



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT DECEMBER 1998

United Utilities

SUMMARY

United Utilities offers good engineering training in electrical-distribution, water-process-control and plant- and vehicle-maintenance trades. All trainees are employed. They have a high regard for their training programme, which is well-organised and well-managed to address the needs of trainees and the company. Equipment and workshop facilities are of a high standard. Equal opportunities are actively promoted within a culture of continuous improvement. Quality assurance arrangements are fragmented and lack a common framework. Formalised agreements with some subcontractors are missing. Understanding of key skills is poor in some areas.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	2
Management of training	2
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent resources
- ◆ highly-motivated trainees
- ◆ comprehensive equal opportunities policies and literature
- ◆ effectively managed training
- ◆ promotion of a culture of continuous improvement

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor understanding of key skills in some areas
- ◆ lack of formalised agreements with some subcontractors
- ◆ fragmented quality assurance system

INTRODUCTION

1. United Utilities plc was formed in January 1996 as a result of the acquisition by North West Water Group plc of Norweb plc. United Utilities is active in over 40 countries and serves 32,000,000 people in urban and rural populations, private households, agricultural customers and major industries and commerce. The utility division brings together North West Water and Norweb Distribution into one single management structure and employs over 5,500 people.

2. North West Water's operations currently have 65 trainees, of whom 22 are modern apprentices and 43 are youth trainees. The laboratory services which provide analytical data and support for water treatment has five trainees on youth training programmes. Norweb Distribution maintains and operates a network of substations, overhead lines and underground cables to bring electricity from the National Grid to factories, offices, shops and homes in northwest England. Norweb distribution currently has 24 trainees on modern apprenticeship programmes in engineering. Launched in November 1996, Unifleet brings together North West Water and Norweb transport to become the major transport provider to United Utilities. Unifleet manages a major internal fleet of 3,600 commercial vehicles, ranging from car-derived vans to heavy articulated tankers. It also maintains 1,000 vehicles on external contracts. Unifleet currently has four modern apprenticeship trainees.

3. All trainees undertake National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) from levels 1 to 3 and most pursue additional further education courses. United Utilities has a contract with North and Mid Cheshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) for trainees working mainly in the northwest of England. The overall unemployment rate in this region is higher than the national average.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. United Utilities produced its first self-assessment report in October 1998. The report is comprehensive and provided inspectors with useful information about the organisation and, in particular, its training arrangements. Inspectors largely agreed with the self-assessment findings, but identified additional strengths and weaknesses.

5. A team of four inspectors spent a total of 16 days at United Utilities during December 1998. They inspected engineering training, including mechanical, electrical, instrumentation, process-control operations, transport and laboratory operations. Inspectors examined company and awarding body documents. They interviewed 27 members of staff and 50 trainees, visited subcontractors and interviewed six of their staff. They observed six training sessions, three trainee reviews and three NVQ assessments. Trainees' NVQ portfolios and work evidence were also examined

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 2

6. United Utilities has 98 trainees in engineering, of whom 50 undertake modern apprenticeships leading to NVQ level 3 and 48 are on youth training programmes. Most trainees pursue other further education courses. All modern apprentices are employed and initially complete a 32-week foundation course, subcontracted to various outside training organisations. Subsequent training to NVQ level 3 is undertaken in the workplace. Modern apprentices are permanently based at one site and within a specialist area: mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, instrumentation or vehicle maintenance. Operations trainees spend the first eight months off site at a skills centre, where they work towards an NVQ level 2 in engineering manufacture. Youth trainees in process control operations undertake a training programme in three operational areas of the business, followed by a 12-month placement in a specialist area. Inspectors found additional strengths to those identified in the self-assessment report and awarded a higher grade

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent resources
- ◆ good working relationships between trainees and trainers
- ◆ comprehensive training and development plans
- ◆ trainees' enthusiasm and high regard for their training
- ◆ well-qualified and experienced trainers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor understanding of key skills in some areas
- ◆ missed opportunities for assessments in the workplace

7. Resources at United Utilities are of a high standard. At its Vertex training centre, the reception area provides substantial refreshment and other facilities, which include an electronic information board, indicating the title and location of each training programme. Excellent residential accommodation is available to trainees who live outside daily travelling distance from the centre. Workshop facilities simulate the best workplace environments. In the electrical section, training includes the 'live' jointing of cables and overhead powerline maintenance. The wide range of equipment in process operation, maintenance and laboratory operations is of current industrial standard. Centres for off-the-job training exceeded the minimum resources required to run NVQ level 2 engineering manufacturing courses. Classroom facilities are good. Trainers are well-qualified and experienced.

