

Northern Training Academy Limited

Monitoring visit report

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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.

Northern Training Academy is an independent learning provider based in Bury, Lancashire. At the time of the visit, there were 354 apprentices and 31 trainees in learning across 15 different apprenticeship standards from level 2 to level 6. Most apprentices study retail-based standards at levels 2, 3 and 4. There are also two apprentices studying at level 6 in business and marketing. Trainees study employability skills alongside a work placement and sector-based qualifications in retail, business, sport and barbering.

The impact of COVID-19 (coronavirus) has been significant on this provider. Most apprentices work in the retail sector with one large fashion company. Apprentices and their line managers have been furloughed for significant periods of time during COVID-19 restrictions. Most apprentices' workplaces have been closed and practical observations in the workplace have not been completed. 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' main focus is to provide apprenticeships in the retail sector. There is a clear progression pathway from level 2 retailer to level 3 team leader and level 4 store manager. Leaders also provide traineeships to young adults who are not yet ready for an apprenticeship.

The level 6 apprenticeship curriculum is not well planned. Leaders acknowledge that this is not their area of expertise. They are not continuing to offer apprenticeships above level 5 and are referring new apprentices to an alternative provider.

Leaders work with employers to offer apprenticeships that meet the needs of their business. For example, they work with a charity to train store managers in the learning mentor apprenticeship. Store managers are now able to provide support to volunteers in their shops.

Leaders identify most of their strengths and areas for improvement. They are taking steps to resolve weaknesses. This includes the delay in successful completion of apprenticeships due to the pandemic. Leaders have developed a contingency plan to prioritise apprentices who have not been able to complete on time. They are now starting to see an increase in apprentices who catch up and complete in a timely manner.

Tutors and coaches are suitably qualified and experienced in the retail sector, but the majority are new to teaching. Leaders invest in training for tutors and coaches so that they are all working towards a recognised teaching qualification. New tutors and coaches work with more experienced staff to share good practice and increase their confidence.

Leaders have not yet established a formal board responsible for governance. They are planning to appoint an external board member to oversee the quality of training in the future. At the time of the visit, leaders did not receive any scrutiny or challenge on how to improve the quality of training apprentices and trainees receive.

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

Apprentices develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours that are relevant to the workplace. For example, retail team leader apprentices learn about Belbin's theory of team roles. They apply this to the workplace and are able to place staff they supervise in the appropriate roles.

Tutors plan the curriculum so that apprentices gradually build their knowledge. For example, apprentices on the level 3 retail team leader programme learn aspects of the finance unit through small topics, such as staffing and training costs. Apprentices then learn more complex topics, such as profit margins and value added tax. This gives apprentices more confidence early in the programme before they attempt more difficult concepts.

Closure of shops due to COVID-19 restrictions has slowed apprentices' opportunities to practise their skills. Most apprentices have continued to learn the theory of retail during furlough, such as how to reshape store displays to improve sales. Employers describe apprentices returning to work with more confidence and knowledge about the business.

Leaders recognise that their delivery of functional skills English, mathematics and information technology is weak. They are carrying out training with tutors and coaches to develop their own knowledge of these subjects. Leaders have altered their curriculum planning to prioritise the delivery of functional skills early in the programme. At the time of the visit, the impact of these strategies is yet to be seen.

Apprentices do not receive impartial careers advice and guidance. Apprentices are aware of higher-level courses within retail. However, they are not aware of the transferable skills they have gained for potential careers in other industries.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that learners benefit from high-quality adult education that prepares them well for their intended job role, career aims and/or personal goals?

Reasonable progress

Leaders develop traineeships to provide training for young adults who are not yet ready for an apprenticeship. Most traineeships link closely to the apprenticeship curriculum, such as retail and business. Traineeships offer a clear progression route into employment.

Most trainees benefit from programmes that are individualised to their needs. Trainees new to retail spend time learning about the retail sector in preparation for their placement in shops. Trainees who have some experience in retail learn about customer service skills for different types of shops, such as fashion compared with fast food.

Trainees develop new skills and behaviours from their training and at their placements. For example, trainees in business learn about professional etiquette and how to communicate effectively with colleagues in the office. They learn how to prepare for interviews and improve their confidence. Most trainees gain an apprenticeship on completion of their traineeship.

Coaches support trainees to develop their English and mathematical skills. Trainees learn how to use the correct punctuation and grammar in their work. Retail trainees use percentages to work out customer footfall against actual sales. Trainees feel more confident in their written work.

Coaches provide careers advice and guidance to trainees before and during their traineeship. Coaches ensure that the pathways chosen and work placements link to trainees' employment ambitions. Trainees understand their career options and next steps.

Coaches do not always have high expectations for trainees. In a few cases, work set is not ambitious enough and targets set are not challenging. A few trainees do not make the progress of which they are capable.

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

Leaders provide appropriate safeguarding training for staff. They carry out suitable pre-employment checks before staff work with trainees and apprentices. This includes suitability to drive to apprentices' workplaces and appropriate maintenance of cars for business purposes.

Apprentices and trainees feel safe. Coaches relate safeguarding training to the industry that apprentices and trainees are working in. For example, they teach retail apprentices and trainees what to do if they find a suspicious package or if a customer is behaving in an unusual way.

Safeguarding training includes information on current topics, such as financial abuse and identity theft. Apprentices and trainees are able to relate this to the dangers they may face in their daily lives.

Leaders include training for apprentices on how to manage conflict in the workplace. They learn about emotional intelligence and mutual respect. This reduces conflict and allows apprentices to work better with their colleagues.

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