



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT JANUARY 2001

# BPP Accountancy Courses Limited

## SUMMARY

BPP Accountancy Courses Limited offers good specialist training for a nationally recognised accounting qualification. Trainees appreciate the quality of the training, and the opportunity to choose between home study and face-to-face teaching. But the management of the modern apprenticeship programme is less than satisfactory. Trainees' key skills are not being developed as required by the modern apprenticeship framework. Trainees are offered no information about their rights and about equality of opportunity. Systems for supporting trainees in the workplace are at best embryonic and, in some cases, missing completely. There are no systems for reviewing the effectiveness of the modern apprenticeship programme as a whole.

### GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	2

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

### KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good off-the-job training
- ◆ effective personal trainer system
- ◆ good learning materials
- ◆ wide choice of methods of learning
- ◆ good staff-development programme linked to appraisal

### KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor rate of achievement of modern apprenticeship framework
- ◆ no overall quality assurance of the modern apprenticeship programme
- ◆ less than satisfactory management of the modern apprenticeship programme
- ◆ ineffective communication with employers
- ◆ inadequate induction process
- ◆ inadequate progress-review system
- ◆ failure to develop trainees' key skills
- ◆ no monitoring of health and safety in the workplace
- ◆ no monitoring of employers' equal opportunities policies or practices
- ◆ lack of awareness of equal opportunities among trainees



## INTRODUCTION

1. BPP Accountancy Courses Limited (BPP) was formed in 1976 to provide courses for trainee accountants. It became a public limited company in 1986 and at the time of inspection, employed more than a thousand staff. The programme leading to a nationally recognised accounting qualification has a course director and six staff in London, as well as two staff at the regional office in Newcastle. At the time of inspection, there were 53 trainees on this programme, working in areas served by 14 training and enterprise councils (TECs), in the South, Southeast and Northeast. BPP contracts with the National Training Partnership (NTP). No co-ordinating TEC was identified before the inspection. Surrey TEC was nominated as the co-ordinating TEC as a result of discussions at the inspection-planning meeting. Trainees choose whether to study through day release, block release, or on a correspondence course. They are all advanced modern apprentices, and are all employed in accounting practices or other financial services organisations.

2. The largest group of trainees is from the Southeast, where the unemployment rate in November 1999 was 2.2 per cent. The next largest group is from London, where the unemployment rate was 4.5 per cent. The third group is from the Northeast, where the rate was 6.7 per cent. The national rate was 3.8 per cent. The proportion of people from minority ethnic groups is 6.2 per cent nationally, 20 per cent in London, 3 per cent in the rest of the Southeast and 1.4 per cent in the Northeast.



## INSPECTION FINDINGS

3. The course manager produced a self-assessment report in April 1999. It took account of the views of trainees and staff but not of those of employers. The report was revised shortly before the inspection, with input from NTP.

4. Two inspectors spent eight days with the company in January 2001. Using face-to-face and telephone interviews, they spoke with 26 trainees, 10 workplace supervisors and four of the company's staff. They visited nine work placements, and examined trainees' files, records of progress, and portfolios, as well as other relevant documents.

### OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

#### **Business administration (accounting)**

**Grade 2**

5. BPP currently has 53 advanced modern apprentices working towards NVQs at levels 2, 3 and 4 in accounting. Twelve of these are based in Newcastle and the rest in London and the Southeast. All the trainees are employed. They work in a range of accounting jobs in high street accountancy practices, accounting departments in small firms, district councils and national organisations. There are no formal entry requirements for the modern apprenticeship programme. No initial testing is done. Induction consists of a telephone call from a member of BPP's staff, followed by a visit at work. Employers or BPP's staff undertake three-monthly progress reviews in the workplace. All assessment and internal verification take place at BPP's offices in London. There are three qualified assessors and one qualified internal verifier. Two staff are working towards the assessors' qualification and one towards the internal verifiers' qualification. The modern apprenticeship programme in Newcastle has been running for only five months. Twenty-five per cent of those who started were found to be ineligible for the programme and have left. In the Southeast, 67 trainees have joined the programme in the past three intakes. One has fully completed the modern apprenticeship framework, and 41 are still on the programme. Fifteen have left without achieving any qualification and the rest have left after achieving an NVQ but without completing all aspects of the modern apprenticeship framework. Inspectors awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good off-the-job training
- ◆ good learning materials
- ◆ wide choice of methods of learning



