

REINSPECTION REPORT

Axia Solutions Ltd Reinspection

05 November 2003



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 learning within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- work-based learning 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.

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Axia Solutions Ltd Reinspection

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REINSPECTION REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. Axia Solutions Limited (Axia) is a private company which was formed in May 1999, and became a vocational assessment centre in April 2001. It is based in the Hothouse Ceramic Design Centre in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent. The company operates under the strategic guidance of two directors and employs nine full-time and part-time staff. Axia offers training in ceramics manufacture, business administration and warehousing throughout the Stoke-on-Trent area and is funded through the Staffordshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Most learners are working towards foundation modern apprenticeships in companies directly connected to the ceramics industry. There are 80 modern apprentices and six learners on national vocational qualification (NVQ) programmes.

2. The major employers in Staffordshire are manufacturing industries. There are 350 ceramics manufacturing companies concentrated in the Stoke-on-Trent area, employing over 25,000 staff. The ceramics industry has over the past few years been in decline, resulting in factory closures, redundancies and short-time working practices. The image of the industry has been severely affected, making recruitment and retention within the sector extremely difficult. The proportion of school leavers in Stoke-on-Trent achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education at grade C or above was 38.6 per cent in 2002, compared with 51.6 per cent nationally. Less than 16 per cent of 16 year olds in the Stoke-on-Trent area participate in work-based learning, and almost 14 per cent do not participate in any form of education, training or employment. Stoke-on-Trent has a minority ethnic representation of 2.5 per cent, according to the 2001 census, compared with 9.1 per cent nationally.

SCOPE OF PROVISION

Engineering, technology & manufacturing

3. Axia has 33 learners on engineering and manufacturing programmes, of whom nine are advanced modern apprentices, 20 are foundation modern apprentices and four are working towards NVQs in ceramics. All modern apprentices work towards key skills at an appropriate level as an integral part of their programme. All learners are employed in a range of companies from small fabrication and engineering companies to large internationally recognised ceramics producers. Learners are able to start their training at any time of the year. All training and assessment is carried out in the workplace. Learners are visited frequently for support and assessment. Learners can enrol for additional courses and workshops through the university on the shop floor online training programme. Axia's staff arrange flexible visits to meet the needs of the learner. Learners' progress reviews take place each month for the first three months and every eight weeks thereafter. Reviews involve the work-based mentor or employer.

Business administration, management & professional

4. There are 23 learners on business administration programmes, of whom 22 are foundation modern apprentices and one is working towards an NVQ at level 3 in administration. All modern apprentices work towards key skills at an appropriate level as an integral part of their programme. More recent learners are also completing their technical certificate. All learners have an induction programme, which includes a learning styles assessment and an initial assessment of literacy, numeracy and language needs. Most learners are employed in the offices of local ceramics companies. All training and assessment is carried out by Axia's staff in the workplace. The new technical certificate is planned to be offered by Axia's staff. There are two assessors and an internal verifier.

Retailing, customer service & transportation

5. There are 30 learners on the warehousing programme, of whom 28 are foundation modern apprentices, one is an advanced modern apprentice and one is an NVQ learner. All modern apprentices work towards key skills at an appropriate level as an integral part of their programme. Twenty-eight learners are employed and two are on a non-employed placement. All learners have an induction programme, which includes a learning styles assessment and an initial assessment of literacy, numeracy and language needs. All training and assessment is carried out in the workplace. Learners are visited frequently for support and assessment. Two part-time assessors are based at the distribution centre and work with the learners. Axia's staff arrange flexible visits to meet the needs of the learner. Learners' progress reviews take place each month for the first three months and every eight weeks thereafter. Reviews involve the work-based mentor or employer.

ABOUT THE REINSPECTION

Number of inspectors	4
Number of inspection days	12
Number of learner interviews	20
Number of staff interviews	24
Number of employer interviews	12
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	10
Number of visits	10

OVERALL JUDGEMENT

6. The previous inspection was carried out in December 2001 and the quality of training in engineering and manufacturing was found to be unsatisfactory. The company's leadership and management and the arrangements for equal opportunities were also unsatisfactory. The quality of business administration training was satisfactory. At the end of the reinspection process, all aspects of the provision still provided by the company were found to be satisfactory.

GRADES

grade 1= outstanding, grade 2 = good, grade 3 = satisfactory, grade 4 = unsatisfactory, grade 5 = very weak

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

	Inspection	Reinspection
Engineering, technology & manufacturing	4	3
Contributory grades:		
Work-based learning for young people	4	3

	Inspection	Reinspection
Business administration, management & professional	3	3
Contributory grades:		
Work-based learning for young people	3	3

	Inspection	Reinspection
Retailing, customer service & transportation		3
Contributory grades:		
Work-based learning for young people		3

KEY FINDINGS

Achievement and standards

7. **The development of learners' practical skills in manufacturing is good.** Learners quickly develop the analytical and practical competences necessary to become effective laboratory or production staff.

