



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT APRIL 1999

REINSPECTION JUNE 2000

Seetec Group

SUMMARY

The Seetec Group offers good training in information technology installation. Trainees are highly motivated. Achievement rates are high in information technology. Training in retailing and customer service, which includes customer service, estate agency, retailing and warehousing, is satisfactory. Assessors provide good support in the workplace across most areas, with most trainees being visited every two weeks. Seetec also offers foundation for work training for adults which is satisfactory and helps prepare adults for the world of work. The provision of key skills training is underdeveloped on programmes where it is required. The promotion of equal opportunities is supported by a range of clearly written policies. Trainee support is satisfactory and all trainees receive initial assessment tests. Employers are aware of their trainees' progress. There is effective management of new initiatives. Quality assurance arrangements are comprehensive but not yet fully operational in all areas of training. A new management-information system and regular staff meetings support them.

As a result of the reinspection of Seetec, the original published report text for trainees support and quality assurance has been replaced by new text which makes reference to the original inspection findings.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
Engineering	2
Business administration	3
Retailing & customer service	3
Foundation for work	3

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

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Trainee support	3
Quality assurance	2

KEY STRENGTHS

- ♦ high levels of achievement by trainees in information technology installation, information technology and warehousing
- ♦ good-quality work placements
- ♦ good computing resources at all centres
- ♦ good awareness by trainees of progress
- ♦ well-organised NVQ portfolios
- ♦ effective anti-harassment procedures
- ♦ well-written and effective complaints procedure
- ♦ good support for trainees with physical disabilities



- ◆ good staff consultation and involvement in the self-assessment process
- ◆ regular opportunities to share good practice

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate induction in the workplace
- ◆ low achievement rates in administration, customer service and estate agency
- ◆ under-represented groups not effectively targeted in publicity materials
- ◆ ineffective deployment of staff
- ◆ inconsistent use of initial assessment results across programme areas

INTRODUCTION

1. The Seetec Group was founded in 1984 as an information technology centre. Seetec employs nearly 200 staff and operates from several locations in Essex, London and Surrey. Seetec, as well as being providers of training and employment services, are suppliers of computing and software services for general medical practitioners. They run a number of training programmes for industrial clients. Seetec is a major training supplier for Essex Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), and three London TECs, FOCUS Central London TEC, London East TEC and SOLOTEC, with around 700 youth and adult participants on various programmes at any one time. There were 636 trainees at the time of the first inspection. At the time of reinspection there were 511 trainees. Essex TEC is the co-ordinating TEC for the reinspection. Seetec offers national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in accounting, administration, computing, customer service, electronic systems servicing, estate agency, information technology, insurance, management, retailing and warehousing.

2. Seetec has a network of offices and training centres throughout London and the Southeast. Seetec's head office is the business technology centre in Hockley, equipped with over 200 computers. This is primarily a residential area close to several large industrial development sites within a 10-15 mile radius. The other Essex sites are town-centre office locations where commercial and retail outlets provide the major source of placements for trainees. The management and flexible learning centre in Rayleigh, Essex, has an adjoining dedicated recruitment service and job-search resource centre. Seetec has newer centres, primarily to support New Deal, in Basildon, Ilford, Romford and Southend. There are training centres based in the centre of Croydon and the City of London (the Liverpool Street area). Both have a mixture of commercial and industrial placement opportunities in their operational areas.

3. Seetec is the private sector's lead contractor for New Deal in the Colchester Employment Service district (north and mid Essex). Working with the Employment Service, Seetec brings together partnerships of local employers, strategic players such as local authorities and Essex TEC, education and training providers, environment groups and the voluntary sector to deliver New Deal for unemployed 18 to 24 year olds. At the time of inspection, there were 575 New Deal clients in north Essex and 267 in other districts. At the time of reinspection there were 463 New Deal clients. New premises were being opened in the Clacton and Braintree areas as part of the provision within the North Essex Unit of Delivery for New Deal.

4. The Croydon and City of London areas have large local minority ethnic communities: 22 per cent for Croydon and 33 per cent for central London areas. Rural Essex has a minority ethnic population of less than 1 per cent. In 1999, the unemployment rate in the main areas in which Seetec operates was below or just above the national average of 5.2 per cent. In Rayleigh, it was 2.2 per cent; in



Croydon, it was 3.1 per cent and in the City of London, 5.6 per cent. In 1998, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 23.3 per cent in Islington, 39.5 per cent in Croydon and 48.6 per cent in Essex, compared with the national average of 46.3 per cent. In 1999, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 27.4 per cent in Islington, 42.4 per cent in Croydon and 49.3 per cent in Essex, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent

INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. Seetec produced its first self-assessment report in November 1998. The group's 'quality manager' attended self-assessment training provided by the different TECs with whom Seetec contracts. There was widespread consultation among staff at the different sites, particularly among programme managers. Briefing sessions were conducted by the group's 'quality manager' at the different sites and trainees' views were sought. The self-assessment report lacked quantitative evaluation. Although many strengths and weaknesses were identified, inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses across most areas. Five of the eight grades awarded by inspectors remained the same as those presented in the self-assessment report, while three were graded lower. Seetec produced a second self-assessment report for the reinspection that reflected on the findings of the first inspection and the subsequent action plan. All staff were consulted in its production and there were updates produced throughout the year. It was supported by reviews of the action plan which showed the progress which had been made. The self-assessed grades for the two areas reinspected were the same as those awarded by inspectors.

6. At the first inspection, a team of nine inspectors spent a total of 35 days with Seetec during April 1999. Inspectors examined the company and awarding bodies' documents. They met staff from Seetec and observed off-the-job training sessions in Croydon, the City of London, Hockley and Southend. Thirty-four employers were visited and during these visits 23 employers were interviewed. Inspectors examined assessment records, trainees' work, and portfolios. They observed 53 monitoring or assessment visits and instruction sessions and interviewed 143 trainees. Reinspection was carried out by a team of three inspectors over a total of nine days, visiting sites in Croydon, the City of London, Hockley and Raleigh. They interviewed 43 trainees and 11 work-placement managers and training supervisors. Nine work placements were visited. They examined documents relating to trainees including files, assessment records, support records, management and quality assurance. They also interviewed staff, including assessors, internal verifiers and managers. Four instruction and monitoring sessions were observed. The following tables show the grades awarded to the on- and off-the-job training sessions that were observed by inspectors in the original inspection and the reinspection:

Grades awarded to instruction sessions at first inspection

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Engineering		3	2			5
Business administration		6	15	1		22
Retailing & customer service		13	8	2		23
Foundation for work		2	1			3
Total	0	24	26	3	0	53

Grades awarded to instruction sessions in reinspection

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Engineering		1				1
Business administration	1					1
Foundation for work		2				2
Total	1	3	0	0	0	4

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering (information technology installation)

Grade 2

7. Seetec offers programmes in information technology installation at its Hockley and Croydon centres. The programmes are popular and are usually oversubscribed. Hockley offers both the install information technology products NVQ at level 2 and the implement information technology solutions NVQ at level 3; only the level 2 qualification is offered at Croydon. There is a pre-entry test of 166 short questions for trainees wishing to progress from level 2 to 3 at Hockley. There are 32 trainees on NVQ level 2 programmes and 12 trainees on NVQ level 3 programmes. Trainees are mainly unemployed adults. Each course lasts for approximately 12 weeks. Trainees on NVQ level 2 programmes attend a centre for four days per week. Two days are spent doing practical work, one day is spent doing key skills and one day is spent doing writing up. Trainees on NVQ level 3 programmes also attend for four days each week, three days are spent doing practical work and one day writing up. Additional strengths and weaknesses were identified by inspectors to those contained in the self-assessment report, but the grade awarded was the same as that in the report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high levels of achievement
- ◆ committed, highly motivated trainees
- ◆ good resources
- ◆ good teaching at Croydon site

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no progression available to higher level programmes at one centre
- ◆ variations in programme delivery at different centres

GOOD PRACTICE

This example demonstrates how good teaching leads to success, which in turn motivates trainees to achieve. In one session observed at the beginning of an NVQ level 2 course, trainees were split into pairs. After a thorough introduction to the main components of a computer, they drew a detailed diagram of the layout of the computer before totally dismantling it. Close attention was paid to safety considerations involving electricity. All machines were then carefully reassembled. On powering up all machines worked. Trainees were enthused and more confident in both their ability and potential to complete the course as a result of the closely supervised practical activity.

