

External review of Modern Apprenticeship delivery by Ayrshire College

A report by HM Inspectors

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CEO/Principal	Angela Cox
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Provider type	College of Further and Higher Education
Lead HMI	Peter B Connolly
Apprentice Numbers	686

1. Background

External inspections of Modern Apprenticeship (MA) providers are planned collaboratively between the provider and HM Inspectors. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) provides information regarding provider performance, including key data to support this process.

During the inspection, a team of HM Inspectors evaluated the quality of training provision and the experiences of apprentices and key stakeholders, including employers. During the visit, the team met with staff, apprentices, employers and other stakeholders and explored the quality of training delivery; how well the needs of apprentices are being met; and approaches to improve the quality of provision.

This report summarises the findings from the inspection, highlighting areas of positive practice and areas for development. The provider receives grades for three elements: leadership and management; quality of delivery, and progress and outcomes. The report also contains any main points for action identified by HM Inspectors. The report will be shared with the provider, Scottish Government and SDS. For colleges, the report will also be shared with the Scottish Funding Council and the college Board of Management. A final summary report will be published on HMIE's website.

2. The provider and its context

Ayrshire College is a large regional college operating from three campuses in Ayr, Kilmarnock and Kilwinning. The college provides education, skills development, and training for learners across the Ayrshire region. The college delivers programmes at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 1-8, including a range of Foundation and Modern Apprenticeships, and bespoke delivery for businesses.

Ayrshire College enrolls approximately 13,000 learners annually and employs over 800 staff. The college works with three local authorities; East Ayrshire, North Ayrshire and South Ayrshire.

Ayrshire College delivers MA provision to approximately 1300 apprentices, 686 of which are contracted directly by the college. Apprenticeship delivery for the remaining majority is sub-contracted to the college on behalf of other contract holders.

Within the college's direct SDS contract, around 70% of apprentices undertake an MA programme

within the Engineering sector, with approximately 12% of apprentices in Construction, 10% in Automotive, and 3% in Plumbing and Heating. For approximately 10% of MA provision, the college delivers programmes in shorter frameworks, including Hairdressing, Regulatory Services, Hospitality, Health & Social Care and Sport.

3. Outcome of external review

The grades for each of the three elements are:

Leadership and Management	Good
Delivery of Training	Satisfactory
Progress and Outcomes	Satisfactory

4. Summary of review findings

A summary of the findings of HM Inspectors are set out below.

Element 1: Leadership and Management – Good

Q1 9.1 Influential vision, values and aims

Areas of positive progress

- The college leadership team has established a clear vision to be the partner of choice for skills and apprenticeship provision in the Ayrshire region. The majority of employers state the college is their first choice for skills training.
- The Board and the senior team have a strong focus on achieving their strategic ambitions which include growing provision in sectors economically important to the region.
- The college's Employer Engagement Strategy (2024-2027) and the Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Strategy (2024-2027) provide a solid foundation for partnership activity. This includes recruitment targets for working with partners to deliver high-quality apprenticeship programmes.
- Senior team members ensure provision is closely aligned to national, regional, and local apprenticeship policy drivers, and the college is widely recognised as a leader in shaping the skills agenda within the region.
- College managers play a key role in a range of skills partnerships, anticipating and shaping training provision to meet the skills needs of employers. For example, through the use of an aircraft hangar on the grounds of an international airport and utilisation of different aircraft types to provide training for aerospace apprentices and employers.

Areas for development

- None identified.

QI9.4 Leadership for innovation and change

Areas of positive progress

- Senior college staff lead the Ayrshire Skills Group and have been influential in the development of an “*Ambitious Ayrshire*” skills strategy which includes consultation with businesses to deliver a stronger economic foundation in the region.
- Growth in MA provision is supporting achievement of the targets set out in the college’s strategic ambitions. For example, the college has developed innovative apprenticeship programmes to meet new demand in wind turbine provision and regulatory services.
- Strong relationships with employers support provision for a wide range of partners, many of whom use the college exclusively for their apprenticeship training. For example, aerospace sector employers acknowledge the responsiveness of the college to meet their changing workplace requirements in the aerospace sector.
- College staff promote apprenticeship programmes well with local schools. Performing engineering operations has been incorporated into a pre-apprenticeship programme for school-college partnership delivery to help learners prepare for employment.

Areas for development

- A few employers believe that college staff are slow to respond and communicate with them to address their concerns, for example, concerning assessment and the planning of work placements. These employers state they have limited opportunities to have direct influence on programme content.
- Meetings between employers and work-based delivery staff take place regularly. However, the subsequent sharing of information with college curriculum staff is limited. This reduces opportunities for effective collaboration and hampers the capacity of staff to evaluate provision and drive improvement.