8. **Retention and achievement rates for ceramics foundation modern apprentices remain poor.** Of the 22 learners who started their foundation modern apprenticeship programme in 2001-02, only three remain in learning. Recently there has been a reduction in the number of early leavers, but the maximum success rate of those still in learning is only 35 per cent.

9. **Retention rates are good in warehousing.** Of the 29 learners who started in the past two years, 27 are still in learning and making good progress. Of those learners who started in 2002-03, most have completed over 60 per cent of the NVQ requirements. However, progress in key skills is poor.

10. Retention rates for business administration are satisfactory. Sixty-seven per cent of those who started in 2002-03 are still in learning, as are all of the learners who started this year. Completion of the full frameworks has been poor. Most learners who started in 2002-03, have now completed between 30 and 50 per cent of their apprenticeship framework.

Quality of education and training

Grades awarded to learning sessions at the original inspection

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

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Engineering, technology & manufacturing	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Retailing, customer service & transportation	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Total	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	3

11. **Highly skilled, qualified and experienced staff provide good on-the-job training in all occupational areas.** There is good use of work-based mentors to enable learners to develop their skills quickly and effectively. Learners are well motivated and attentive. Some business administration employers offer additional training courses in computer applications.

12. **The approach to key skills is inconsistent.** In business administration and manufacturing foundation modern apprenticeships, key skills are introduced at the start and are an integral part of the training programme. Work-related learning materials have been produced to support learners. However, in warehousing and on the ceramics advanced modern apprenticeship programme, the introduction of key skills is delayed. Learners have not had any specific key skills training, and assessment does not cross-reference to the NVQ standards.

13. **There is a good range of work placements available to learners,** from large multi-national employers to small family businesses. They are well resourced and provide good on-the-job training. One large national employer has equipment, which is at the forefront of ceramics production technology. A national distribution employer teaches learners the skills needed to become competent warehouse operatives.

14. **The use of the individual learning plans in warehousing and business administration is poor.** The plans are standardised, and are not particularly helpful in tailoring training to individual needs. The learners needs relating to their workplace are not reflected in their plans. For example, a learner who has considerable prior experience has exactly the

same plan as a learner who started straight from school. Most actions agreed with learners relate to gathering evidence, rather than achieving a learning objective.

15. **Assessment is regular and well planned.** Accredited assessors carry out all assessment in the workplace. Good use is made of evidence from everyday tasks in the workplace. There is a good ratio of work-based assessors and verifiers to learners. Assessors and internal verifiers are conscientious and comply with awarding body requirements. Assessors give constructive feedback to learners verbally and in writing. Assessors make good use of questioning techniques to thoroughly test the learners' background knowledge.

16. **In warehousing, learners are given detailed assessment reports,** which are cross-referenced to NVQ standards, and are given feedback to help future performance. Good use is made of a range of evidence including photographs.

17. **Axia provides good support for all learners.** During the first three months of training learners are reviewed every four weeks, and every eight weeks thereafter. Progress reviews are thorough and well recorded. Training officers set short-term targets for learners and these are routinely reviewed at subsequent reviews.

18. **Learners receive good support from their employers.** Some learners see assessors on a daily basis and have weekly meetings with assessors. Employers participate fully in target-setting and performance monitoring. Learners who have additional needs in literacy and numeracy are encouraged by their employers to attend a local college during working hours. Assessors vary the days they work to reflect the needs of learners.

19. Internal verification is satisfactory. There is a clear strategy and verification is well planned. Standardisation meetings are held each quarter, when good practice is exchanged. Internal verifiers and assessors from the employers are well supported and regularly attend meetings.

Leadership and management

20. **Axia's directors give clear strategic direction** and set demanding targets for retention and achievement rates based on performance.

21. **There is good internal team-working,** characterised by an open management style which fully involves staff in developing key performance indicators. There is a much greater emphasis on monitoring the learners' and company's performance.

22. **Axia has strong and well-established links with a wide range of employers in the ceramics industry.** Work placements for vocational programmes are particularly good.

23. **Achievement rates for modern apprentices are still poor.** In engineering and manufacturing, the achievement rate at the time of the previous inspection was zero. This rate has increased to 20 per cent at the reinspection. Recently there has been a reduction in the number of early leavers. Of the seven learners who started in 2003, all

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are still in learning. However, the maximum success rate of those still in learning is only 35 per cent.

24. The management of on-the-job training is satisfactory. In engineering and business administration, the development of practical skills is identified as a strength. Employers are fully involved in the planning of training and assessment and progress reviews.

