

Accountancy Learning Ltd

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.

Accountancy Learning was established in January 2012. Its head office is in Exeter, with two additional centres in Plymouth and Taunton. On establishment, the company offered distance learning courses in accountancy on a commercial basis under the auspices of the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT). This provision now has around 1100 registered learners. Subsequently, Accountancy Learning was subcontracted to provide accountancy apprenticeships by BCTG Ltd and Somerset Skills and Learning. This arrangement, for around 50 apprentices, continues.

Accountancy Learning has offered levy-funded apprenticeships in its own right since April 2017. It has two standards-based apprenticeship programmes, which are assistant accountant at level 3 and professional accounting technician at level 4. The majority of its 51 levy-funded apprentices are on the level 3 programme.

Themes

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

Reasonable progress

Accountancy Learning's leaders have used their extensive practical experience of accountancy and training very well to develop and sustain productive long-term working partnerships with regional, national and small accounting companies in the south west of England. Employers recognise, and strongly respect, the company's role in developing and maintaining professional standards. Leaders ensure that new entrants to the profession receive the training and support they need to achieve well.

Leaders and managers are successful in ensuring that most employers have a good understanding of the aims and content of the apprenticeship programmes. They play an active role in supporting their apprentices' development and achievement. Leaders and managers work closely with employers to ensure that apprentices are placed on the right level of programmes and can access relevant learning opportunities. Employers value the flexibility of Accountancy Learning staff in planning learning to meet the needs of employers and each apprentice. One employer commented approvingly that as a result apprentices were not a

'homogenous, standardised product', but that they quickly became of tangible benefit to their business.

Procedures for recruiting apprentices are thorough, detailed and effective. They are carried out with integrity. Staff select those joining the level 3 programme carefully and in collaboration with employers. Almost all level 3 apprentices are either new to accountancy or have only basic learning or experience in the profession. Apprentices on higher-level programmes are more experienced and typically aiming to achieve career goals involving further study and qualifications. All apprentices are employed by the companies they work for. Accountancy Learning's managers have ensured that the very few with fixed-term contracts have long enough to complete their programmes of study. Employers plan that almost all apprentices will remain in full-time employment at the end of their learning programmes.

Managers pay close attention to ensuring that apprentices have access to, and use, designated periods of off-the-job training and learning, including weekly tutor-facilitated sessions at the company's offices. However, these sessions do not cater for the needs of all apprentices, particularly the minority who require a structured and tutor-directed approach to learning.

Information and communication technology is a particularly well-integrated feature of the programmes offered. Accountancy Learning staff have developed a good range of online and text-based learning resources for each level of apprenticeship programme. Apprentices regard these resources highly and use them very well to learn and develop their professional skills. In a small minority of cases, apprentices are not sufficiently aware of the portfolio requirements of the apprenticeship or the end-point assessment structure. This leads to confusion about whether they can complete their learning in the timescale specified.

Leaders and managers liaise closely with employers and apprentices so that they quickly discover if the provision does not meet their needs. However, leaders and managers have not put in place effective and systematic arrangements to identify and achieve continuous improvement in the provision. Leaders produce a very detailed annual self-assessment report and quality improvement plan. However, both are almost wholly descriptive and lack rigorous evaluation. They pay too much attention to identifying the many processes and systems used to administer the apprenticeship programmes, but very little on evaluating how well they work and their impact on apprentices.

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**

Staff assess apprentices thoroughly before the start of their programme to identify their strengths, weaknesses and learning styles and their competence in English and

mathematics. This provides managers and tutors with a good understanding of apprentices' starting points, which they use to plan subsequent learning and measure apprentices' progress. Most apprentices are already proficient and qualified to the required levels in English and mathematics by the start of their programmes.

Although most apprentices are already strongly independent learners, they value the professional insights, feedback and guidance they receive from their tutor during their programmes. Most tutors monitor each apprentice closely and foster good working relationships over time. Learners appreciate their tutor's six-weekly visits for in-depth, face-to-face reviews and being contacted each week by telephone or email. However, not all tutors routinely maintain this level of contact. A high proportion of apprentices attend weekly drop-in sessions, facilitated by a tutor, at Accountancy Learning's offices. Tutors do not structure or plan these sessions sufficiently to meet the needs of all apprentices.

Tutors and managers use a weekly meeting well to monitor apprentices' progress, identify any concerns and plan support. Minutes of past meetings show a consistently strong focus on maintaining a high quality of learning and achievement. Tutors are quick to intervene and provide effective support to the very few apprentices who have struggled or fallen behind. They normally do this working in partnership with apprentices' employers.

Most tutors support apprentices well to gain new skills, knowledge and understanding which they use in their workplaces. Apprentices can describe very clearly how their skills have improved and how this has increased their personal effectiveness and professional competence. Most apprentices quickly become able and productive members of their work teams. Apprentices identify specific examples of new learning, such as being able to produce management accounts and trial balances. They explain confidently how they implement this knowledge at work. Apprentices often gain promotion during their apprenticeship. One apprentice nearing the end of a level 3 programme provided peer support and mentoring to new employees and has taken on more senior responsibilities. An apprentice on a level 4 programme has gained promotion to the role of finance officer, and an apprentice who started out as a finance administrator is now a finance support officer.

Almost all apprentices have strong aspirations to develop their careers, and many identify the goal of becoming a chartered accountant. Most tutors ensure that apprentices receive appropriate information, advice and guidance to support their longer-term aspirations. Apprentices' pass rates are generally very high in the examinations that form a progressive and key part of achieving the qualification. A very small minority of apprentices are not aware that they can gain pass-, merit- or distinction-level grades in examinations taken during their programmes and are not being challenged to achieve the higher levels.

Most tutors provide apprentices with useful feedback on written work or test papers that is clear and developmental. This ensures that apprentices know what they need to do to improve. Most tutors identify any corrections needed in spelling, punctuation

and grammar in apprentices' written work. Managers have not developed a strategy to ensure consistency in the quality and effectiveness of all tutors' feedback.

Apprentices complete reflective logs as part of their apprenticeship which help them articulate their experiences and skills development. Most apprentices find it difficult to write the log, but they gradually develop this skill over time. Senior leaders are only in the very early stages of exploring how they can link these logs more closely with apprentices' preparation for the professional discussion element of the end-point assessment.

Managers' observations of teaching and learning are infrequent, and they do not use them well to ensure consistency of good practice or identify any staff development needs.

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

Appropriate safeguarding arrangements are in place, but their effectiveness cannot be gauged because there has been no referral or an incident. Apprentices and staff know who the two trained designated safeguarding officers are and how to report a safeguarding concern. Safer recruitment practices are in place and managers use them routinely. Managers ensure that training staff are subject to formal Disclosure and Barring Service checks which are initiated on appointment, maintained and regularly reviewed.

Apprentices feel safe in their work and during off-the-job training at Accountancy Learning sites. Staff pay good attention to effective health and safety practice at work. All staff who have direct contact with apprentices have received appropriate and specific training in safeguarding, British values and the 'Prevent' duty in the current year, but apprentices have not. Apprentices receive a thorough induction, during which they usually discuss these aspects.

Although tutors make references to safeguarding aspects during reviews, it can be too cursory. Apprentices therefore lack a deeper understanding about how these aspects relate to them in, and outside, their workplaces. Managers rely very heavily on materials produced by a third party to explore issues relating to bullying and harassment, radicalisation or extremism, and working safely online. They have not yet developed specific and contextualised materials of their own. Staff have yet to discuss how they might create such materials and promote them to apprentices.

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