

Alliance Learning



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Assessment Information

Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met
Assessor's Name	John P G Smith
Visit Date	11 – 13 May 2021
Client ID	C14019
Assessment Reference	PN200791
Continuous Improvement Check Year 1 due by	17 May 2022
Continuous Improvement Check Year 2 due by	17 May 2023
Accreditation Review onsite visit to be conducted by	17 May 2024

Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives and Outcomes

Alliance Learning (Alliance), based in Horwich, Greater Manchester, is a company limited by guarantee and an exempt charity, offering a range of learning and training programmes. As at the last Assessment, the company holds a contract with the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) for Apprenticeship provision. Programmes delivered include Intermediate, Advanced and Higher Apprenticeships in Business Administration and Management, Customer Service, Childcare, and Engineering, although since the last Assessment Health and Social Care has been dropped from the offer. Other provision includes the renewed ESF funded contract to deliver the Skills Support for the Workforce (SSW) programme and a Study Programme in Engineering, as well as a range of Commercial provision in sector specific awards and non-accredited specialist staff development courses.

The Alliance vision is to “*continuously provide a high standard of delivery in teaching and learning to our learners and customers, with a strong focus on vocational, individual, and social value. Delivery will be inclusive, innovative, and inspiring to ensure they reach their full potential and provide a quality return on investment for employers*” and the Mission Statement to help achieve this vision continues to be “*Success through Learning*”.

The partnership with the University of Bolton, highlighted at the last Assessment, has since developed further, with Alliance now a wholly owned subsidiary of the University of Bolton Group (UBG), that also includes the local FE College and another service provider, and this has facilitated an excellent opportunity to develop with partners a range of progression options for learners, as well as to maximise use of resources and avoid duplication of provision.

The company is run by the Chief Executive (CEO), who reports to the Board, comprising voluntary members who are senior managers from companies operating in the sectors covered by Alliance provision; membership has also been strengthened by the recruitment of additional expertise in legal and educational areas that have improved the role of the Board in stretching and challenging, driving improvements across all aspects of the business and ensuring legal compliance.

Since the last Assessment, Alliance has undergone a restructuring, driven by the impact of the pandemic, which has necessitated some redundancies and a merger of some roles and responsibilities, including a new tier of ‘middle managers’, to drive increased efficiency, provide support to managers and facilitate communication, and to support succession planning. The CEO is now supported by a small Senior Management Team (SMT) and a slightly larger Management Team, who are responsible in turn for teams of Marketing/Business Development staff, Quality Assurance and Compliance, and Programme delivery staff (Senior Subject Specialist Tutors/Subject Specialist Tutors).

Alliance continues to promote provision, including the embedded Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), through a diverse range of approaches, including staff attendance at school assemblies, careers and jobs fairs, and holding open days for prospective learners and their parents. During the pandemic promotion switched to on-line approaches where appropriate and possible, although because of the impact of the virus on many employers, and thus vacancies, promotion required was minimal.

Additional approaches include relationship management and ongoing engagement, including training needs analyses, with the large and loyal network of local employers, which provides a source of repeat business, while the Alliance website contains comprehensive details of provision and support on offer, and Alliance makes copious use of social media to promote services.

Strong links to key local and regional employer and training provider networks, including UBG, Team Bolton, the Bolton and Bury Work Based Learning Partnership, Chambers of Commerce, and the Greater Manchester Learning Providers Network, provide additional opportunities to promote the Alliance offer.

IAG continues to be integral to ('threaded through') all provision. People expressing interest in an Apprenticeship can make an initial enquiry on-line or by telephone, and staff provide a brief description of programmes on offer, referring if appropriate, to a subject specialist tutor for further details, or to other providers when the provision is not in the Alliance curriculum. If the enquirer wishes to proceed, they are invited to an initial interview to determine whether the programme is right for them; the process begins with a generic overview of Apprenticeships, what they involve, respective roles and responsibilities and so on, followed by an in-depth exploration of the specific programme. A key feature is the emphasis on the future, post-programme and the session includes details of the range of professions and careers that the programme could lead to, and their salaries, along with the potential routes to achievement.

