

Mercia HR Management Limited

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 53304

Name of lead inspector: Derrick Spragg

Last day of inspection: 30 September 2010

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

Address: 55 Waterloo Road
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Information about the provider

1. Mercia HR Management Limited (Mercia) is a private training provider founded in 1982 based in Wolverhampton city centre. Mercia holds contracts with the Skills Funding Agency. Government funding accounts for 70% of Mercia's income. Mercia provides advanced apprenticeships and apprenticeships in engineering, administration, customer service, management, learning and development, information and communications technology and programme led apprenticeships in engineering technology. Mercia provides Train To Gain programmes for the Black Country Training Group consortium which were not part of this inspection.
2. Mercia works with companies based in the West Midlands some of which have apprentices employed throughout England and Wales. At the time of the inspection, the provider had 95 engineering apprentices of which just over half were advanced apprentices and 15 administration learners of which three were advanced apprentices. The West Midlands has higher unemployment levels and a higher proportion of people from a minority ethnic group than the national average.
3. Mercia provides training on behalf of the following providers:
 - The Black Country Training Group
4. The following organisations provide training on behalf of Mercia:
 - Wolverhampton College
 - Telford College
 - Sutton Coldfield College
 - Stafford College
 - Dudley College
 - Burton College
 - Coleg Morganwg
 - Barnsley College
 - Bolton College
 - St Helens College
 - Motherwell College
 - Norwich College
 - Stourbridge College.

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
Employer provision: Apprenticeships	110 apprentices

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Grade 3
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	3
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	3
Safeguarding	3
Equality and diversity	3
Subject Areas	Grade
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	3

Overall effectiveness

5. The majority of apprentices achieve and are very positive about their training with Mercia. Advanced engineering apprentices progress to higher level qualifications. A very high proportion of business administration apprentices succeed, achieve the apprenticeship framework and do very well. Engineering apprentices succeed at a good rate and advanced apprentices at a satisfactory rate. The quality of training at work for all engineering apprentices is good and they are well supported. Learners gain skills and develop confidence. Learners say they feel safe.
6. The staff are good, they really care about what they do and want apprentices to succeed. They work very well with the companies they use for apprenticeship training and make sure that safety and welfare are given a high priority. Equality and diversity is promoted. Apprentices and employers get involved in planning and improving the provision and contribute to the annual self assessment process.

Main findings

- The majority of apprentices achieve and most of them make satisfactory or better progress. Success rates overall in business administration were outstanding in 2008/09. Success rates for engineering overall are satisfactory and good for apprentices. Success rates for advanced apprentices in engineering were low but are now satisfactory.
- Apprentices attain good skills and understanding. Engineering apprentices gain qualifications at a higher level than required by the framework. They feel safe. They demonstrate a good understanding of health and safety in the workplace.
- Training and assessment are good. Apprentices benefit from good on-the-job training. Assessment practice is good. Assessment is planned and carried out well in the workplace. Most learners' work is of a high standard with good supporting evidence.
- Apprentices receive constructive feedback on their progress. However, in some cases the short-term learning objectives set at reviews are not sufficiently detailed or challenging.
- Mercia meets the needs and interests of apprentices and employers very well. Apprentices are visited regularly by Mercia staff and programmes are planned flexibly to meet their needs.
- Mercia staff work particularly effectively in partnership with employers to plan and provide programmes that match the company requirements and meet apprentices' needs.
- Support for apprentices is good. Mercia staff provide effective advice and guidance during the programme.
- Managers provide effective leadership at a time of significant change in the management of the organisation. Staff are appropriately experienced and trained with a good approach to continuous professional development. Demanding targets are set although the management process for this has only recently been introduced.
- Safeguarding is satisfactory. Learners' health, welfare and safety are prioritised. Learners feel safe and arrangements to safeguard learners meet current requirements. Further work is required to fully embed enhanced safeguarding arrangements with employers and apprentices.
- Promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Internal arrangements for the promotion of equality and diversity are effective. External promotion has been less effective in attracting a diverse group of apprentices that reflects the local population.
- Mercia has implemented a satisfactory approach to involving apprentices and employers in planning and improving the provision.
- Mercia's self-assessment arrangements are satisfactory overall. The process involves staff, learners and employers appropriately. Some aspects of planning for improvements have lacked rigour and a few planned actions such as implementing interim internal verification have not yet taken place. Mercia provides satisfactory value for money.

