist primarily of topic handouts, which are of variable quality. Learners told inspectors that they are not provided with reading lists, including for level 5 programmes. As a result, most learners do not produce work of a high standard.
- Leaders, managers and staff are motivated by a desire to improve the life chances of their learners and are committed to their pastoral support. They have a firm commitment to active citizenship. This civic-minded sense of duty informs the culture of Elms Associates

Ltd and underpins an ethos of care and compassion that ensures that learners feel valued.

- Employers speak very favourably about the support that they receive from leaders, managers and staff. They appreciate the skills developed by those employees who complete their courses. Many employers are also learners, frequently on level 5 courses, and they recommend the provider to their employees.

The governance of the provider

- The very small management team of Elms Associates Ltd also acts in a governance role. The team has not had sufficient capacity to plan new strategic direction effectively or to offer sufficient challenge and support to improve outcomes for learners and address longstanding poor practice in teaching, learning and assessment.
- The leadership team has ensured that the curriculum addresses regional care sector workforce development needs in terms of specific vocational skills, such as end-of-life care. They have strong relationships with local employers and maintain regular contact with them. However, they do not plan the curriculum well to develop wider employability skills, such as in English, mathematics, and information and communication technology.
- The leadership team receives advice and external scrutiny from other providers in the sector, but this is limited to apprenticeship provision and has no impact upon adult learning programmes.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders and managers ensure that staff have appropriate training in safeguarding, including in relation to the 'Prevent' duty. Assessors are well prepared to discuss safeguarding issues with their learners, including e-safety, gangs and the risks of radicalisation and extremism. The designated safeguarding lead and two other members of staff have undertaken additional extensive training.
- The designated safeguarding lead maintains a register of safeguarding concerns. The register provides evidence that such concerns, which are few, are dealt with appropriately and effectively.
- The strong, caring culture at Elms Associates Ltd underpins assessors' vigilant pastoral support for their learners. Assessors know their learners very well and know how to report any safeguarding concerns that they may have. Assessors' close relationships with employers reinforce the 'safety net' that surrounds learners.
- Leaders and managers consult with a range of local agencies, including local authorities, to inform their safeguarding policies and procedures.
- Managers check the suitability of staff to work with learners through the Disclosure and Barring Service. They are about to put in place additional checks as part of their recruitment process, including requests for references from previous employers.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Inadequate

- Assessors do not plan and provide learning effectively to meet the needs of individual learners. They collect insufficient information about learners' knowledge and understanding at the beginning of their courses. This restricts assessors' ability to provide the support that the least able learners need and to challenge learners, including the most able, to achieve their full potential. Consequently, too many learners make slow progress and do not produce work at the standard of which they are capable.
- Too often, assessors set learning goals based exclusively on gathering evidence to complete units of qualifications. They pay insufficient attention to the development of learners' knowledge and understanding. A few assessors do not have the subject knowledge that they need to help learners to improve their work. As a result, too much learning remains superficial, with a narrow focus upon unit completion, and too many learners produce work that only just meets the minimum requirements of their courses.
- Assessors do not routinely use effective activities and resources to support learning. They rely too heavily on informal emails to their learners. Although assessors expect learners to study independently using internet search engines, they rarely provide effective guidance to help learners locate and evaluate high-quality information online. When learners cannot find relevant information, or do not understand a question, too many assessors email them information to reproduce in their workbooks. This information is sometimes inaccurate or misleading. Learners often merely reproduce in their own words information taken from worksheets that their assessors provide. As a result, too many learners produce written work of a low standard and do not develop effective study skills.
- Assessors do not plan and provide teaching, learning and assessment to develop learners' English, digital and mathematical skills well. Too many assessors see these skills as irrelevant for learners on adult learning programmes and have few expectations that learners should make progress in these areas. Assessors rarely give constructive feedback to help learners to develop their skills. Their advice is usually little more than a reference to an external skills website. As a result, learners make very little progress from their starting points, especially in relation to their literacy skills. They continually repeat the same spelling and grammar errors.
- Assessors do not routinely provide feedback that helps learners to extend their knowledge and understanding. Although assessors provide regular feedback, in too many instances it focuses narrowly on unit completion and only rarely on the development of new knowledge. Assessors' feedback offers much moral support and encouragement, but is often too positive. In many cases, assessors do not have qualifications at the level at which they are teaching, and this limits their ability to give well-informed feedback. As a result, too many learners do not develop their learning well from their starting points.
- Assessors have appropriate industry experience, often as managers of care homes. This enables them to work well with employers to support those learners who stay on their courses to develop vocationally specific skills that are useful at work. Assessors work well with employers to identify opportunities for learners to gather evidence to complete qualification units. Employers value visits from assessors and frequently attend reviews with learners. Learners benefit from their supportive employers who help them to apply aspects of their learning to their work context well.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