8. The training and development plan produced for the TEC is comprehensive. The personal training plan is derived from the appraisal system and contains additional training requirements, including the personal development of trainers.

9. Relations between trainees and training staff are good. All on-the-job trainees have regular progress reviews and e-mail accounts. Off-the-job trainees have progress reviews more frequently than is contractually required. All trainees are employed. This helps trainees to feel an accepted part of the organisation and contributes towards their enthusiasm for the training.

10. Understanding and recording of key skills in the electrical distribution department are poor. There is no assessment in the workplace, with heavy reliance on witness testimony. Witnesses are unaware of the NVQ criteria. Their status is not recorded on job sheets, and trainees, portfolios contain no register of witnesses and their credentials. Trainees' competence cannot be systematically verified until the workplace assessments fully meet the requirements of the awarding body.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

11. United Utilities has an equal opportunities policy, communicated to all staff and trainees at induction. The company provides guidance on how to deal with bullying and/or harassment, and stresses abuse will not be tolerated. Equal opportunities practice is monitored and actively promoted in job advertisements and publicity literature. Inspectors agreed with the grade in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive equal opportunities policies and guidance
- ◆ active promotion of equal opportunities in publicity literature
- ◆ information available in a variety of formats
- ◆ appointment of equal opportunities officer to monitor and review policies and procedures

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient emphasis given to trainees on harassment policy
- ◆ lack of monitoring of equal opportunity arrangements of subcontractors

12. United Utilities has detailed policies and procedures on equal opportunities. Trainees are informed of these policies and procedures during induction, but do not receive specific information about harassment, although the company has excellent leaflets on how to deal with harassment. The company promotes its commitment to equal opportunities in all job advertisements placed in local and national newspapers. Information is available in a variety of formats, which include Braille, large print and cassette tape.

13. A member of staff has specific responsibility for implementing and monitoring equal opportunities policies and procedures. This officer received training for the rôle and is currently reviewing systems and policies. United Utilities keeps detailed information on recruitment of minority ethnic groups, but does not check this against local data.

14. No formal checks are conducted or agreements reached with subcontractors on the application and monitoring of equal opportunities on their sites. A subcontracted college stated in its students' handbook that the equal opportunities policy is displayed in the reception area – it is not nor could staff find a copy of it. Female trainees have to ascend two floors of stairs for access to the toilets whereas two male toilets are available on the ground floor.

Trainee support

Grade 2

15. Trainees receive an assessment of numeracy and literacy skills and a test for mechanical aptitude, followed by a thorough interview. They undertake a two-day induction programme, usually residential, covering rights and responsibilities, health and safety, career, training, and product information and an introduction to the company and its culture. All trainees are employed. They are supported by the company's own training organisation, whose purpose is to produce well-trained people ready for employment in United Utilities.

16. Opportunities to join the company's training programme are advertised annually in the local press. United Utilities works closely with local schools and careers

offices. It offers two-week taster programmes to schools to help potential trainees make informed decisions. Ex-trainees often refer trainees and recommend work placements. Inspectors agreed with the grade in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive induction programmes
- ◆ thorough and effective recruitment procedures
- ◆ frequent opportunities to discuss progress
- ◆ good counselling and support
- ◆ opportunities to gain additional qualifications

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of systematic assessment of key skills on entry
- ◆ missed opportunities to integrate key skills at level 2

17. Induction is well planned and trainees value the introduction to the requirements of the company and training programme. They benefit from strong technical and pastoral support in the training organisation and work placement. Advice from visiting assessors is comprehensive, and enables trainees to complete their programmes successfully. Trainees' progress is reviewed and a witness testimony assessment carried out monthly. Trainees are clear about the assessment process.

18. Each trainee has his/her own mentor which helps them settle and gives them confidence to tackle live responsible jobs. Mentors are trained in the mentoring process and offer personal advice to trainees. They give substantial support, especially in the early days of their training, through individual tutoring and monthly reviews with the assessor and departmental manager. All aspects of support for trainees are fully documented and regularly reviewed.

19. Trainees have the opportunity to attend additional courses. They value the guidance on other educational courses, future opportunities, and the support of management in relation to expanding their career prospects. Trainees understand that a 'business case' has to be produced and accepted, before go-ahead is given.

20. Placement visits are frequent. Opportunities to use reviews and assessments to plan training in the workplace are missed. Key skills are not systematically assessed at entry level, so that previous achievements often are not accredited. Workplace supervisors' knowledge of NVQs and key skills is variable.

