

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of provider: Acacia Training Ltd.  
Date of visit: 7 June 2007

### Context

Acacia Training Ltd (ATL) is a private company established in 2001 to provide training for care settings. Its main office is based in Biddulph, Staffordshire, with two further centres in Manchester and Crewe. Since the previous inspection, in March 2006, ATL has discontinued its contract to deliver training on behalf of Scientiam Ltd (Scientiam). It now holds its own contracts with the Greater Manchester and Staffordshire Learning and Skills Councils to provide Train to Gain programmes. It also delivers Sure Start programmes and a variety of courses for commercial privately funded learners.

There are three apprentices on an early years programme and five on a health care programme under the Scientiam contract. A further 17 advanced apprentices on early years and 12 advanced apprentices on health care are also part of this contract. In total, there are 37 learners still in learning within the Scientiam contract.

A total of 439 learners are on the Train to Gain programmes. Of these, 55 learners are taking literacy and numeracy skills qualifications. The remainder are taking a health and social care qualification, with 337 learners taking a level 2 national vocational qualification (NVQ), 46 taking a level 3 NVQ and one learner taking a level 4 NVQ. Under the Sure Start contract there are 106 learners on a variety of NVQ programmes on health and social care, and eight learners taking a training assessor qualification. At the time of the monitoring visit, ATL had a total of 582 learners on government-funded programmes. This represents approximately half of the total provision delivered by ATL.

At the previous inspection, ATL's overall effectiveness was satisfactory. Leadership and management were satisfactory, as was equality of opportunity. Quality improvement was inadequate. The sector subject area of health, public services and care was judged to be satisfactory.

### Achievement and standards

How effectively has the provider improved achievement rates across all areas?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, achievement rates were high on early years Employer Training Pilot programmes. Achievements on social care apprenticeships were

satisfactory. Achievement rates on the early years advanced apprenticeship programme were low. Progress was at least satisfactory for most learners, with the exception of those on the early years apprenticeship programmes. ATL has made reasonable progress in improving learners' achievement rates since the previous inspection.

In 2006, for managerial reasons, ATL decided to end its subcontracted provision with Scientiam. However, it continued the training programme for the existing 99 learners. Since then, 32 learners have completed their apprenticeship framework and 28 have left the programme without achieving. A further 37 learners remain on the programme. Of these, 85% are making satisfactory progress and are due to achieve in July 2007.

For learners on the new contract, the Train to Gain programme, achievements are satisfactory. Of the learners who started the programme last year, 75% have already achieved their qualification. Out of 622 learners who joined the programme in 2006-07, 92% are still on the programme or have already achieved. Overall, these learners are making satisfactory progress.

#### Initial assessment

What actions have been taken to improve the effectiveness of learners' induction and initial assessment?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection this was identified as a weakness. ATL has made significant progress in ensuring that induction is effective and that initial assessment adequately identifies learners' additional learning needs. ATL now carries out an analysis of employers' training needs and advises them on the range of programmes available for their workforce. Assessors visit the learner and the employer in the workplace and establish the employer's commitment to the training programmes.

All learners receive an assessment that takes into account their previous and current job roles. The outcomes are used to place the learner on the most appropriate level of programme. The enrolment onto the programme is adequately completed on an individual basis in the workplace by the assessor.

Appropriate initial advice and guidance is given. Learners receive information about their training needs and their learning programme. Assessors explain clearly how the programme will meet the requirements of the learners' roles and how it will contribute to their career development.

Induction is now satisfactory. It is conducted promptly at the start of the training programme. A new comprehensive induction pack has been created covering the main aspects of the learners' programme and employers' rights and responsibilities. However, an excessive amount of information is covered during this session.

Learners take an electronic basic skills assessment. The results are used to help ensure that the learner is placed on the most suitable level of programme and to highlight any additional learning needs. They also take a skills scan related to their work and training programmes. The outcomes indicate any need for additional technical knowledge. Those learners identified as requiring further knowledge receive substantial additional training from their assessors.