25. **The company has still to formalise a coherent key skills strategy.** Issues still remain with poor key skills training, particularly in the late introduction in engineering and warehousing.

26. **There is weak management of literacy, numeracy and language support.** There is no clear strategy for how support will be provided. There are no arrangements to diagnose dyslexia or dyscalculia, or to provide language support for speakers of other languages.

27. **Equal opportunities policies and procedures are clearly written and are appropriate for the learners.** The action plan is monitored each quarter by the equal opportunities steering committee.

28. **Positive action has been taken to attract under-represented groups.** Promotional literature has been produced in Urdu, and circulated to mosques and community centres. Working with the Ceramic Industry Forum, several local projects involving schools, teachers and employers have resulted in work placements and promotional events to raise the profile of ceramics manufacturing in the local area.

29. In business administration, seven men have been recruited and this represents 43 per cent of the present intake. All advertising states that Axia is an equal opportunities provider.

30. Learners have a satisfactory awareness of equal opportunities, complaints and appeals procedures and how these affect them in the workplace. All learners are given information for individual study covering bullying and harassment, which is completed as part of their training. Equal opportunities is reinforced during progress reviews.

31. Clear, well-written policies and procedures which cover all aspects of the training process support the quality assurance strategy. Quality assurance is viewed as the collective responsibility of all staff.

32. All trainers are observed each year. Detailed observation records are kept and training and attainment is graded. Trainers are given feedback, development points are identified, and progress is monitored through individual performance reviews.

33. Performance indicators for starts, retention, achievement, progression and widening participation have now been introduced. Progress against targets is reviewed at quarterly staff meetings, and specific targets are reviewed every three months. The company has also started to benchmark performance against the LSC rates for Staffordshire, to help set realistic performance targets for learners.

34. Employers and Axia closely monitor the learners' attendance and punctuality. Early leaver analysis has led to the introduction of a four-week occupational taster programme in ceramics.

35. **Communication between internal verifiers and assessors has significantly improved.** There are regular standardisation meetings and good practice is shared. There is thorough sampling of evidence and regular observation of assessors.

36. **Significant improvements have been made to the self-assessment and the development planning processes.** Company staff are fully involved and contribute initially through occupational area reviews. The views of employers and learners are gathered each year through questionnaires and follow-up telephone interviews.

37. The development plan identifies key priorities for the company. Staff responsibilities for actions are clearly identified together with appropriate timescales for completion. Progress against the development plan is reviewed at quarterly staff meetings and staff personal development reviews.

During the reinspection process, the inspectors identified the following strengths and weaknesses:

Leadership and management

Strengths

- good internal team-working and communication
- strong partnerships with employers
- positive action to attract under-represented groups
- clear and effectively communicated arrangements for quality assurance

Weaknesses

- weak use of the management information system
- inadequate staff training in equality of opportunity
- ineffective management of language, literacy and numeracy support

Engineering, technology & manufacturing

Strengths

- good development of practical skills
- effective and frequent work-based assessment
- good support for learners

Weaknesses

- poor retention and achievement rates for foundation modern apprentices
- late introduction of key skills for advanced modern apprentices

Business administration, management & professional

Strengths

- good development of vocational skills
- good support for learners

Weaknesses

- insufficient planning of individual learning

Retailing, customer service & transportation

Strengths

- good support for learners
- good work placements

Weaknesses

- poor use of individual learning plans
- late introduction of key skills

DETAILED REINSPECTION FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

During the reinspection process, the inspectors identified the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths

- good internal team-working and communication
- strong partnerships with employers
- positive action to attract under-represented groups
- clear and effectively communicated arrangements for quality assurance

Weaknesses

- weak use of the management information system
- inadequate staff training in equality of opportunity
- ineffective management of language, literacy and numeracy support

38. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Axia's directors give clear strategic direction. The business plan has clearly identified business objectives, which reflect the company's vision and mission. Staff are aware of these objectives and in some cases have specific responsibility for their achievement. There are demanding yet realistic targets set for retention and achievement rates based on current performance, although the growth targets for enrolment are ambitious.

39. An improved management structure has been introduced since the previous inspection. There is good internal team-working, characterised by an open management style which fully involves staff in developing the company and setting key performance indicators. There is a much greater emphasis on monitoring the learners' and company's performance. Quarterly network meetings, staff meetings and personal development reviews all encourage accountability and shared responsibility. Ongoing issues relating to learners are discussed daily as they arise. Communication is fluid and generally efficient. Axia's staff visit employers regularly to support the development of learners and to discuss problems with trainers and assessors. Axia's staff are dedicated to ensuring that issues are dealt with to the benefit of learners and employers.