8. Both the NVQ level 2 and 3 programmes have high rates of achievement by trainees, consistently above 90 per cent for each 12-week course. A Seetec trainee was awarded the awarding body's silver medal for excellence in 1998 for NVQ level 3. Trainees on NVQ level 2 and 3 programmes are highly motivated and determined to succeed in gaining their qualifications. Several of the trainees based at Croydon travel substantial distances across London at their own expense. All NVQ level 2 trainees at Hockley are determined to do well enough in their course to be able to move onto level 3. Trainees have a clear picture of how the two programmes complement each other and lead to improved chances of employment.

9. During all sessions observed, trainees applied themselves to the tasks in hand and no time was wasted. Trainees are confident about seeking help from staff or from fellow trainees who are more experienced. This enables trainees in NVQ level 2 groups of widely different abilities, owing to their previous experience with information technology, to progress at good rates within the same group. Both the Croydon and Hockley centres are physically well resourced in terms of dedicated rooms for course delivery and appropriate computers to provide simulated installation activities. Tutors are knowledgeable, and reference activities to the necessary competencies required to gain qualifications. All trainees are aware of what is required to build a portfolio of evidence. The internal verifier has a session with every new group of trainees to cover the requirements of the NVQ, portfolio-building and other areas such as appeals. Trainees complete a 'skill scan' questionnaire to outline their previous experience and confirm that they are on the right level of course.

10. There is currently no progression route to NVQ level 3 at the Croydon centre. The chance to progress at Hockley is a key motivational factor for Essex-based trainees. Teaching styles and programmes vary at the two centres. In one centre, trainees are encouraged to get 'hands on' within their first week of training, stripping down a computer. In the other centre, initial practical tasks are simpler, involving the installation of a mouse. Trainees questioned preferred the former approach, and many who are more experienced in information technology, felt held back in the initial stages of their course. Training materials developed by individual tutors are not effectively shared between the two centres. There is some variation in delivery on the same site. Two NVQ level 2 groups placed together for writing up their evidence were given the same progress test, although one group had not covered all the content of the test paper.

Business administration**Grade 3**

11. Seetec offers training in administration and information technology. Trainees are based at a number of sites at Southend, Rayleigh, Hockley, Croydon and London. Seetec has 146 trainees following programmes in administration. Eighty-seven are modern apprentices, and 21 are national trainees; there are 37 other youth trainees, and three adults. One hundred and thirty-three trainees are employed; the rest are on work placements. Trainees are visited in the workplace

once a fortnight by an assessor from Seetec. Seetec has 132 trainees working towards use and support information technology levels 1, 2 and 3 and support information technology users levels 2 and 3. The trainees include 66 youth trainees and 39 unemployed adult trainees. These trainees complete their information technology qualifications in-house and there are no work placements with employers. There are also 14 modern apprentices and 13 national trainees. All modern apprentices are employed and receive individual coaching in the workplace. Key skills are currently not formally integrated into the training programme. Nine staff are involved in the assessment of administration NVQs. All have trainer/assessor awards and three have teaching or training qualifications. Three information technology staff do not have trainer/assessor qualifications. Only two assessors currently have assessment decisions countersigned by other assessors. However, eight out of 11 information technology staff have qualifications in information technology. The self-assessment report was not accurate in identifying all strengths and weaknesses of the training. The grade awarded by inspectors is lower than that in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ trainees well supported and highly motivated
 - ◆ challenging targets set for trainees in administration
 - ◆ rigorous work-based assessment in administration
 - ◆ effective involvement of trainees in administration programmes
 - ◆ good physical resources in information technology
- high achievement rates in information technology

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of structured off-the-job training programmes
- ◆ inadequate induction
- ◆ assessor-driven programmes in information technology
- ◆ narrow range of assessment methods in information technology
- ◆ inconsistent recording systems in administration
- ◆ poor achievement rates in administration

12. Trainees are very positive about their programmes, and about the support that staff at Seetec provide. Trainees receive regular individual coaching, which helps develop their confidence, builds an effective rapport with their assessor and allows them to move through their qualification at a steady pace. Information technology trainees receive one-to-one attention in the training centre where they are mainly based. Trainees on administration programmes are visited in their workplace once a fortnight by an assessor, who examines the evidence they have collected, helps them build their portfolios and sets them appropriate work-based tasks. Trainees value these assessment visits and the constructive guidance they are offered by assessors. However, at one centre, staffing problems have led to delays in assessment visits for administration trainees. Instead of being fortnightly, these are

currently held monthly at best, and some trainees have been visited only four times in the past six months. Trainees have been informed that assessment visits will be suspended until further notice. In addition, there has been a high turnover of assessors at this centre, with some trainees having three different assessors in a six-month period. Action has been taken to recruit another assessor.

13. There is a lack of structured off-the-job training, and no training plan to ensure the systematic delivery of theory in either administration or information technology. Administration assessors have a bank of pre-set questions which all trainees have to answer and include in their portfolios, but there is no structure for the delivery of these questions, and the knowledge delivered is based largely around the procedures operated in the trainee's own workplace. Trainees do not have the opportunity to share experiences of different work environments, and to develop their understanding of different systems and ways of working

14. Induction for administration trainees is brief and limited. Potential trainees have an introductory meeting with an assessor, during which they discuss and sign up to a programme. This is followed, about three weeks later, by a further session in which the trainee is given his/her portfolio, a set of the NVQ standards and set an introductory task. Issues such as health and safety in the workplace, equal opportunities, and grievance procedures, are briefly discussed, and trainees sign an induction checklist.

15. Administration trainees are all either employed or on work experience. All the evidence for their NVQs is gathered from the workplace, and assessors negotiate with employers to ensure that opportunities to meet all the evidence requirements for the qualification are made available to trainees. Where necessary, for example, with the development of information technology skills, trainees are given the opportunity to receive further training at one of Seetec's centres. Assessment is rigorous, with detailed questioning to ensure that all aspects of the NVQ range statements are covered. Portfolios are of a high standard, thorough and well organised, with an appropriate range of diverse evidence. Administration trainees at the Hockley site took first and second places in the local chamber of commerce Trainee of the Year award for 1998. Trainees are active in identifying which evidence they need to gather, and in logging their progress. There is effective target-setting in administration. Fortnightly assessment visits end with the establishment and recording of manageable and appropriate short-term targets, which are discussed and agreed on between the trainee and assessor. Longer-term targets regarding the completion date for NVQs are also negotiated, and administration trainees are encouraged to set themselves challenging deadlines. However, achievement rates for administration are poor, with only 29 per cent of the trainees who started gaining a qualification in 1997-98. By contrast, achievement rates on information technology programmes are excellent, at 92 NVQs per hundred leavers for youth trainees, and over 100 NVQs per hundred leavers for adults. One trainee who completed use and support information technology level 3 has received a silver medal for outstanding work from the awarding body.