QI9.5 Securing improvement of quality and impact of training

Areas of positive progress

- Employer and apprentice satisfaction levels are high with apprenticeship programmes.
- College managers have introduced a range of initiatives to improve their provision, including a Learning and Teaching Academy and establishing peer review arrangements. However, these are at an early stage of development, and it is too early to measure their impact.

- The majority of staff plan their activities effectively.

Areas for development

- There is insufficient focus on the delivery and progression of meta skills in apprenticeship programmes.
- A minority of staff, apprentices and employers are not involved consistently in planning for improvements for MA programmes.
- A few lecturing staff do not plan lessons sufficiently well or share learning intentions with apprentices.
- Heads of Learning and Skills are not sufficiently aware of college-wide SDS apprenticeship outcomes or apprenticeship achievement rates across curricular areas.
- A few employers and apprentices are not sufficiently aware of the mechanisms for providing feedback on their experiences out with planned quarterly reviews.

Element 2 Delivery of training – Satisfactory

QI 5.1 Design and deliver of training

Areas of positive progress

- Apprentices have access to a wide range of high-quality resources to support the delivery of their programmes. Industry standard resources such as access to an international airport and aircraft demonstrate a strong commitment to the delivery of relevant technical skills.
- Apprentices make productive use of a good range of online and digital platforms. These ensure that they have good access to learning resources for self-directed study and revision opportunities.
- Direct progression routes from pre-apprenticeship programmes support apprentices and employers to develop appropriate attitudes and behaviours and obtain relevant underpinning knowledge that enhances the quality of the learning experience.
- Almost all staff confidently demonstrate their subject knowledge when delivering apprenticeship programmes.
- Apprentices work collaboratively together during workshop activities. Most apprentices engage enthusiastically and are motivated to study whilst at college.
- Most lessons are planned effectively. This helps ensure apprentices make good progress and feel well supported.
- In a few curricular areas, apprentices make good use of opportunities to accelerate their on-campus learning through flexible start dates or module style delivery.

Areas for development

- The development of meta skills is not embedded consistently by delivery staff in all apprenticeship training activities. Progress made by apprentices in meta skills development is not tracked effectively.
- College staff comply with SDS framework requirements in relation to the duration of programmes and have limited scope to extend or reduce timescales. As a result, apprentices feel that opportunities to accelerate their learning are limited and that this impacts their ability to complete their programme more timeously.
- Approaches to recording apprenticeship progress are inconsistent and differ across curriculum teams. Apprentices can readily access their progression records online in particular areas, whilst for others, records are entirely paper-based and not readily accessible by apprentices or their employers.
- Almost half of all apprenticeship lessons observed were disrupted due to the late coming of either apprentices or staff at the start of the session, class cancellations at short notice, and long or extended break times.

QI 5.4 Effectiveness of training

Areas of positive progress

- Most teaching staff are experienced in their subject area, demonstrate good breadth of knowledge of their curriculum and use relevant industry examples to deepen and enhance apprentices' levels of understanding.
- All engineering assessors confidently demonstrate to learners the links between skills, knowledge and work-based tasks.
- In a few programmes, apprentices make good use of a selection of meta skills, related to their work roles. This enhances their understanding of the tasks they are completing and allows them to reflect on the progress they are making.

Areas for development

- A number of apprentices highlight that the subject material they study during their college programme does not link sufficiently well to their job roles.
- A few apprentices find theory-based subjects overly prescriptive and learning episodes too passive.
- In a few programmes, apprentice's understanding is compromised during pre-assessment activities by the overuse of passive learning and teaching methods.

QI 8.1 Reflection on provision to improve training

Areas of positive progress

- Most employers work well with college staff to reflect on and improve apprenticeship learning whilst attending college. For example, one organisation's training staff worked with the college to introduce a more relevant MA programme in process manufacturing.
- Most learners are aware of campus-based support service provision. They disclose their own additional support needs (ASN) on enrolment and access college services where required.
- There are positive relationships between apprentices, their assessors and their tutors.

Areas for development

- Apprentices do not systematically receive an induction to the college. This diminishes the early college experience for those who do not receive an induction.
- Apprentices routinely disclose any additional support needs to their employers. However, too often this information is not communicated directly to delivery staff and work-based assessors. As a result, staff are not sufficiently aware of individual support needs and are hindered in meeting the additional needs of apprentices timeously.

Element 3 Progress and Outcomes – Satisfactory

QI 1.1 Achieving and maintaining high levels of service delivery

Areas of positive progress

- The overall rates of apprenticeship achievement in one large curriculum area have been consistently high in the previous three years.
- In specific curriculum areas, a few apprentices are confident in identifying appropriate meta skills and their relevance to the workplace.
- A few apprentices are successful in national competitions. For example, an Ayrshire College aerospace apprentice won the Scottish Apprentice of the Year Award in 2024. A construction apprentice was runner-up in the national Skillbuild competition the following year.
- Recruitment of female apprentices to apprenticeship programmes has improved slightly in the last year.
- College staff provide helpful support to those apprentices who leave their programmes early due to redundancy. This enables them to quickly find new employment or progress to alternative apprenticeship provision.