### Skills for life

What actions have been taken to adequately meet learners' literacy, numeracy and language needs?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection this was identified as a weakness. ATL has made significant progress in identifying and meeting the learners' literacy, numeracy and language needs. The skills for life strategy is now closely linked to the outcome of learners' initial assessment and skills scans. Outcomes are appropriately used to build the necessary additional support for each learner.

ATL has recruited two new appropriately qualified members of staff to carry out initial assessment. They are also able to identify learners' literacy, numeracy and language needs and provide targeted support for those learners, as appropriate. In total, there are now three members of staff qualified to level 4 in literacy and numeracy skills support, and two more members of staff are currently working towards becoming qualified.

Most of the learners on the Train to Gain programmes are receiving additional learning support and are making satisfactory progress, comparable to that of other learners.

### The quality of assessment practice

What actions have been taken to ensure consistency in assessment practice?	Reasonable progress
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This was highlighted as a weakness at the previous inspection. ATL has made reasonable progress in improving the consistency of assessment practice. It has started to hold regular assessment practice standardisation meetings. Staff have identified key inconsistencies in assessment practice and have redesigned the documents to ensure all relevant topics are covered during learners' assessment. The documents are clear and allow the recording of discussions on health and safety and equality of opportunity. Assessors do not use standardised questions to develop learners' knowledge on these topics.

Employers receive information about their learners' progress or development, but the new assessment forms do not gather feedback from them. Employers' involvement remains an area for improvement.

Assessment of learners on the Train to Gain programmes is now planned at the start of the programme. Learners are now assessed on a continuous basis throughout the programme. Assessors have attended professional training courses to update their assessment skills. ATL has also updated its learning resources, and learners and assessors now use the same up-to-date online learning materials which cover all the NVQ units.

### Management information systems

What further developments has the provider made to the use of its management information system?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection, ATL's use of management information was identified as a strength. It has continued to develop the system and its use, to ensure the analysis of data highlights opportunities for improving the learners' experience. ATL now produces data reports which are used in management meetings and shared with the assessing teams to review learners' achievements.

Individual learning plans are now linked to the information system in a very detailed way, capturing all the activity that has taken place at each visit conducted by assessors. The information enables managers to identify learners at risk very quickly. However, the management information system does not provide a percentage to show the overall progress made by each learner. This is calculated manually by managers. Managers use the information system to monitor staff performance and productivity and to validate the support that learners receive from their assessors.

There are plans to continue developing the system to integrate the recording of equality of opportunity discussions held with learners to monitor any issues and identify patterns of concern.

### Quality improvement

What actions have been carried out to implement an appropriate quality improvement strategy?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection this was recognised as a weakness. The quality improvement arrangements were found to be insufficiently developed. ATL has made reasonable progress in ensuring the full implementation of the quality improvement framework.

The quality policy and procedures were redesigned in March 2006 and updated in 2007. They are now available on ATL's intranet and follow strands such as quality assurance, use of data and documents. However, some of the critical detail, such as the frequency of quality improvement activities, is missing.

The provider has made some progress in the use of observations of teaching and learning to improve the provision. These are now carried out by a qualified member

of staff who is also vocationally competent. Observations of training and assessment are well planned and the provider is now grading each observation. However, there are no written criteria to support grading decisions. Some of the sessions are graded too generously.

Feedback from learners and employers continues to be collected quarterly. Improvements, such as the new, more comprehensive induction pack, have been made based on the feedback received from learners. Over the past 18 months the provider has analysed feedback from learners and employers but the quality of the analysis is variable. Only recently has more targeted analysis begun to take place.

There is insufficient formal analysis of feedback over time to identify trends or opportunities for improvement.

The provider has continued to develop its staff awareness and involvement in the self-assessment process. It holds an annual event in which staff discuss the strengths and areas for improvement. The current self-assessment report is mostly accurate, although it is insufficiently evaluative. A development plan targets the identified areas for improvement. This is formally reviewed at team and management meetings and is discussed during staff appraisals.