16. Assessors on the administration programme complete a form after each

workplace visit which briefly describes the progress which has been made, and outlines the actions agreed and targets negotiated. These are filed, and a copy kept by both assessor and trainees. Trainees also maintain a record of their progress against the NVQ. This is filed in their portfolio, which they keep either in the workplace or at home. Assessors do not keep a copy of this progress record, and there is, therefore, no overview in training centres of the progress of each trainee, nor a back-up copy should a portfolio be lost. Internal verification of administration programmes is rigorous and ongoing. However, although verifiers keep a record of every portfolio or assessment sampled, there is no systematic sampling strategy to ensure even coverage of assessors, trainees and units. Verifiers complete feedback sheets after sampling, and comment on the areas in which evidence is insufficient. Assessors then ensure that trainees supply additional or improved evidence. However, although the improvement is sometimes acknowledged in the records by a date, an initial or a tick from the verifier, this is not always done, and it is sometimes not clear whether an omission has been rectified.

17. Information technology trainees are based in-centre. Their programmes are largely assessor-driven, and they are given little encouragement to take responsibility for their own learning. There are no opportunities for information technology trainees to generate work-based evidence. Portfolios contain work which is mainly assignment-based, and they are of variable quality. The assessment methods used by information technology tutors are narrow and limited. Physical resources for information technology are good and there are a large number of computers with a range of updated software at each site to meet the requirements of the NVQ and to accommodate individual trainee's needs. There is no effective off-the-job training or the use of training plans in information technology. There is no formal way of teaching theory to trainees. Trainees liaise individually with assessors, work at their own pace and receive individual coaching from assessors to solve problems. Assessors at each site organise the NVQ programmes in different ways. For example, at one centre assessors issue trainees with training schedules relating to the use of software packages for word processing and spreadsheets only. Trainees do not have these schedules at another centre. Several early leavers have commented on the lack of training for software packages. Trainees are also issued with a variety of work requests by tutors for assessment purposes at all sites in order to simulate the requirements of the NVQ. These requests are not linked to the units, performance criteria and range statements of the NVQ and are mostly assignment based. They are corrected by assessors as required. At one centre, trainees create their own work by following instructions on the work request in order to research assignments. However, timescales, deadlines and pressures to simulate the working environment are not always effectively monitored at all centres.

18. Information technology assessors fail to use observation as a method of assessment at all sites. Trainees are only directly observed for one or two elements of the qualification at levels 1 and 2 which relate to cleaning the computer. In a level 2 portfolio for the element relating to creating and maintaining relationships, only one performance criteria was assessed by direct observation and the rest were assessed by questioning and product evidence. At one centre, assessors use indirect

observations to report more frequently on trainees' progress. They also use more in-depth questioning to assess knowledge and understanding. There is little use of live evidence in the portfolios. Some trainees have one or two pieces of live evidence in their portfolios such as a database produced for other assessors but this is very rare.

19. Trainees feel supported by assessors and are able to ask for individual coaching as required. They are also motivated to achieve the qualifications. Youth trainees particularly enjoy being treated as adults in their daily working environment. At Hockley, there is an open information technology workshop every Wednesday evening for three hours. All information technology trainees can attend to get help from assessors. In the City, evening workshops are also provided as and when required for adult trainees. Trainers are also sensitive to individual needs and there is a good rapport with trainees. All trainees are able to attend job-search workshops towards the end of their training programmes and most are keen to go into employment.

20. There is no formal induction into the information technology NVQs. This includes inductions into modern apprenticeship and national traineeship programmes. The quality of information given to trainees at the start of the programme varies from site to site. As a result, trainees are not always aware of the content of the training programmes, assessment methods or the demands that these will make on them. Trainees commented on feedback sheets that they would have liked more guidance on what was expected of them in the early stages of the course, as well as an explanation of the work to be carried out. Most modern apprentices and national trainees have a lack of understanding of key skills and are completing information technology NVQs prior to starting key skills.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 3

21. Seetec provides training and assessment across a wide range of service sector NVQs at levels 1, 2 and 3 in the modern apprenticeship, national traineeship and general trainee programmes. There are 119 trainees working towards retail NVQs, 45 for distribution and warehousing operations NVQs, 54 for estate agency NVQs and 55 for customer service NVQs. All trainees have employed status and receive training and assessment in a wide range of workplaces. These include shops, supermarkets, department stores, large and small warehouses, high street estate agencies and in many organisations requiring customer service provision. All NVQ assessment is carried out at workplaces. Training is provided through both workplace supervisors and in-house company training programmes. Some trainees are offered additional specialist training by their employing organisations. Inspectors awarded a grade that is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ frequent assessor visits and observations

POOR PRACTICE

An estate agency trainee was assessed against her demonstration of security and confidentiality procedures. In the event there were gaps in her knowledge and understanding and she was not able to demonstrate her competence. Her manager had not been directly informed about the assessment or asked to coach or instruct her in these office procedures. She would have been very happy to undertake this work as it was a fundamental part of the company's organisation and it was essential that the trainee fully understood and could apply them. A minimal amount of additional training could have prevented the need to re-assess the trainee in these areas.

- ◆ thorough testing of theoretical knowledge
- ◆ good awareness by trainees of progress
- ◆ assessors in retailing, warehousing and estate agency with extensive occupational experience
- ◆ well-organised retailing and warehousing portfolios
- ◆ good liaison with workplace supervisors in retailing and warehousing
- ◆ high achievement levels in warehousing NVQs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of formal off-the-job training in estate agency
- ◆ lost opportunities for evidence collection in retailing and warehousing
- ◆ low achievement rates in estate agency and customer service
- ◆ some poor use of recording documentation in estate agency and customer service
- ◆ some employers not engaged in NVQ processes in estate agency
- ◆ in customer service, trainees' progress hampered by staff shortages in two centres

22. Assessors in retailing, warehousing and estate agency hold appropriate assessor awards and occupational qualifications and have in-depth NVQ assessment and occupational experience. They are able to explain the NVQ national standards to trainees and ensure that any retailing or warehousing techniques not covered by in-house company training are explained to them. They adapt their assessment methods to suit the pressures of the workplace and the normal busy periods for the retail trade. They pay close attention to detail when observing trainees recharging fork-truck batteries, using carton crushing equipment in supermarkets, and lifting double mattresses and wide screen television boxes. When it is necessary for the assessor to stay in the background and observe trainees dealing with customer queries, they check immediately afterwards to see if customer queries were correctly responded to.

