

TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT
JANUARY 2001

ADULT LEARNING INSPECTORATE REINSPECTION JUNE
2002

BPP Accountancy Courses Limited



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was established under the provisions of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based training within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- ◆ work-based training for all people over 16
- ◆ provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- ◆ the University for Industry's **learndirect** provision
- ◆ adult and community learning
- ◆ learning and job preparation programmes funded by Jobcentre Plus
- ◆ education and training in prisons, at the invitation of her majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the *Common Inspection Framework* by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

Grading

In summarising their judgements about the quality of provision in curriculum or occupational areas and about the quality of leadership and management, including quality assurance and equality of opportunity, inspectors use a five-point scale. The descriptors for the five grades are:

- ◆ grade 1 – outstanding
- ◆ grade 2 – good
- ◆ grade 3 – satisfactory
- ◆ grade 4 – unsatisfactory
- ◆ grade 5 – very weak.

SUMMARY

The original inspection of BPP Accountancy Courses Limited was carried out by the Training Standards Council's inspectors. The inspection resulted in less than satisfactory grades being awarded for equal opportunities, trainee support, management of training and quality assurance. These areas have been reinspected against the requirements of the *Common Inspection Framework* by the Adult Learning Inspectorate, which replaced the Training Standards Council on 1 April 2001. The sections of the original report dealing with equal opportunities, trainee support, management of training and quality assurance have been replaced with the findings of the reinspection. Also, the report summary, report introduction and introduction to the inspection findings have been updated and reflect the findings of the reinspection. Sections of the report, dealing with areas which have not been reinspected, have been left in their original form. The amended inspection report is published on the Adult Learning Inspectorate's website (www.ali.gov.uk).

BPP Accountancy Courses Limited offers good specialist training for a nationally recognised accounting qualification. Learners appreciate the quality of the training, and the opportunity to choose between home study and face-to-face teaching. The management of the modern apprenticeship programme is less than satisfactory. At the time of the original inspection, learners' key skills were not being developed as required by the modern apprenticeship framework. Since then, some learners have completed their key skills portfolios, but many have not and they do not fully understand what they have to do. Most learners have chosen to drop out of the training programme rather than complete their key skills, and have concentrated purely on their accounts training. At the time of the original inspection, learners were not given information about their rights and about equality of opportunity. By reinspection, some work has been carried out to ensure learners are protected in their workplaces. Systems for supporting learners in the workplace, at the time of the original inspection, were at best embryonic and, in some cases, missing completely. By the time of the reinspection, systems are in place, although the initial assessment, planning and review cycle is still weak. There are still no strong 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

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good off-the-job training
- ◆ good learning materials
- ◆ wide choice of methods of learning
- ◆ excellent support from employers

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
- ◆ inadequate progress-review system
- ◆ lack of awareness of equal opportunities among learners

INTRODUCTION

1. BPP Accountancy Courses Limited (BPP) was formed in 1976 to offer courses to trainee accountants. It became a public limited company in 1986 and, at the time of the original inspection, employed more than 1,000 staff. At the time of the original inspection, the training programme had a course director and six staff in London, as well as two staff at the regional office in Newcastle. At the reinspection, the number of staff has increased to eight in London, as well as the two in Newcastle. At the time of the original inspection, there were 53 learners, working in areas served by 14 training and enterprise councils (TECs), in the South, Southeast and Northeast. BPP contracted with the National Training Partnership (NTP). No co-ordinating TEC was identified before the inspection and Surrey TEC was nominated as the co-ordinating TEC as a result of discussions at the inspection-planning meeting. The amount of learners, at the time of the reinspection, had fallen to 33, and all but one are advanced modern apprentices. There is one foundation modern apprentice. At the reinspection, BPP is contracting purely with the National Contracting Service (NCS). Learners choose whether to study through day release, block release, or on a correspondence course. They are all employed in accountancy practices or other financial services organisations.

2. The largest group of learners is in the Southeast, where the unemployment rate in November 1999 was 2.2 per cent and in April 2002 was 1.7 per cent. The next largest group is from London, where the unemployment rate was 4.5 per cent at the time of the original inspection, but which had fallen to 3.6 per cent by the time of the reinspection. The third group is from the Northeast, where the rate was 6.7 per cent at the end of 1999, and 5.4 per cent in April 2002. The national rate was 3.8 per cent in November 1999, and 3.1 per cent in April 2002. The 1991 census shows that the proportion of people from minority ethnic groups is 20.2 per cent in London, 3.1 per cent in the Southeast and 1.4 per cent in the Northeast, compared with 6.2 per cent nationally. In 2000, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of education (GCSEs) at grade C or above was 41.5 per cent in the Northeast, 45.2 per cent in London and 51.8 per cent in the Southeast, compared with 49.2 per cent nationally. In 2001, the proportions have risen to 42.8 per cent in the Northeast, 46.2 per cent in London and 52.7 per cent in the Southeast, compared with 47.9 per cent nationally.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

3. The course manager produced a self-assessment report in April 1999. It took account of the views of learners and staff but not those of employers. The report was revised shortly before the original inspection, with input from the NTP. Two self-assessment reports were produced shortly before the reinspection, in February and March. A further update was given on the first day of the reinspection. One of the assessors was responsible for producing the report, but all managers and members of staff involved in the programme contributed to it.