- The large majority of learners do not develop their English, mathematical and digital skills well.
- Learners have a limited understanding of how to study successfully. Too many, including the most able, do not develop effective independent study skills and too many rely on their assessors to provide answers.
- The majority of learners appreciate their regular review sessions. They maintain frequent contact with their assessors by telephone and email correspondence as well as in face-to-face sessions. However, a minority of learners are not well prepared for learning when they arrive at review sessions. For example, a few learners forget to bring their course files.
- Learners appreciate the high levels of pastoral support and encouragement they receive from their assessors. Relationships between assessors and learners are characterised by an ethos of care. Assessors' constant positive messages encourage learners to develop confidence and a sense of ambition. Employers speak positively about the increased confidence that they see in their workforce.
- Learners benefit from useful pre-enrolment guidance about their courses from their employers as well as from Elms Associates Ltd. Course handbooks include links to the National Careers Service website, and assessors provide further, informal careers guidance during reviews. Learners who complete their courses use this advice and guidance well to develop their careers within the care sector.
- Learners feel safe and are safe. They are able to keep themselves and others safe from risks in their localities. They use safe working practices and prioritise health and safety requirements in their workplaces. They have a good understanding of how to stay safe from the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

Outcomes for learners

Inadequate

- Too many learners in the previous academic year made slow progress, and the majority did not complete their courses. Only a small minority of learners achieved their qualifications.
- Although current learners make better progress and a higher proportion stay on their courses, the proportion of learners at all levels who complete their course on time is still too low.
- Learners on level 3 programmes frequently produce work of a low standard or a standard that only just meets the requirements for their courses. Too many learners, including the most able, do not fulfil their potential. Their written work is often very brief and inappropriately informal. It shows little evidence of wider learning beyond what they already do as a matter of course in their jobs. The limited amount of additional knowledge evidenced in learners' work is often taken from worksheets provided to learners, with some rewording.
- A small minority of learners who complete their level 3 courses progress to further study at levels 4 and 5; however, the majority of learners do not progress and are not well

prepared for higher-level study. Learners who enrol on level 5 courses do not produce work of a high standard. For example, their work frequently shows limited familiarity with relevant research and little ability to evaluate different points of view.

- Learners who complete their courses develop useful sector-specific skills that meet the needs of their employers. As a result, the majority of these learners remain in employment in the sector. Around one third secure promoted positions or increased responsibilities, including promotion to management positions in care homes. However, the weak development of English and mathematics skills restricts the future options of too many learners.
- Learners who remain on their courses enjoy learning and can describe the new work skills they develop. For example, learners talked about ways in which they could better understand the emotional needs of people who are reaching the end of their lives.

Provider details

Unique reference number	1236710
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	19+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	22
Principal/CEO	Michael Wilkinson
Telephone number	01325 243823
Website	www.elms-associates.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 or above	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	-	-	-	-	-	20	-	7
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	-	-	-	-	-	-		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	-		-		-			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	-							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	-							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	N/A							

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the managing director, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's strategic and quality improvement plans. Inspectors used individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed progress reviews, read digital correspondence between assessors and learners, and scrutinised learners' work. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

Inspection team

Rebecca Clare, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Philip Pullen

Ofsted Inspector

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