40. Axia has strong and well-established links with a wide range of employers. Work placements for vocational programmes are particularly good. Axia has a high profile with local ceramics manufacturers, and has been involved in a number of projects to promote the industry. In conjunction with the Ceramic Industry Forum, several local projects involving schools, teachers and employers have resulted in work placements and promotional events to raise the profile of ceramics manufacturing in the local area. One of the directors is leading the pilot development of the University on the Shop Floor

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national initiative to provide enhanced learning resources and online learning opportunities for all employees in ceramics companies.

41. The management of on-the-job training is satisfactory. In engineering and business administration, the development of practical skills is identified as a strength. All learners have a thorough induction with Axia and their employer, which covers health and safety and equal opportunities. Results of diagnostic assessment for literacy and numeracy are used to identify additional support needs. There is, however, insufficient recognition of previous knowledge and experience when designing individual learning plans. Employers are fully involved in the planning of training, assessment and progress reviews. However, the company has yet to formalise a coherent strategy for key skills. Issues remain with poor key skills training, particularly in terms of the late introduction in the engineering advanced modern apprenticeship and the recently introduced warehousing programme. In response to the large number of early leavers in ceramics manufacturing, Axia has recently introduced a four-week taster programme, but it is too early to judge the impact of this initiative as yet.

42. There is weak management of literacy, numeracy and language support. There is no clear strategy to identify how support will be provided. Staff awareness is relatively poor. For instance, the uses and limitations of the initial assessment tests are not fully understood. A learning styles questionnaire booklet is given to all learners, which asks 80 questions, but it includes technical language which learners who have literacy needs find difficult to understand. The purpose and use of the questionnaire is unclear and the results are not used for the planning of individual learning. There are no arrangements to diagnose dyslexia or dyscalculia, or to provide language support for speakers of other languages. However, one member of staff is due to attend dyslexia awareness training. There is no strategy for supporting literacy and numeracy needs in the workplace.

43. There are currently six learners who have been identified as needing literacy and/or numeracy support. Arrangements have been made for them to attend a local college once a week. Axia has responded promptly to the needs of these learners, but the issues have not been fully thought out. It is unclear how the needs of the learners are being diagnosed and there have been no discussions about how to make the learning vocationally relevant. There is no service level agreement or contract with the college at present. However, a member of staff from Axia will observe the college provision.

44. The recent introduction of a new management information system has greatly improved the range of data available. Data typically include recruitment, starters, completers, early leavers, achievement, attendance and progress review dates. However, access to management information is poor for staff as only the system administrator has direct access and is still being trained in its use. The system is not being used to provide the range of management reports that the training team needs to manage the modern apprenticeship programme. The monitoring of learner performance, achievement by different groups, progression data, rates of NVQ achievement and key skills performance are all completed on a separate system. Monitoring of company performance trends is based on contract volumes and not on individual intakes.

45. Current completion rates for modern apprenticeship frameworks are still poor. In engineering and manufacturing, the completion rate at the time of the previous inspection was zero. This rate has increased to 20 per cent at the reinspection. Recently there has been a reduction in the number of early leavers. Of the seven learners who started in 2003, all are still in learning. However the maximum success rate can only be 35 per cent. The recently introduced foundation modern apprenticeship in warehousing has not reached its scheduled end date yet. For learners who started in 2002-03, 92 per cent are still in learning and are making good progress. Similarly in business administration, of the learners who started in 2002-03, 67 per cent remain in learning and they are also making good progress towards completion of their framework. The changes needed to improve provision have been introduced, but it is too early to judge the impact on final achievement rates.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 3

46. Axia is committed to the concept of equality and fairness. All staff are encouraged to take responsibility for equal opportunities in their day-to-day working. One of the directors gives strategic direction on equality and diversity. The company policy includes sections on legislation for discrimination, recruitment, training, assessment and monitoring and is reviewed each year. The policy is supported by procedures which cover harassment, bullying and appeals. Policies and procedures are clearly written and are appropriate for the learners. The equal opportunities action plan is monitored each quarter by the equal opportunities steering committee.

47. Recruitment practices do not discriminate against any group of learners. Axia operates an open recruitment policy and no applicant is turned away. Local labour market research has been carried out which has highlighted the need to attract under-represented groups, predominantly from minority ethnic backgrounds, but also unemployed school leavers. Positive action has been taken to deal with this issue, but the proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups remains poor. Promotional literature has been produced in Urdu, and circulated to mosques and community centres. Axia attends careers fairs, and good links have been established with local schools to develop an interest in the ceramics industry. For example, a current project with local ceramics manufacturers provides work placements for pupils and teachers to highlight the career opportunities in the local ceramics industry.

