



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT AUGUST 1998

Casson's Commercial College

SUMMARY

Casson's Commercial College is based in Oldham. It maintains strong links with local employers who provide placements of a high quality. Training in business administration is satisfactory. Achievement rates are consistently above local and national averages. There is a lack of co-ordination between on- and off-the-job learning. Training in key skills for the small number of modern apprentices is poor. Management of training and quality assurance are satisfactory.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	3

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	3
Trainee support	3
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ high rates of trainee achievement
- ◆ high-quality placements
- ◆ highly committed staff
- ◆ consistently high standard of trainees' portfolios

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no formal planning of training in the workplace
- ◆ insufficient initial assessment of trainees
- ◆ insufficiently systematic quality assurance procedures
- ◆ data not used to inform management decisions



INTRODUCTION

1. Casson's Commercial College is owned by the principal and is a sole trader. It employs two full- and two part-time trainers and a full-time administrator. Two of the trainers are also internal verifiers. It was established in 1965 as a secretarial school, covering Oldham and neighbouring towns, and is now based on the edge of Oldham town centre. It has been delivering government-funded training since 1974. Casson's Commercial College provides training in business administration, customer service and information technology, all of which is funded by Oldham Chamber of Commerce Training and Enterprise (CCTE). Trainees are working towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3, through modern apprenticeships or other work-based training programmes for both young people and adults. At the time of inspection, no trainees were training in information technology and only five in customer service. These trainees were interviewed, but these areas were not fully inspected.
2. The unemployment rate is 5.4 per cent in Oldham, and rising, compared with the national average of 5.1 per cent. Minority ethnic groups represent approximately 11 per cent of the population. The unemployment rate in these communities is 38 per cent.
3. The number of school leavers for Oldham achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 36 per cent, compared with the national average of 53 per cent, for 1997.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. Casson's Commercial College produced its first self-assessment report for the inspection. The principal produced a draft report after training provided by Oldham CCTE. This draft was discussed with all staff, and amendments were made.

5. A team of four inspectors spent a total of 12 days at Casson's Commercial College during August 1998. All aspects of the business administration training were inspected. Inspectors examined documents at the training centre and at employers' premises. They met the principal and staff from Casson's Commercial College, 10 employers and 19 trainees. They examined assessment records, trainees' work and portfolios, awarding bodies' reports and company policies.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 3

6. Casson's Commercial College has six adult trainees and 33 youth trainees registered on programmes in this occupational sector. Of the 33 youth trainees, 16 are employed and seven are modern apprentices. Thirteen of the 17 non-employed youth trainees were on work placement, while the other four had started the programme within the previous six days. Adult trainees follow a programme for 12 weeks initially, although, if required, extensions to this period can be agreed on. Several adults have completed the programme in fewer than 12 weeks. Training and assessment take place in the training centre and in the workplace. The strengths identified in the self-assessment report were a reflection of normal practice. The inspectors found that the self-assessment report did not identify some strengths and failed to identify additional weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors was lower than the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive induction
- ◆ good working relationship between trainers and trainees
- ◆ good rate of trainee achievement
- ◆ excellent links with employers
- ◆ high-quality work placements

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ key skills are insufficiently developed
- ◆ some poor-quality trainee reviews
- ◆ training in the workplace lacks formal planning

7. Placement arrangements are excellent. Training is provided in a supportive, professional environment. Trainees' achievement is above local and national averages. Over the last three years, NVQ qualifications per 100 leavers has averaged 68 per cent for youth trainees, compared with the Oldham and national figures in 1996-97 of 56 per cent and 57 per cent respectively.

8. The organisation provides good instruction in key skills as part of off-the-job training for trainees, sent by local employers who have a training contract with CCTE. By contrast, there is inadequate provision of key skills training for modern apprentices.

9. Trainees' reviews do not always take account of previous reviews, and line managers are not involved in training and assessment planning. Some trainees' workplace supervisors have insufficient knowledge of NVQs to enable them to take advantage of training and assessment opportunities.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

10. Casson's Commercial College has a clear commitment to equal opportunities and open access for intake of trainees. This is due, almost completely, to the attitude of the proprietor and staff, rather than to any formal system or policy. Virtually all Casson's Commercial College's applicants are referred to it by the local careers service. Most of the strengths identified by the organisation represented normal practice. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses. The grade awarded is lower than that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent staff attitude
- ◆ good off-the-job training facilities for the disabled
- ◆ good collection and analysis of data on new trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no equal opportunities policy
- ◆ no collection of data relating to trainees' achievements and destinations

11. All trainees are valued. They are advised of their rights and of grievance and complaints procedures, at induction. The number of trainees on the programme from minority ethnic groups is representative of the population in Oldham. Of the 44 trainees at Casson's Commercial College, only two are male. However, recruitment is outside the control of the organisation. All potential starters are submitted by the local careers service. Of the five male applicants, two joined the programme. Casson's Commercial College's premises are accessible to those with disabilities.

