

INSPECTION REPORT

National Business College Limited Reinspection

24 October 2002



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Grading

Inspectors use a seven-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of learning sessions. The descriptors for the seven grades are:

- *grade 1 - excellent*
- *grade 2 - very good*
- *grade 3 - good*
- *grade 4 - satisfactory*
- *grade 5 - unsatisfactory*
- *grade 6 - poor*
- *grade 7 - very poor.*

Inspectors use a five-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision in occupational/curriculum areas. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes quality assurance and equality of opportunity. The descriptors for the five grades are:

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

The two grading scales relate to each other as follows:

SEVEN-POINT SCALE	FIVE-POINT SCALE
grade 1	grade 1
grade 2	
grade 3	grade 2
grade 4	grade 3
grade 5	grade 4
grade 6	grade 5
grade 7	

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.

SUMMARY

The provider

The National Business College Limited is a private training organisation based in Huddersfield. It currently offers foundation and advanced modern apprenticeships, to learners in business administration at levels 2, 3 and 4, and key skills to level 3. Modern apprenticeships are funded through a contract with West Yorkshire Learning and Skills Council.

The National Business College Limited was established in 1983 and specialises in business-related subjects and information technology. The college has offered work-based learning since 1993. Learners are employed in a range of local industries including financial services, information technology services, transportation, manufacturing, engineering, the legal profession and schools. The college has two shareholders, who are the principal and the financial controller. The principal markets the business, develops links with local companies and is the quality assurance manager. There is a training manager who is responsible for overseeing the contract for modern apprenticeships. This person also teaches, carries out assessments and acts as an internal auditor. There are also three tutors, four other assessors, one internal verifier and three advisers who accredit prior learning. There are regular meetings of all staff as well as meetings specifically for staff involved in teaching and assessment or in sales and marketing. The college has a range of policies and procedures which cover equality of opportunity. There is a quality assurance policy and a quality assurance manual. The company has carried out self-assessment for a number of years, and the most recent report was produced in July 2002.

Overall judgement

The ALI's inspection in July 2001 found that training for learners in business administration programmes was unsatisfactory. The organisation's leadership and management, including its arrangements for equal opportunities and quality assurance were also unsatisfactory. At the end of the reinspection process, all aspects of the provision were found to be satisfactory or better.

Grades awarded

	Original	Reinspection
Leadership and management	4	2
Contributory grades:		
Equality of opportunity	4	3
Quality assurance	4	3

NATIONAL BUSINESS COLLEGE LIMITED REINSPECTION

	Original	Reinspection
Business administration, management & professional	4	2
Contributory grades:		
Work-based learning for young people	4	2

During the reinspection process, the inspection team identified the following key strengths, weaknesses and other improvements needed:

KEY STRENGTHS

- effective strategies to improve retention rates
- good skills development at work
- good off-the-job training
- well-managed assessment and support arrangements
- good monitoring of the quality of training and assessment

KEY WEAKNESSES

- insufficient use of data for management purposes
- weak monitoring of equal opportunities
- poor awareness of framework requirements by learners and employers

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- more assessment by direct observation in the workplace
- better links between business plans and organisational strategic planning

THE REINSPECTION

1. The reinspection of National Business College Limited (NBC) was conducted in three stages. A total of nine inspection days was used. The first visit was on 24 October 2002. The second stage was completed on 3 and 4 December 2002. The final stage was completed on 25 and 26 February 2003. NBC had prepared a new self-assessment report and action plan for inspectors to examine. Inspectors interviewed 22 learners, visited 11 employers and carried out 15 interviews with NBC's staff. Three learning sessions were observed and graded. They looked at specialist training resources, new management information systems and organisational procedures and policies. They inspected 11 portfolios of evidence, 22 individual learning plans, NBC's business and strategic plans, assessment and verification documents and promotional literature. As part of the reinspection, inspectors reviewed the new arrangements for progress reviews, assessment and verification.