48. The development of the university on the shop floor has already started to impact on learners who are beginning to access additional qualifications to enhance their apprenticeship programme. Details of training opportunities and vacancy lists have been posted in all libraries across the potteries as well as community centres and schools where there are many people from minority ethnic groups. In business administration, seven men have been recruited, which represents 43 per cent of the present intake. Advertising material includes a number of images which are neutral in terms of ethnicity, gender and disability. All advertising states that Axia is an equal opportunities provider. Equal opportunities data are collected, and monitoring of learners in terms of ethnicity and gender and disability has recently been introduced.

49. Learners have a satisfactory awareness of equal opportunities, complaints and appeals procedures and how these affect them in the workplace. Learners are aware that they should not be treated any differently to other employees and have an awareness of issues surrounding ethnicity and gender. Equal opportunities is reinforced at all assessor visits. A review guide has been developed with specific equal opportunities questions to help assessors raise the topic during reviews. Equal opportunities is covered during induction where learners are given an independent study guide on bullying and harassment to be completed as part of their training. This is well laid out and easy to understand. A new equal opportunities training programme has been written which is to be delivered to learners. Employers have also been invited to send managers on the programme free of charge. Learning styles questionnaires are used as part of the initial assessment process, but the results are not used to plan the training.

50. There has been no formal staff training in equal opportunities. Aspects of equal opportunities have been covered in courses for training and development qualifications. However, there has been no dedicated training or update training relating to new legislation or practices.

Quality assurance

Contributory grade 3

51. The company's quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory. There are clear, well-written policies and procedures which cover all aspects of the training process. Effective action has been taken to deal with the two areas for improvement which were identified at the previous inspection. Quality assurance is viewed as the collective responsibility of all staff, and is covered during staff induction. Axia's staff understand the procedures and their importance. The company's internal quality assurance monitoring process focuses on all procedures each year. All documents are centrally controlled and detailed records are maintained. Issues arising are recorded and dealt with. However, the system focuses too much on compliance and does not adequately evaluate the quality of individual processes. The exception is the observation of occupational training in the workplace. All trainers are observed each year and detailed observation records are kept. Training and attainment is graded, trainers are given feedback, development points are identified and progress is monitored through individual performance reviews. At the time of reinspection, 50 per cent of scheduled observations had been carried out. The process has yet to be extended to training in key skills and literacy and numeracy.

52. Performance indicators for starts, retention, achievement, progression and widening participation have been introduced. Progress against targets is reviewed at quarterly staff meetings, and specific individual targets are reviewed every three months. At the previous inspection none of the learners had completed the framework. Since then, 21 learners have completed their framework. Employers and Axia closely monitor the learners' attendance and punctuality. The company has recently introduced colour-coded learner monitoring documents, which are updated each month. These provide an overview of the learners' progress against the framework requirements. Learners who need additional support are identified and appropriate support is given. Early leaver

analysis has led to the introduction of a four-week occupational taster programme in ceramics. Of the seven starts in 2003-04, all are still in learning. The company has also started to benchmark performance against the LSC rates for Staffordshire, to help set realistic performance targets.

53. Axia has a contract which clearly defines its relationship with the employer and its learners. The contract specifies the level of service each party is entitled to expect. Axia's assessors check that learners are having the appropriate level of support, through regular visits and progress reviews. However, there is no contract with the local college for support with literacy and numeracy.

54. Internal verification is satisfactory. Communication between internal verifiers and assessors has significantly improved. There are now regular standardisation meetings to share good practice. Thorough sampling of evidence takes place and observation of assessors is regular. However, the strategy for internal verification is not fully developed. Internal verification is mainly concerned with compliance, rather than the quality of assessment practice. Feedback to assessors often focuses on presentation and referencing of evidence in portfolios. Insufficient feedback is given on wider assessment issues such as the appropriateness of assessment methods and efficiency of assessment.

55. Significant improvements have been made to the self-assessment and the development planning processes in order to resolve the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. Company staff are fully involved in the process and contribute initially through occupational area reviews. The views of employers and learners are gathered each year through questionnaires and follow-up telephone interviews. On completion of the draft report, Axia's staff and some employers and learners are invited to a meeting to review and discuss the draft before final publication. The report closely follows the format of inspection reports, identifying strengths and weaknesses against the 'Common Inspection Framework'. The development plan identifies key priorities for the company, and staff responsibilities for actions are clearly identified together with appropriate timescales for completion. Progress against the development plan is reviewed at quarterly staff meetings and staff personal development reviews. Self-assessment is now seen as a key process in the company's approach to continuous improvement. The company has produced two self-assessment reports which are self-critical, and the grades in the most recent report are consistent with inspectors' judgements in all areas of provision.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Engineering, technology & manufacturing

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	33	3

During the reinspection process, the inspectors identified the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths

- good development of practical skills
- effective and frequent work-based assessment
- good support for learners

Weaknesses

- poor retention and achievement rates for foundation modern apprentices
- late introduction of key skills for advanced modern apprentices

Achievement and standards

56. Employers are very committed to training. Learners develop good practical skills in the workplace and demonstrate very good standards of work. They quickly develop the analytical and practical competences necessary to become effective laboratory or production staff. Portfolios are satisfactory. They are well organised and evidence is clearly referenced to the unit requirements. There is, however, an over-reliance on assessors to complete the cross-referencing of evidence. Written responses to background knowledge questions are accurate, demonstrate good understanding and are supported by well-written assessment reports.

