



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT SEPTEMBER 1998

REINSPECTION REPORT DECEMBER 1999

Axia Solutions Ltd
(originally published as
Association for Ceramic Training
and Development)

SUMMARY

Axia Solutions, formerly part of the Association for Ceramic Training and Development, provides training programmes in manufacturing ceramics and business administration. At the time of the first inspection, quality assurance arrangements were unsatisfactory. The training provided in ceramics manufacturing was good, but achievement rates had been disappointing. Business administration training was satisfactory. The training in both areas was well attuned to the needs of the industry. Trainees were well supported and received good feedback on all aspects of their work. Management was sound, and staff were well qualified and trained for the roles which they fulfilled. Axia Solutions was reinspected 12 months after the original inspection report was published. Considerable improvements have been made to the quality assurance arrangements and there are now satisfactory policies and procedures in place.

As a result of the reinspection of Axia Solutions, the original published report text for quality assurance has been replaced by new text, which makes reference to the original inspection findings. This summary page, the overall report introduction and the inspection findings introduction have also been amended to reflect the findings of the reinspection. All other sections of the original published report, which have not been subject to full reinspection, have been left in their original form.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Manufacturing	2
Business administration	3

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	3
Trainee support	2
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	4

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ assessment carried out in the workplace
- ◆ comprehensive trainee support
- ◆ staff experienced and skilled in the industry
- ◆ close employer involvement in planning and delivery of training
- ◆ good training within relevant commercial resources
- ◆ all staff understand and promote quality assurance procedures



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KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor historic achievement rates
- ◆ too many leave programmes early
- ◆ subcontracting arrangements not effectively managed
- ◆ good or poor practice not systematically shared

INTRODUCTION

1. Axia Solutions Ltd (Axia) has taken over the training contract from the Association for Ceramic Training and Development (ACTD) which was subject to the first inspection. Axia is based in the Hothouse Ceramic Design Centre in Stoke-on-Trent and employs staff who previously worked for ACTD on the training of young people and the administration of training programmes.

2. Axia provides training mainly in ceramics manufacturing and business administration, although a few trainees are involved in warehouse & distribution and engineering programmes. Training leads to the acquisition of national vocational qualifications (NVQs). All trainees are based in companies directly connected to the ceramics industry. At the time of inspection, there were 152 young people in training. At the time of the reinspection, there were 106 young people in training. Sixty-four were following NVQs at level 2 in manufacturing ceramics, of which 56 are national trainees, and eight are on other work-based training programmes. Thirty-one are following NVQs at levels 2 and 3 in business administration of which 24 are national trainees, two are in other work-based training programmes and five are modern apprentices. There are three modern apprentices taking NVQs in engineering. Inspectors did not inspect engineering or retailing and customer services. Training is funded through a contract with Staffordshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

3. The ceramics industry is unusual in that such a large proportion of the companies in this sector are located in a single geographical area – Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire. Products range from tableware and giftware to tiles, sanitary-ware and industrial ceramics. The industry is characterised by a few large companies, most of which are household names, and many small- and medium-sized enterprises. There are approximately 250 ceramics manufacturing companies in the area, 70 per cent of these employ fewer than 25 people. Approximately 25,000 people are employed in the sector locally. Trainees are placed in a wide range of companies, which represents the industry in terms of size and product.

4. The Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire area still shows a heavy dependence on manufacturing, accounting for nearly 30 per cent of all employment. Those full-time jobs traditionally undertaken by men are in decline. Unemployment was low, at 4.4 per cent, in January 1998, compared with a West Midlands average of 5.2 per cent and a national average of 5.3 per cent. Local unemployment in Stoke-on-Trent is higher, at 5.6 per cent. In December 1999, local unemployment is 4 per cent, just above the national average of 3.8 per cent. People from minority ethnic groups make up 2.6 per cent of Staffordshire's population; however, these groups are concentrated in the Stoke-on-Trent and east Staffordshire areas.



