

# INSPECTION REPORT

## **Aston Commercial Training**

**06 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 and Jobcentre Plus programmes. 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
- **learndirect** provision
- Adult and Community Learning
- training 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.

## Overall judgement

Where the overall judgement is that the provision is adequate, only those aspects of the provision which are less than satisfactory will be reinspected.

Provision will normally be deemed to be inadequate where:

- more than one third of published grades for occupational/curriculum areas, **or**
- leadership and management are judged to be less than satisfactory.

This provision will be subject to a full reinspection.

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning. A statement as to whether the provision is adequate or not is included in the summary section of the inspection report.

# **INSPECTION REPORT**

## **Aston Commercial Training**

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## INSPECTION REPORT

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. Aston Commercial Training (Aston) is a private training organisation, which provides modern apprenticeships and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in business administration, management and professional, information technology (IT), customer service, hairdressing and care. The organisation was established in 1987 and has a training centre in Northampton and uses the premises of three hairdressing companies for practical hairdressing training. Aston also has a learndirect access point. At the time of inspection, there were 134 learners on government-funded training programmes. There were too few learners in IT, customer service and care for these areas to be inspected separately.
2. Aston's two partners set the organisation's strategic aims and direction. One of the partners looks after financial management, while the managing partner is responsible for the provider's operational management. The provider currently employs 14 full-time staff and 17 staff on a subcontracted basis. The five subcontracted staff train and assess hairdressing, accounting and residential estate agency learners.
3. Aston's training is funded by Northamptonshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The Northamptonshire area, from where Aston recruits its learners, has a minority ethnic representation of 4.9 per cent, according to the 2001 census, which is considerably lower than 9.1 per cent for England as a whole. However, Northampton and Wellingborough's minority ethnic populations are closer to the rate for England.

### SCOPE OF PROVISION

#### **Business administration, management & professional**

4. There are 47 business administration, accounting and residential estate agency learners. Ten advanced modern apprentices are working towards residential estate agency NVQs. Eight advanced modern apprentices and 11 foundation modern apprentices are working towards NVQs in administration or accounting. On the NVQ training programme, 10 learners are working towards NVQ level 2 in administration, and eight learners are working towards NVQ at level 4 in accounting. The company recruits most learners directly through its own promotional activities, and the rest through referrals by employers or from Connexions. Learners are employed in a variety of local companies, including accounting companies, solicitors, estate agencies, commercial and industrial companies, public-sector organisations and Aston's own offices. Most learners attend the training centre one day each week for off-the-job training to prepare them for the technical certificate and key skills. Off-the-job training is either held at Aston's training centre or at a specialist computer training centre in Northampton. Residential estate agency learners have off-the-job training on one day each month.

## Hairdressing & beauty therapy

5. There are 78 hairdressing learners, 67 are foundation modern apprentices, nine are advanced modern apprentices and two learners are on an NVQ training programme. All learners are working towards NVQs at level 2 and 3 in hairdressing. Learners find out about their training programmes through Aston's publicity or their employer. Approximately 40 per cent of the learners have been transferred to Aston from a local training company who no longer contracts with the LSC. Learners work in hairdressing salons throughout Northampton, Wellingborough and Kettering and the surrounding areas. Most of these salons are independent and family-owned businesses. Off-the-job training takes place one day each week in one of three hairdressing academies, one of which is staffed by Aston. The other two academies are subcontracted to give off-the-job training, assessment, internal verification and certification for learners. Learners attend Aston's training centre for key skills training.

## ABOUT THE INSPECTION

Number of inspectors	5
Number of inspection days	20
Number of learner interviews	52
Number of staff interviews	13
Number of employer interviews	14
Number of subcontractor interviews	2
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	3
Number of visits	17

## OVERALL JUDGEMENT

6. The quality of the provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically, training in business administration, management and professional, and the leadership and management are good. The company's approach to equality of opportunity is also good, and its quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory. The quality of work-based learning in hairdressing is satisfactory.

## GRADES

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

<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>2</b>
Contributory grades:	
Equality of opportunity	2
Quality assurance	3

<b>Business administration, management &amp; professional</b>	<b>2</b>
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	2

<b>Hairdressing &amp; beauty therapy</b>	<b>3</b>
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3

## KEY FINDINGS

### Achievement and standards

7. Achievement and retention rates are at least satisfactory on all training programmes offered by Aston. Many of Aston's retained learners are successful in achieving their full qualification aims. **Achievement rates for key skills and additional qualifications are good**, particularly for hairdressing learners. On the NVQ training programme in business administration, management and professional, there are very high retention and achievement rates.