4. Two inspectors spent eight days with the company in January 2001. Using face-to-face and telephone interviews, they spoke with 26 learners, 10 workplace supervisors and four of the company's staff. They visited nine work placements, and examined learners' files, records of progress, and portfolios, as well as other relevant documents. For the reinspection, four inspectors spent a total of 16 days with the company. They interviewed 19 learners in their workplaces throughout the north, east and south of the country. They visited 16 workplaces, and interviewed seven workplace supervisors or training managers, either directly or by telephone. They interviewed six members of staff, at the London and Newcastle offices. They also examined learners' files, minutes of meetings, and other 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 3

12. At the time of the original inspection, the company had, and continues to have an equal opportunities statement which indicates that learners with additional learning support needs will be offered appropriate support. Most employers have their own equal opportunities policies. The organisation does not carry out recruitment but monitors learners by ethnic origin, gender, age, and disability. Historically, all learners on the training programme were women. However, at the time of the original inspection and currently, there are approximately equal numbers of men and women. At the time of the original inspection, there was one learner with a disability. Currently, there are no learners with disabilities. There are three learners from minority ethnic groups. Learners are given information on equality of opportunity during their induction.

At the original inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

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

13. Since the time of the original inspection, the company has been working on

the weaknesses. There has been some activity by BPP to raise awareness of equal opportunities, and it is now included in induction. BPP now has a complaints procedure which has very recently been given to learners, but has not yet been given to employers. It has not yet been used. Employers are now required to supply BPP with a copy of their equal opportunities policy. Most of the records show that they are now in place, and BPP ensures that the employers have informed their learners about their own equal opportunities policy. BPP is not monitoring the effectiveness of employers' own policies. The strengths which were identified in the most recent self assessment report were considered to be no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified weaknesses which matched those in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ open access to training through flexible provision

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ little understanding of equal opportunities by learners

14. BPP's accounting programmes allow learners to study in the way that suits their preferred learning style and their personal circumstances. Learners can choose their preferred pattern of attendance at a training centre. This can be one day a week, in the evening, at weekends, or any combination of these methods. They can choose to attend either regularly each week, or by block release of several consecutive weeks. Study materials are also available as a correspondence course. For those learners living in rural areas this option is often the only solution. The distance learning option includes support for learners, by a central telephone support system, a named tutor's personal mobile phone or by e-mail. Some learners have chosen to work for employers who use BPP because of the choice of learning modes.

15. There is little awareness of equality of opportunity. The learners who have joined the training programme most recently have more understanding than those who have been training for some time, but awareness is generally poor. Induction materials contain basic information and the company has recently started to reinforce some of the learners' knowledge and awareness. Currently, there is no system for checking and confirming understanding of equal opportunities, although there are plans to review the effectiveness of information given during the progress review meetings. One site has produced an equal opportunities quiz to make the subject more interesting for learners. At the time of the original inspection, there was no equal opportunities policy in place. BPP now has a policy which promotes equal opportunities to its staff. The policy is detailed but does not refer to current legislation, training, employer monitoring or modern apprentices. It is new and has not been issued as yet. At the time of the original inspection, it was identified that staff had not been trained in equal opportunities, and there has still been no training, although four staff are booked to attend a training session the day

after reinspection. Learners have copies of the awarding body's appeals procedure in their training materials but remain unsure of the content, although they feel they could approach BPP staff with complaints. BPP continues to collect data on learners' gender, ethnic group and disabilities. The data are still not analysed and are not used as a basis for action. Some information has been collected from one site for the local LSC and it is to be used locally as part of a marketing initiative.

Trainee support

Grade 3

16. Employers recruit the learners, and BPP offers training to anyone who is nominated by their employer, regardless of their former academic achievements. An initial assessment test is carried out. Induction consists of a short introductory session, individually in the workplace. The individual learning plan is completed at this visit. Progress reviews are planned to take place on a quarterly basis in line with contractual requirements.