5. Educational attainment levels vary considerably among different districts in Staffordshire, with parts of Stoke, Cannock and Newcastle faring particularly badly. Overall achievement levels in Staffordshire are marginally above regional and national averages when measured against the foundation-level learning targets of the national targets for education and training (NTETs). The number of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 46.3 and 30.3 per cent respectively, compared with the national average of 53 per cent, for 1997. Staying-on rates in full-time education, in 1997, stood at 67.6 per cent in Staffordshire and 52.8 per cent in Stoke-on-Trent. In 1999, achievement of GCSEs at grade C and above was 35.8 per cent compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

6. The process of self-assessment in advance of the original inspection was new to ACTD, and some support was provided through workshops organised by Staffordshire TEC. Most of ACTD's staff were involved in compiling evidence for the report, and trainees were consulted as part of the process. The report did not cover the full range of factors in *Raising the Standard*, and many of the strengths represented descriptions of how the organisation operates, rather than being an analysis of its effectiveness. Inspectors did identify strengths in many of these areas, but also identified several additional weaknesses. The areas for improvement which were proposed in the report were in line with some, but not of all, of these areas of weakness.

7. During the first inspection, a team of four inspectors and one specialist advisor spent a total of 16 days at ACTD during September 1998. Inspectors visited 21 companies. They interviewed 50 trainees, 32 workplace supervisors, employers and five of ACTD's staff. Eight work-based training sessions were observed. A wide range of documentary evidence was also examined, including trainees' portfolios, individual training plans, reviews, assessment records, contracts and records of meetings.

8. Reinspection was carried out by a team of two inspectors for a total of four days. They interviewed 29 trainees and carried out interviews with one Axia assessor and six staff from employers of which three were internal verifiers and two were assessors. They conducted seven interviews with Axia staff. A range of trainees' records were examined, along with trainees' portfolios, individual training plans, reviews, assessment records, internal and external verifiers' reports, and policies and procedures.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Manufacturing (ceramics)

Grade 2

9. ACTD is responsible for 122 young people following ceramics training. Twenty-nine are taking vocational training, 91 are national trainees at NVQ level 2 in ceramics and two are modern apprentices at NVQ level 3. ACTD works closely with two subcontractors, which are, themselves, large companies in the ceramics industry, to deliver training. A third subcontractor has recently become a placement provider. Almost all of the training is work based, delivered within ceramics companies. The two modern apprentices also attend college for training on a day-release basis. Although inspectors generally agreed with the self-assessment report, inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses. In particular, the self-assessment report lacked sufficient judgements about training and assessment or

achievement. Some strengths described were normal practice, rather than exceptional practice. Inspectors agreed with the grade awarded by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-organised, good-quality training
- ◆ high-quality and comprehensive work-based assessment
- ◆ good frequency of feedback on development of skills
- ◆ good employment rates achieved
- ◆ confidence, motivation and achievement are promoted by positive working relationships

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor achievement rates in the past
- ◆ slow progress for some trainees
- ◆ inflexible modern apprentice framework
- ◆ poor planning and delivery of key skills in modern apprenticeships

10. Training is well organised and of good quality. Those who achieve the required standard usually find employment in the company in which they are placed. There is regular contact among the provider, employers and trainees, with frequent meetings between workplace training co-ordinators and ACTD's staff. ACTD's staff visit trainees every eight weeks. Most trainees are generally well informed about their progress and have good access to trainers and assessors. The quality of advice received is, in most cases, good. Individual training plans are too general and do not always reflect an individual's occupational training needs or highlight the different occupational skills and knowledge, which each trainee will ultimately achieve. Trainees' basic skills are assessed on entry to the programmes, with help provided, where needed.

11. Assessment and internal verification are good. Ceramics companies' employees undertake almost all assessment and internal verification. All assessors are qualified and have relevant occupational NVQs. The positive working relationship between trainers and trainees promotes confidence and encourages motivation and achievement.

12. Historically, trainees' achievement has been poor. NVQs per 100 leavers between 1996 and 1997 was 22.7, improving between 1997 and 1998 to 26.5. Improvements continue; the latest quarterly figures show NVQs being achieved in more realistic timescales and the number of those who leave before achieving qualifications is reducing.

13. The rate of assessment and achievement varies considerably among companies. In some companies, trainees work towards their NVQ from the start, but, at others, trainees are accredited only towards the end of their two-year training programme. Occupational competencies could have been achieved much earlier, and those who leave before the end of two years may miss out on qualifications for which they could have been accredited. ACTD is working to change embedded traditions among trainers about timing of assessment. New trainers and assessors are now carrying out regular, formal reviews and assessment. The industry's pay structure and, indeed, the transition from trainee grade to employed status are related to the meeting of performance targets on the job. In some cases, employers defer NVQ assessments until these performance targets have been met, sometimes even until long after they have been met. ACTD has recently introduced a minimum requirement of 50 per cent of NVQ units and three key skills to be assessed in the first year, where possible, and the remaining 50 per cent of NVQ units in the second year. In the past, trainees were not shown the documents for their NVQ and did not know in detail what they were aiming for or that assessment could happen as each unit was completed. For trainees beginning more recently, continuous assessment begins very quickly, and they are now much more involved in their own learning and assessment. Key skills are assessed during induction. While considerable work has been carried out to make them relevant, they are not always sufficiently set in the context of the workplace to be meaningful to most trainees.