If the programme is the right fit, they progress to Stage 1 IAG. Applicants review previous achievements and experience, immediate and longer-term goals, undertake a BKSB skillscan to determine level of study and any additional support needs, and where employers have specified minimum GCSE grades, these are checked. A development since the last Assessment has been the introduction of CognAssist, an IT tool that determines in detail the individual learning style and enables appropriate techniques to be applied on a highly individualised basis. Applicants are supported where necessary with coaching on interview skills and CV writing; as at the last Assessment, Alliance operate a recruitment service for employers, and learners are selected for and referred to an appropriate vacancy for interview.

Once matched to a vacancy learners progress to induction, when they meet their subject specialist tutor and the employer, and the specific job role is explained, along with the off-the-job learning requirement; roles and responsibilities are confirmed, and they go on to develop an Individual Learning Plan (ILP), with a schedule and milestones, based on the identified individual needs, along with any bespoke requirements of the employer. They also complete a Scorecard of their self-assessed 'soft' outcomes, with any additional help required to develop them incorporated into the ILP. Programmes include day-release teaching sessions as well as on-the job training, and progress is reviewed regularly, and the ILP adjusted where necessary to meet any additional support needs identified.

Throughout the programme learners are prepared for the End Point Assessment (EPA), and supported in any other ways they may need. They are encouraged always to think about their next steps and ultimate goals, and at the end of the programme an exit session seeks to ensure they have a positive progression plan for their next and subsequent steps.

During the pandemic, the majority of these IAG and teaching and learning processes transferred to on-line format, with all staff pitching in to ensure a speedy process.

Learner outcomes are defined as a range of soft skills and personal development, including improved confidence, team-work, communication, and personal well-being. Achievement is measured through the Scorecard approach referred to, which determines a baseline from which to track improvements, via the review process described, when learners update their scores to demonstrate progress. Programmes include inbuilt personal development units or modules, thus ensuring that all successful achievers have improved in these areas.

Learners commented on the ways in which programmes had helped them to develop these personal strengths: *“Much more confident”*; *“Made me see what I’m capable of”*; *“A better understanding of my role”*; *“It confirmed that I could do the job”*; *“I’ve grown massively”*; *“Come a long way on my personal skills development”*; *“I have a clear idea of what career I want, and I have a route”*.

The aims and objectives of the service are founded on the Alliance mission – *“IAG is at the heart of the service Alliance Learning provides to ensure that customers receive good quality training with outcomes to help them progress in their careers, raise learner aspirations and provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary to be able to make a positive contribution to their communities and society as a whole”*. They link directly to the Alliance mission and wider strategic aims and objectives, targets and KPIs, and include to provide information on future learning and labour market opportunities, support the development of employability skills and the social development of learners, improve, develop and sustain economic mobility, signpost and refer learners where appropriate, and link learning to careers advice and guidance, to meet learner needs and the demands of employers.

The extent to which these are achieved is measured in numerous ways. Bi-monthly Board meetings, informed by detailed reports and statistics provided by the CEO, explore every aspect of performance against aims, objectives and targets, often ‘deep diving’ into a particular trend, and provide ongoing challenges and quality reviews, and guidance on governance.

Formal SMT meetings take place bi-weekly, carrying out a similarly rigorous examination of performance, budget, issues potentially impacting, and identifying areas for development. These meetings are in turn informed by weekly staff team meetings which review team and individual performance against targets, and highlight any at risk learners or other factors to be addressed. A notable feature of these meetings is that they are also attended by members of other teams, to receive and pass on relevant information and to ensure coherence in delivery.

In addition to these formal meetings staff get together frequently, to catch up and identify any matters that need immediate attention and resolution. All of these forums, informed by highly detailed statistical data from OneFile, as well as regular full staff briefings, ensure all are fully up to date with the position, and are able to address issues that are impacting on success; as mentioned, communication around Alliance involving all staff, is comprehensive so that all are aware of the position.