- ◆ supportive employers

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ insufficient guidance on collecting work-based evidence of competence
- ◆ poor rate of achievement of modern apprenticeship framework

6. All the trainers who provide off-the-job training are qualified accountants with many years of experience in accountancy. They bring their professional experience into the training rooms, which adds interest to their training and helps the trainees to understand how theory is applied to practice. The training is well planned. The same topics are covered at the same level in each training centre.

7. BPP produces good learning materials. There are distance-learning packages, textbooks, workbooks and study packs for each unit. The material is easy to understand and explains accounting theories in a clear and simple manner. Learning is reinforced by citing practical examples and setting questions which trainees use to test their understanding. There are audiotapes to accompany some of the units on the distance-learning courses.

8. BPP offers off-the-job training in a range of study modes to meet the needs of individual trainees and their employers. There are distance-learning packages for trainees who do not live close to one of BPP's training centres. For those who prefer to attend a training centre, there are day-release and block-release courses, evening classes, and revision courses. Trainees choose a method or combination of methods to suit themselves and their employer. For example, they may choose distance learning combined with revision courses.

9. Many of the workplace supervisors have themselves achieved a nationally recognised qualification in accounting and understand the demands which it places on trainees. Some employers give extra study time during working hours. Workplace supervisors give trainees opportunities to sample different job roles. This enables trainees to put into practice the skills which they have learned in the training environment and to broaden their range of experience. For example, one trainee working for a high-street accountancy firm, has had experience in the small business department, the auditing department, and the taxation department. Some good project work is done at level 4 which not only meets NVQ requirements, but also generates useful data for employers' research.

10. Trainees are given insufficient guidance on collecting work-based evidence of competence and assembling a portfolio. There are notes at the beginning of each study pack explaining the need for work-based evidence but these notes are not sufficiently reinforced. Despite this lack of guidance, some trainees produce good portfolios. No assessment takes place in the workplace, and little use is made of witness testimonies from workplace supervisors. Observation is not used as a method of assessment.



11. Most employers and trainees do not understand the importance of key skills in the modern apprenticeship framework. Some trainees who have almost completed an NVQ at level 4 have not started working towards the key skills qualification. The trainees have little idea about the types of evidence to collect or how to build such evidence into their portfolios. Because of this, the achievement rate for the modern apprenticeship is poor. Only one trainee has completed all aspects of the framework so far but 80 per cent have achieved an NVQ. Because the acquisition of key skills is regarded as separate from the NVQ work, any work-based evidence is assessed twice: once for the NVQ and again for the key skills qualification. This is inefficient, leads to trainees producing more evidence than is necessary, and delays their progress towards the achievement of a modern apprenticeship.

## GENERIC AREAS

### Equal opportunities

### Grade 4

12. The company has an equal opportunities statement which indicates that trainees with additional learning support needs will be offered appropriate support. Some large employers have their own equal opportunities policies. The organisation does not carry out its own recruitment but monitors trainees by ethnic origin, gender, age, and disability. The modern apprenticeship programme is available only to trainees who are able to complete it before they are 25. Three years ago, all the trainees starting the programme were women. There are now roughly equal numbers of men and women trainees. Over the past three years, there has been one trainee with a disability on the programme, and there have been no trainees from minority ethnic groups. The aspects of the training which were listed as strengths in the self-assessment report were no more than normal practice. The company did not identify any of the weaknesses found by inspectors, who awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good access to training and assessment for trainees with physical disabilities

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ lack of awareness of equal opportunities among trainees
- ◆ no procedure for dealing with complaints
- ◆ no monitoring of employers' equal opportunities policies or practices

13. All of BPP's training centres have training rooms and toilet facilities which are easily accessible for trainees in wheelchairs. Arrangements have been made in the past to help people with hearing or sight impairments to undertake training

courses and examinations, although not on government-funded programmes. Learning materials can be produced in Braille. Marketing materials have images of men and women trainees from various ethnic groups. The materials make no reference to equal opportunities other than the ease of access for people with disabilities.