Grades awarded to learning sessions at the original inspection

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Business administration, management & professional	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	3
Total	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	3

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 2

During the reinspection process, the inspection team identified the following strengths, weaknesses and other improvements needed:

STRENGTHS

- effective strategies to improve retention rates
- good range and effective marketing of work placements
- good arrangements for staff appraisal
- good monitoring of the quality of training and assessment
- well-managed initial assessment and support arrangements
- good awareness of equality of opportunity by learners

WEAKNESSES

- weak implementation of employer agreements for training
- weak monitoring of equal opportunities
- insufficient use of management information

2. Since the original inspection in July 2001, NBC has implemented a range of important changes across the whole organisation. New arrangements for initial assessment now give all learners a detailed analysis of their potential to achieve at a particular level of national vocational qualification (NVQ). Learners are now placed on the most appropriate level of study to suit their own aims and those of their employers. Assessment and verification practices have improved. Learner progress reviews are now more focused on progress towards achieving the qualification and are used well to highlight any gaps in the learners' progress and understanding. A new member of staff has been appointed to manage these arrangements and monitor additional basic skills and key skills support for learners. Learners now have their support needs recognised before they agree their individual learning programme. Learning support for key skills and basic skills is well organised and is offered in a flexible manner to meet the employers' and learners' work patterns.

3. NBC staff now closely manage and supervise the initial assessment of key skills and basic literacy and numeracy skills support needs. Learners are helped to improve their literacy and numeracy, with the clear intention of improving their progress and retention rates. NBC has introduced new and improved assessment practices and more focused progress reviews which have had most impact on retention rates. Since the original inspection, the retention rates have improved significantly across all programmes. The retention rate for advanced modern apprentices has improved from 48 per cent in 2000-01 to 75 per cent in 2001-02 and currently stands at 90 per cent for those who started during 2002-03. The retention rate for foundation modern apprentices has improved from 50 per cent in 2000-01 to 54 per cent in 2001-02 and currently stands at 93 per

cent for those who started during 2002-03.

4. NBC has strong links with the 107 companies which provide work placements and employment for its learners. Job advertisements in newspapers are studied and contact is made with new companies to discuss whether they would consider employing a modern apprentice. NBC carries out appropriate checks to ensure that employers can provide a suitable job description, are committed to paying for the learners' off-the-job training and have adequate health and safety policies and procedures in place. After learners are initially placed, NBC's staff make weekly telephone calls to the employers to check that the work placements are working well. Since the original inspection, NBC monitors employers more closely to establish that the employers can offer an adequate range of skills to cover the NVQ. If employers are unable to offer the full range of work, NBC still works with the employer, but identifies additional work experience for the learner to gain the necessary skills and competences.

5. NBC has been accredited with the Investor in People standard since the original inspection, which is a national standard for improving an organisation's performance through its people. It now carries out annual appraisals of all staff and they are linked to broad business objectives and other sources of evidence about an individual's performance throughout the year. Staff development is now a planned activity and many staff have taken part in training and development activities which have benefited them and the organisation, and have improved learners' experiences.

6. Initial assessment and support arrangements are well managed. A newly appointed member of staff has overall responsibility for organising diagnostic initial assessment of basic skills and key skills. Learners' prior achievements are fully accounted for during initial assessment and, as a result, many learners have been given an exemption from key skills examinations. Initial assessment of support needs is systematic for all learners, and any support identified through this procedure is quickly organised and provided by qualified basic skills support staff.

7. NBC has an employer agreement with all employers. It also provides employers with an information booklet which explains important information and outlines the employers' responsibilities. Both documents explain areas such as time off for study and how employers can support learners throughout their training. However, insufficient emphasis is placed on ensuring employers adhere to these guidelines, duties and responsibilities. Too many employers allow their learners to leave training early and without finishing the qualification or framework requirements. Over the past three years, over 40 per cent of all early leavers have left the training but remain in employment with the same employer. Few sanctions have been applied to employers over this period and little evaluation has taken place to establish why this situation has occurred.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 3

8. Since the original inspection, NBC has identified that some learners need more updating and awareness of equal opportunities, and this has been carried out when NBC's staff visit learners at work. Learners have a good understanding of equal opportunities. Learners are introduced to the policies during their induction and are reminded about anti-harassment and grievance procedures at each progress review. Learners are given questionnaires to check their understanding of equal opportunities throughout their training. Learners are aware of NBC's complaints system and records show that complaints have been dealt with swiftly by NBC's staff.