8. **Learners develop excellent personal and employability skills on the business administration programmes.** Learners on all programmes have a good standard of practical skills. Hairdressers demonstrate practical skills that are of a good commercial quality. Learner's confidence and interpersonal skills improve greatly. The standard of learner's written work is generally satisfactory and particularly good for residential estate agency learners.

9. **Target-setting for learners is weak.** Targets set at learner's progress reviews are not always measurable or timebound. In hairdressing, employers are not fully involved in the target-setting process and targets are not effectively linked to learners' progress. Business administration, management and professional learners make good progress and most achieve their qualifications within the agreed time. However, some hairdressing learners are making very slow progress.

### Quality of education and training

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Business administration, management & professional	0	4	1	1	0	0	0	6
Hairdressing & beauty therapy	0	0	3	2	0	1	0	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>

10. **Much of the teaching and learning at Aston is good**, with eight of the 12 observed teaching sessions being good or very good. Training is highly individualised in business

## ASTON COMMERCIAL TRAINING

administration, with learners working at their own pace. Practical hairdressing skills are well taught and this is supported by detailed study material to develop the essential knowledge requirements of the NVQ. Key skills training in hairdressing is particularly effective and learners are prepared well for tests. However, inspectors found the off-the-job training at one hairdressing subcontractor to be poorly planned. There was insufficient variety in activities to meet the learners' needs and an over-reliance on learners completing written work. Attendance for this off-the-job training was poor.

11. **Learners receive good on-the-job training.** Employers in business administration, management and professional have good knowledge of the requirements of the programme, the off-the-job training content and their responsibilities towards learners. Hairdressing learners receive good support from well-qualified and experienced practitioners at work.

12. **Aston's training centre provides a flexible, spacious and pleasant learning environment.** There is a good range of reference materials and workbooks. The hairdressing learners have off-the-job training in good-quality, well-equipped realistic work environments with an appropriate range of clients.

13. Aston has sufficient qualified and appropriately trained staff. There is a high ratio of teachers to learners and a good level of individual support. Assessors and internal verifiers hold relevant qualifications, however, some of the hairdressing assessors are new to this role.

14. Aston has an appropriate company policy for internal verification. In business administration, management and professional programmes, internal verification is satisfactory. There is insufficient monitoring of the assessment practice in hairdressing to ensure that weaker practice is rectified. Some learners' progress is delayed by having to repeat assessment activities or collect evidence no longer required for the revised NVQ standards.

15. All learners have an appropriate initial assessment, which identifies a relevant programme of study and additional support for portfolio development. Some learners have used online packages to develop their literacy skills. Nine hairdressing learners have been identified as having additional learning needs and are receiving individual support. Aston does not have access to a basic skills qualified tutor.

16. Learners' work is regularly set and marked with appropriate feedback given to support development of knowledge and skills. Good use is made of oral and written questions and answers to test learners' knowledge and understanding. Assessments are generally satisfactory and in residential estate agency are well planned with frequent observation of learners at work. However, in all other programmes there is insufficient assessment of learners in the workplace. In accounting, very little workplace evidence is used and there is no direct observation in the workplace.

17. **Communication with employers is very good.** Aston's recruitment agency takes particular care to match learners needing work or placements with vacancies from



employers. Training staff give employers regular feedback on off-the-job training, attendance and learners' progress. However, in hairdressing, the person conducting progress reviews does not have sufficient information about learners' performance in off-the-job training and assessment to give an informed view of their progress.

18. **The range of programmes offered by Aston meets learners' and employers' needs well.** Many learners take a good range of additional qualifications and training to meet their current and future job requirements. In hairdressing, two new off-the-job training centres have opened recently to offer a wider range of learning venues to learners. There are good additional activities for hairdressing learners, including participating in competitions and attending trade exhibitions.

19. **All learners receive a thorough and comprehensive induction.** Learners understand their rights and responsibilities. Learners and employers are well prepared for the training programmes and understand how key skills and additional qualifications fit into the modern apprenticeship course.

### Leadership and management

20. **Training programmes are well managed** by an established team of managers and the managing partner. The partners set a clear direction for good-quality training across the company. Communication is regular and particularly effective. Learners' issues are discussed frequently and appropriate practical solutions are sought.

