HMIE | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

Modern Apprenticeships

Inspection findings for academic years 2023 to 2026

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Executive summary

The Modern Apprenticeship (MA) sector remains broadly strong. Employer engagement, apprentice support and workplace learning are effective across provider types.

Attainment is the main differentiator of provider performance, particularly in early education and childcare, older apprentice cohorts and large multi-campus colleges. Meta-skills are increasingly prominent, but embedding, tracking and evidencing their impact are not yet consistent across all providers. Quality assurance and self-evaluation need to move beyond process to demonstrate measurable improvement in apprentice outcomes.

Safeguarding practice is generally strong, but governance, assurance and oversight require further strengthening in complex delivery models. Participation and representation by gender, disability, care experience and ethnicity remain persistent national challenges and require sustained, measurable action.

Introduction

HM Inspectors (HMI) undertake regular inspections of all MA provider types. These include local authorities, employers, managing agents, colleges, universities and independent training providers. Inspections are planned collaboratively between the provider and HMI. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) provides information on provider performance, including relevant data, to support the process. HMI evaluate the quality of training provision and the experiences and outcomes of apprentices and stakeholders, including employers.

Inspection evidence over the last three years (2023 to 2026) highlights a number of clear messages.

The MA sector remains fundamentally strong. Inspectors continue to identify:

- highly effective employer engagement
- strong apprentice support
- relevant workplace learning
- positive progression outcomes across most provider types

However, attainment, quality assurance and self-evaluation for improvement, meta-skills development and evidence of impact remain challenges within the sector.

Across the evidence base, the strongest providers combine positive apprentice experiences with measurable impact. They demonstrate strong attainment, systematic quality improvement arrangements, effective performance management and clear evidence of sustained outcomes.

The national picture

The overall quality of apprenticeship provision remains strong. High-performing providers continue to achieve very positive evaluations across all elements.

Lower-performing providers are typically characterised by a combination of weaker attainment, less effective self-evaluation and inconsistent performance management. In these providers, experiences and outcomes for apprentices are diminished as a result.

The gap between the strongest and weakest providers is widening.

High-performing providers demonstrate:

- clear strategic alignment between apprenticeship delivery and workforce needs
- mature quality cultures
- robust self-evaluation
- strong outcomes
- effective use of digital technologies
- high levels of employer ownership

In contrast, lower performing providers may demonstrate similar strengths in apprentice support and employer engagement but do not consistently translate these into sustained attainment outcomes or measurable performance improvement.

Key messages

Attainment rates are the principal differentiator of performance

Apprenticeship attainment is an important factor shaping inspection outcomes nationally.

Attainment performance is a common factor in lower evaluations, particularly for large college providers and some independent training providers, and particularly for apprentices aged 20 and over.

Providers should not only deliver positive apprentice experiences but also demonstrate strong completion and attainment outcomes that lead to sustainable positive destinations. That said, in most cases, successful completion is leading to sustained employment.

A national priority is therefore to improve low attainment, completion and framework achievement rates, particularly for:

- early education and childcare provision
- older apprentice cohorts
- large multi-campus college providers
- some independent training providers

Meta skills are a major national improvement theme

The most prominent curriculum-related theme from inspection evidence is the development and embedding of meta skills.

Overall, providers support the recognition and recording of meta skills, but challenges remain in consistent embedding, tracking, apprentice understanding and evidence of impact.

There is a marked contrast between those providers where apprentices clearly understand and can articulate meta skills and those where apprentices and employers have limited awareness of them.

As a national priority, providers now need to move beyond introducing meta skills to embedding them, measuring their development and evidencing their impact systematically across all apprenticeship programmes.

Self-evaluation is moving from process to impact

Quality arrangements and approaches do not always lead to demonstrable improvement. Self-evaluation arrangements remain inconsistent across providers. This is often a result of a lack of staff reflection, professional dialogue and focused action planning for improvement.

Inspectors have repeatedly identified the need to strengthen approaches to self-evaluation, the use of performance data and the involvement of stakeholders in quality arrangements. Weak action planning for improvement and limited evaluation of improvement activity too often undermine providers' capacity to drive improvement.

The sector now needs to prioritise strengthening evidence-based self-evaluation, with clearer links between actions, performance measures and their impact on outcomes for apprentices.

Digital innovation is a defining feature of high performance

Technology-enhanced delivery is one of the strongest features of high-performing providers across the sector nationally. This is most often evidenced through the successful use of approaches such as:

- e-portfolios
- digital evidence gathering
- hybrid learning models
- sophisticated apprentice-tracking systems
- livestreamed workplace assessment

The highest-performing providers increasingly use digital systems not only for delivery but also to support quality assurance, apprentice engagement and performance monitoring.

The sector should aim to extend effective digital assessment and apprentice-tracking approaches more consistently across provision.

Apprentice support, wellbeing and safeguarding are strong overall

One of the most positive aspects seen by inspectors is providers' consistent support for apprentices' wellbeing and pastoral needs. Inspectors frequently identify strong mental health and wellbeing support, accessible pastoral care, positive assessor relationships and responsive safeguarding approaches. In highly performing providers, these arrangements are personalised, well understood by apprentices and embedded in day-to-day delivery. They contribute positively to apprentice confidence, engagement and progression.