9. NBC has a range of equal opportunities policies and procedures, including anti-harassment, grievances and complaints. The equal opportunities policy has been reviewed and updated since the original inspection. NBC states its intention to be an equal opportunities organisation in its recruitment publicity. The principal is responsible for equal opportunities. Three of NBC's staff are actively involved as members of a diversity and equality group which was formed by the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and all of NBC's staff have attended training on equal opportunities legislation. The proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups is approximately 13 per cent, which is in proportion with the local population.

10. NBC is about to start a project initiated by the West Yorkshire LSC to allow employers to self-assess their equal opportunities and diversity arrangements. However, at present, the monitoring of equal opportunities at NBC and at employers' premises is weak. Arrangements for monitoring employers' equal opportunities arrangements rely on questioning learners during progress reviews. While this provides useful information about learners' experiences and levels of understanding of equal opportunity, it does not provide important information about employers' arrangements in the workplace. Data are collected on learners in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and disabilities and some analysis has taken place. However, these data are not used by NBC to influence its recruitment procedures or its action plan to counter gender stereotyping. There is no analysis of data to show trends over time in retention and achievement rates, or job outcome rates between men and women, learners from minority ethnic groups or learners with a disability. Access to the training centre for learners with restricted mobility is only to the ground floor of the building. There are accessible toilets and a teaching room on the ground floor which can be equipped with computers. There is ramped access to the front and back entrances of the building. No wheelchair users have applied for modern apprenticeships in recent years.

Quality assurance**Contributory grade 3**

11. Since the original inspection, NBC has introduced new internal verification procedures which have identified and resolved weak practices and set new actions for improvement. NBC has an action plan to monitor its training in the workplace or at NBC by direct observation. This approach to monitoring, when established, will form part of the staff appraisal procedure. Current monitoring of the standard of training involves monthly staff peer group review meetings which identify good and poor practices and prepare action points for improvement, internal verifier observations of assessment practices, reviewing qualification progress rates and the analysis of learner and employer' questionnaires. These monitoring arrangements have led to improvements in learners' progress and target-setting at reviews.

12. Management information systems at NBC have improved since the original inspection. A new data management system has been introduced and staff training is still ongoing. NBC continues with the collection of information on the number of starters, the number of leavers and retention and achievement rates. Reports are now being prepared which consider aspects of programme performance other than the information needed to meet the local LSC contracts and NBC business requirements. However, there is insufficient use of this information for action-planning and target-setting to sustain continuous improvement.

Good Practice
<p><i>One NBC assessor provided a learner with a college leaflet about bullying and harassment. The learner was asked to read it and comment on its suitability for use by NBC when inducting other learners. The learner was pleased to have been given this task and felt it also updated her equal opportunities awareness in the process.</i></p>

AREAS OF LEARNING

Business administration, management & professional

Grade 2

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	53	2

During the reinspection process, the inspection team identified the following strengths, weaknesses and other improvements needed:

STRENGTHS

- particularly effective learner support
- very effective assessment practices
- broad range of flexible learning arrangements
- good off-the-job training
- strong individual support

WEAKNESSES

- poor awareness of framework requirements by employers and learners
- poor updating of individual learning plans

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- more assessment by direct observation in the workplace

13. Learners make good progress at work and develop skills which make them effective in their roles. NBC's staff encourage learners to take every opportunity to demonstrate their skills to their supervisors and employers and this often leads to learners being given specific tasks and responsibilities. NBC also encourages learners to use the opportunities at work to gather evidence for the NVQ and key skills. Learners frequently carry out additional responsibilities at work, such as maternity leave cover, and in several cases this has led to promotion. Learners display confidence and competence in the workplace and learners and supervisors frequently credit improvements to NBC's training programme.