21. **Business-planning effectively identifies the company's development needs.** Aston is careful about introducing new training programmes and pilots new programme areas to see if they meet the profile and aims of the company.

22. Management information is used appropriately to monitor the company's performance towards achieving the LSC's targets. However, there is insufficient target-setting by Aston to improve retention and achievement rates.

23. **Resources are managed effectively.** Off-the-job training takes place in well-equipped and pleasant environments. Staff are well managed, although some of the more recently qualified assessors and internal verifiers are not yet fully established or confident in these roles.

24. Aston has clear staffing policies, including a particularly effective appraisal system. A wide range of training and development activities are being taken by staff. There are clear links between appraisal and the business plan targets.

25. **Equality of opportunity is promoted well to learners and staff.** Aston has developed and implemented good-quality materials that stimulate discussion among learners. Staff are knowledgeable about equality and diversity, including individual learners' needs and religious holidays and events.

26. Aston's quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory for all aspects of training.

## ASTON COMMERCIAL TRAINING

Learners', staff's and employers' views are effectively sought, analysed and acted on. There are many changes and developments to programmes as a result of this feedback. However, there is insufficient monitoring of subcontractors. Much of this has been completed informally and inconsistently. Inspectors identified many issues with one of the hairdressing subcontractors, not all of which have been rectified.

27. **The self-assessment process is weak** and not particularly clear in establishing appropriate strengths and weaknesses. Some of the weaknesses identified in previous years' self-assessment reports have not been acted on and appear in the current report. Self-assessment is ineffective as a tool for improvement. There is an appropriate development plan, which is regularly monitored.

*The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:*

### **Leadership and management**

#### **Strengths**

- good internal and external communication
- well-managed approach to developing good-quality training
- good promotion of equal opportunities to learners and staff
- regular and effective staff appraisal system
- good use of feedback to improve programmes

#### **Weaknesses**

- insufficient monitoring of subcontractors
- ineffective strategies to improve retention and achievement rates
- weak self-assessment process

### **Business administration, management & professional**

#### **Strengths**

- good retention and achievement rates on NVQ programmes
- excellent development of personal and employability skills
- good off-the-job training
- very good liaison with employers
- strong individual support for learners

#### **Weaknesses**

- weak target-setting for learners
- insufficient use of assessment in the workplace

## **Hairdressing & beauty therapy**

### **Strengths**

- good teaching and achievement of key skills
- good practical support for learners
- good-quality learning environments
- wide range of additional activities and training

### **Weaknesses**

- insufficient quality assurance of assessment practice
- some ineffective reviews of learners' progress
- poor planning and organisation of off-the-job training at one subcontractor

**WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT ASTON COMMERCIAL TRAINING:**

- the fun training experience
- the modern, trendy hairdressing trainers
- the friendly, approachable and supportive staff
- staff give good support for key skills
- staff say thank you and want you to do well
- the sense of achievement and receiving certificates

**WHAT LEARNERS THINK ASTON COMMERCIAL TRAINING  
COULD IMPROVE:**

- reduce the amount of written work
- better relaxation areas at the training centre
- more assessment at work, rather than at the off-the-job training

**KEY CHALLENGES FOR ASTON COMMERCIAL TRAINING:**

- improve retention and achievement rates
- further develop the quality assurance arrangements
- increase the use of assessment in the workplace

## DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

### LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 2

*The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:*

#### Strengths

- good internal and external communication
- well-managed approach to developing good-quality training
- good promotion of equal opportunities to learners and staff
- regular and effective staff appraisal system
- good use of feedback to improve programmes

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient monitoring of subcontractors
- ineffective strategies to improve retention and achievement rates
- weak self-assessment process

28. Aston's internal communication among staff and with subcontractors is regular and particularly effective. There is weekly discussion of individual learners' issues, their progress and attendance. Practical solutions are discussed to improve learners' motivation. Aston keeps good records of the weekly meetings, with clear staff responsibility for actions. The managing partner holds monthly meetings with the three hairdressing companies who train and assess learners off the job. There is good discussion of learners' progress and how to improve the structure of the training. A focus group for hairdressing companies was established this year to share views on training and whether Aston is meeting the salon owners' needs. Aston has clear policies for monitoring health and safety in the workplace. Aston has given support to many employers to help them develop their own health and safety and employment practices. Aston regularly sends out updates on legislation to employers. There are appropriate agreements between Aston, employers and subcontractors that include all aspects of training and the responsibilities of each organisation. Employers value the recruitment service offered by Aston.