At the original inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

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

17. Some progress has been made by BPP in three of the weaknesses. Significant improvements have been made with the induction and all learners now receive a revised induction programme. Some improvements have been made with progress reviews and initial assessments, but both areas are still weak. There has been little progress in the use of the individual learning plans. In its self-assessment report, BPP failed to identify these weaknesses.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent support from employers
- ◆ flexible and responsive support from BPP
- ◆ exceptional rate of progression to higher qualifications

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate initial assessment procedures
- ◆ poor use of individual learning plans
- ◆ weak progress reviews

18. The support from employers is excellent. They take a personal interest in their learners' progress and make sure that they have the best advice, guidance and

GOOD PRACTICE

One busy employer, who wishes to provide extra support facilities for his learners, has periodically arranged for his office to be opened on a Saturday. Learners are given access to all relevant office records. All partners attend and give learners the benefit of their experience throughout the day.

support. Many employers arrange for learners to have access to specialist services which means that learners can see if they want to go on to specialise in areas such as taxation or business planning. There is a good standard of individual coaching. Many employers have designated a member of staff to take charge of learner support. The level of support given by employers is reflected in the learners' motivation and the good level of progression to higher qualifications.

19. The support from BPP is flexible and responsive. It arranges for tutors to be available out of normal working hours and all learners are given the tutors' personal telephone numbers, including mobile numbers. Tutors give good advice and guidance on occupational areas and pastoral care. The learners contact tutors by letter, in person at the training centre, or by e-mail. Tutors record all calls and contacts. This level of flexible support was identified as a strength in the self-assessment report. Most of the learners' questions are answered within 24 hours. However, when personal trainers have been asked questions about key skills, they have not always been able to answer them.

20. The learners make good progress in accounting skills. Over 75 per cent have progressed from NVQ at level 2 through to level 4. They are encouraged to pursue their studies to a higher level and are given good advice and guidance on the opportunities available. In the past two years, 63 per cent of learners who completed their technician qualification NVQ at level 4, have gone on to study for higher professional awards. The routes for progression to higher-level qualifications motivates learners throughout their training programmes. The advice they are given ensures that they have an understanding of all the opportunities for employment in the different fields of accountancy. The self-assessment report identified progression as a strength.

21. The arrangements for initial assessment are weak. The test does not adequately identify specific needs. There is no adequate method of identifying the learners' level of key skills. There is no procedure for assessment of a learner's previous experience, learning or qualifications. Accreditation of prior learning is not systematically carried out. There are no arrangements to identify learners' additional support needs. If a learner requests support, BPP attempts to help. However, learners are not given an adequate initial assessment and support needs are being missed. Initial assessment was not identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report.

22. Individual learning plans are seen as an unnecessary requirement of the modern apprenticeship framework. As BPP does not undertake an adequate initial assessment, the only information which is recorded on the individual learning plans is academic results. There is no record of any accounting skills gained in the workplace before starting the modern apprenticeship programme. Individual learning plans are not updated regularly, although learners do realise that target dates can be altered if they take the initiative. Training which is undertaken with employers is not routinely recorded.

23. The system for reviewing the learner's progress is weak and the quality varies. Generally reviews are of little value to the organisation or to the learner. The review process does not routinely involve the workplace supervisor or other employer representative, although they usually sign the form. In rural areas, progress reviews do not take place at employers' premises. Copies of the review documents are not always given to the learner or the employer. Most employers carry out their own reviews of their learners' progress but they are not linked to BPP's system. In a few cases, employers have been asked to carry out the review, and the learner has been sent the appropriate form for completion by the line manager. However, the employers have had no advice or guidance on what is required. In some cases, the interval between progress reviews has been as much as six months. If progress reviews are missed, there is no follow-up procedure. The self-assessment report did not identify the poor quality of progress reviews as a weakness.

Management of training

Grade 4

24. Overall responsibility for the modern apprenticeship programme lies with the course director who reports to the managing director. There are two course managers who undertake the day-to-day management of training in each of the two sites. There are two modern apprenticeship co-ordinators who carry out progress reviews and administration, and five tutor/assessors. One of the co-ordinators is also an assessor, and the other is working towards the assessor qualification. The company now has the operating procedures of the NCS, which sets out its specific responsibilities. Written records are kept of applications for training. There is a computerised system for recording achievement of units towards the NVQs. There are some specified procedures relating to the management of staff and the off-the-job training. They cover recruitment and selection of staff and training courses. All staff have job descriptions. There is a system of six-monthly staff appraisals undertaken by the course director and course manager, and a staff development programme. Managers set targets for the programme and individual staff members are responsible for meeting the targets. There is a regular cycle of meetings and a monthly staff bulletin. Lines of communication are clear. Most of the weaknesses in training were identified in the self-assessment report.