14. All the open-learning materials, forming part of the modern apprenticeship programme, are presented as a single pack. This amount of information is daunting and discourages trainees, reducing its effectiveness to aid learning. The national framework for modern apprenticeships does not currently meet the needs of the ceramics industry at NVQ level 3. Trainees have to do NVQ level 2 before going on to level 3, even if they are management trainees and it is not an appropriate NVQ for them. A new framework is being developed by ACTD to allow achievement of relevant ceramics NVQs at this level.

Business administration

Grade 3

15. Business administration training is provided for young people entering a broad range of administrative rôles in companies in the ceramics industry. Almost all trainees are placed in ACTD's member organisations. There are 30 trainees participating in the business administration programme. There are two modern apprentices following the ceramics industry framework, 19 vocational trainees and nine national trainees.

16. Training is organised and managed in differing ways, reflecting the development of the programme in the recent past. For example, 20 trainees are placed in one large company. A subcontractor provides these trainees with off-the-job training for half a day each week, in training facilities on the employer's

premises, and for one full day each month, off site. Trainees also have the opportunity to participate in a range of in-company training programmes. ACTD's staff visit trainees in placement to monitor progress and review the training programme with them and placement staff. The subcontractor carries out the assessment. For the six national trainees in this group, key skills training and assessment are the subcontractor's responsibility. Most of the remaining trainees are recruited by ACTD and placed with smaller employers. Training is work based, and ACTD's staff support training by both regular visits and carrying out assessment. Finally, there are two trainees placed with employers and attending college on a day-release basis. The staff used to support the administration programme are the same staff who support the main ceramics programme.

17. The self-assessment report noted several strengths in training, assessment and resources. Most of these were confirmed by inspectors. However, other strengths noted were no more than normal practice. The report gave no information about trainees' achievement, rates of progress or outcomes and did not accurately identify weaknesses in the review procedures in one part of the programme. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that proposed by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good-quality resources for off-the-job provision
- ◆ good pace and progress in training
- ◆ well-motivated trainees
- ◆ effective use of records of achievement

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some trainees have no off-the-job training
- ◆ key skills are not delivered in modern apprenticeships
- ◆ college provision not reflected in individual training plans
- ◆ some poor programme planning

18. Most trainees in business administration have access to good on- and off-the-job training opportunities. In one company, trainees are able to participate in a range of training courses and have access to training and study resources on site. Trainees are motivated towards their training and receive good-quality help and guidance from ACTD's staff. Placements are generally well managed and offer an appropriate range of occupationally relevant opportunities for developing skills and knowledge. Trainees make satisfactory progress. Reviews are carried out regularly, and training records are accurate and comprehensive. Assessment is well planned and uses various methods to improve its accuracy and relevance. There are sufficient qualified work-based assessors. During 1997-98, 43.2 NVQs per 100 leavers were achieved – slightly below the average for the Staffordshire TEC area.

19. In the few cases where trainees attend college, there is inadequate integration of this training and on-the-job activities. Training plans do not reveal sufficient details of the college programme, and reviews of progress in this area are incomplete. National trainees and modern apprentices are aware of the requirements of key skills, but there has been no work to develop learning opportunities in the programme, and, consequently, no assessment or achievement. In some parts of the provision, trainees' programmes are poorly planned. Some additional learning needs are not identified during initial assessment, although they are usually picked up at a later stage. Consequently, some trainees have not progressed as quickly as they could have. Some trainees have no off-the-job training; all their training takes place in the workplace where there is some portfolio building.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

20. ACTD has a comprehensive range of policies and procedures for equal opportunities. All subcontractors are aware of, and follow, ACTD's policies. Recruitment of trainees and staff is monitored by gender, age, ethnicity and disability. Data are monitored and analysed, but, as yet, no positive action has been taken to target under-represented groups. One per cent of trainees is from minority ethnic groups – below the local area's minority ethnic population figure of 3.5 per cent. Forty-three per cent of trainees are men and 57 per cent are women. One trainee has a disability. Inspectors agreed with the grade proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive and well-documented grievance procedures
- ◆ workplace assessors are trained in the application of equal opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no follow-up action from monitoring reviews
- ◆ gender stereotyping in some training materials

21. Employers and trainees are aware of their equal opportunity rights and obligations. All workplace assessors attend practical sessions built into their training on how equal opportunities relate to training and assessment. There is particular emphasis on trainees with additional needs.