Areas for development

- Overall rates of apprenticeship achievement have been below the national average for the last three years and are not improving.
- Rates of achievement in a few specific frameworks have been consistently low for the last three years and are declining.

Q12.1 Apprentice progress and achievement of individual outcomes

Areas of positive progress

- College staff track apprentice progression well and can confirm that almost all apprentices who attain their MA qualification continue their employment.
- Most employers are satisfied with the progress of their apprentices and confirm the skills they are learning are relevant to the workplace.
- A few apprentices are aware of progression opportunities to higher levels of study related to their employment. College staff provide opportunities for the recognition of apprentices' prior learning to support access to professional awards.
- Plumbing apprentices are supported to select relevant subjects based on their experiences and feedback provided from the previous year's programme. This supports their needs and the needs of their employers to make their learning relevant to their work context.

Areas for development

- None identified.

5. Main points for action

The following main points for action are identified:

- College managers should embed strategies to improve rates of apprenticeship achievement where they are low.
- College staff should be supported to ensure that arrangements to reflect upon the quality of apprenticeship delivery and outcomes are implemented consistently to support improvement.
- College managers should ensure that all apprentices and staff adhere to agreed class start times, and break times to reduce disruption to lessons.
- College managers should ensure that all apprentices receive a consistent, high-quality induction to their programme.
- Work-based assessors and tutors should be encouraged to work more collaboratively to

enhance apprentices' understanding of their skills development in both on-the-job and off-the-job contexts and enhance the quality of their MA experience.

6. Examples of highly effective practice

- The high-quality level of resources available to aerospace apprentices and the relationships with aeronautical engineering employers.
- The provision of an MA programme in regulatory services.

7. What happens next?

HM Inspectors are confident that the college has the capacity to continue to improve and will make no further visits as a result of this inspection. The SDS Skills Investment Advisor will monitor the college's progress in addressing the issues identified within this report.

Peter BConnelly
HM Inspector

Appendix 1 Grades used in reporting

A common grading scale is used in making judgements for provider reviews:

- Grade 1 **EXCELLENT** – Outstanding and sector leading
- Grade 2 **VERY GOOD** – Major strengths
- Grade 3 **GOOD** – Important strengths with some areas for improvement
- Grade 4 **SATISFACTORY** – Strengths just outweigh weaknesses
- Grade 5 **WEAK** – Important weaknesses
- Grade 6 **UNSATISFACTORY** – Major weaknesses

Summary

- An evaluation of **excellent** applies to training which is of a very high quality. An evaluation of *excellent* represents an outstanding standard of training which exemplifies very best practice and is worth disseminating beyond the current provision. It implies that very high-levels of performance are sustainable and will be maintained.
- An evaluation of **very good** applies to training characterised by major strengths. There are very few areas for improvement and any that do exist do not significantly diminish apprentices' experiences. While an evaluation of *very good* represents a high standard of training, it is a standard that should be achievable by all. It implies that it is fully appropriate to continue to provide training without significant adjustment. However, there is an expectation that the provider will take opportunities to improve and strive to raise performance to excellent.
- An evaluation of **good** applies to training characterised by important strengths which, taken together, clearly outweigh any areas for improvement. An evaluation of *good* represents a standard of training in which the strengths have a significant positive impact. However, the quality of apprentices' experiences is diminished in some way by aspects in which improvement is required. It implies that the provider should seek to improve further the areas of important strength but take action to address the areas for improvement.
- An evaluation of **satisfactory** applies to training characterised by strengths which just outweigh weaknesses. An evaluation of *satisfactory* indicates that apprentices' have access to a basic level of training. It represents a standard where the strengths have a positive impact on apprentices' experiences. However, while the weaknesses will not be important enough to have a substantially adverse impact, they do constrain the overall quality of apprentices' experiences. It implies that the provider should take action to address areas of weakness while building on its strengths.
- An evaluation of **weak** applies to training which has some strengths, but where there are important weaknesses. In general, an evaluation of *weak* may be arrived at in a number of circumstances. While there may be some strengths, the important weaknesses will, either individually or collectively, be sufficient to diminish apprentices' experiences in substantial ways.

It implies the need for prompt, structured and planned action on the part of the provider

- An evaluation of **unsatisfactory** applies when there are major weaknesses in training, requiring immediate remedial action. The training experience for apprentices is at risk in significant respects. In almost all cases, staff responsible for training evaluated as unsatisfactory will require support from senior managers in planning and carrying out the necessary actions to effect improvement. This may involve working alongside other staff or agencies in or beyond the immediate support given by the provider.

Appendix 2 Evaluative Terms

The following standard HMIE terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.