At the original inspection, the main weaknesses were identified

- ◆ 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

25. The management of the modern apprenticeship programme has improved recently but it is too early to fully assess the impact on the learner. Some problems with course administration still exist. Monitoring of health and safety in the

workplace is now being carried out, although at the Newcastle site, none of the staff have a recognised health and safety qualification. Learners are progressing with their key skills, and some portfolios have now been completed. However, some learners are still confused about key skills. Communication with large employers has now improved. BPP has introduced a new account management system which employers value. Smaller employers are less happy and continue to request additional information.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ strong employer commitment to learners' development

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient focus on work-based learning
- ◆ slow development of strategies for key skills

26. Employers are determined that learners achieve their full framework. Many employers are allowing job rotation to enable learners to achieve the full accounting qualification. Most employers carry out internal reviews, which identifies additional learning needs. Most employers offer additional training which supports the modern apprenticeship programme. This additional training is conducted on and off the job, but it not recorded by BPP in the individual learning plans. BPP has an incentive scheme which gives employers a refund of fees when learners complete the framework. The scheme has helped with the development and progression of key skills.

27. BPP are not paying enough attention to the work-based aspect of the training programme. BPP has a good track record with the achievement of accounting qualifications and there is a strong focus on external examinations. There is little observation in the workplace and opportunities are not always taken for assessment of daily tasks. The review process is poor and visits to the workplace are not taking place to meet contractual requirements. Inspectors identified one learner who was ineligible for the training scheme.

28. A strategy for the development of key skills now exists and some learners have achieved their key skills. However, the strategy is not being implemented reliably. Staff have been working hard on this part of the training programme but there is no qualified internal verifier and, as yet, none of the staff has achieved the key skills assessor award. A new member of staff, who has the appropriate qualifications, is due to start employment immediately after the inspection. There is no initial assessment of key skills. Separate portfolios are still being produced, although tutors have just introduced a work-based project to help learners work towards key skills alongside their NVQ. However, there is insufficient use of tasks being carried out in the workplace. The decision by the accounting awarding body to withdraw from offering key skills assessment and certification has added to

BPP's difficulties. BPP has recently received centre approval from a different awarding body, but this change has caused further delays for learners.

Quality assurance

Grade 4

29. The course manager is responsible for the quality assurance of the training programme. Learners complete evaluation forms at the end of every training session, or correspondence course module. They also complete a questionnaire when they leave the programme. There are evaluation forms in every textbook and correspondence course module, but learners rarely complete them. The company analyses the results of assessment and compares the different methods of training, as well as comparing them with competitors' results and national averages. The company has a national quality assurance award and is approved by various professional accounting organisations as a training provider for higher-level courses. It has met the requirements of the awarding bodies for the NVQ and key skills. Inspectors found a significant weakness which had not been identified in the self-assessment report.

At the original inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

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

30. There is still no overall reliable system for assuring the quality of the training programme. BPP has produced some procedures to ensure consistency, but they are checklists and do not ensure that the reviews are comprehensive and set relevant targets. Since the original inspection, there have been some initiatives to improve the level of feedback in the organisation. Employers are now asked for their views, and the employer who now has a dedicated account manager is pleased with the difference it has made. There are now arrangements to increase the feedback from learners by asking for their comments on induction and progress reviews, and on the overall programme, but they have only recently started. The self-assessment system is now more established, and the self-assessment report and action plan have been updated every couple of months. However, the process is not adequate to ensure continuous improvement. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge that many of the serious weaknesses identified at the original inspection were still evident at the reinspection.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-established system for collecting learners' views

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient monitoring of modern apprenticeship programme

31. The system for monitoring learners' satisfaction with their training is well established and well used. Learners 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 level of satisfaction. Any changes in the level of satisfaction are investigated. Tutors encourage learners to complete their evaluation forms.

32. BPP does not have a reliable system for ensuring the quality of its modern apprenticeship programme. Assessors and other staff from BPP do not make frequent visits to the workplace and they are unaware of how well the programme is working for each learner. Learners and their employers are aware of the helpline provided by BPP to answer technical questions about the training courses and the training materials, but some are frustrated at being unable to find out about key skills. There has been some internal auditing, with managers from the two sites auditing each other's files. However, this activity has only checked that the forms have been completed. There have been some meetings to develop and monitor the post-inspection action plan, but many of the dates agreed on the action plan have passed, and it is not clear who is responsible for ensuring the plan is met. The organisation has sought advice from the awarding bodies and the funding bodies. However, it has not had a formal external verification visit from the main awarding body for two years, and the awarding body it uses for key skills is not helping to develop internal verification or assessor practice. There are some good ideas in the organisation about how the provision could be improved, but no system for ensuring that the ideas are put into practice and then evaluated.