What does Mercia need to do to improve further?

- Increase the number of advanced engineering apprentices who succeed and complete by more thorough attention to retaining learners on the programme.
- Adopt a more rigorous approach to improvement planning by prioritising actions and thoroughly evaluating their impact.
- Strengthen the leadership and management process for setting demanding targets by using external benchmarks and by carrying out thorough management review and evaluation. Improve the way short-term learning objectives are set at reviews for engineering apprentices by making them more detailed and challenging where appropriate.
- Improve the rigour of interim internal verification in engineering programmes by sampling more thoroughly assessment decisions and by observing the assessment process regularly.
- Implement effective promotional activities to attract a more diverse group of apprentices that reflect the local population.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- that Mercia found me the job
- that Mercia staff are flexible and always ready to help me
- the very good support from the staff
- the enjoyable visits by staff that make it easy for me to plan my work
- the good planning that suits my work arrangements.

What learners would like to see improved:

- no comments received.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the good initial guidance in setting up programmes
- the effective relationship with Mercia staff
- being kept up to date with the apprentice's progress
- effective skills training
- the high standards set
- the good results achieved by apprentices
- good understanding of our needs and expectations
- that employers' staff respect Mercia's professionalism.

What employers would like to see improved:

- no comments received

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement Grade 3

7. Mercia has partially met the areas for improvement noted in the last inspection report published 2006. Overall success rates have improved and, in business administration, they are significantly higher than at the time of the last inspection. In engineering success rates were low for two years after the last inspection but have now improved and are currently higher than in 2006. Mercia has not yet achieved greater effectiveness in its equality of opportunity strategies and this remains an area for improvement.
8. Self assessment is satisfactory overall although some aspects are not sufficiently rigorous or prioritised effectively. Staff, learners and employers are involved in the process effectively. Some difficulties in the past with producing accurate data for the self assessment report against which to judge programme performance and identify improvement priorities have been resolved recently.

Outcomes for learners Grade 3

9. The majority of apprentices achieve and most make satisfactory progress. Success rates for learners in business administration were outstanding in 2008/09 when 90% of the learners were successful in achieving the full framework. Engineering apprentices succeed at a good rate, currently at 85%. Success rates for advanced apprentices in engineering have been low but at the 2010/11 year end are satisfactory at 70% based on the most recent Skills Funding Agency data reports.
10. Apprentices gain good work-related technical skills and develop their occupational knowledge effectively. Engineering apprentices take the opportunities available to progress to higher-level qualifications. They improve their economic and social well being making good progress at work.
11. Apprentices feel safe at work and when training off-the-job. Health and safety is promoted through all stages of their programme and is regularly re-enforced. All apprentices seen during the inspection were wearing correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) , were working in a safe manner and demonstrated a good understanding of health and safety in the workplace. Employers standards of health and safety are good. Apprentices feel well protected from bullying and harassment and develop an understanding of stereotyping and discrimination in the context of their work and learning.

The quality of provision Grade 2

12. The quality of provision is good in engineering. Training and learning are good. Apprentices benefit from good on-the-job training. Some companies support

the apprentices with a particularly well planned and enriched training programme at work. In other companies apprentices work with an experienced and well qualified engineer as a mentor, learning skills under their guidance. Assessment practice is good. Good use is made of workplace assessment with frequent, well planned visits by Mercia staff to observe apprentices at work. Apprentices evidence is well presented and of a good standard. Mercia staff maintain good up to date records showing apprentices' progress. Apprentices have a good awareness of their progress and what they need to do to achieve. The regular reviews of progress are good overall. However, learners are not always sufficiently encouraged to complete units early, and some of the short term learning objectives set at review are not specific enough or demanding.

