

Mercuri International (UK) Limited

Monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 2625231

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Inspection dates: 20–21 May 2021

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

From October 2018, Ofsted undertook to carry out monitoring visits to all newly directly funded providers of apprenticeship training provision which began to be funded from April 2017 or after by the Education and Skills Funding Agency and/or the apprenticeship levy. This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of those arrangements and as outlined in the 'Further education and skills inspection handbook', especially the sections entitled 'Monitoring visits' and 'Monitoring visits to providers that are newly directly publicly funded'. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

Mercuri International (UK) Limited became an approved apprenticeship provider in 2018. It started teaching its first apprenticeships from September 2019. There are currently 187 apprentices following standards-based apprenticeships for level 4 sales executive. A few apprentices follow level 5 operations departmental manager and level 3 team leader standards.

Leaders responded quickly when COVID-19 (coronavirus) restrictions started and began teaching apprentices remotely. They were able to continue training activities with most employers and apprentices, but as a result of the restrictions and employers adapting to leave the European Union, a significant minority of apprentices left their course early.

The impact of COVID-19 has been taken into account in the findings and progress judgements below.

Themes

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

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have worked closely with employers to design a comprehensive sales curriculum to meet their specific needs. The curriculum focuses specifically on the sales skills and attributes that sales apprentices need, such as handling objections, emotional intelligence and resilience. The provider also teaches a small but increasing number of leadership and management qualifications, helping employers to build managers' capacity to lead and influence people to achieve their best.

Leaders ensure that employers and apprentices follow appropriate recruitment processes. They receive helpful information and are clear about the expectations of

each apprenticeship – including arrangements for end-point assessment. Apprentices also receive appropriate initial training and assessment, so that they follow the right course and develop significant new skills. However, leaders accept that during the early stages of delivery – when the pandemic hit – a significant minority of apprentices withdrew from the programme, most as a result of furlough, redundancy or resignation.

Employers and leaders plan sufficiently apprentices' on- and off-the-job training. However, they do not monitor closely enough whether all apprentices gain enough training at work to be able to routinely apply theory into practice. In a few cases – because of business pressures – apprentices do not have sufficient time to complete their off-the-job training.

Leaders understand the strengths and weaknesses of the training, and have suitable plans to improve it. Leaders have rightly identified that they do not assess sharply enough apprentices' starting points so that all apprentices develop their English, mathematical and digital skills beyond level 2. Also, for those apprentices who require functional skills in these subjects, too few master these skills quickly enough.

Leaders have identified an appropriately qualified and experienced educational professional in a governance role to question them on how well apprentices achieve their potential. The governor – along with additional external reviewers – challenges leaders effectively on their curriculum plans. They also provide leaders and coaches with helpful support to enable them to improve their practice.

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

Coaches appropriately assess apprentices' starting points, taking account of their work-related, English and mathematical skills and knowledge, but they do not explore fully apprentices' skills and behaviours. Although coaches plan the curriculum content in a logical order, they do not always use apprentices' information to adapt learning so that apprentices fill the gaps rapidly in their individual skills.

Coaches have significant experience of the sales industry. This helps them to provide apprentices with vivid examples to help them make sense of new knowledge and sales environments. For example, in role play sessions coaches play various characters to challenge apprentices to improve their sales techniques, giving them a better understanding of different customers' personalities and behaviours.

Coaches routinely assess apprentices' understanding and progress. Using a variety of methods – including quizzes, end of module tests and one-to-one reviews – most coaches provide apprentices with sufficient feedback so that they know what they need to do to improve and what to do next. In a few cases, coaches do not give

sufficiently precise feedback on formal assessments. Where an apprentice falls behind, coaches use oral questions effectively to bridge any gaps in their knowledge, helping them to catch up. Although apprentices are clear about what they need to do to achieve a distinction grade, for a few apprentices their current workload is a barrier to achieving higher grades.

Although the minority of apprentices who require functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics have access to appropriate learning resources, leaders have not provided them with sufficient teaching and support to improve these skills quickly enough. Also, leaders do not ensure that all apprentices who already hold the requisite qualifications in English and mathematics continue to close knowledge gaps, particularly in mathematics.

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

Leaders have developed an effective safeguarding culture, paying particular attention to learners' well-being, including their mental health. Staff and coaches have recognised the pressures of the sales environment during the pandemic and routinely follow up apprentices' concerns. They ensure that apprentices receive appropriate referral to relevant agencies or medical intervention.

Staff and learners receive the requisite safeguarding training – including the 'Prevent' duty and online safety – so they know what to do if they are concerned and who to contact if needed. Designated safeguarding staff have the requisite qualifications, the lead officer at level 4. Leaders follow an appropriate safer recruitment process, ensuring that all teachers and coaches have the appropriate clearances and documentation before teaching apprentices.

Despite providing apprentices with routine safeguarding communication updates, leaders rightly accept that coaches do not reflect on these themes regularly enough to ensure that apprentices know of emerging dangers, such as gang and county lines activity, particularly in their local areas.

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