

Acacia Training Limited

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Ian Higgins, HMI

Visit date(s): 18-19 November 2020

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Interim visit

Context and focus of visit

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out 'interim visits' to further education and skills providers. Interim visits are to help learners, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of learners in this period, including those with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

We intend to return to routine inspection in January 2021 but will keep the exact timing under review.

The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below and the findings are based on discussions with leaders, managers, staff and learners.

Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we made this visit remotely to reduce pressure on the provider.

Information about the provider

Acacia Training Limited (Acacia) was established in 2000 to provide training for employers and its employees in health and social care, and early years and playwork. The company operates from its head office in Trentham, Staffordshire. Acacia recruits apprentices in both large and small- to medium-sized businesses from all regions in England. Acacia has recently expanded the range of qualifications it offers to include areas such as dental nursing and beauty therapy.

Exactly 1,261 apprentices currently study with Acacia and its subcontractor. Around 60% are studying apprenticeships standards, with the remaining 40% on apprenticeship frameworks. The vast majority of apprentices are on programmes in health and social care, or childcare and playwork. Exactly 190 are intermediate level, 867 are advanced level and 201 are higher apprentices; 1,189 of the total are aged 19 or over. There are also 677 learners studying adult learning programmes. Almost all of these are studying programmes at level 3, with a few learners studying programmes at level 4 and above.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of learners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

Leaders told inspectors that the impact of the pandemic has been varied. In some sector areas such as health and social care, and residential childcare, learners have continued in the workplace and the impact has been minimal. Whereas, in sector areas such as beauty therapy, dental care, and sport and fitness, workplaces have closed. Some apprentices have been furloughed. Where workplaces have closed,

assessors continue to revisit the curriculum and reorder topics so that learners can continue to develop their knowledge and skills.

Teaching moved online through the use of an online portfolio system and communication tool. For those staff who did not have the equipment to work remotely, leaders provided them with mobile phones and table-top devices.

Acacia has supported the wider community response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in the care sector, it provides induction training to key workers entering the workplace. It provided mental health first aid training free of charge to its learners, staff, and the employers with which they work. The company took on the staff and learners from three organisations who were struggling with the impact of the pandemic.

As we have entered another period of national restrictions, leaders and managers stated how this continues to provide challenges. In sector areas such as beauty therapy, and sport and fitness, workplaces have closed again. Assessors continue to work with learners in these sector areas, so that they remain engaged in their training. Where apprentices have been made redundant, Acacia has provided careers advice and guidance, 'flipping' apprentices to new opportunities through a process of skills mapping.

Leaders have continued to work with stakeholder organisations. They sit on a number of local board groups. Leaders shared how this allows them to gain insights from stakeholders, such as local enterprise partnerships, to plan and support their continued response to the ongoing pandemic, for example when they were planning for the current period of new national restrictions.

What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of learners?

Assessors have revisited the curriculum as learning moved online. In sector areas where workplaces closed, such as beauty therapy, they have reordered topics appropriate to the restrictions the apprentices faced in their job roles. For example, assessors have moved knowledge units forward and moved practical units later. They have used a range of methods to carry out assessments. For example, in dental care, apprentices recorded themselves setting up for a sterilised procedure, because assessors could not visit the workplace. Assessors used the time when workplaces were closed to support learners to be well prepared to return. For example, in dental care, apprentices looked at the most up-to-date standard operating procedures, so that they could work safely when they returned to the workplace.

Assessors are using a range of activities to check that learning is taking place, for example through using online quizzes and review sessions. They continue to make sure that apprentices can apply their theory learning in the workplace. For example, in childcare, the idea of person-centred approaches was seen in an observation. This

was then revisited in a subsequent theory session to deepen apprentices' understanding.

Staff continue to monitor learners' progress closely. Curriculum quality leads produce reports which are monitored at board level. Employers share how they can review the progress their employees are making through the online portfolio system. Assessors undertake regular reviews with learners and employers present. They put support plans in place where needed. For example, as national restrictions eased, some face-to-face visits were prioritised for those learners who needed them.

Staff stated that the attendance and engagement of learners have continued to be high. For those learners who did not use remote delivery prior to the pandemic, assessors provided training so that they can participate in remote learning.

How are leaders ensuring that learners are safe and well informed about potential risks, including from online sources?

Acacia has invested in its information and communication technology infrastructure, including its own cyber security. It has provided training to staff and learners on how to use online learning tools safely.

Staff and apprentices have access to a wide range of information to support their mental health and well-being. For example, they can access an application which allows them to score themselves in relation to their well-being. The application gives users information on how to improve this as a result.

Leaders have identified those learners who are more vulnerable, for example apprentices who have been furloughed. Assessors contact these learners regularly and speak with their employers to monitor these learners' welfare.

Learners and staff have 24-hour access to report any concerns they may have. They can do this by telephone, email and through an online application. Learners and apprentices know where to report any concerns they may have.

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