57. Since the previous inspection, 21 learners have completed the modern apprenticeship framework. Progress with key skills is now satisfactory. However, despite this improvement, retention and achievement rates for ceramics foundation modern apprentices are still poor. Of the 22 learners who started in 2001-02, only three remain in learning. Recently there has been a reduction in the number of early leavers, with seven of the learners who started in 2003 still in learning. However, the maximum success rate of those still in training can only be 35 per cent.

Quality of education and training

58. Experienced, well-qualified employer staff provide good on-the-job training. Learners have a thorough induction from Axia and the employers. Key aspects such as equality of opportunity and health and safety are covered in depth. Employers make good use of

work-based mentors to enable learners to develop their skills quickly and effectively. On-the-job trainers deliver very good practical training sessions. For example, in one session learners were being trained to prepare plate moulds and the trainer gave a good, clear demonstration. The learner was allowed to practise, while the trainer checked and ensured a good level of understanding. The trainer stayed with the learner and gave appropriate support to help develop the technique of applying lubricant to a plate mould.

59. Key skills training is introduced at the start of the foundation modern apprenticeship and work-related learning materials have been produced to support key skills training. Three work-based projects have been developed which enable learners to gather job-related evidence to meet the assessment requirements for communication, application of number and information technology. This is in contrast to the advanced modern apprentices where the introduction of key skills training is delayed. There is inadequate planning and integration of key skills and there is some duplication in the collection of evidence. Learners do not see the relevance of key skills, and completion of the qualifications has a low priority.

60. Learners have access to good training resources at work. Axia's staff have experience in the ceramics industry and the employers' training staff are highly skilled ceramics workers who have attended formal training as trainers. These employers range from worldwide ceramics manufacturers to small and medium-sized enterprises which specialise in hand-finished products. One large national employer has equipment which is at the forefront of ceramics production technology.

61. Assessment is well planned. Accredited assessors carry out all assessment in the workplace and the ratio of work-based assessors and verifiers to learners is good. Most assessors are employed as ceramics production operatives. This gives learners the opportunity to access regular, planned assessment. In most cases the assessor is also the trainer and this ensures that assessment opportunities are maximised. Assessors give constructive feedback to learners verbally and in writing. Assessors make good use of questioning techniques to thoroughly test background knowledge. All assessments are recorded in detail and give clear descriptions of the assessment activity and the assessor's judgements. All completed assessment documents are placed in the learners' portfolios.

62. Initial assessment is satisfactory. All learners complete a diagnostic assessment for literacy and numeracy during their first month on programme and the results are used to develop individual learning plans. A local college provides specialist support for learners who have additional learning needs. Training officers accompany learners and give additional support during the initial stages of the college programme. Learners also complete a learning style assessment, but the use of the results are not used to structure individual training programmes.

63. Axia provides good support for all learners. During the first three months of training, learners are reviewed every four weeks and thereafter every eight weeks. Progress reviews are thorough and well recorded and include pastoral support and monitoring of

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progress against the individual learning plan. Training officers set short-term targets for learners, which are routinely reviewed at subsequent reviews. One training officer was observed setting targets for a learner and the learner's work-based assessor. Employers give good support to their learners and are fully committed to the review process and participate fully in target-setting and performance monitoring. Learners who have additional needs in literacy, numeracy and language are encouraged by their employers to attend a local college for training during working hours. Axia has recently produced an equal opportunities study pack for learners. Equal opportunities is reinforced through focused questioning at progress reviews. Some employers have created supportive training environments where learners can work on real products for customers while developing their production speed.

Leadership and management

64. Leadership and management in engineering and manufacturing are satisfactory. Since the previous inspection, documents for monitoring learners' progress have been introduced. Retention and achievement rates are discussed regularly between the provider, subcontractors and employers. More thorough monitoring of progress now takes place during review and assessments. Progress for current learners is satisfactory and is relative to the length of time on programme. Significant improvement has been made to internal verification since the previous inspection. Regular internal verifier standardisation meetings are now held each quarter, between internal verifiers and work-based assessors. Communication between internal verifiers and assessors is good and minutes are kept of all meetings. Assessors, including those from subcontractors, are observed carrying out assessment activities in the workplace. Axia has developed strong and effective working relationships with local engineering and manufacturing employers, particularly in the ceramics industry. All employers value this relationship with Axia and speak highly of the visiting staff.

