

Inspection of Babington Business College Limited

Inspection dates:

12 to 15 December 2023

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Babington Business College Limited (Babington) is a very large national independent learning provider. Leaders offer apprenticeships in all regions of England alongside a range of commercial professional training. There are head offices in Birmingham and Derby. Almost all apprentices study their courses online. A very small number of level 2 customer service practitioner apprentices are taught in the workplace.

Leaders specialise in offering standards-based apprenticeships from level 2 to level 7. They provide courses in accountancy, people professions, leadership, management, digital, data, business skills and customer services. Leaders have recently concluded their offer of adult courses and apprenticeships in property, financial services, retail and logistics.

There are around 4,300 apprentices, of whom three quarters are aged 19 or over. Leaders work with over 800 employers. Several of these employers are large national and international organisations.

Leaders have partnerships with three subcontractors. The relationships with Birmingham City University and QA Limited are concluding. The partnership with Henley Business School to offer level 7 apprenticeships is ongoing.

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

Most apprentices receive good training and support from specialist trainers in workshops and skills coaches in one-to-one sessions. During their studies, apprentices become ready to take on additional responsibilities and implement improvements at work. For example, level 4 regulatory compliance officer apprentices learn to conduct complex investigations and compile formal reports for legal action. Level 3 accountancy apprentices enhance financial information in company performance data dashboards to support managers. As a result, most apprentices are prepared well to progress in their current job roles and future careers.

Employers and skills coaches ensure that most apprentices undertake activities at work that help them to practise what they have been taught. For example, level 2 customer service apprentices, who work in small shops, visit larger stores to understand different customer experiences. Level 4 regulatory compliance officer apprentices complete shadowing, role-play and investigation activities that develop their skills. These activities help apprentices to apply what they learn in different contexts and settings.

Staff create a calm and respectful online learning environment that supports apprentices to learn. During online sessions, staff use virtual breakout rooms well. This allows apprentices to discuss topics in detail and learn from the experiences of people who work in different industries. However, apprentices' attendance at workshop sessions varies too much. To mitigate this, skills coaches monitor attendance closely and ensure that most apprentices catch up with any missed work.

Skills coaches develop apprentices' knowledge of how to stay mentally healthy. In monthly reviews, they usefully focus on how apprentices are feeling and progressing. If an apprentice requires any support, relevant actions are agreed and implemented. Apprentices can also talk to the experienced staff in the safe and sound team. They offer a range of suitable support services or appropriately direct apprentices to external agencies.

Younger apprentices complete useful sessions on safeguarding, online safety and other topical matters. They can explain how this is relevant to their lives and job roles. However, adult apprentices and their employers do not always find these personal development topics relevant. Several of the tasks that apprentices must complete are not age-appropriate. They understandably say that completing these activities takes time away from their studies.

Apprentices feel safe during their studies and at work. They know how to report any concerns about abuse or bullying. Apprentices feel able to talk to their skills coach or employer and are confident they will be listened to.

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

Leaders have clear and well-focused ambitions for apprentices. Over the last six months, the new leadership team has significantly reduced the number of apprenticeships and courses on offer. The team has rightly removed courses with not enough focus on learners' and apprentices' career aspirations.

Staff pay close attention to apprentices' and employers' needs to inform training. Managers organise courses well so that apprentices gain the initial knowledge they need before they learn new material. For example, level 3 data technician apprentices study different file types, their advantages and drawbacks, before they learn how to import and manipulate data. This enables most apprentices to master topics quickly.

Managers and staff plan appropriately to meet the needs of apprentices with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). A dedicated SEND team works with the course design team to ensure that resources are accessible for all. Staff make suitable use of support plans to adjust their teaching and the support that they offer.

Most specialist trainers and skills coaches have appropriate qualifications and occupational expertise. They participate in suitable teacher training. This helps them to use their subject expertise well to enliven teaching, answer apprentices' questions and link theoretical topics to workplace practice.

Staff have access to an array of relevant development opportunities, such as membership of professional organisations and external resource libraries. Skills coaches who teach accountancy use these resources effectively to update their industry experience and keep abreast of changes in the sector.

Most specialist trainers introduce topics clearly and use suitable resources to complement their explanations. They make good use of group activities where it is appropriate to do so. For example, level 5 operations and departmental manager apprentices discuss their experience of different management styles with each other. This helps apprentices to better understand the potential impact of different approaches on their staff.

Leaders are yet to ensure that level 7 accountancy or tax professional apprentices benefit from a high-quality experience. Apprentices receive too little tuition and must study too many topics independently. This makes it difficult for them to grasp challenging subjects, and they fail their exams multiple times. Leaders are in the process of redesigning the curriculum, but it is too soon for inspectors to judge the impact this may have.

In workshops, specialist trainers use questioning and other activities well to check apprentices' understanding. In one-to-one sessions and reviews, most skills coaches follow this up with further discussion, which helps apprentices to consolidate their

learning. However, in a few cases, skills coaches place too much emphasis on evaluations of apprentices' confidence levels rather than their actual understanding.

Most staff set work for apprentices that is suitably challenging. Work often requires apprentices to think deeply about topics. For example, level 5 coaching apprentices work with a range of cognitive behavioural coaching models, apply them in their work and reflect on the effectiveness. However, in a small number of subjects, apprentices complete work that is too easy. For example, level 3 business administrators repeat the same activities or complete tasks that do not relate to their jobs. This does not support them to develop their understanding.

Historically, too many apprentices left their courses early, without completing their final assessments. As a result, the proportion who achieve their qualifications has been too low. Managers have taken several actions to resolve this. They have improved recruitment arrangements, ceased working with less supportive employers, and made improvements to the planning and teaching of courses. This has led to a substantial decrease in early withdrawals and bodes well for the future. However, it is too early to be certain of the impact on achievement rates.

Almost all apprentices who complete their studies pass their final assessments, and many gain high grades. Most apprentices who need to gain functional skills English and mathematics qualifications do so. Almost all remain in employment at the end of their studies.

Apprentices receive appropriate careers advice and support from their skills coaches. These discussions take place during reviews and, in the best examples, this is also embedded into the curriculum. However, leaders recognise that there is further work to do to ensure that apprentices on higher-level qualifications receive suitable careers advice and guidance to support their next steps.

Leaders and managers identify clearly and accurately strengths and weaknesses in the quality of education. Through their quality improvement plan, they set clear targets to improve. They take action to resolve any weaknesses they identify, such as too many apprentices leaving their courses before they complete them. Their actions have led to more apprentices remaining on their courses. Managers with responsibility for subcontracting, in the main, monitor this provision well.

Governors have the right backgrounds and expertise to challenge and support senior leaders to make improvements. Governors use board meetings to focus on the main areas for development. They ask leaders searching questions to explore the progress that they are making. These discussions contribute well to leaders' focus on securing improvements.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Increase the rate that apprentices attend their workshop sessions to reduce the amount of time they must spend catching up.
- Ensure that level 7 accountancy or tax professional apprentices benefit from the same high-quality training as other apprentices.
- Ensure that all apprentices benefit from demanding work that allows them to apply their knowledge and skills.
- Continue to monitor the impact of actions to improve the number of apprentices who complete and achieve their course.

Provider details

Unique reference number	50586
Address	55 Colmore Row Birmingham B3 2AA
Contact number	03333234050
Website	www.babington.co.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Mark Basham
Provider type	Independent learning provider
Date of previous inspection	2 March 2015
Main subcontractors	Birmingham City University Henley Business School QA limited

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of quality, 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 visiting 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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