

Phoenix Training Services (Midlands) Limited

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Phoenix Training Services (Midlands) Limited (Phoenix) was inspected in February 2019. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

Soon after its full inspection Phoenix was purchased by Challenge-trg. In August 2019, the provider was awarded 'work-ready Lot 2' devolved funding by the West Midlands combined authority. Phoenix now delivers mostly short learning programmes to employed workers and the unemployed. At the time of the monitoring visit, 39 adult learners were on a 14-week programme in functional skills English or mathematics. All current learners are employed, and almost all speak English as a second language.

Themes

What progress have leaders and managers made in developing a curriculum which is in line with learners' starting points, education and health-care plans and long-term goals? Insufficient progress

Leaders and managers have not yet developed learning programmes that meet the broader needs of learners according to their starting points, with regards to a wide range of knowledge, skills, behaviour and attitudes. They do not plan learning activities to target and improve learners' attitudes when they demonstrate resistance towards gaining employment. The curriculum remains too narrow and focused exclusively on achieving the vocational or employability short qualification.

Learners undertake an initial assessment of English and mathematics to enable managers to place them on the appropriate course. However, managers do not use this information to support learners to develop these skills. Learners who speak English as a second language do not complete an appropriate assessment of their English language skills. Many experience rejection when applying to join the learning programmes, as they do not meet the language entry requirements. Leaders and managers do not provide further additional support to help these learners improve their language skills, so that they can access the learning programme quickly in the immediate future.

Leaders and managers state that the number of learners with learning disabilities and/or difficulties has significantly reduced since the inspection. They rely on learners disclosing their own learning needs and disabilities. When learners do so,

they do not receive the necessary support to enable them to complete the qualification and to be prepared well enough for their future career goals.

Critically, tutors do not take into account the prior employment experience of learners when setting the learning goals for those doing an employability programme. Only very recently, leaders and managers have begun identifying the existing vocational knowledge of learners before they join the security courses. However, tutors do not use this information well enough to tailor the programme to their knowledge needs, ensuring that they acquire significant new knowledge and skills.

What progress have senior leaders made towards Reasonable progress effectively tracking and monitoring what learners know, understand and can do?

Leaders and managers have tackled the weakness identified at the inspection by establishing a new management structure which has brought small improvements to the provider's data monitoring systems. For example, they now monitor separately the performance of the courses they teach as part of their direct contract, and those that they deliver as a subcontractor for a college. This enables them to gain a more accurate picture of the true performance of each course. They now set targets to ensure that learners stay on and complete their courses, although these targets are the same across all programmes. Leaders and managers have not focused on ensuring that these targets are sufficiently challenging, or even realistic.

Leaders and managers acknowledge that their main measure of the performance of the programmes they deliver is the achievement of the qualifications. Although they state that tutors know the progress that learners make, leaders and managers do not yet track and measure that learners can do more and know more as a result of doing their short qualifications. Leaders and managers do not monitor and scrutinise sufficiently and frequently enough the attendance and destinations of learners.

Governors continue to receive insufficient information about the quality of education that learners receive and the impact that this has on the learners' achievements over and above gaining the qualification. This restricts the level of challenge that governors can pose to leaders and managers to improve the provision rapidly. Governors focus their scrutiny of the provision mostly on financial and contractual performance.

What progress have leaders made in improving Reasonable progress the quality of the learners' experience through the recruitment of well-qualified teachers and the management of staff performance?

Leaders and managers have recruited appropriately qualified tutors to deliver functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics. In addition, they have recently appointed a new tutor with appropriate teaching qualifications and experience to teach warehousing and construction courses and to support the development of their online learning platform. Leaders and managers have identified poor performance among their tutors and applied performance management

measures appropriately to ensure that all tutors can deliver training and learning to the expected standard. Managers conduct frequent reviews with most tutors, bringing together and sharing the results from their quality observations and evaluations. However, their identified actions for improvement are insufficiently specific to ensure that tutors and managers know what they need to do to bring about rapid improvement.

Leaders and managers have provided a high volume of short staff-development activities since the inspection. In the main, these concern updates to the qualification or preparation for changes to functional skills, for example. Leaders and managers have not focused sufficiently on delivering staff development interventions that lead to sustained improvements in teaching and assessment practice – or the design of the content of their qualifications – to ensure that the courses provide a rich learning experience for all learners.

Leaders and managers have not assured themselves that the new members of staff teaching the English and mathematics functional skills longer courses are having a positive impact on what learners understand and can do now as a result of doing these courses. Leaders and managers do not yet check that learners are making sufficient and rapid progress towards achieving their learning objectives within the planned period of time.

What progress have teachers and assessors made to improve their use of assessment, so that assessments inform learners of their progress and are used to shape the curriculum? Insufficient progress

Managers review in detail the final written assessments of learners to provide tutors with clear and accurate feedback on what they need to improve with regards to the quality of their own feedback practice and the standards of learners' work. However, this feedback takes place too late for learners, as it is completed once they have left their course. It is too early to assess whether instructors and assessors are using the feedback they receive to improve the quality of their practice for subsequent groups of learners.

When designing courses, managers and tutors do not consider in sufficient detail the purpose, type and reporting arrangements for assessments during the course. As a result, they do not plan to identify what learners have learned at different stages of the programme. This restricts leaders' and managers' ability to re-shape the curriculum to bridge any knowledge gaps identified in learners throughout the course. For example, managers have not developed an assessment plan for English and mathematics. Halfway through the course, managers have not yet captured any information about the quality of the learners' work and whether they can do and understand more than when they started the programme.

The feedback that assessors provide to learners is not of a consistently good quality. In some cases, tutors identify errors but do not help the learners understand what they need to do to make the required improvements. For example, in questions which require detailed explanations, tutors do not offer enough guidance on what the learner needs to do. In a minority of cases, tutors' feedback consists only of

ticking assessment objectives without further explanation. Assessors do not consistently identify and correct spelling and grammatical errors in learners' work. On occasions, assessors' own work contains spelling errors.

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