29. Aston's partners set a clear direction for good-quality training across the company. Considerable effort has recently been taken to establish the three hairdressing academies to meet the current and future needs of learners. Managers and the partners are approachable and highly responsive to staff, learners' and employers' issues and comments. Aston has an appropriate annual business plan, which clearly identifies the areas where the company hopes to develop and the market reasons behind this. There is careful development of new programmes through pilot schemes to see if they match the profile of Aston's training and aims. The managing partner maintains good links with external organisations to influence the future of training in administration and update staff with current developments. Aston's managers take an active role locally in raising

the profile of work-based learning and in promoting courses.

30. The managing partner and managers use management information effectively to monitor the organisation's performance, mainly towards achieving LSC targets. Reports are produced to let managers and staff know when reviews, health and safety checks and paperwork are due.

31. Aston has a strategy for improving retention and achievement rates. It is too early to monitor its effectiveness, however, the business administration, management and professional achievement rates have shown a decline over the past three years. Overall, Aston did not meet its completion targets for last year but has set an even higher target for this year. Aston currently only has a strategy for how the current four months between August and December will be achieved. There are no targets for improving retention rates. Staff are unclear about retention and achievement targets.

32. Staffing policies are clear and easily accessible in a staff handbook. Aston has recently been reaccredited for Investors in People, a national standard for improving an organisation's performance through its people. Staff have a regular four-monthly appraisal and find the process highly motivational. Staff training needs are clearly identified through the appraisal process. A wide range of development activities are currently being followed by staff to meet their own and the business' needs. There are clear links between the appraisal and business plan targets. The appraisal contains a section about new business objectives. New staff are well supported and have formal reviews of their performance every six weeks. All staff have clear job descriptions that are reviewed at their appraisal. Resources are well managed.

33. All of Aston's learners are initially assessed for their literacy, numeracy and key skills needs. This information is used to determine which type of programme they should pursue. Individual support with portfolio-building and special arrangements for assessment are arranged for learners. Nine hairdressing learners have been identified as having additional learning needs and are receiving individual support. Aston does not currently have access to a trained basic skills tutor to support the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills. Aston recognises this as an area for improvement. Some learners have used learndirect skills for life packages, and their literacy skills have improved.

### **Equality of opportunity**

### **Contributory grade 2**

34. There is good promotion of equal opportunities to learners and staff. Aston has developed good-quality induction materials that cover a range of equality and diversity issues. Initial induction is followed by reinforcement of equality of opportunity throughout the learning programme. This includes a training session with questions that challenge learners and stimulate debate, and includes learners completing handouts and performing role-plays. Thirty per cent of learners have completed a learndirect course on equal opportunities, which includes learning about harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Staff also receive a comprehensive induction to equal opportunities and are encouraged at meetings and staff appraisal to take on equality of opportunity training.

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Staff are knowledgeable about the subject and share expertise. One member of staff has produced a booklet on dyslexia and dyspraxia, which has been widely distributed. A list of religious holidays has been produced and is regularly updated to ensure all staff are aware of, and respect, religious holidays. Learners and staff have a good understanding of equal opportunities and are enthusiastic about the subject.

35. Data collection and analysis is satisfactory. Statistics on ethnicity, gender and disability are collected and analysed by area of learning, and compared with the local and national profile. Analysis of learners' relative achievement by ethnic group in numeracy and in communications shows there to be no difference in achievement even from learners who speak English as an additional language.

36. Employers receive a copy of Aston's equal opportunities policy and booklet on equality and diversity, which are clear and comprehensive. Aston's staff carry out monitoring visits every eight to 12, in which where policies are monitored and employers are updated on any changes in legislation. Learners are also questioned about equal opportunities at progress reviews but this has only recently started to be formally recorded.

37. Learners are aware of their rights and how to complain. There are appropriate records of how complaints are dealt with. Staff are responsive to learners' needs and often deal informally with individual concerns and issues. However, Aston does not effectively monitor learners' experiences at some companies and subcontractors to ensure fair practice.