Review of performance reports highlights overall achievement rates at 80% against target of 80% and timely achievements at 79.07% against target of 78% (pre-pandemic), highlighting the effectiveness of the service in driving success. Destination data is also positive: of leavers surveyed, 100% are employed, and 72% are still employed with the same company with which they did their apprenticeship (10% are in a different role, but with the same company). Of the 28% who are not, they are employed elsewhere, but in the same profession/sector. 6% of leavers are also enrolled on higher education courses, 18% have secured pay-rises and 12% have secured promotions. These figures demonstrate the effectiveness of the service in achieving its aims and objectives.

All staff are involved in the planning, review and quality improvement approaches, which, along with the processes described include the development of the Annual Strategic Plan; this is informed by feedback from staff, employers, and via links to the networks mentioned.

The process employs comprehensive Labour Market Information on current and future skills needs and potential markets for Alliance locally and in the wider region, with programmes planned in line with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Industrial Strategy.

The Business Plan is similarly constructed, with each team consulted extensively as to capacity, resource and skills needs. A recently introduced feature has been the validation process in which teams assess the extent to which programmes will support wider objectives and strategies, and respond to changes in demand.

The Self Assessment Review (SAR) and resulting Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) are similarly constructed at team level, with each team carrying out a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) of its own offering and resources, and developing improvements or adjustments accordingly, setting designated responsibility and targets for completion; these feed into the whole company plan, which is reviewed in the ways described. Staff also commented on how they were always encouraged to question, and propose ideas for improvement outside of these formal arrangements.

Staff performance is monitored through the statistical analyses mentioned, along with regular supervisions and one to ones with line managers, and observation of teaching and learning, all of which help to identify any development needs or wishes; throughout the Review staff referred to the wide range of CPD they had attended. A new approach, the staff buddying system, helps to transfer good practice in techniques and sector specific knowledge between staff. The restructuring described above has meant that staff have taken on additional responsibilities, with accompanying CPD to support them, to the extent that all are able to support colleagues, either during absence or at peak pressure times.

Internal quality assurance continues to ensure programmes are delivered to awarding body standards and that staff are adhering to required processes, while standardisations ensure all are delivering consistently and help to develop approaches for accommodating any changes required. External compliance audits from ESFA, regular reporting on recruitment and learner progress, and close contract scrutiny by the Board and SMT, ensure the company is meeting its obligations contractually.

Feedback from learners and employers, as well as staff, is actively sought, through formal surveys and at learner progress reviews or in classroom sessions, and this, along with staff suggestions, is evaluated and implemented as appropriate.

Improvements implemented through these approaches include the rescheduling of learner review frequency (less often, more effective); review of the Scorecard process; migration to web-based accounting; purchase of software and platforms to support on-line delivery of teaching; migration of paper-based materials to on-line format; running a replacement learner survey following the withdrawal of EFSA; new presentations for the initial interview and Stage 1 IAG; creation of school leaver promotion weeks for young people with no knowledge or experience of the sectors covered by Alliance provision; siting a stand promoting commercial provision at parents' evenings; and streamlined links between social media and the website.

Improvements resulting from feedback include the development of bespoke modules for employers' specific skills needs; investigating the quality of a company to facilitate learners' job change; additional WhatsApp one to one sessions; development of sessions to prepare for EPA; referral to a range of websites for further information; additional sessions to underpin understanding of particular techniques and processes; provision of IT kit for learners to facilitate on-line learning; provision of adjustments for learners with particular needs; introduction of Friday dress down; and additional staff training on internal systems.

Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment, which are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criterion of the **matrix** Standard.