14. Trainees cannot remember being given any information about equality of opportunity by BPP's staff. The company does not have a policy to promote equality of opportunity among trainees, employers, or its own staff. Some trainees felt that they had been discriminated against in previous jobs, and so had some understanding of the issues of discrimination and bullying, but they did not feel that BPP had offered them any explicit support or advice. Staff have not had any training in equal opportunities. They collect data on trainees' gender, ethnic group and disabilities, but these data are not analysed or used as a basis for action. Trainees have copies of the awarding body's appeals procedure in their training materials but they remain unsure of how to appeal. BPP does not have a formal procedure for dealing with complaints, although trainees feel that staff are approachable and would respond sympathetically to any complaint. The company has not checked which employers have an equal opportunities policy of their own or monitored equality of opportunity in the trainees' workplaces.

### **Trainee support**

### **Grade 4**

15. The responsibility for trainee support lies with the manager of the course. He is aided in this by a customer liaison officer, who works on the modern apprenticeship programme one day each week, and by three full-time personal trainers. Employers undertake the recruitment and selection of trainees, and BPP provides training to anyone nominated by their employer regardless of their former academic achievements. Induction consists of an introductory phone call from a personal trainer, usually followed by a visit to the workplace. The necessary TEC and NTP paperwork and an individual training plan are completed at this visit. If an initial visit does not take place, the paperwork is sent to the employer for completion. There is no formal system for the accreditation of prior learning. Progress reviews take place on a quarterly basis in line with the TEC's contractual requirements. If progress reviews are missed, there is no follow-up procedure. There are no links with external support agencies. The self-assessment report did not identify the weaknesses in trainee support identified by inspectors. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ effective system of personal trainers
- ◆ high rate of progression to higher-level qualifications

### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate induction process
- ◆ poor use of individual training plans
- ◆ inadequate progress-review process
- ◆ no system for identifying or meeting additional support needs

#### GOOD PRACTICE

*One trainee prefers to study late in the evening. If he has any queries, he sends an e-mail to his trainer. He usually finds a reply in his mailbox when he logs on again next day.*

16. Every trainee has a personal trainer. All personal trainers have gained the nationally recognised accounting qualification which the trainees are working towards, have a good knowledge of the awarding body's procedures and are well placed to respond to trainees' concerns and queries. They all have, or are working towards, the assessors' qualification and higher-level accounting qualifications. The personal trainers contact each trainee at the beginning of the course to explain their role. During busy times, this call may be delayed by a few weeks. The trainees are told that they can contact the personal trainers by telephone, e-mail, letter, or in person when they attend the training centre. Personal trainers are available until late on some evenings. They record all contacts with their trainees. Trainers deal with trainees' personal problems, answer technical accounting queries, and provide advice and guidance on matters relating to the awarding body and assessment. Most questions are answered within 24 hours. However, when personal trainers have been asked questions on key skills, they have not always been able to provide the answers.

17. The trainees make good progress in acquiring accounting skills. Over 60 per cent have progressed from NVQ level 2 through to level 4. They are then encouraged to pursue their studies to a higher-level and are given good advice and guidance on the opportunities available. The availability of routes for progression to higher-level qualifications motivates trainees throughout their training programmes, as they can identify a route to their chosen goal and can see trainees ahead of them who are achieving that goal. The advice they are given ensures that they have an understanding of all the opportunities for employment open to them in the different fields of accountancy.

18. There is no formal induction programme. The introductory telephone contact does not always occur sufficiently early in the programme, and makes little impression on the trainees. The trainers' first visits to the workplace often occur three months after the trainee has started training. No mention is made of health and safety, equal opportunities, the appeals or grievance procedures, or trainees and employers' rights and responsibilities. The NVQ is explained in the training materials which trainees are given at the beginning of their course. Trainees' understanding of the modern apprenticeship framework is never checked.