22. ACTD changed its monitoring systems for equal opportunities a year ago and now collects data on a monthly basis. From these, it has identified groups, which are under-represented in training, but, as yet, no positive action has been taken to target

or improve the situation. New promotional material has just been designed for national traineeships, but does nothing positive to address the problem. Open-learning material for national traineeships has images which conform to traditional gender stereotyping throughout.

Trainee support

Grade 2

23. Some trainees have initial assessment using the Basic Skills Agency's assessment pack, although one subcontractor uses selection days for assessment. All trainees receive a comprehensive induction to their scheme; this includes guidance on their programmes and qualifications. Pastoral support is given through regular workplace visits, the frequency of which is geared to trainees' needs and exceeds both TEC and ACTD's targets. Trainees who achieve their NVQs are given appropriate guidance on possible further qualifications. In the self-assessment report, ACTD claimed strengths, but did not identify any weaknesses. Some of the strengths identified were normal practice, but inspectors identified others, together with some weaknesses. Inspectors confirmed the grade proposed by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ newly introduced four-week foundation programme
- ◆ early initial contact visit to trainees referred by employers
- ◆ frequency of review meetings to meet trainees' needs
- ◆ productive working relationships with employers
- ◆ trainees appropriately placed and effectively supported

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ full contents of induction not retained by trainees
- ◆ some poor identification of additional learning needs

24. ACTD reacts quickly to support trainees and employers. Trainees, who have found their own placements and are referred to ACTD by their employers, are routinely visited and inducted within days. Review visits, where ACTD is the direct provider, are at quarterly intervals or more frequently. ACTD sets itself a target of eight-weekly visits. Review visits are arranged to meet trainees' needs and may be monthly, or even more frequent, if needed. Pastoral care is good. Working relationships between ACTD and employers are close and enable effective placements to be found. Trainees who need a change of placement are found one swiftly. Some companies make a particular point of taking on or accepting trainees with learning difficulties.

25. Until recently, many trainees left the ceramics programme without achieving a job or a qualification. ACTD has recently introduced a four-week foundation

programme for all new trainees, to counter this trend. This is well designed, gives trainees a flavour of what the work will be like and explains the training and NVQ process in greater detail. Other purposes are to introduce trainees to assessment and to help them to discover, at an early stage, whether they feel that the ceramics industry is for them. The scheme induction programme is very comprehensive, but trainees' retention of the material is often poor. The foundation programme gives the opportunity to reinforce it and to check, at the end, for retention. Initial assessment is not sufficiently rigorous to identify all trainees' support needs.

Management of training

Grade 3

26. ACTD works to a constitution drawn up by its member companies. The organisation is managed by a director who reports to a board of management, drawn from the industry, and other stakeholders. There is a three-year strategic and financial plan, setting out the broad direction which the organisation will take. This is brought into sharper focus by means of a series of key performance indicators, forming the main focus of the director's reporting to the board. Three staff are fully employed in the delivery of training programmes, while three others, including the director, devote a part of their time to this work. The self-assessment report did not place sufficient emphasis on management issues. Inspectors identified further strengths and weaknesses, but agreed with the grade proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ staff have extensive experience of the ceramics industry
- ◆ clear sense of purpose
- ◆ productive working relationships with local organisations
- ◆ effective communication with employers and subcontractors

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ limited use of short-term target-setting
- ◆ responsibility for training arrangements is unclear in some instances
- ◆ limited management information systems

27. ACTD has a clear mission in respect of its training activities. This is complementary to the organisation's other rôles and is well understood by staff and subcontractors. This rationale, and the working methods, are clearly linked to industry needs and endorsed by them. In general, policies are effectively implemented, and several changes to operating practices have been made, during the last year, to address shortfalls in performance. Operational and financial plans are reviewed regularly and amended in the light of actual performance.