14. All learners take part in an initial assessment of their learning support and key skills needs. The assessment results form an action plan of support needs at the start of the training programme. In most cases, the action plan and support needs are sensitively

shared with employers and this has led to good support for learners at work. NBC carefully matches work placements to the learners' needs and monitors this match over the first four weeks. When additional literacy and numeracy support is needed, it is organised by qualified support staff. If learners are academically capable, but have additional support needs such as poor self-confidence, lower-level qualification aims are set initially. Workplace supervisors are now actively involved in the progress review process. In most cases supervisors use the review meetings to prioritise learners' work patterns to allow them to gather evidence for the NVQ and key skills. NBC closely monitors learners' progress towards the achievement of the NVQ. It uses a database to record progress towards individual units and this allows NBC's staff to identify the learners who are not meeting their targets. Action is taken and additional support is given to help learners to improve their progress. All cases of slow progress are scrutinised at the peer group monthly meetings and details of actions are discussed. Employers are also updated on any slow progress every month. Progress towards the achievement of NVQs is satisfactory across all programmes.

15. NBC has maintained its flexible training arrangements since the original inspection. It still offers a good range of flexibility in its efforts to meet the needs of learners and employers. As well as being open every weekday, NBC is also open for one evening a week. Learners are able to work on their portfolios or use the computers with the help of tutorial staff. If learners are unable to attend NBC, assessors visit their workplace more frequently. When one modern apprentice no longer had transport to attend NBC in the evenings, tutors arranged flexible attendance hours to fit in with the employer's priorities.

16. Off-the-job training sessions are good. Tutors plan the sessions well and include teaching materials and techniques which cater for a range of learning styles in mixed ability groups. Learners are constantly involved throughout the sessions and are encouraged to contribute in the group discussions. All examples and anecdotes used by tutors to broaden learners' understanding of the background knowledge aspects of their qualification are closely linked to the workplace and the NVQ. Learners who have additional literacy or numeracy support needs are carefully managed in learning sessions. Tutors are keen to include them in discussions and all additional support is given on an individual basis by a qualified basic skills tutor.

17. Learners and workplace supervisors are insufficiently clear about the programmes learners are following. Staff at NBC are now clear about the qualification framework requirements, but too many supervisors at work believe that the learners are only working towards an NVQ, rather than the full framework. Many of the supervisors and learners are unclear about what is needed to achieve the key skills. Learners do not have a good overview of how well they are progressing. Although there are good short-term action plans which specify what learners need to complete, learners are rarely clear about when they should start the next stage of learning. NVQ progress is recorded well by NBC assessors. However, they do not record learners' evidence for key skills in the same manner, and evidence for key skills portfolios still tends to be left to the end of the framework.

18. Individual learning plans are not always updated as learners progress. NBC only records the target dates for the NVQ units when learners are near to completion. The learning plans are not used as a means of setting long-term targets and they are not used in conjunction with the progress review records to check overall progress. The learning plans do not always record details of additional support.

19. Assessment practices have improved significantly since the original inspection. There is much more use of workplace evidence. Supervisors write detailed witness testimonies which link to the qualification standards, and supervisors who are qualified assessors are contributing to assessment. However, there are occasions when there is still insufficient use of assessors' direct observations in the workplace. In some cases, learners are near the end of their framework and they have only been observed once by an assessor. NBC is aware of this problem and it is included as an action point in the current self-assessment action plan.

Good Practice

Assessors give good practical tips to learners such as in touch typing, spelling and providing additional evidence for portfolios.

Employers attend NBC to see learners make presentations on their work. As well as learners valuing this support from their supervisors, employers learn more about their learners' off-the-job training.