38. There have been some initiatives to attempt to widen participation through targeting boy scouts groups and boys' schools. Leaflets have been translated into Bengali and sent to local Bengali groups in deprived areas. Aston has also relocated its annual recruitment event from the centre of town to a deprived and predominantly Asian area, encouraging the participation of whole families at these events. There has been a small increase in the number of learners from minority ethnic backgrounds recruited over the past three years. In 2002-03, 4 per cent of hairdressing learners and 10 per cent of business administration, management and professional learners were from minority ethnic groups. However, the proportion of men on hairdressing programmes has declined from 8.2 per cent of learners in 2001-02, to 3 per cent in 2002-03. In business administration this has remained unchanged over the last two years: 15 per cent of learners are men. The training centre is inaccessible for learners with restricted mobility; an issue recognised in self-assessment. Aston offers to make alternative arrangements for learners who need more accessible off-the-job training facilities.

### Quality assurance

### Contributory grade 3

39. Aston has satisfactory quality assurance procedures for all aspects of its training. A six-monthly internal audit of files monitors paperwork, including individual learning plans, induction and reviews. There is both formal and informal quality assurance of what happens in the workplace, including the quality of on-the-job training. The development manager and one of the internal verifiers observe training each month. Staff find this



process supportive and helpful in developing their skills. Observation of training is planned effectively and carried out using clear criteria for observers. There is insufficient monitoring of subcontractors. Much of the monitoring of the accounting and residential estate agency is done informally and little is recorded. Inspectors identified many issues with one of the hairdressing subcontractors, including the planning of off-the-job training, availability of models and the range of activities that learners are involved in. Some of these have been picked up by Aston, others have not. Actions identified at meetings are not followed up effectively for this subcontractor.

40. Learners' feedback is collected twice a year through a comprehensive questionnaire. The results are analysed and circulated to all staff. The analysis shows that many learners are very satisfied with their training, level of support, feedback and progress reviews. Aston has identified issues with the number of assessments and quality of induction through feedback from learners and has introduced solutions to improve these aspects of the programme. Specific comments from learners are effectively followed up by managers to identify individual solutions to issues. This year's annual employers' questionnaire has not yet been analysed. Employers' feedback has been used to enhance programmes, for example, the introduction of a training day for Afro-Caribbean hairdressing. Staff are actively encouraged to make recommendations for change.

41. There is an appropriate company policy for internal verification, including the sampling of portfolios, standardisation meetings and coaching for assessors. In most areas, internal verification is effective. However, in hairdressing, internal verification is not adequate in quality assuring the assessment process. Sharing of good practice among internal verifiers has started, but is not fully established.

42. The self-assessment process is well established, and is in its sixth year. The managing partner produces the report and staff are asked for their views. There is insufficient use of learners' and employers' views in self-assessment. The current report is exceptionally long and repetitive. The strengths and weaknesses for each area are not particularly clear. Many weaknesses are identified for each area, but these are contradicted by good grades. Aston has not awarded contributory grades for quality assurance and equality of opportunity. Some of the weaknesses identified in previous years' self-assessment reports have not been put into action and appear in the current report. Self-assessment is generally ineffective as a tool for improving Aston's provision. There is an appropriate development plan, which is monitored regularly through staff meetings.

## AREAS OF LEARNING

### Business administration, management & professional

Grade 2

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	43	2

*The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:*

#### Strengths

- good retention and achievement rates on NVQ programmes
- excellent development of personal and employability skills
- good off-the-job training
- very good liaison with employers
- strong individual support for learners

#### Weaknesses

- weak target-setting for learners
- insufficient use of assessment in the workplace

#### Achievement and standards

43. Achievement and retention rates are very good on NVQ programmes, at 91 per cent in 2001-02 and 61 per cent in 2002-03. A further 27 per cent of learners are still in learning. All NVQ learners that have been retained in these two years have achieved their qualifications. The number of learners on modern apprenticeship programmes has shown a decline in the past three years. In the same period, achievement and retention rates on modern apprenticeship programmes have also declined. Both retention and achievement rates for modern apprentices are satisfactory. There are still many learners working towards achieving their qualifications and since the data were submitted for the tables of achievement and retention, four additional learners have started training programmes. There are very good pass rates for learners who sit accounting examinations.

44. The standard of work in portfolios is good, particularly on the residential estate agency programme. Learners' confidence and interpersonal skills improve greatly. There is good progression into further training or employment on leaving the training.

45. Target-setting for learners is weak and not always measurable or timebound. Not all learners are set targets for completing individual units or qualifications in their individual learning plan. Where dates are set, they are often all at the end of the course. Action-planning is often weak, and does not identify what the learner is to achieve by the next progress review or how it is to be done. In some reviews, target-setting is not individualised and targets are identical for each learner. Staff do not always record the

progress learners make in overcoming barriers to employment such as literacy and numeracy progress. However, learners are making good progress on their programmes, and most achieve their qualifications within the target date for completion.