23. All workplaces are suitable for trainees to gather evidence across a wide range of circumstances. In the larger retail and warehouse units, fork-truck training is given by companies. There are additional training programmes on customer care, picking and packing, despatch, workplace and goods security, health and safety, replenishment and safe storage methods. Trainees have clearly benefited from the NVQ programme and supervisors commented during interviews that they could see an improvement in trainee performance as the qualification process progressed. In the busy warehousing environments, trainees learn to work in teams with bulky items, while always showing an awareness for safety when using 'dog' picking trolleys in narrow lanes which are also used by fork-lift reach trucks. Trainees are issued with the correct safety equipment and follow rules and procedures correctly. Trainees were observed dealing with many different demands such as simultaneous customer and telephone queries, having to stop work on replenishment of stock to take customers to other parts of supermarkets when they

GOOD PRACTICE

In customer service where there are three or more trainees in a company, SEETEC has adopted a policy of encouraging the involvement of managers by offering them the opportunity of taking an NVQ level 4 in management. This is designed to encourage the direct supervision of trainees in companies and the use of the management standards in applying good practice.

had goods location queries. Trainees have learned how to check critical dates, such as sell-by, deliver-by and order-by and to correctly complete paperwork records or update databases. Assessors visit workplaces very frequently and ensure that the optimum amount of naturally occurring evidence can be assessed in the workplace. This frequency of visits varies from once every week to once per month depending on trainees' progress and workplace circumstances. On some occasions, however, due to the pressurised nature of some warehousing work in particular, observation opportunities are missed when trainees are busy.

24. Portfolios of evidence in retailing and warehousing are well laid out with evidence properly structured and cross-referenced to NVQ standards. This structure enables trainees to understand their qualification and helps them to measure their progress. Portfolios contain some well-written reports, surveys and data analysis as well as examples of product evidence such as receipts, despatch notes and picking lists. The bulk of the evidence is supplied by repeated, detailed and lengthy observations by assessors of trainees carrying out their normal work. In some cases, up to 18 or more observations of natural performance in the workplace are carried out in one year, which is above average for this type of NVQ. This emphasis on natural performance is good practice and is accurately recorded.

25. In previous years there have been problems with trainees' retention and achievement rates. This year, the warehousing NVQ achievement rate has risen to 79 per cent, a higher level of achievement than is normally seen in this type of NVQ provision. Seetec has attributed this to better management of assessment by programme managers and more support and advice for trainees by dedicated and perceptive assessors. Assessors and their appropriate internal verifiers keep detailed progress records for each trainee. In addition, action plans for future work and assessment opportunities are agreed on with trainees and a paper copy is left on each assessment visit. The internal verifier samples the portfolios in progress and also observes assessors performing their duties to ensure the quality of the process. Most workplace supervisors welcome the visits by the assessors and there is a good rapport between trainee, supervisor and assessor.

26. There are lost opportunities for evidence collection in retailing and warehousing. Although the NVQ evidence is identified and collected very well, those on modern apprenticeship and national traineeship programmes need to demonstrate knowledge of key skills, including application of number, communication and use of it. Some assessors are still learning to assess key skills by gathering evidence to attain their own key skills qualification at level 3. However, this learning process has been implemented too late and some trainees have already completed NVQ level 2 and moved on to NVQ level 3 without collecting or identifying any evidence suitable for their mandatory key skills requirements. In the retailing and warehousing environment, there are many opportunities to use key skills every day, and this omission has led to a waste of trainees and assessors' time. When trainees' performance cannot be observed, for example, there may be no deliveries to a shop when the assessor is present, questions are asked to test the trainee's knowledge of processes. The questions and the trainees' responses are not recorded in sufficient detail for the internal verifier

to audit them, when checking to ensure full coverage of performance to national standards.

27. All trainees on the retailing and warehousing programmes are employed, either full- or part-time, and many have previous experience in the role. Although Seetec does accept and accredit previously obtained fork- truck qualifications and other certificates, a comprehensive and systematic initial analysis of trainees previous experience has not yet been introduced. There are lost opportunities for trainees to use the accreditation of prior learning process to enable them to progress more quickly through the NVQ.

28. Estate agency trainees have work placements in a mixture of companies across London and Essex, including those which are part of national chains and independent offices. There is no formal regular off-the-job training in estate agency, and trainees receive one-to-one instruction or coaching in their workplace. Forty open learning packs have been recently purchased by the Essex centre. Assessors usually visit trainees on a fortnightly or three-weekly basis depending on the centre. Customer service trainees from one centre report being de-motivated by the substantial delays in assessments ranging from six weeks up to three months. One member of staff left the company and has not been replaced and two others have been absent for a long period of time. In another centre, the re-allocation of one assessor's duties has meant an increased workload for others and subsequently fewer workplace visits for trainees. In estate agency, sometimes assessors' visits are postponed or cancelled at short notice by trainees owing to the pressure of work at the estate agents where they are working. The visits are usually rescheduled, but this can cause major delays in trainees' progress. One modern apprentice who has been on programme for over two years has been delayed for over six months in completing her NVQ level 3. Some trainees are not allocated any time at work to collect evidence or to organise their portfolios, and some employers are not attuned to the idea of training.

29. The company has a standard form which is used by assessors for assessment, review and action-planning purposes. There are major variations in the way in which this form is completed ranging from nothing beyond a signature and a date, to detailed notes as part of an assessment plan. The form, however, does not lend itself to the use of such information, as the boxes on the form are too small. The dual role of the form for assessment/review and the designation of one box for feedback/action can lead to it being completed in a general way, when staff also regard it as applying to assessment planning. Demanding targets are set for trainees in customer service and there is continuous action-planning as part of an ongoing process in both areas. However, the individual training plans of trainees are not updated to reflect any changes that occur in target dates for trainees to achieve their qualifications.

30. The majority of trainees on these programmes are modern apprentices and while some trainees have made some progress towards achieving the required key skills, this has not been consistent and only applies to a minority. Mapping of key skills has occurred in both estate agency and customer service and there has been a pilot scheme delivering training in the latter. However, one of the exercises set for

one trainee for the application of number was for her to imagine she was a carpet fitter, rather than focusing on her actual work activities as an estate agent.

31. In estate agency, trainees complete 'write ups' or story boards when submitting evidence for assessment. They are also required to use a request for assessment form, which is attached to every piece of evidence and indicates the standards which are being claimed. However, the trainees do not always complete these forms in advance. This leads to assessors prompting trainees about the application of their evidence to the standards and then directing them to indicate which ones have been covered. Some assessments are dominated by assessors and this is sometimes compounded by the use of leading questions. Assessors do use their experience of the industry by using detailed verbal questioning to test trainees' understanding and to ensure they can demonstrate their competence across the standards. At the end of assessments, assessors pass their records to the trainees, to be placed in their portfolios. Assessors do not keep their own records of their assessments and do not, therefore, have direct access to them when monitoring progress. This prevents assessors from subsequently comparing and evaluating the questions they have asked and does not allow for the creation of banks of questions. The expertise and experience of assessors is acknowledged and valued by trainees.

32. The frequent use of the request for assessment forms by attaching them to every piece of evidence leads to considerable duplication of effort and paper consumption, as trainees go on to complete their portfolios using standard awarding body documentation. This includes the use of a cumulative assessment record and element recording sheets which essentially serve the same purpose as the request for assessment form. These forms are, however, only filled in when the portfolio of evidence is complete. This serves no specific purpose and appears to negate the key functions of the company's forms.

33. Appropriate and effective guidance is provided by assessors on the production of portfolios, which contain a diverse range of evidence. Trainees are encouraged to use appropriate direct evidence from the workplace matched with assessments of their performance in the workplace, supported by witness testimonies from managers, which are then mapped against the NVQ standards. The trainees' portfolios clearly display their competence and contain sufficient evidence to meet the national standards. Trainees keep a copy of a progress checklist, which is the request for assessment form in a different guise, and is usually completed by the assessor. Used in this context as a single sheet of paper it enables trainees readily to identify their progress and targets against the standards by providing a visually simple and direct cumulative record. One assessor uses different colours on the progress checklist to record how often different types of evidence are being employed.