Business administration, management & professional**Grade 3**

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	23	3

During the reinspection process, the inspectors identified the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths

- good development of vocational skills
- good support for learners

Weaknesses

- insufficient planning of individual learning

Achievement and standards

65. Retention rates for business administration are satisfactory. Sixty-seven per cent of those who started in 2002-03 are still in learning and all of the learners who started this year are still in learning. Completion of full frameworks has been poor, but an improved approach to key skills is having a clear impact. Most learners who started in 2002-03 have now completed between 30 and 50 per cent of their apprenticeship framework. Learners who started in the past few months are making particularly good progress. Learners' work is of a good standard and their word-processed documents are particularly well presented.

Quality of education and training

66. There is good development of learners' vocational skills. They are in suitable work placements, which enable them to learn the full range of administration skills and gain experience of a wide range of tasks. Learners are well motivated and attentive. Work-based supervisors and colleagues provide good on-the-job training. Some supervisors have a particularly good grasp of how to provide effective coaching. All learners have good learning opportunities in the workplace. Some employers also offer additional training courses in computer applications. Learners make good progress and gradually take on more responsibility. They develop a professional attitude to their work and increase their maturity and confidence.

67. There is insufficient planning of individual learning. Individual learning plans are all the same, and only target dates vary. The learners needs relating to their workplace are not reflected in the individual learning plans. For example, a learner who had considerable prior experience has exactly the same plan as a learner who started straight from school. A learner whose job centres on financial operations has the same individual

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learning plan as a learner who is a personal assistant. There is insufficient planning of learning in the workplace. Supervisors often give tasks to their learner in sequence. Most actions agreed with learners relate to gathering evidence, rather than achieving a learning objective.

68. Until a few months ago, key skills were not an integral part of the learning programmes and assessments were late starting. Key skills are now introduced at the start of the programme and are an integral part of the vocational training. Axia's staff help learners to identify projects which provide excellent opportunities to demonstrate key skills knowledge as well as benefiting the employer. For example, one learner researched the mobile telephone services for her company. Learners will soon be able to take key skills tests online, which will speed up assessment further.

69. Reviews of learners' progress are satisfactory and take place at regular intervals, usually every eight weeks. They involve the learner, assessor and workplace supervisor in useful discussion about progress in the job and the qualification. Progress is monitored, documents are updated, and further training needs are identified. However, actions agreed in reviews sometimes do not provide sufficiently clear targets for learners. Reviews do not place sufficient focus on reviewing the effectiveness of learning.

70. Initial assessment is satisfactory. All learners complete a key skills diagnostic assessment and the results are used to plan the learners' training. Employers and Axia's staff review the job roles to check that the range of assessment opportunities will satisfy the requirements of the apprenticeship programme. Learners are well matched to their job role and the qualification.

71. Assessment and internal verification are satisfactory. Assessments are adequately planned and recorded and good use is made of evidence from the workplace. Assessors and internal verifiers are conscientious and comply with awarding body requirements. However, some assessment is controlled by the assessor and some practices are inefficient. For example, one learner was asked to produce a witness testimony for one part of the performance criteria. There is an overuse of write-ups, insufficient cross-referencing of evidence across a range of units and insufficient use of varied assessment methods. Internal verification identifies gaps and invalid evidence, but makes no reference to inefficient assessment practice.

72. There is good support for learners. Axia's staff visit learners in the workplace regularly every two, three or four weeks, according to need. If a learner is not progressing, visits may take place every week. Workplace supervisors are supportive and generally have a good understanding of how to support learners. There are good working relationships between learners, supervisors and assessors. Learners know how to access support if they have a problem. Axia readily provides practical support for learners. For example, if learners need to attend the training centre, taxis are provided. Learning support has improved in recent months. New learning materials have been purchased which support key skills development. Most learners have access to the internet and make good use of online sources of information to support their learning.

Leadership and management

73. Leadership and management in business administration is satisfactory. There is close monitoring of work placements where Axia and the employers work closely together to manage training and assessment. The causes of slow progress and poor framework completion have largely been identified and steps have been taken to deal with the problems. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced. All staff attend monthly staff meetings and assessors attend formal standardisation meetings every quarter. There is regular monitoring of the learners' performance and attendance, by staff, directors and employers. All staff contribute to the self-assessment process. An annual review of the occupational programme with learners and employers is included in the self-assessment report. Staff performance reviews are held quarterly and formal appraisals take place each year. A number of staff are currently studying for further qualifications. Staff are provided with the support and resources to develop the curriculum and to make improvements.