The following tables show the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of the inspection.

LSC funded work-based learning																	
Advanced modern apprenticeships (AMA)	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000										
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	21		33		27		15									
Retained*	4		14		22	81	13	87									
Successfully completed	2		11		21	78	13	87									
Still in learning	13		11		0	0	0	0									

\*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

LSC funded work-based learning																	
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000										
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	17		41		58		66									
Retained*	5		29		45	78	57	86									
Successfully completed	5		23		42	72	54	82									
Still in learning	7		2		0	0	0	0									

\*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

LSC funded work-based learning																	
NVQ Training	2002-03		2001-02		1999-2000												
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	33		22		1											
Retained*	20		20		0	0											
Successfully completed	20		20		0	0											
Still in learning	9		1		0	0											

\*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

### **Quality of education and training**

46. Off-the-job training is of a good standard across all programmes. Five of the six training sessions observed by inspectors were good or very good. Training is highly individualised, with learners working at their own pace, supported by individual help and coaching from tutors. Learners are well motivated to work independently. Accounting learners work at a good pace. There is a good mix of background knowledge followed by practical consolidation exercises. Key skills training and assessment are an integral part of training from the start of the course.

47. The spacious accommodation at Aston's training centre provides a flexible and pleasant environment. There is a good range of reference materials and workbooks. Learners use tailor-made, open-learning workbooks. These are well written in appropriate language and guide them on the types of evidence required from the workplace. Most computer equipment meets industry standards, although some equipment and software is out of date. Aston recognises this, and plans to replace this equipment in the very near future. Some learners have off-the-job training at a specialist computer training centre, where there is excellent industry-standard computers and software. Learners have easy access to photocopiers, telephone, fax, video player and a digital projector.

48. Aston has sufficient appropriately qualified and experienced staff. There is a training co-ordinator and four assessors, three of whom are also internal verifiers. Training and assessing for accounting and residential estate agency is subcontracted to external trainers, assessors and internal verifiers. Where new programmes have been introduced, for example in residential estate agency, managers have sought trainers, assessors and internal verifiers with good commercial expertise and credibility. There is a good staff to learner ratio. Assessors and internal verifiers hold relevant qualifications, however, Aston recognises the need for more trainers to have teaching qualifications. One of the trainers has recently started a teaching qualification.

49. All learners have an appropriate initial assessment to determine the level of course, vocational skills level and any learning support needs. Initial assessment and support for learners with additional numeracy and literacy needs is satisfactory. Level 2 learners work through online programmes, where they develop their spelling, punctuation and numeracy. Learners' key skills development needs are met through workpacks to prepare them for external tests, again with support from staff. Although staff provide adequate support, only two staff have basic or key skills qualifications.

50. There is good assessment-planning in the residential estate agency programme, where learners have clearly identified assessment actions. Administration learners are encouraged to collect product evidence from the workplace. Insufficient use is made of assessment in the workplace in accounting and administration. Opportunities are missed to observe learners at work. Witness testimonies are often identical and do not always state what the learner did to prove competence. In accounting, very little workplace evidence is used and there is no direct observation in the workplace. However, in

residential estate agency, there is very frequent use of workplace observation. Learners' work is set and marked regularly, with constructive comments from tutors. Good use is made of oral and written questions and answers to test learners' knowledge and understanding. Challenging projects are set, including one in which accounting learners at level 4 are required to research and evaluate the impact of computerised accounting systems on their organisation, making recommendations on how possible problems could be minimised.

51. Learners develop excellent personal and employability skills in the first few weeks of their programme. Most learners have social and skills barriers that prevent them from entering directly into jobs. Learners embark on an intensive course at the training centre until they are ready for work. A high proportion of learners are helped to find a job by Aston. During this intensive training, most learners achieve up to 10 certificates in telephone techniques, equal opportunities, spreadsheets, database, audio text processing and interview techniques. At the same time they work towards a level 2 NVQ in administration: completing supportive but challenging work experience in the company's office to develop practical skills. They are extremely well motivated by their sense of achievement and are enthusiastic about their rapid rate of progress.