34. There are some gaps in the internal verification in the estate agency programmes. The lead internal verifier has not achieved the appropriate training and development qualification and her work has not been supported or checked by a qualified person. No observation of assessors undertaking assessments have been carried out over the last nine months, including for a new assessor. The whole

Seetec estate agency assessors' team meets approximately four times a year in quality assurance and control meetings. These meetings cover other matters besides quality assurance and are seen as a very useful forum to exchange ideas. Unfortunately, the one new part-time assessor is not able to attend all of these meetings owing to personal commitments and the travelling involved. In estate agency and customer service there is no training programme and little structure to the coaching and individual training sessions that trainees receive, beyond that of responding to individual needs. Some companies provide their own training in customer service or estate agency, but scant attention is paid to this work by assessors. Managers are encouraged to provide witness testimonies for trainees, but this is essentially a passive approach to supporting them. This reflects the approach of a minority of employers who do not want to engage in training or to allow time for information technology, as it interferes with work activities. However, other employers are keen to support their staff and to help directly with their training, but they are not encouraged to do so.

35. Some trainees in estate agency have been provided with open learning materials, and in customer service, written questions are used to test trainees' understanding and knowledge. These do not, however, constitute a training plan or create a structure to ensure that trainees make appropriate progress. The size of the training pack in estate agency is intimidating for some trainees, and they do not refer to it beyond using the so called "pink sheets" which relate to the NVQ standards. The vast majority of trainees are employed as estate agents and may have already had some experience of the industry, which would have moved them beyond the information provided in the training pack. Although the average number of NVQs achieved per 100 leavers is 47 per cent across all programmes, there are wide variations in achievements in individual programmes, namely, 79 per cent for warehousing, 53 per cent for retail, 35 per cent for estate agency and 23 per cent for customer service. Trainees' achievement rates are well below the national average of 62 for the number of NVQ qualifications per 100 leavers.

Foundation for work

Grade 3

36. Seetec offers a range of training opportunities for adults within its foundation for work provision. These fall mainly into the category of prevocational training (PVT), which come under the local brand name of Basic Employability programmes and which give trainees the chance to gain units of the key skills NVQ award at level 1, in addition to achieving set targets. Trainees may also progress to NVQ level 1 using information technology while still under the PVT programme. The information technology training for PVT is delivered at Seetec's own well-resourced training centres in Croydon and Southend. A further Basic Employability programme in woodland management is delivered at the Hockley centre situated close to Hockley Wood where the practical training actually takes place. Additional support for key skill development is provided at the Rayleigh training centre on a day-release basis. Seetec provides a short programme leading towards an appropriate NVQ for trainees employed by local companies. Seetec staff are responsible for the assessment and review of trainees' progress towards the NVQ. This programme is known locally as Jobtrack (formerly Recruit and

Train). There are 43 trainees on PVT, of which 19 are following the NVQ level 1 information technology qualification. One trainee is taking a business administration NVQ and two trainees are on the Jobtrack option linked to an NVQ in warehousing and distribution at level 2. In 1998-99, retention figures indicated a drop-out rate of approximately 22 per cent. Some 54 per cent gained NVQ level 1 qualifications of which 29 per cent moved onto achieving a level 2 award. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths and weaknesses identified in Seetec's self-assessment report. They identified additional strengths and awarded the same grade given by Seetec.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good NVQ achievement levels
- ◆ additional qualifications offered to adult trainees
- ◆ trainees have a sound knowledge of key skills and NVQ assessments
- ◆ exceptional working relationships between all involved in training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ few employer placements
- ◆ low attendance rates at one centre
- ◆ inadequate levels of training and assessment staff at one centre
- ◆ some review and assessment documentation lacks detail

37. Seetec currently provides Basic Employability programmes for adults at the Croydon, Hockley and Southend training centres. All trainees are assessed against a checklist of barriers to employment and interviewed to determine their interest and potential for training and are then placed on a six to eight week course to develop interpersonal skills and gain units of key skills NVQ at level 1. These units are 'working with others' and 'improve own learning ability'. In the Solotec area, additional set targets may be achieved, such as building self-confidence and timekeeping; however these are not offered in the Essex TEC area. The majority of trainees want to gain employment in an environment where computers are used and are enthusiastic about the key skills and eagerly look forward to progressing to the NVQ in information technology at level 1 and then level 2. Achievement levels are good with above 90 per cent gaining key skills qualification and over 50 per cent being awarded the NVQ information technology at level 1. Some trainees select the woodland management option and good use is made of acres in Hockley Wood for practical training. The training available is dependant on seasonal influence and the requirements of the local council. At the time of the inspection, trainees were taking part in tree planting and clearing paths. The supervisor also takes responsibility for portfolio-building sessions at the nearby Rayleigh Centre on a day-release basis. One trainee was using the programme for a reference to enable him to progress to a sports turf course at a local college of further education.

38. Some excellent training and support is delivered, particularly at the Southend

centre where the marketing, recruitment, administration, training and tutoring is the responsibility of one member of staff. Information technology resources are good, with modern computers, up-to-date software and sufficient equipment to ensure trainees work one to a station. Staff are available for support but self-directed learning is encouraged. Trainees interviewed showed a high level of support for each other and on many occasions trainees were seen to offer help to others learning to use information technology. In addition to key skills, other qualifications are offered to trainees such as a recognised basic health and safety certificate and chainsaw training.

39. Trainees receive a comprehensive induction, including information on health and safety and clear explanations about the training programme. All trainees interviewed showed a firm understanding of the programme and the NVQ assessment structure and took immense pride in the development of their portfolios. These were tidy, well documented and up to date with a range of evidence relating to the assessments and, where assessments had been carried out, these were well documented with clear feedback recorded. However, in the main assessments are assignment based and controlled by the tutor. At one centre, the assessment process is less structured, resulting in trainees' work not being assessed on a timely basis. The Jobtrack provision relies on Seetec's staff to carry out assessments in the workplace and these are carried out in a well-organised manner. The majority of trainees revealed a thirst for progress and one commented that previously he had 'ambled along' but with the chance to gain a qualification his life now 'had perspective'.

40. Despite the level of support offered and the relevance of the training, attendance on the Basic Employability programme remains at below 50 per cent at the one centre and little is being done to follow up trainees' absences. Attendance at the other centre is much better with a number of trainees arriving at the premises well in advance of the start of the day. In some cases, they prefer to continue with the exercises rather than take formal breaks during the day.

41. At one centre, there is currently no PVT tutor and this has resulted in a lack of recruitment to the Basic Employability programme since November 1998. Several attempts have been made by Seetec to recruit personnel, but a suitable applicant has yet to be appointed. The previous member of staff left the post in February, and the review process has suffered in terms of the amount of time devoted to monitoring the development of the individual trainees. The information technology assessor has adopted the role of tutor in addition to other training and assessment duties and some trainees commented that they sometimes only had a few minutes with the information technology assessor to update their targets.