28. Communication within the organisation is mainly informal, but appropriate to its size. Monthly team meetings are the main mechanism for this, but memoranda and electronic mail are also used. There is good teamwork and a positive working atmosphere. All staff have job descriptions and objectives, although these are very brief and lack measurable targets and timescales. Responsibility for some key aspects of the training provision is not clear-cut. All staff objectives are shared across the whole organisation. Training needs are identified, in consultation with the director, by individual staff, and any certification is recorded in a National Record of Achievement, maintained by every member of staff. The effectiveness of training is evaluated through discussion. ACTD has a wide range of links with organisations such as local authorities, the careers service, schools and Staffordshire Partnership, formed to help with economic regeneration. These links are successful in raising the profile of training in the industry; they also aid recruitment. There has been particular success in persuading employers to train assessors and internal verifiers.

29. In some cases, the respective responsibilities of subcontractors and ACTD have not been clearly understood, resulting in either gaps in training or widely differing practices in different workplaces. A management-information system collects most of the relevant data. However, the system lacks the capacity to provide detailed reports or analysis to inform decision-making.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

30. Since the original inspection, the training arm of ACTD, which is the National Training Organisation, has been set up as an independent training provider trading as Axia Solutions Limited. The company secretary is responsible for quality assurance and this is clearly understood by all staff. A quality assurance manual, with supporting procedures has been developed and introduced, involving all the staff. All providers and placements are contracted to Axia and not to the TEC.

At the first inspection, the weaknesses identified were as follows.

- ◆ there is no documented quality assurance system
- ◆ partial understanding of quality assurance among staff and subcontractors
- ◆ improvement in quality of training is underdeveloped
- ◆ contract review procedures not working effectively in all cases
- ◆ lack of consistency in delivery across training provision
- ◆ quality assurance action-planning and review are underdeveloped

31. The grade awarded to quality assurance by the first inspection team was grade 4. In the recent self-assessment report submitted for reinspection, Axia Solutions highlighted actions which had been taken to improve the provision. With the exception of the management of subcontractors, inspectors confirmed the improvements. Additional strengths and one different weakness were also

identified. Axia proposed a grade of 3 in the self-assessment report, with which inspectors agreed.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ all staff involved understand and promote quality assurance procedures
- ◆ evidence of continuous improvement
- ◆ demanding targets set and measured to improve the quality of training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no effective management of subcontracting arrangements
- ◆ underdeveloped programme review
- ◆ no systematic sharing of good or poor practice

GOOD PRACTICE

An example of good practice in monitoring trainees' achievements was demonstrated by one large, internationally known ceramics manufacturer, by using a skills matrix board. This board has all the tasks listed that every member of staff is required to perform at each stage of the manufacturing process. Team leaders assess the competency of staff at regular intervals and record their competence on the skills matrix board. The tasks match the requirements of the NVQ and the board is used to monitor both staff and trainees' progress.

32. Since the first inspection, a quality assurance manual with supporting procedures has been developed. Axia approached the TEC for advice and all the staff have been involved in the development and its introduction. Staff are aware of their responsibilities and work together to enable effective implementation. As an example of improvement, there had previously been a delay in assessing the manufacturing ceramics NVQ at level 2. Axia, through negotiation with the large companies, instigated two of the four units of the NVQ at level 2 being assessed in the first year of the programme. This had not been happening in a number of companies where the delivery of the units had been delayed, often with trainees achieving no units in the first year. This involved Axia in persuading some large and internationally prestigious companies to change their practice.

33. Staff are set demanding targets which are aimed at improving the quality of training. These are formally reviewed on a quarterly basis and informally every week. The formal review is recorded and enables both appraiser and appraisee to enter their comments. Targets can also be modified at this stage.

34. The large companies, who are subcontractors of Axia Solutions, still have their own accredited assessment centres in ceramics, with their own assessors and internal verifiers. While the relationship with Axia is very good, the large companies' processes and procedures are not audited. Axia is unaware of how the internal verification sampling plans of these large companies are carried out. Axia has not undertaken observation of training and does not have formal meetings with the companies' assessors.

35. Axia has been busily rectifying most of its shortcomings in quality assurance, however there is no plan of how it will take quality assurance forward to further the quality of training. The emphasis is on a quick response to problems rather than deciding on areas where they wish to take an active approach. There is an action plan but no procedures for improving the provision of quality assurance.



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36. Axia is reliant on its good working relationships with employers to ensure quality assurance. Where good or poor practices are observed, they are not shared with colleagues. Staff have discussed some practices, but they are not formally registered and highlighted in minutes of meetings. In fact, many staff meetings are not formally minuted.