52. Communication with employers is good from the outset. Employers particularly appreciate the care which Aston takes to find them suitable candidates for job vacancies. The skilful matching of learners' skills and abilities with employers' requirements helps learners to settle in quickly at work. Employers have good knowledge of the requirements of the programme, the off-the-job training content and their responsibilities towards learners. Some learners have had their job role adapted to give them the experience needed for the NVQ. Employers give good on-the-job training to help learners develop new skills. Learners additionally receive specialist off-the-job training from their employers on such areas as: computerised accounting, customer service, and software packages for insurance and legal offices. Many learners are given increased responsibilities as they progress on the course and are often promoted during training.

53. Learners have a group induction to the programme and an individual induction in the workplace. The comprehensive induction includes an introduction to the programme, assessment methods, and rights and responsibilities. Learners are given clear information about how to appeal or complain and about the equal opportunities procedures.

54. Learners receive good pastoral support from friendly and approachable staff. Progress reviews are carried out at least every 12 weeks. Aston works with employers to resolve any problems in the workplace such as work overload or personality clashes. Aston quickly finds learners alternative jobs if issues cannot be resolved. Learners receive support and guidance for personal problems, and staff are flexible about attendance until these are resolved. Additional monitoring and support is given to learners who are at risk of dropping out of the programme.

## **Leadership and management**

55. The management of learning is satisfactory. There is good teamworking among staff, who meet daily to share information and ideas, and discuss learners' needs and progress. Meetings are recorded and action points are followed up. Internal verification is satisfactory. Regular standardisation meetings are held with assessors, although these are not always recorded. There is effective forward planning to meet changes in programmes and qualifications. Staff are involved in business-planning. New staff are well supported through shadowing, mentoring and training. Staff development is readily accessible through the appraisal process and on individual request. Staff attending external courses share the information with the rest of the team. Monitoring of subcontractors is largely informal and unrecorded, although it is frequent. Staff have limited involvement in self-assessment. The self-assessment report does not provide clear information about strengths and weaknesses. However, there is a culture of continuous improvement, which has benefited the learners' experience.

**Hairdressing & beauty therapy****Grade 3**

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	78	3

*The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:*

**Strengths**

- good teaching and achievement of key skills
- good practical support for learners
- good-quality learning environments
- wide range of additional activities and training

**Weaknesses**

- insufficient quality assurance of assessment practice
- some ineffective reviews of learners' progress
- poor planning and organisation of off-the-job training at one subcontractor

**Achievement and standards**

56. Retention and achievement rates are satisfactory, although many learners are still on training programmes. Retention and achievement rates for advanced modern apprenticeships were very good in 2000-01, when 77 per cent of learners were retained and 69 per cent of those learners who started programmes achieved their full qualification. On all programmes, most learners who have been retained have achieved their planned qualifications.

57. There is good achievement of key skills. Most learners successfully complete the key skills qualification early in their training. Many learners improve their confidence and skills at work through the key skills training and achievement. The learners' practical hairdressing is of a good, commercial quality.

58. Some learners are making very slow progress and take too long to complete their qualifications. Many of these learners had transferred from another training company. Many learners are unclear about actions or targets and few have a copy of their individual learning plan. There is weak monitoring of learners' achievement of targets through the progress review process.

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The following tables show the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of the inspection.

LSC funded work-based learning																	
Advanced modern apprenticeships (AMA)	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01												
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	15		3		26											
Retained*	3		2		20	77											
Successfully completed	2		1		18	69											
Still in learning	6		1		2	8											

\*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

LSC funded work-based learning																	
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01												
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	45		46		46											
Retained*	1		27		28	61											
Successfully completed	1		8		24	52											
Still in learning	39		22		5	11											

\*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

LSC funded work-based learning																	
NVQ Training	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01												
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	1		1		4											
Retained*	0		0	0	3	75											
Successfully completed	0		0	0	2	50											
Still in learning	1		1	100	1	25											

\*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

### Quality of education and training

59. There is some good practical teaching and support. Two of the training sessions observed by inspectors were good. In practical training, there is a high ratio of trainers to learners. Learners enjoy their practical training and make good progress in developing hairdressing skills. Learners receive individual feedback to identify progress and future actions. Study materials are detailed and are effective in helping learners to develop the practical skills and essential knowledge requirements of the NVQ. In some training



sessions, there are a good range of learning activities. However, at one subcontractor there is some poor planning and organisation of off-the-job training. This currently affects around 23 per cent of Aston's total learners. For these learners, there is a lack of variety in their learning activities. There is insufficient planning or use of strategies for training to meet the learners' needs. Learners have difficulty getting models for off-the-job training, and too much emphasis is placed on learners completing written work instead of developing their practical skills. Attendance rates at this subcontractor's training sessions are poor. Some learners are poorly motivated. Aston is aware of some of these issues and has started to discuss these with the subcontractor at meetings.