42. In some instances, owing to staff shortages, the review documentation and assessment recording paperwork lacks detail and does not always identify clear targets for progression. A great deal of reliance is placed on directed self learning where trainees work at their own pace through information technology resource books and carry out assignments as directed by the tutor. Individual training plans at one centre fail to identify targets and, in fact, state that they are no longer applicable. Individual support needs such as numeracy, literacy and language help

are not met, despite being identified by trainees.

43. Seetec promotes the opportunity for work experience as part of the PVT provision in recruitment literature, but at the time of inspection, only two trainees had been on work placement. This lack prevents trainees from benefiting from experiencing a real working environment and the chance to explore the pressures and consequences of being in the workplace. Assessments are carried out on Seetec's premises and there are missed opportunities for involving employers in work-based training and assessment.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

44. There is an equal opportunities policy and procedure which meets legal and TEC contractual requirements. The training director takes overall responsibility for equal opportunities. Equality of opportunity is a regular agenda item at management meetings, and the company strives to lead by example in terms of the recruitment of minority ethnic staff. The centres in the City of London and Croydon operate within communities which have a high minority ethnic population; this is not the case in Essex. Some of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report are no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ clear and comprehensive equal opportunities and harassment policies
- ◆ designated harassment officers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate data collection
- ◆ recruitment and publicity material does not target under-represented groups
- ◆ poor awareness of equal opportunities by some smaller employers

45. The equal opportunities and harassment policies were drawn up by a consultant two years ago in order to ensure that all legal and TEC contract requirements were satisfied. The policies are the subject of review by the training director and the senior management team twice a year. These reviews have resulted in two modifications to the original policy. Seetec has one male and one female member of staff offering support and advice to staff and trainees across all centres who need help to deal with harassment issues. This facility has been accessed to good effect. There are also examples of harassment being dealt with satisfactorily by company supervisors in the workplace.

46. Equality of opportunity, harassment, grievance and disciplinary procedures are

all covered in the trainees' induction and are referred to in a conditions of service handout for trainees. For some trainees, equal opportunities, in terms of trainees' responsibilities in the workplace, are also covered during the assessment of some NVQ elements. However, there are some trainees in all the occupational areas who have not retained their awareness of Seetec's equal opportunities or harassment policies and procedures. Seetec holds copies of the equal opportunities policies for some of their employers, but few of the employers interviewed could recall any discussion with Seetec's staff about equal opportunities, and some did not have their own equal opportunities policies.

47. Two feedback questionnaires for trainees have been introduced which include reference to equal opportunities. One contains a joint question with health and safety, and both require the trainee to understand the term "equal opportunities". Some statistical information has been gathered for the past year, but there is no comparative material for earlier years and no breakdown by occupational area. TEC statistics are available for three of the four contracts and are, in some cases, incomplete. The statistics indicate that Seetec is attracting fewer people from minority ethnic groups into national traineeships and modern apprenticeships than into adult training and other youth training. They also indicate that Seetec attracts few young people with disabilities. Access for those with mobility difficulties is good at the training centres, where ramps and ground floor training rooms are available. Employers meet trainees needs as necessary. Seetec is attracting high numbers of women, but the make-up of some of the individual occupational programmes continues to reflect gender stereotyping. Employers' views are not sought formally but are gathered during visits to trainees in the workplace.

48. A procedure has been introduced to ensure that all recruitment and publicity material is checked to ensure that it makes reference to Seetec being an equal opportunities employer. There is some material still in use which has not been covered by this procedure. The material produced is for use in all centres. The material does not use pictures showing under-represented groups such as women on information technology installation programmes or trainees from minority ethnic groups. There is no material aimed at particular groups or communities. During the course of the inspection, two examples were noted of sexually explicit material displayed in the workplace. A calendar was noted on the wall of a butcher's shop, and postcards were seen on the wall of an estate agent.

Trainee support

Grade 3

49. Since the first inspection Seetec has further developed its initial assessment process for trainees. A range of standard tests are now used across all centres to determine the suitability of trainees for the programmes offered. Where trainees do not meet the relevant criteria they are referred back to the careers service or Employment Service. In some cases, referrals are made to other external agencies identified as being better suited to meet trainees' additional learning needs. The training director of the company has been identified as having overall responsibility for trainee support. Basic and key skills are assessed for all trainees prior to their entry onto a programme of training. Trainees' retention rates across

programmes have improved significantly since the first inspection although reliable data are not available to show specific reasons for this. Induction has now been standardised across all centres and job-search training is recorded. Staff training has been targeted to improve the support provided for trainees.

GOOD PRACTICE

The following is an example of good practice in responding to specialised training needs of a particular industry. In estate agency, a one-day training course on personal safety was organised for trainees in the London area. The day was organised in conjunction with the metropolitan police and the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. Feedback from the trainees clearly showed how much they learnt from the day and how they valued the advice they received.

At the first inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ underdeveloped initial assessment
- ◆ unco-ordinated additional support for trainees with learning difficulties or disabilities
- ◆ insufficient involvement by employers in the review process
- ◆ accreditation of prior learning and experience not available in all programmes

50. In the self-assessment report submitted prior to reinspection the company identified the areas where trainee support has improved, but it did not accurately identify its strengths and weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors was the same as that in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good support to meet individual trainees' needs
- ◆ employers have detailed knowledge of trainees' progress
- ◆ staff training focused on improving support to trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some written reviews lack detail
- ◆ trainees' prior experience not routinely considered when devising individual training programmes
- ◆ inconsistent use of initial assessment results across programme areas

51. Trainees in the workplace have frequent visits from assessors and are reviewed and assessed regularly. In many programmes this is fortnightly. Many assessors encourage trainees to contact them outside their planned visits and are able to alter their timetables to accommodate trainees' needs for assessment or support when they request it. One trainee with a limited attention span has negotiated shorter review visits with her assessor to enable her to concentrate fully during each visit. All trainees are issued with contact telephone numbers for their assessor. Where employed trainees are unable to attend the training centre during usual working hours they are encouraged to drop in to their local centre during evening sessions. Some assessments have been carried out during evening appointments where this better suits the needs of the trainee. Quality assurance committee meetings are used as a vehicle to discuss the additional support provided across the company and to share ideas and practice. Employers are able to cite examples of where additional support provided by Seetec's staff has had a positive effect on the progress of trainees.

52. Seetec has continued to make efforts to enable those trainees with physical disabilities to access and continue training. Individual trainees with specific physical disabilities have been supported through the provision of adapted materials and equipment. A large print screen for a visually impaired trainee was made available, a computer mouse converted to a rolling-ball system in information technology for a trainee with limited dexterity, and a sign language interpreter for a deaf trainee are examples of additional support. A range of support is provided for trainees in the workplace and training centres. An extensive list of external referral agencies, originally produced for Learning Gateway provision, has been circulated to all staff as a resource and has resulted in improved use of external agencies by members of training staff to meet the needs of individual trainees. A trainee for whom English was their second language lacked confidence in spoken and written English. She was referred, with her agreement, to the basic skills unit of the local education authority for two hours each week. The trainee has successfully achieved unit certification for key skills and is now working towards NVQ level 1 in information technology.