Management of training

Grade 2

21. The management of training in the organisation has recently been reorganised. At the same time there was a significant increase in the number of trainees. Trainees are now allocated to business areas and become part of that business area, during

training. Process operations trainees' programme covers all sections. Trainees are recruited in response to the projected needs of the business plan, and their development is linked to both their personal needs and the objectives of the organisation. Their final placement follows extensive discussions with managers and training staff. Training statistics are used to improve the quality of the training provision. Inspectors identified more strengths than declared in the self-assessment report, and awarded a higher grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effectively managed training
- ◆ clear links between training and development and business needs
- ◆ management decisions informed by accurate data
- ◆ good working relationships between trainees, training staff and subcontractors

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of formal contractual arrangements with some contractors.
- ◆ No recording of meetings of young person development group

GOOD PRACTICE

Process control trainees are allocated to groups which meet monthly to discuss issues and compile agenda items for the main meeting. At a later date, a representative from each group sits on a small committee with other trainees' representatives, together with the company's training co-ordinator. Concerns and information are exchanged, and minutes of the meetings are communicated to all trainees through e-mail. This process acts as an effective way of communicating the views and ideas of trainees and gives a quick response about issues raised.

22. On-the-job training provision is well managed. Trainees understand their progression plans and know, in advance, the business areas to which they will be allocated for training purposes. They are exposed to all aspects of the business in their training and are treated as full team members. The initial off-the-job training is subcontracted to various training centres across the region. Training at these centres is good. Trainees are placed at a centre near to their home.

23. Staff development is carried out by staff and managers at periodic appraisal interviews, linked to the business plan. Data about training are collected, analysed and issued to all managers and training staff on a monthly basis in booklet form. The system keeps track of training records, is used to predict future training needs and is linked to other organisational databases, such as budgetary control. The information and reports are also used to measure the quality and cost-effectiveness of training.

24. Communication between trainees and training staff is good and is assisted by the open culture of the organisation. Process control trainees, other than those undergoing initial off-the-job training, have e-mail accounts to enable quick and efficient passing of information. For these trainees, apprentice committees have been formed which meet monthly to create an agenda to be discussed at a subsequent meeting with the training co-ordinator. Representatives from each committee then meet the training co-ordinator formally. Information is exchanged and minuted by an apprentice, before being communicated by e-mail to other trainees.

25. Training co-ordinators from the various divisions met regularly to draw up the self-assessment report. They continue to meet as a young person development group to share best practice and address training issues. However, these meetings are not

recorded. Not all subcontractors have formal contracts with United Utilities, which limits the company's ability to insist on certain standards and leads to varying practice.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

26. The main divisions of United Utilities operate separate quality assurance systems which were developed independently under a previous organisational structure. The company is working to bring these systems under a common framework. There is an established culture of quality assurance in the company, which helped with its recent application to training. Inspectors found additional strengths and weaknesses to those detailed in the self-assessment report, but agreed with the grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ commitment to continuous improvement
- ◆ achievement of several quality kitemarks
- ◆ actions taken as result of trainees' feedback and self-assessment

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no consistent documentation of quality assurance arrangements
- ◆ varying practices and standards across the organisation
- ◆ ineffective internal verification in some areas

27. United Utilities is committed to a policy of continuous improvement. A business excellence department is responsible for the implementation of this policy. The objective is the achievement of a business excellence model, including training.

28. Progress is being made in raising the standard of quality assurance within each division, and in producing a common framework. The company has been accredited for ISO 9000, Investors in People, and NAMAS Charter Mark. Weaknesses identified during self-assessment have led to actions to address them. These include the formation of a young people's development group, responsible for continuing self-assessment, monitoring improvement plans and sharing best practice. An ex-apprentices committee obtains feedback from previous trainees. This has led to more frequent reviews of training.

29. Trainees are consulted regularly about the effectiveness of their training. At the company's Vertex training centre, they complete a course review questionnaire approximately every five weeks. This information is scanned to a database, from which detailed analyses are printed. Managers and tutors receive a monthly copy of this report and are required to investigate and resolve any significant deficiencies in

the quality of training. Other questionnaires issued to other parts of the organisation are analysed to inform the self-assessment process.

30. Quality assurance procedures for training are not consistently documented and there is no control system. Practices and standards vary across the organisation. Trainees' portfolios in operations and plant services departments are of a high standard, including detailed cross-referencing of key skills evidence, excellent illustrations, diagrams and supporting evidence; one trainee has recently gained an award for the quality, content and presentation of his portfolio. In electrical distribution, however, portfolios lack a contents page, indexing and sufficient evidence. Internal verification is ineffective in this department. None of the current NVQ level 3 trainees' assessments has been internally verified; there has been reliance on industry-based, non-NVQ methods of assessment and verification. External verifiers' reports call for action in this area.