- Alliance benefits from highly effective leadership and management, that provides a clear strategic direction and purpose, is fully inclusive of staff, whose contribution to planning and review is encouraged, and promotes transparency and frequent communication around the organisation so that all are aware of the position, and buy in to the aims and objectives of the service. (1.2)
- This includes an astute recruitment and succession planning approach which ensures that only people who share Alliance values are taken on; staff are fully committed to the mission, and to learner progress and well-being, and are highly flexible and adaptable, and the Review highlighted a strong teamwork ethos. Staff are encouraged to develop, and have ready access to CPD, and there were numerous examples of training and development undertaken by staff at all levels, of long-term staff members, and of staff progression from junior to management roles. (2.3, 2.4)
- Alliance continues to provide highly effective, personalised and ‘threaded through’ IAG to all learners, that focuses on their immediate needs as well as their future careers direction, that ensures they enrol on to the right programme, remain committed to it, and are helped to overcome barriers to their attendance and successful completion. The IAG supports the development of learners’ professional knowledge and skills, as well as their personal development and aspirations, and facilitates progression and positive destinations post-programme, as demonstrated by the positive achievement statistics. (1.1, 3.2)
- As at the last Assessment, Alliance has in place some robust and effective quality assurance and improvement mechanisms, in which everyone is involved, and throughout the Review staff repeatedly commented on how they were always looking for, and encouraged to implement, improvements. Learners, too, mentioned how responsive staff were to their feedback, and the Review highlighted numerous examples of improvements and innovations put in place. (1.7, 4.3, 4.5)
- Alliance makes effective use of technology to support the business, with a wide range of applications and platforms in place that facilitate communication and progress monitoring, aid quality assurance, and enhance the provision of IAG and teaching and learning. (4.7)
- Networking and partnership are a key strength of Alliance; its membership of the University of Bolton Group and of a range of professional and sectoral networks provides access to labour market intelligence on current and future skills needs, helping to shape provision; helps provide progression routes for learners; offers access to the sharing of ideas and good practice to support improvements; and reduces duplication of provision and increases effective use of resources to deliver local and regional skills needs. (1.8)

Areas for Development

Areas for development are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and a way for an Assessor to add value e.g. where the service is of a high quality, development areas are offered to help the service be even better than it already is, or to give insight into practices seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and areas for development. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice and guidance service is in any way lacking. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty-four months from the date of this Assessment, along with any other notable developments. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criterion of the **matrix** Standard.

- The IAG Policy sets out clearly the aims, objectives and intended outcomes of the IAG on offer and how it will be delivered at each stage of the learner journey. Alliance may wish to consider adding to the policy that services are accredited to the **matrix** Standard, thus demonstrating their high quality, that is externally validated. (1.1)
- The Alliance website contains detailed and comprehensive information about programmes and courses available, and it may wish to consider supplementing this with a more detailed description of the threaded through IAG that is integral to each offering, thus highlighting to prospective learners and employers the high levels of support in place. (1.6)

The annual **matrix** Continuous Improvement Check will allow the organisation to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the developments they are continuing to make in order to support individuals. These may include the Areas for Development above. <https://matrixstandard.com/assessment-journey/continuous-improvement-checks/>

Please note that annual Continuous Improvement Checks are mandatory and non-completion within the required timescale will impact on your organisation's accreditation, please see the section Assessment Information for dates.

Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process.

MS Teams interviews with the Chief Executive, four senior managers, four managers, 24 members of staff and 20 learners

Telephone interviews with a Board Member, three partners, one client and one manager

Review of key documentation, including the Business Plan, SAR/QIP, various quality manuals and policies, learner documentation, performance reports and statistics; and the Alliance website

Feedback was provided to the Chief Executive and the Apprenticeships and Quality Manager at the end of each day, and to the Chief Executive and the Senior Management Team at the end of the Review

Conditions of Accreditation

Holders of the **matrix** Standard Accreditation must:

1. Maintain and continually improve upon their services.
2. Throughout the period of accreditation satisfy The Growth Company that the organisation continues to meet the requirements of the **matrix** Standard via the annual continuous improvement checks and the three-year accreditation review.
3. Complete annual continuous improvement checks in a timely way, it is expected these will be carried out annually by the accreditation anniversary date.
4. Inform The Growth Company or their Assessor if the key contact name/contact details change.
5. Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the **matrix** Standard at least 3 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 3 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.
6. Inform The Growth Company of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email: matrixStandard@growthco.uk.
7. Inform The Growth Company immediately if they wish to extend or reduce the scope of their accreditation.
8. Inform The Growth Company of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received (within the scope of the accreditation).
9. Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause The Growth Company and/or the **matrix** Standard to be brought into disrepute.
10. Only use the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines. For example, if a certain department is successfully **matrix** accredited, the Quality Mark can only be used on that department's letterhead or on that department's page on their internet homepage.
11. Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for accreditation review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by The Growth Company and do not display the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark nor refer to be a former holder of the **matrix** Standard.
12. Be aware that The Growth Company reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.