53. Seetec has worked to increase the involvement of employers in the training process. An employer's handbook has been produced which provides information on the organisation, NVQs and roles and responsibilities in training. A number of existing and new employers were consulted prior to producing the handbook to ensure that the content reflected their needs. The handbook has only recently been issued and formal feedback has not yet been gathered on its usefulness. Informal feedback from employers suggests the handbook is useful. Managers and workplace supervisors are regularly updated on the progress of trainees as part of the frequent assessment visits. They are involved in planning and arranging assessment opportunities and are able to talk knowledgeably about the progress of trainees. Employers are encouraged to identify areas where trainees require additional support. One employer has worked with Seetec's assessor to identify key words for a trainee to work on to improve her spelling of occupationally specific terminology. Some employers acknowledge that they do not always have time to be involved in trainees' reviews owing to work commitments, however, Seetec's staff keep them up to date on trainees' progress towards their NVQ.

54. Since the first inspection a variety of staff training has been provided to improve the support given to trainees. Seetec has recently achieved Investor in People status. A member of staff in each training centre has achieved a qualification in identifying prior learning and additional staff are close to completing the same award. Staff involved in the initial assessment process have achieved a unit from the national standards for training and development to demonstrate their competence in identifying individual training needs. Supervisors on the New Deal programmes are working towards accreditation for their coaching skills. Seetec has a qualified member of staff in each centre to provide counselling and guidance to trainees. All staff know who the trained counsellors are for their centre. A list of staff dedicated to providing help with harassment issues has been issued to trainees. This was in response to trainees requesting information on who the staff were in all centres should they wish to talk with someone other than the nominated person in their own centre. Additional training has been provided for

staff on subjects including dyslexia and mental health awareness. As a result of attending the mental health workshop, one member of staff has adopted a more flexible approach to the attendance pattern of one trainee diagnosed as schizophrenic. Another member of staff is working towards a qualification in teaching literacy and numeracy to improve the options provided.

55. A minority of trainees are unaware that formal reviews of their progress take place. Although copies of review sheets are given to trainees and employers some trainees see the documents as forms that they are required to sign. They do not recognise the value of the reviews in providing a focus for acknowledging their progress and achievement. Some trainees are not clear about the difference between assessment visits to look at NVQ achievement and review visits to monitor their progress. Few records of reviews contain details of comments made by employers. Reviews vary across centres in the level of detailed information that is recorded. A number of reviews, particularly for basic employability trainees, are comprehensive and contain short-term targets while others contain bland and unspecific comments which are of little use to the trainee. While some reviews contain little information on the achievements and progress of trainees others detail the percentage of the NVQ that the trainee has achieved and many trainees are able to quote this when asked. In some programme areas, formal reviews do not take place at the frequency specified in the trainees' individual training plans, review activity is informal and happens almost daily.

56. The accreditation of prior learning is recognised where a current certificate is available. Those trainees who have previous occupational experience and have clearly identifiable prior learning are not routinely accredited for their knowledge, skills and experience in their respective fields. A number of trainees have had previous jobs in their occupational areas where they have had to perform tasks to industry competent levels. This information is recorded but not routinely used to amend individual training programmes to take this into account. Individual training plans do record where trainees have previously achieved relevant qualifications. Some note that certificates have been requested as evidence of achievement. Seetec's policy on the accreditation of prior learning requires updating. There are no easily available guidelines for staff which clearly detail how accreditation of prior learning should be dealt with. The formal training of staff to identify and accredit prior learning is viewed by the company as a vehicle to secure a more consistent approach in this area across all programme areas. At the time of reinspection this has not yet been fully achieved.

57. At the time of the first inspection material devised by the Colchester Institute for initial assessment had been recently introduced, but was not in use across all centres. This material is designed to be a diagnostic test which identifies basic skills needs as well as key skills. This test is used to filter out those trainees for whom Seetec does not provide training. This has since been supplemented by additional material to identify the occupational area of the trainee, an NVQ assessment and general comments from the person carrying out the initial assessment interview. The initial assessment process is primarily used to determine the most appropriate level of programme for each trainee and not necessarily any specific additional support required. An average mark across the tests is given and

recorded and where one trainee scored a particularly low mark in literacy, this was not easily identifiable from the average score given. The results of initial assessment are not consistently recorded on individual training plans. Some tests are clearly marked and a numerical mark recorded, which was shared with trainees. Others are notated with terms such as 'excellent' and give no indication of the level of ability of the trainee concerned. In these cases trainees were not aware of the results of their initial assessment.

Management of training

Grade 3

58. Seetec operates from three main sites at Hockley, City of London and Croydon. Each of these sites is run by a local manager and reports directly to the operations manager who has group responsibility. The Hockley site has two sub-centres at Rayleigh and Southend and the City office has recently opened a sub-centre at Romford. Programme managers, who are responsible for teams of assessors, co-ordinate each occupational sector. The programme managers report to a training director on quality and training issues. The organisation has a total of 169 staff although 50 of these are involved in activities outside government-funded training. Fifty-two employers are engaged in New Deal contracts and 67 in youth programme training. Twenty-four per cent of employees involved in youth training were themselves previously trainees with Seetec. Government-funded training accounts for 70 per cent of Seetec's business. New Deal training comprises 50 per cent and other TEC funded training makes up 20 per cent of the group's activities. Trainee numbers have declined slightly over the past three years after an earlier significant expansion in the early 1990's. The self-assessment report accurately identified two of the key strengths in management of training but failed to highlight the weaknesses. Inspectors found additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good staff consultation
- ◆ close target monitoring
- ◆ effective management of new initiatives

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ ineffective deployment of staff
- ◆ serious limitations in the effectiveness of the management-information system
- ◆ underdeveloped staff appraisal and training procedures

59. Managers have recently undertaken a thorough survey to explore what staff

think about various aspects of their employment. Eighty-one per cent of staff responded and a dozen key conclusions were reached. This led to an action plan to respond positively to staff concerns, particularly surrounding the way employees are inducted into the company and subsequently trained and appraised. Staff have also revealed concerns about internal communication. This has been promptly addressed with the introduction of a quarterly newsletter that is circulated to every employee. It gives a concise overview about the company's financial position, management policies and staffing situation. It also includes contributions from each of the department's senior managers responsible for reviewing developments across the company. Staff at all levels have opportunities to express concerns and share ideas. Senior managers meet quarterly to review departmental progress and corporate policy. Programme managers and internal verifiers meet at least every three months to give feedback on developments in their own occupational areas and to share good practice. Teams within each occupational sector meet monthly to consider issues specific to their vocational qualification. Important information is cascaded down through this meeting structure and back up to the senior management level. All meetings are formally minuted.

60. Each occupational area has targets, and programme managers report progress at quarterly business planning meetings. The training director sets each member of the team a personal target, and assessors are particularly aware what their personal objectives are. Operations managers monitor the overall progress towards meeting the company's contractual operations. Graphical representations of achievement are produced each month and discussed at senior management meetings.

61. There is a general trend by senior managers to develop what they refer to as a 'quality culture' at a strategic and operational level. A group quality manager was appointed in 1998 and all procedures are being systematically reviewed. This post has specific responsibility for implementing new strategies with continuous improvement as the main objective. This has led to change in several areas. A new staff induction and handbook was introduced at the beginning of 1999. Other initiatives include a complaints procedure for trainees, a policy on harassment, revised trainee feedback questionnaires, improved internal communication and formal analysis of leavers' destinations.

