

The West Midlands Creative Alliance Limited

Inspection dates: 6–8 November 2019

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

West Midlands Creative Alliance (Creative Alliance) is an independent learning provider and a not-for-profit social enterprise. It works with 74 employers – mostly in the West Midlands – to provide levy and non-levy funded apprenticeships in the creative media industry. These employers include 42 small and micro employers with up to five employees. Most apprentices are on level 3 programmes. All programmes are of 12 to 15 months' duration. Of the 109 apprentices in learning, 42 are on frameworks and 67 on standards-based programmes. One in five of apprentices is on business administration and customer service programmes. On entry to the programmes, most apprentices have some knowledge and experience of working in the industry and have the required qualifications in English and mathematics. Most of the apprentices on frameworks have completed their learning and are awaiting their certificates.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Apprentices love their jobs and enjoy learning from industry experts, and knowledgeable development coaches and line managers. Apprentices welcome the precise feedback on their work, and this encourages them to produce a high standard of work that helps their employers and clients. Apprentices become competent digital marketers and content producers for businesses and entertainment venues. They value the highly effective support and guidance from staff and employers.

Apprentices consider an apprenticeship to be their preferred option compared to a university degree, as they gain extensive knowledge of the creative industry. They become versatile, with a strong knowledge, set of skills and work ethic, and demonstrate excellent team working. They become highly confident in their ability to secure broad-ranging work assignments. Most apprentices move into rewarding jobs and careers, or into higher education.

Apprentices feel safe, working in diverse, friendly and dynamic working environments, free from bullying and harassment. Apprentices feel well prepared for modern society. They have a good understanding of British values such as respect and tolerance, the rule of law and democracy. They develop this understanding in thoughtful discussions on local and topical issues.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders and managers have established strong partnerships with world-renowned theatre companies, creative houses, and many micro employers with the intent of providing them with a highly trained workforce. The sector faces skill shortages. Creative Alliance fulfils the needs of these employers, who find it difficult to secure bespoke training from other providers.

Development coaches are highly skilled and experienced professionals from their field. They work very closely with the employers to design a curriculum that develops apprentices' knowledge of the markets, consumer behaviour and technical skills to enable them to work in the sector. Coaches work very flexibly with the employers to arrange the order of curriculum and assignments to suit the business needs.

Development coaches plan monthly sessions in detail, with clear objectives for specific knowledge which the apprentices will develop. They support apprentices to grasp new concepts. By asking searching questions, setting tasks for small groups, who then feed back to the whole group, they enable apprentices to embed new learning such as consumer behaviour in their long-term memory. Coaches test apprentices' knowledge by asking them to summarise the content of their written work and recording their knowledge in their learning journals.

Line managers support apprentices to apply their knowledge to their workplaces. This consolidates apprentices' skills and turns them into skilled professionals. For example, while working under the creative director's direction, apprentices successfully launched a nail gel to break into the UK market. The apprentices conducted a thorough market research of nail bars, retailers and customers. They produced a 'strapline', 'pitch' and costing and presented these successfully to the client.

Employers provide meaningful and demanding on-the-job training for their apprentices, which reflects their value to the company. Apprentices grow in confidence. Their communication skills improve substantially as they grow into their roles swiftly. For example, a junior content producer apprentice used his digital content knowledge about video editing techniques to work on live broadcasts.

Development coaches and employers provide swift and constructive feedback to the apprentices on their strengths and areas for improvement. This helps to ensure that apprentices have a good recall of the concepts from their memory of, for example, principles of analytics and how to use these effectively to target clients' products and services.

Apprentices use their English, mathematics and information technology skills particularly well in their everyday job roles. Whether conducting market research, writing the briefs for the companies, or making presentations to the customers, apprentices continue to develop and sharpen these skills. For example, apprentices use their mathematical skills to stay within the budget for a campaign, understand behavioural data and test their hypothesis by evaluating impact on people's behaviour. They pitch to the company with indicative financial costs and benefits projections for their businesses.

The standards of apprentices' work are high in most cases. Digital marketer apprentices have developed highly imaginative campaigns for clients on a professional networking portal and a photograph-based social media platform to promote products, concepts and businesses.

The director runs high-quality weekly information and careers guidance. In these sessions, apprentices gain a detailed insight into what it is like to work in the sector as well as the range of career opportunities.

The board members are knowledgeable and committed. They represent a broad range of employment sectors. They scrutinise the work of the managers diligently and challenge them to improve the quality of education and safeguarding.

Managers conduct fair and firm review of performance of the staff with a strong focus on well-being of coaches. This includes an acceptable workload and support when needed. Managers have removed some poorly performing staff. They have also lost staff due to several changes and resignations. This has

meant that some apprentices did not get the support, training and reviews in time and that communications with employers were poor during this period.

Leaders and managers do not use data effectively to measure the performance of apprentices by age, gender, level, disability or ethnic groups. Managers do not have a clear idea of the performance of these groups. Despite managers' efforts to increase the number of apprentices from minority ethnic groups on apprenticeship programmes, participation rates from these groups remain very low.

Managers and development coaches now have a good overview of the progress of apprentices. This has improved since the new provider monitoring visit. Apprentices are making expected or better progress. However, managers have been slow at identifying and meeting the needs of a few apprentices who needed specialist support for dyslexia and other additional learning needs. This has meant that they are behind in the completion of their learning programmes.

In the period of transition from frameworks to standards, development coaches and managers have not fully grasped the idea of promoting high standards for all apprentices. Most apprentices have high levels of attainment at entry to the programmes and some experience of working in a paid or voluntary capacity. Coaches do not, at the outset, identify candidates who can achieve merits and distinctions and so do not have a full understanding of the capability of all apprentices. The preparations for end-point assessment for apprentices close to completion of their programmes are effective.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Governors, senior leaders and staff have a strong awareness of safeguarding – including the 'Prevent' duty – and of local issues. By working closely with employers, they have established a culture of safeguarding and respect. Managers employ suitable staff after thorough checks on their background.

Managers use their strong links with local bodies to seek help, share information and refer apprentices. All staff take proactive steps to protect apprentices by being vigilant and spotting signs of vulnerability such as mental well-being, attendance and poor hygiene. Apprentices are aware of the dangers of the online world and know who to contact if they need to. Managers deal with any incidents of potential safeguarding and the safety of apprentices effectively and swiftly.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Conduct a comprehensive assessment of apprentices at entry to establish their potential to achieve merits and distinctions; support their learning so that they can achieve according to their potential.

- Identify the additional learning needs of apprentices promptly and provide support in good time to ensure that apprentices make expected progress.
- Collect, analyse and use data to narrow the achievement gaps between different groups of apprentices.

Provider details

Unique reference number	58920
Address	Unit 213 Scott House The Custard Factory Gibb Street Birmingham B9 4AA
Contact number	0121 753 0049
Website	www.creativealliance.org.uk
Principal/CEO	Noel Dunne (Director)
Provider type	independent learning provider
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements including observing learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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