19. Individual training plans are seen as a bureaucratic requirement of the modern apprenticeship framework. BPP does not undertake any formal initial assessment. The only information about trainees' abilities which is recorded on the individual training plans is past academic results. There is no record of any accounting skills gained in the workplace before starting the modern apprenticeship programme.



There are no procedures for the accreditation of prior learning. For example a trainee with an advanced general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) including key skills qualifications at level 3 had a plan which included a target date for the achievement of key skills already certificated. Individual training plans are not updated regularly, although trainees do realise that target dates can be altered if they take the initiative.

20. The progress-review system is poor. Different arrangements are used in London and Newcastle. In London, employers are given a batch of progress-review forms dated at three-monthly intervals. It is the responsibility of the employer to complete these and forward them to BPP. The employers have had no advice or guidance on what is required. Trainees do not have the opportunity to discuss any difficulties they may be having at work with an independent person. The quality of the progress reviews varies. For example, one employer simply fills in the progress-review form and the trainee signs it, while another sets up a formal progress-review meeting at which relevant aspects of training are discussed in detail. In Newcastle, the progress reviews have only recently started and have been conducted over the telephone. The only record of the progress review is a brief written comment on whether the trainee is happy. The trainee signs this record when they next attend the training centre. The progress-review process does not involve the workplace supervisor and is so general in nature as to be of no value to either the organisation or to the trainee.

21. There are no arrangements to identify trainees' additional support needs. If a trainee identifies a need and requests support, BPP attempts to respond. However, because trainees are not given an initial assessment or asked to complete a health questionnaire, support needs are being missed and trainees are being disadvantaged.

## **Management of training**

## **Grade 4**

22. Overall responsibility for the modern apprenticeship programme lies with the course director for the nationally recognised accounting qualification, who reports to the two managing directors. The course manager for internal verification for the nationally recognised accounting qualification undertakes the day-to-day management of training. He is aided in this by another course manager, who is responsible for the classroom courses. A client liaison officer, who works on the modern apprenticeship programme for one day each week, helps with the administration of the programme. BPP's contract is with NTP rather than with separate TECs. The company does not have a copy of the operating procedures which set out its specific responsibilities. Written records are kept of applications for training. There is a computerised system for recording each trainee's achievement of units towards the NVQs. There are some specified procedures relating to the management of staff and the off-the-job training. These cover recruitment and selection of staff and how training courses should be run. All staff



have job descriptions. There is a system of six-monthly staff appraisals undertaken by the course manager, and a staff-development programme. Managers set targets for the numbers of trainees to be placed on programmes. Meeting these targets is the responsibility of the whole team rather than of any individual. There is a regular cycle of meetings and a monthly staff bulletin. Lines of communication are clear. Most of the aspects of training identified in the self-assessment report as strengths were no more than normal practice. Most of the weaknesses identified by inspectors were not identified in the self-assessment report and inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good staff-development programme linked to appraisal

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ poor management of the modern apprenticeship programme
- ◆ no monitoring of health and safety in the workplace
- ◆ failure to develop trainees' key skills
- ◆ ineffective communication with employers

23. All staff have an appraisal every six months with the course manager. Appraisals are well planned and recorded. The previous year's performance is reviewed against set criteria. All staff are encouraged to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. During the appraisal, needs for training are identified and discussed. There is an annual staff-development programme, which includes training for trainers at three levels: for new trainers; for those who have been training for up to two years; and for longer-serving trainers. The training includes topics such as presentation, voice control, understanding body language, motivation techniques and timing skills. This programme enhances trainers' teaching and training skills. Its effectiveness is monitored by questionnaires to the trainees. New trainers are encouraged to work alongside experienced trainers as part of their development process. The personal trainers all hold the nationally recognised accounting qualification which the trainees are working towards and are all undertaking higher levels of accounting qualifications. All staff attend off-the-job training to ensure that they keep their professional competency up to date. The linking of the staff-development programme to the appraisal system ensures that the training being undertaken meets the needs of the individual and the company. The frequency of the appraisal ensures that staff motivation is kept high and that they can see how they are valued by the organisation as it invests in their development.