However, safeguarding oversight remains a persistent challenge, particularly where subcontracted provision or large-scale delivery models are in operation. Inspection evidence shows that the sector needs to focus more on:

- safeguarding governance
- accountability
- employer awareness
- consistent oversight across delivery partners

An important national improvement priority is to strengthen safeguarding governance and assurance across all MA provision, with a particular focus on providers supporting apprentices aged under 18 and those operating across dispersed or complex delivery models. Providers must ensure that:

- safeguarding and child protection procedures are consistently understood and applied by staff, employers and partners
- risk assessments are robust for young apprentices who travel or stay away from home
- Prevent training and awareness are fully embedded

This should move safeguarding beyond compliance to a more systematic, evidence-based approach that demonstrates effective oversight, timely action and sustained protection for apprentices.

Equality, diversity and inclusion remain a challenge

Participation by and representation of apprentices with protected characteristics remain significant national challenges for the MA sector. Inspectors continue to identify concerns about imbalances in participation and representation among apprentices from a range of backgrounds, and about the impact of wider

equality strategies. While many providers have appropriate policies and strategies in place, inspectors often find that these do not yet lead to sufficient, demonstrable improvement.

Recurring and long-standing participation gaps include:

- women in science, engineering, technology and mathematics (STEM) frameworks
- men in childcare
- apprentices from minority ethnic backgrounds
- disabled apprentices
- apprentices from care-experienced backgrounds

The persistence of these issues suggests that equality, diversity and inclusion require sustained cross-sectoral strategic attention, with a stronger focus on measurable action and demonstrable impact.

Key messages by provider type

Employers

Employer providers perform strongly nationally. Their main strengths include:

- strong workforce planning
- apprentices being considered employees rather than a separate apprentice group
- high levels of organisational ownership
- direct links between training and business outcomes
- strong attainment and progression outcomes

The principal emerging challenge for employer providers is to sustain high performance, maintain strong attainment among younger apprentices and continue to widen participation.

Independent training providers

Independent training providers (ITPs) perform strongly overall.

Their strengths include:

- strong employer relationships
- flexible delivery
- innovative assessment approaches
- apprentice-centred support arrangements

Bespoke approaches to delivery by ITPs tailored to employer needs often lead to faster rates of apprentice completion. This in turn supports apprentices to move into sustained employment or further training over a shorter timescale.

The more commonly identified challenges for this provider group include:

- destination tracking
- participation and representation
- attainment among older apprentices
- the consistency of self-evaluation

Colleges

Colleges present the most varied inspection profile nationally, with smaller college providers generally performing better than larger counterparts. Consistent strengths of college apprenticeship delivery include:

- strong employer engagement
- excellent vocational facilities
- experienced staff
- regional workforce influence

However, colleges also demonstrate the most common national weaknesses, including:

- poorer attainment rates
- inconsistent performance management
- limited embedding of meta-skills
- insufficient self-evaluation for improvement
- less systematic destination tracking

College curriculum design and delivery are not always sufficiently tailored to the needs of individual employers. On occasion, workplace skills are not well enough aligned with emerging industry practice.

The priority for the sector, particularly large multi-campus colleges, is to improve attainment and strengthen performance intelligence so that strategic intentions translate more consistently into successful apprentice outcomes.

Managing agents

Overall, managing agents deliver high rates of apprentice attainment. They have sufficient safeguarding governance arrangements in place with subcontractors. That said, on occasion, these arrangements require strengthening to ensure consistent oversight across complex delivery models.

Generally, they maintain good relationships and manage performance, work-based delivery and assessment well.

The involvement of sub-contractors in self-evaluation activities is too limited. This restricts opportunities to identify shared strengths, effectiveness of quality assurance and improvement of overall provision.

The main national priority is to ensure that accountability for apprentice outcomes, safeguarding and performance improvement remains clear across all partner arrangements.

Local authority provision

Local authority provision demonstrates particularly strong features.

Strengths include:

- alignment with local economic priorities
- innovative community-focused models
- flexibility in meeting local labour market needs
- personalised support

This suggests that there is significant potential for apprenticeships as tools for community sustainability, rural workforce development and place-based economic growth.

The improvement priority for local authority provision is to ensure that these strengths are supported by consistent evidence of attainment, progression and measurable impact across programmes.

Key national improvement priorities

The most significant national improvement priorities are to:

- raise attainment and completion rates where they are low, particularly within some of the main frameworks, college provision and older apprentice cohorts
- move beyond awareness raising in relation to meta skills and ensure that they are systematically developed, tracked and evidenced in terms of their impact
- strengthen self-evaluation and action planning to support measurable improvement and incorporate stakeholder views effectively
- improve destination tracking through consistent monitoring of progression and its long-term impact
- improve participation and representation across sectors, including for female apprentices, apprentices from minority ethnic backgrounds, disabled apprentices and those who are care-experienced
- strengthen oversight of complex delivery models, particularly subcontracted provision and managing-agent arrangements operating at scale, with a clear focus on safeguarding governance, quality assurance and consistency.

Overall message

Inspection evidence points to a Scottish MA system that remains strong, responsive and increasingly apprentice-centred.

The strongest providers combine excellent apprentice support with rigorous performance management and evidence-driven improvement.

Success should not be judged primarily by positive apprentice experiences and employer satisfaction alone. Providers must demonstrate:

- consistently robust quality arrangements
- more equitable participation
- stronger attainment
- measurable impact