13. Mercia meets the needs and interests of apprentices and employers very well. The pace of training at work and the content of the programme responds well to the individual's needs and to those of the employer. Individual programmes are skillfully planned and employers contribute effectively to planning and reviewing. Mercia staff work effectively with employers and apprentices through recruitment and selection. Employers are fully involved in the work-based elements of the framework and take a keen interest in the apprentice's development. Arrangements for training and assessment are flexible to suit both the apprentices' and employers' needs.
14. Partnerships with employers are good. Mercia has sustained good training partnerships with many employers over a considerable period of time. Apprentices benefit from the particularly strong and productive relationships Mercia staff have developed with employers. The employers have a high regard for the work done by Mercia. They particularly value the good response made by Mercia to their needs and the contribution made to their company's development. Employers contribute well to reviews working alongside Mercia staff and to forward planning of training. Senior managers in companies speak highly of the way Mercia staff are respected by their employees for their professionalism.
15. Care, guidance and support for apprentices are good. All apprentices receive a thorough initial assessment. Apprentices receive highly individualised personal advice, guidance and support with their programme. They are encouraged to contact their assessor for support when they require it including outside normal working hours. Assessment and guidance visits are very frequent and regular. When needed, visits are modified to suit shift patterns.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

16. Leadership and management overall are satisfactory. Managers and staff are strongly committed to apprenticeship training and acting in the interests of the apprentice. They are clear about their roles and responsibilities and work effectively together to improve the provision. They are appropriately experienced and trained with a good approach towards continuous professional development. Managers are providing effective leadership during a period of

significant change for the organisation. Mercia's contract for Train to Gain is effectively managed and learners achieve at a good rate. Operational planning is satisfactory. Measurable objectives for work based learning have not been clearly specified or prioritised in the past although this was in the process of being rectified at the time of the inspection.

17. Mercia's arrangements for safeguarding young people are satisfactory. Appropriate policies and procedures cover apprentices, staff, employers and subcontractors. Staff review welfare and wellbeing through regular conversations with individual apprentices at work and during training sessions. A designated member of staff leads on safeguarding and relevant staff have been trained and have a sound appreciation of what is required of them. Staff who have regular contact with young people have undergone CRB checks. The enhanced approach to safeguarding that Mercia has introduced is not yet fully embedded with employers and apprentices.
18. Equality and diversity are satisfactory. Promotion of equality and diversity with apprentices is effective through induction training and regular reviews with learners. Employers' practices and their awareness of equality and diversity are checked regularly. Mercia has established monitoring arrangements and there are no significant gaps in performance between different groups. The proportion of apprentices from minority ethnic groups involved in Mercia apprenticeship training is lower than the local population. The management strategy for the external promotion of equality and diversity is underdeveloped. Access to the main centre for people with mobility problems is unsatisfactory.
19. Mercia's engagement with apprentices and employers to support improvement is satisfactory. Managers have implemented a satisfactory approach to developing the way in which staff, apprentices and employers engage in planning and improving the provision. Apprentices and employers provide regular feedback.
20. Mercia's overall approach to self assessment is satisfactory. Staff are involved in all stages and the judgements are based on the common inspection framework. Past difficulties with management information have been overcome and performance monitoring and review are satisfactory. The process of improvement planning, including interim internal verification and observations of training in engineering, lacks rigour. A revised and improved quality management system is operating but it is too early to judge the full impact of this.
21. Mercia provides satisfactory value for money. Many employers provide good resources for on-the-job training. Resources in the main centre are fit for purpose. Staff are qualified and experienced for their roles. Expertise and training resources within Mercia's commercial provision, including a range of management, health and safety and engineering training resources, support apprenticeship training programmes.

Information about the inspection

22. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the Mercia's work based learning manager, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, the previous inspection report, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
23. Inspectors visited workplaces and used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)
Mercia HR Management Limited

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners		
Full-time learners	115	115
Part-time learners	0	0
Overall effectiveness	3	3
Capacity to improve	3	
Outcomes for learners	3	3
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3	
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3	
How well do learners progress?	3	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	3	
How safe do learners feel?	2	
Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	n/a	
How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	n/a	
Quality of provision	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
Leadership and management	3	3
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	3	
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	3	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	3	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	3	

*where applicable to the type of provision

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