24. There are procedures to ensure a consistent approach to the off-the-job training across the country. However, there are no specified procedures for the management of the modern apprenticeship programme. For example, the company has no written procedures dealing with induction or progress reviews. The lack of operating procedures has led to different approaches to managing the modern



apprenticeship programme in different training centres. Managers are unclear about their roles and responsibilities and find it difficult to judge how well they are doing.

25. BPP issues a health and safety booklet to all staff, but the company is unclear about its health and safety responsibilities towards trainees at work. No workplace health and safety audits have taken place and there is no monitoring of employers' health and safety policies and practices. Any real or potential hazards to the trainees' safety have not been identified. No one in the company has a qualification in, or has attended any training on, health and safety in the workplace.

26. There is no clarity about who is responsible for the development of trainees' key skills. There is no staff member with any qualification in, or experience of, teaching key skills. The trainees have little understanding of what is required and they have made almost no progress towards their key skills qualifications. Many have almost completed their training programme but have yet to start working towards a key skills qualification. Most trainees believe they have to build a separate key skills portfolio. Managers have failed to deal with these problems. Several trainees have left without completing the modern apprenticeship framework, although they have achieved the appropriate NVQs. Those who have stayed on have had their programmes lengthened unnecessarily.

27. Too little information is given to employers when trainees start modern apprenticeship programmes. Explanations of what is expected from the trainee and the employer are given too late and are too brief, or are non-existent. An employers' handbook has recently been produced, but most employers have not read it. The handbook is too general, and does not explain BPP's working practices, or the particular challenges of the AAT programme. Employers are not given sufficient information about trainees' attendance and progress at the off-the-job training sessions. This shortage of information prevents the employers from playing a full part in the trainees' professional development.

### **Quality assurance**

### **Grade 4**

28. The course manager is responsible for the quality of the programme, and is also the only qualified internal verifier. Trainees are expected to fill in evaluation forms at the end of every training session they attend, or correspondence-course module they complete. They also complete a questionnaire on leaving the programme. There are evaluation forms in every textbook and correspondence-course module, but trainees rarely complete these. The company analyses the results of assessment and compares them for different methods of training, as well as comparing them with competitors' results and national averages. The company holds the ISO 9000 award and is approved by various professional accounting organisations as a training provider for higher-level courses. It has met most of the requirements of the awarding body for the NVQ. Inspectors found weaknesses



which had not been identified in the self-assessment report and awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ well-established system for collecting trainees' views

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ no overall quality assurance of the modern apprenticeship programme
- ◆ ineffective arrangements for self-assessment

29. The system for monitoring trainees' satisfaction with their training courses is well established and well used. Trainees are expected to complete evaluation forms at the end of each training course they attend. The responses are analysed, to ensure that there is a consistently acceptable overall level of satisfaction. Any dips in the level of satisfaction are investigated.

30. There is no survey of trainees or employers, to ascertain their views about the modern apprenticeship programme as a whole. Because assessors or other staff from BPP do not make regular visits to the workplace, they are unaware of how well the programme is working for each trainee. Trainees and their employers are aware of the helpline provided by BPP to answer technical questions about the training courses, and the training materials, but they are frustrated at being unable to find out about other things such as key skills. There is frequent informal and unrecorded discussion of the programme, but this is generally limited to the content and training and assessment methods for the NVQ. The monthly meeting to discuss trainees' progress concentrates on trainees' achievements of NVQs rather than their overall development as modern apprentices.

31. The company's arrangements for self-assessment failed to identify most of the weaknesses identified by inspectors. There are serious weaknesses in the company's management of its modern apprenticeship programme and in its approaches to trainee support, equality of opportunity and quality assurance. In all these generic areas, inspectors awarded lower grades than those given in the company's self-assessment report.