Retailing, customer service & transportation**Grade 3**

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	30	3

During the reinspection process, the inspectors identified the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths

- good support for learners
- good work placements

Weaknesses

- poor use of individual learning plans
- late introduction of key skills

Achievement and standards

74. Warehousing is a new programme which was introduced in 2002-03. There has been insufficient time for the current learners to complete their full framework, but retention rates are good. Of the 30 learners who started over the past two years, 27 are still in learning. Learners are motivated and are making good progress in their NVQ training. They are confident in the busy commercial environment and demonstrate good practical skills. Portfolios are well organised and evidence is clearly cross-referenced to the NVQ requirements. However, many learners report that assessors organise their portfolios for them. They cross-reference the evidence, but while all the work is the learners', they demonstrate insufficient knowledge of the organisation of their portfolio. Of the learners who started in 2002-03, most have completed over 60 per cent of the NVQ requirements. Progress with key skills, however, is poor.

Quality of education and training

75. Training in warehousing is satisfactory. All learners have a formal induction to the modern apprenticeship framework by Axia, and employers provide a work-based induction. Equal opportunities, health and safety, key skills and the NVQ requirements are covered in detail. Work-based trainers review job roles and the range of opportunities available for gathering evidence in the workplace. Additional learning needs are identified through initial assessment, and training in literacy and numeracy is provided by a local college. All practical occupational training takes place on the job. Good use is made of experienced staff to help learners gain new skills. Employers are positive about the benefits of the training and have experienced improved work rates and greater awareness of company working practices by learners. Additional off-the-job training is provided to meet learners' needs. Manual handling courses are delivered to

industry standard supported by good handouts and questionnaires to test learning.

76. The introduction of key skills has been delayed. Learners have not had any specific key skill training and assessment does not capture evidence of key skills. The requirements have not been cross-referenced to the NVQ standards. This problem has been recognised by Axia, and staff are being trained and learning materials are being prepared.

77. Reviews are carried out every four weeks during the first three months of the programme and every eight weeks thereafter. The use of individual learning plans is poor. They are standardised and not particularly helpful in tailoring training to individual needs. Achievement targets are set for learners and are reviewed by assessors, but they are not always recorded adequately. It is difficult for learners to monitor their own progress.

78. There is a good range of work placements for learners, from large multi-national employers to small family businesses. They are well resourced and provide good on-the-job training. One large multi-national employer has training lines to teach learners the skills needed to become a competent warehouse operative. Training managers from the employer plan and deliver the training. Regular meetings are held with Axia's assessors to discuss learner needs. Training rooms are available, as are cupboards to store training materials. Company training initiatives are being used to capture evidence for key skills.

79. Assessment practices are satisfactory. Assessors have extensive occupational experience and make good use of this knowledge when working with learners. They ensure that learners make the most of the opportunities to gather appropriate evidence in the workplace. Learners are given detailed assessment reports, which are cross-referenced to NVQ standards. They are also given feedback to help future performance. Good use is made of a range of evidence including photographs, when appropriate.

80. Internal verification is now satisfactory. At the previous inspection, there was no clear strategy for internal verification, but this has now been resolved. Standardisation meetings are held each quarter, when good practice is exchanged. Sampling plans have been established for the past few months. Internal verification reports are satisfactory. The new assessor in the warehouse has been observed carrying out assessments and reports have been completed. The approach to assessment was about compliance to standards only, but a holistic approach is now being successfully used at the major employer.

81. There is good support for learners. Assessors are based at employers' premises and learners see them on a daily basis. Assessors have regular weekly meetings with learners which reflect the learners' workload and their assessment schedules. Assessors vary the days they work to reflect the needs of learners. They are approachable and try to resolve problems quickly. They have persuaded the employers to change learners' work schedules to reflect the framework. One learner whose ability to provide evidence for the framework was limited, has changed location after a meeting between the assessor

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and the first-line manager. Assessors are supporting the learner in the new role. When learners need practical support, like a lift to college, assessors readily respond. Assessors offer pastoral support to learners and training co-ordinators offer additional support if needed.

Leadership and management

82. Leadership and management in warehousing are satisfactory. Work placements are closely monitored and Axia and the employers work closely together to manage the training and assessment. Formal and informal communication is good. All staff attend monthly staff meetings, including the employers' staff. Assessors attend formal standardisation meetings on a quarterly basis. Minutes of meetings include clear action points with staff responsible for actions, and target dates are highlighted. Progress on action is reviewed at subsequent meetings. There is regular monitoring of the learners' performance and attendance by staff, directors and employers. All staff contribute to the self-assessment process. An annual review of the occupational programme with learners and employers contributes to the company's self-assessment report. Staff performance reviews are held quarterly and formal appraisals take place every year. A number of staff are currently studying for further qualifications. The company is flexible and responsive when dealing with requests from individual assessors for further training.