60. Teaching in key skills is particularly good. Learners use practise booklets with small, achievable topics to develop their skills and prepare for key skills tests. Training materials are relevant and appropriate for hairdressing. Learners make good progress with their key skills. Learning is regularly assessed through test questions and learners are given individual support with areas of difficulty.

61. Learners work in good-quality, modern, well-equipped salons. They receive good support from well-qualified and experienced practitioners. The salons reflect current fashion standards, are attractive and provide a stimulating environment for new entrants to the industry. Off-the-job training in the academies is in a realistic work environment, with an appropriate range of clients. In one of the academies, there are particularly good teaching and learning resources.

62. All staff are vocationally well qualified and experienced. They regularly update their skills and knowledge and maintain personal development records. There are 12 staff in the subcontracted academies and six in Aston's own academy. Two members of Aston's staff support the link with employers and on-the-job learning through 12-weekly progress reviews. There are sufficient assessors and internal verifiers. However, some of the assessors and internal verifiers have only recently been trained to assess and verify. Aston has provided very good and well-received support for these staff. There are additionally two salons that have work-based assessors, who have not been internally verified. Most of the assessment happens in the academies as part of the off-the-job training. The quality assurance of assessment is insufficient in ensuring that the good practice is maintained and weaker practice is rectified. There is some good assessment practice, with learners receiving detailed feedback. Some assessors use a wide range of diverse assessment and witness testimonies, however, others do not. Some learners are unnecessarily repeating assessment activities following poor-quality witness testimonies. A small number of assessors are unclear about the new NVQ requirements. Learners' progress is delayed by obtaining evidence that is no longer required.

63. Aston has substantially developed the hairdressing training programme over the past two years, and two of the academies were opened in the three months before inspection to meet the needs of learners. One academy has opened in Kettering to enable learners in that area to study more locally. The on- and off-the-job training effectively meets learners' needs. Many employers provide additional off-the-job training in their salons, which broadens the learners' knowledge and work skills. This includes courses in cutting, colouring and manufacturers' courses. Some learners take additional training offered by

## ASTON COMMERCIAL TRAINING

Aston, including assessor qualifications, units in men's hairdressing and a course in Afro-Caribbean hairdressing. There are good additional activities for learners, including competitions and visiting trade exhibitions. Aston holds regular awards ceremonies and a learner of the month competition. Learners find these very motivational.

64. Learners receive good pastoral support at their progress reviews. The progress review process forms the main link between on- and off-the-job training. However, the person conducting the progress review does not have sufficient information about learners' performance in off-the-job training, their assessments or the progress they are making towards their NVQ and key skills to give a rounded view of learner's progress. Employers are not fully involved in the target-setting process.

65. All learners receive a comprehensive and thorough induction to their learning programme. Aston regularly revisits topics such as equality of opportunity, health and safety, the NVQ criteria and the employment rights and responsibilities required for the modern apprenticeship. Learners also receive an effective induction to work and the off-the-job training. All learners take a recognised initial assessment of their literacy, numeracy, vocational and key skills. The results are used to identify learner's key skills practise needs and additional support for their vocational work. Aston has plans to use online skills for life learning packages to support these learners. So far, two of the nine learners identified as having additional learning needs have received this support to develop their literacy and numeracy learning needs. Aston's self-assessment report acknowledges the need for staff to have key and literacy and numeracy training qualifications.

### **Leadership and management**

66. The management of the hairdressing training is satisfactory. A recently appointed co-ordinator supports the training academies and has developed successful relationships with staff at the off-the-job training venues. There has not been sufficient quality assurance of these subcontractors, although some observations of training and assessment have recently started. There are regular, minuted meetings with subcontractors. Staff are clear about their job roles and there are effective lines of responsibility. A member of staff is responsible for liaising with employers and developing and co-ordinating the contract. Communication with employers is regular and effective. Equality of opportunity is effectively promoted and monitored through learners' progress reviews. The hairdressing self-assessment report is very long and identifies many strengths. It has not been sufficiently self-critical, however, in recognising key weaknesses.