62. Staffing resources are stretched in some areas of the organisation. Internal verifiers and assessors cover large geographical areas in parts of the country where transport is often difficult. For example, one estate agency assessor working out of the City office has to travel to Redhill in Surrey to visit trainees, even though another assessor is available at the Croydon office. In some areas, there are insufficient staff. A lack of administration assessors in one geographical area has led to delays in assessment for trainees which has hindered trainees' progress. Elsewhere, there has been no foundation for work tutor for over two months. Many staff feel burdened by the workload demands. The problem is manifested in several ways. For instance, training is often combined with assessment in a single visit. Assessors are being asked to take on additional occupational areas, particularly the customer service NVQ. Staff are not always clear about the responsibilities of their colleagues. Some assessors are unable to attend the regular quality assurance control meetings owing to the distances involved and pressures

of work. Communication between centres is not always effective. Some occupational areas do not have clear leadership to co-ordinate practice. There have been problems recruiting staff in one geographical area.

63. The company uses a computerised database that is used solely to satisfy TEC contractual requirements. Performance is primarily measured by NVQs per 100 leavers. This is the yardstick that is discussed at senior management meetings and used to compare corporate achievement with competitors. There is no analysis of trainee intake year-on-year, or of retention and achievement by programme or occupational sector. Seetec is not able to access this information easily from its system. Requests by inspectors to provide this information both before and during the inspection were not met. Internal meeting minutes demonstrate the difficulties faced by programme managers in producing data.

64. An entirely new system has recently been developed for staff appraisal. This is the result of a pilot scheme which has been running at the Hockley centre. Senior management has now approved the new procedures. Training for managers and staff about the new system and the objectives of appraisal is about to be delivered. There are plans to introduce the new system in summer 1999, but no definite strategy has yet been decided. Work is currently being undertaken on the development of a staff training programme. The framework has been designed but not yet presented to senior managers for approval. Staff have benefited from training in the past, but this has concentrated mainly on the qualifications necessary for assessors and internal verifiers to achieve. In the past, there has been staff training in areas such as health and safety, equal opportunities, key skills and counselling. This has been delivered on an unplanned basis and there is no structure to the staff development programme at the present time.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

65. Seetec has developed new quality assurance procedures since the first inspection. These are now established for New Deal programmes, where they were introduced on a trial basis. The arrangements are now being adapted to suit the TEC-funded training and, although they are not finalised, significant progress has been made and many aspects of the system are already fully active. The quality assurance arrangements are recorded and widely applied throughout the organisation.

At the first inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ quality assurance system lacks structure
- ◆ little impact by the quality assurance system on quality of training and assessment
- ◆ several examples of poor practice in assessment and internal verification
- ◆ good practice not effectively shared

66. Seetec has concentrated on addressing all of the previously identified

weaknesses, producing regular updates to its action plan and self-assessment report. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths given in the self-assessment report. Other strengths were over-stated or inappropriate to quality assurance. Inspectors considered the one weakness identified by Seetec to be insufficiently important to quality assurance. The reinspection grade is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

GOOD PRACTICE

There is good practice in the use of performance data to promote improvements. Managers analyse programme performance by occupational area and regional office. The results are published and circulated to all staff in the form of a league table. This is updated each month to show changes in position. This has successfully promoted friendly competition within the organisation which has resulted in improved achievement by trainees across all occupational areas.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ extensive and effective quality assurance arrangements
- ◆ staff's good understanding of quality assurance system
- ◆ regular opportunities to share good practice
- ◆ frequent action-planning and review drives improvement

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some improvement not fully established in all areas of training

67. The quality assurance system is well structured and clearly written. There are procedures for controlling the key stages of the training process and for controlling the design and use of all training and assessment documents. There is an extensive audit programme to monitor compliance with these procedures, both within Seetec and its New Deal subcontractors. Internal verification is sound and consistently applied across the organisation. However, the internal verification strategy does not guarantee a minimum sample of assessors' work. Trainees' achievement and retention data has been used to analyse performance by occupational area and by regional office. Targets are set at programme and individual level which aims to improve on last year's achievements. A new management-information system has been developed which supports more sophisticated data analysis for the current contract year, but this has yet to make any impact. Seetec benchmarks itself against other providers by reviewing published Training Standards Council's inspection reports on a weekly basis to identify good and poor practice. There is systematic feedback from trainees, employers and staff. Some of the questions asked try to cover too wide a subject area with one question. Individual problems are tackled immediately and trends are analysed once a year. The response to feedback questionnaires is high. Over 60 per cent of employers, and up to 85 per cent of trainees in some areas, returned completed questionnaires. The system does not allow anonymous responses but does give trainees the option not to reply. At present, there is no established system to ensure that all trainees and employers receive the results of the evaluation process.

68. There is a dedicated quality assurance manager for the group and a team of three staff who manage and review the system. Seetec has a quality assurance strategy which explains how the entire system works. This has been produced for the entire company and includes activities outside the scope of government-funded training programmes. It is fragmented and not entirely self-explanatory. The system is underpinned by a staff meeting structure which focuses on quality assurance issues and effectively communicates ideas for improvement and areas of

concern to appropriate staff. The group's quality assurance manager monitors all feedback and ensures that relevant action plans are raised and implemented. He makes quarterly reports to the senior management team, which are then summarised to staff in a managing director's bulletin, along with other company information. All staff have a high awareness about self-assessment and the quality assurance arrangements. They feel they are part of the process of continuous improvement and several new initiatives have been introduced as a result of staff contributions.

69. Assessors meet in their respective programme areas each quarter. These meetings are chaired by the programme managers. The location varies so that each regional office has the opportunity to host the event. These are well attended and productive. Training and assessment practice is discussed and new ideas are tried. Programme managers and the group's quality assurance manager attend another tier of quarterly meetings where ideas are exchanged across occupational areas. The group's quality assurance manager feeds back to the senior management team which is ultimately responsible for implementation of policy and resources. The system effectively promotes good internal communication and ensures that self-assessment and continuous improvement is at the heart of the organisation's activities. There has been considerable success in standardising practice across the regions which has led to significant improvements since the first inspection.

70. Internal auditors deal effectively with non-compliance with procedures and order corrective action. Team meetings, feedback evaluation and data analyses result in improvement plans. Action plans are issued and closely monitored by managers. The group's quality assurance manager has responsibility for co-ordinating the action plans and for ensuring that they are implemented. This is done through quality assurance meetings with staff and through the internal auditors who monitor progress as well as check system compliance. Overall, the quality assurance arrangements have been effective in driving continuous improvement during the past year. There are many examples of change which has improved the training. Some improvements are procedural and others have a direct impact on the trainees. For example, a new initial assessment process has been introduced which more accurately identifies trainees' learning needs, induction is now more focused and more memorable, laptop computers have been issued to each assessor to support information technology key skills in the workplace, staff are being trained to be more effective in the way they support trainees, New Deal subcontracting arrangements have been changed where performance is unsatisfactory, trainees' achievement levels have improved year on year, the number of early leavers has more than halved, and employers have a new handbook explaining their responsibilities.

71. The quality assurance arrangements are more established in the New Deal provision, which is used to trial new ideas. The same principles are now being applied across TEC-funded programmes, but this exercise is not yet complete and there are still some differences between the two. For example, while written procedures are finalised and documents are standardised in New Deal, Seetec is still working on this in the TEC-funded area. Training is observed in New Deal by the internal auditors. There is no observation in the TEC-funded programmes, but



staff are presently working towards formal qualifications to enhance their ability to evaluate the quality of training sessions. Seetec is able to analyse data more extensively in New Deal, but has to rely on less sophisticated methods for TEC-funded programmes until its new management-information system is fully established. Seetec has recognised these issues and is taking steps to standardise its quality assurance arrangements across all of the government-funded programmes.