12. Data are recorded on the gender, ethnicity and disability of those trainees applying. Little has been done to attract more applications from young men who are under-represented or from minority ethnic groups. There is no analysis of the achievement rate or employed status of trainees by ethnic background, gender or disability.

Trainee support

Grade 3

13. On joining, all trainees go through an initial induction which provides them with a clear understanding of portfolio-building. Staff hold regular, documented reviews more often than is contractually required. Casson's Commercial College's contacts with local employers have enabled a network of high-quality work placements to be built up. Action-plans are created and agreed on with trainees who are encouraged to use work-based evidence and are, on occasions, observed in the workplace by their assessor. At the training centre, trainees have access to staff on an individual basis, as required, though much of their time is spent working without supervision. Inspectors found additional weaknesses to those identified in the organisation's self-assessment report, and the grade awarded was lower.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ very good up-to-date information on employment opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no initial assessment of trainees' basic skills
- ◆ insufficient initial identification of trainees' learning needs

14. With the low trainee-to-staff ratio, all staff have a detailed knowledge of individual trainees, and most tuition is at a one-to-one level. Reviews are regular, well conducted by the staff and are recorded. Staff respond well to concerns from employers and trainees and are able to arrange changes in work programmes, in order that particular performance criteria be met. Casson's Commercial College scans local newspapers for jobs advertisements to which trainees might respond. Trainees are well supported, if they agree to make an application.

15. New trainees do not undergo an initial skills assessment, and trainees' strengths and weaknesses are not always identified. Therefore, the training plan does not always reflect trainees' strengths and weaknesses or the individual support which they might require.

Management of training

Grade 3

16. Casson's Commercial College has no written policies or strategies. The principal is closely involved with the training and placement providers. Through this contact and long-term involvement in the business community, Casson's Commercial College has developed good, long-standing relationships with work-placement providers. The self-assessment report failed to identify any weaknesses, and some of the strengths were considered by inspectors to be normal working practice. Inspectors awarded the same grade as did the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ clearly defined staff roles
- ◆ effective trainers and assessors
- ◆ good working relationship with work-placement providers
- ◆ good promotion of key values

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ data are not sufficiently used to inform management decisions and staff actions
- ◆ lack of a systematic approach to the recording of trainees' progress
- ◆ lack of formal review to develop training and assessment policies and strategies

17. The management style is informal, but effective and appropriate for an organisation of this size. It promotes the image of an organisation which is highly professional and successful. Everyone is quick to respond to trainees' needs.

18. Formal means of communication, such as staff meetings and regular briefings

by the principal are kept to a minimum. Much of the communication of information in the organisation is by word of mouth. Some staff do not have clear action-plans. Staff have not carried out any analysis of strengths and weaknesses in their work or in the organisation's provision.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

19. Casson's Commercial College is an Investor in People. The self-assessment report regarded the length and style of the current quality assurance manual as unhelpful and indicated that a simpler version would be desirable for the size of Casson's Commercial College's management systems. The organisation is relatively small and the close working relationships and professionalism of the staff sustain the quality of its systems on a day-to-day basis. The grade awarded by inspectors was the same as that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high regard for quality is evident in the approach to training by staff

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ unsatisfactory and inappropriate quality assurance manual
- ◆ no systematic quality assurance process

20. Staff have a keen awareness of the importance of sustaining quality in all aspects of their work with trainees and employees. They are reviewing the quality of training provided, but are not doing so in a systematic way against agreed criteria. Many of the work-placement companies have been known to Casson's Commercial College for over ten years. Contact with these employers takes place on a social level, as well as on a professional one. Feedback is frequent and regular, though very informal; it is always acted on. There is scope for staff to devise a quality assurance process which is sufficiently systematic to cover all aspects of provision, without being too complex or bureaucratic for a small organisation such as Casson's Commercial College.