



**matrix**<sup>®</sup>  
quality standard for information  
advice and guidance services

# Assessment Report

Alliance Learning



The matrix Standard is delivered by The Growth Company on  
behalf of the Department for Education  
E: [matrixStandard@growthco.uk](mailto:matrixStandard@growthco.uk) T: 01423 229 665

<b>ASSESSMENT INFORMATION</b>	
<b>Assessment Type</b>	Accreditation Review
<b>Assessor's Decision</b>	Standard Met
<b>Assessor's Name</b>	John P G Smith
<b>Evidence Gathering/Assessment Date/s</b>	21 – 23 May 2024
<b>Client ID and Assessment Reference</b>	C14019; PN202414
<b>Accreditation Review to be conducted by</b>	13 May 2027

<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	
<b>Evidence gathering</b>	Visit to the Alliance centre in Horwich
<b>Staff interviews</b>	Interviews with the Chair of the Board and 31 managers and members of staff
<b>Recipient interviews</b>	Interviews with a total of 26 learners
<b>Partner interviews</b>	Interviews with four partners
<b>Document review</b>	Review of the CEIAG Policy, the SAR and QIP, Learner Personal Development Strategy, various learner documents and promotional material; and the Alliance website

## About the organisation

Alliance Learning (Alliance), part of the University of Bolton Group (UBG), is a training company based in Horwich, whose aspiration is: to be one of the leading training providers in Greater Manchester, responding to local employer need for education and training swiftly and professionally. This will be balanced with a wider network of commercial developments to meet employer need. Our focus is on our people and stakeholders. Delivery will be inclusive, innovative and inspiring to ensure all learners and customers reach their full potential and provide a quality return on investment for employers.

Alliance programmes include Level 2 – Degree Apprenticeships in Business Administration, Customer Service, Engineering and Leadership & Management, and a range of Commercial provision in sector specific awards and non-accredited

specialist staff development courses, including in Health & Safety, Specialised Plant, Management & Professional Development, Engineering, First Aid and Mental Health.

Alliance is also able to develop and deliver bespoke courses or add-ons to existing programmes to meet employer-specific needs as they arise.

The company is run by the Chief Executive (CEO), who reports to the Board, and is supported by a small Senior Management Team (SMT) and a Management Team, who are responsible in turn for teams of Marketing/Business Development staff, Quality Assurance and Compliance, and Programme delivery staff.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) are central to the Alliance offer to ensure that customers receive good quality training with outcomes to help them progress in their careers, take responsibility for their life choices and progress in learning and work, and raise their aspirations and capitalise on the opportunities available to them. The IAG offer has recently been substantially enhanced and strengthened to incorporate a greater emphasis on careers and progression, and personal development, through the implementation of the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) Policy and the Personal Development Strategy. Support for SEN learners has also been strengthened, with a SEN register accessible to all tutors and other relevant staff, that ensures all support needs are identified and addressed.

The aims and objectives of the service include to provide access by all learners to good quality independent CEIAG on future learning and labour market opportunities; support the development of employability skills; help improve, develop and sustain economic mobility and provide knowledge, skills and behaviours to enable learners to make a positive contribution to communities and society; signpost and refer to appropriate specialist and independent services; and tailor support to individual needs.

## The Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

IAG is integral to all provision. Prospective learners 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, assisted by the recently introduced Career Road Maps.

Where the prospective learner is nominated by their employer, the individual will receive a similar description, usually with the employer also present.

Where the programme is not appropriate or suitable for the enquirer (or nominee) they are referred to other providers or alternative programmes; If it is appropriate for

them, they progress to the next stage, in which they review previous achievements and experience, immediate and longer-term goals, undertake a BKSBS Skillscan to determine level of study and any additional Functional Skills development or support needs, and a Cognassist assessment to determine individual learning styles to enable appropriate teaching and learning approaches for each learner. Applicants are supported where necessary with coaching on interview skills and CV writing; Alliance continues to 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.

A recent development has seen the introduction of the 'Right Course, Right Choice' review at four weeks, to confirm that it is appropriate, or to identify an alternative.

Programmes include centre based teaching sessions, a feature of which includes the completion by learners of a Learner Journal, to encourage them to reflect on, and better retain, the knowledge acquired. As well as on-the-job training, being part of UBG facilitates visits by learners to university facilities to gain experience, skills and knowledge of state-of-the-art machinery and processes, and generally broaden their skills bases. Progress is reviewed regularly, with the learner's manager also involved, and the ILP being updated where necessary to meet any additional support needs identified.

Programmes incorporate a large and varied range of personal development, employability and enrichment sessions, through tutorials and external speakers, scheduled via the recently introduced Personal Development Calendar, in line with the increased career progression emphasis referred to above, and in many cases learners can engage in voluntary projects to support particular causes, utilising the skills they have learnt on programme. Learners are also encouraged to undertake additional development in generic topics, such as First Aid, or in additional work skills, to enhance their employability. Drop-in CEIAG sessions are also available to all learners.

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. A recent development has seen the ongoing follow-up of learners to track destinations and ensure they have not become NEET.

## The difference the IAG makes to recipients and the overall impact

Learner outcomes are defined as a range of soft skills and personal development, including improved resilience, confidence, independence, team-work, communication, and personal physical and mental 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, with ILPs updated, and where necessary additional development added. This process, and participation in the personal development and enrichment programme, ensures that all successful achievers improve in these areas.

Learners commented on the ways in which they had been able to develop these personal strengths, citing improved confidence, teamwork, communication, career progression awareness, as well as broader societal knowledge and improved life skills.

The extent to which the aims and objectives of the service, and its intended impact, are achieved is measured in various ways:

Bi-monthly Board meetings, informed by detailed reports and statistics provided by teams via 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.

Management meetings take place 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, informed by OneFile statistics on learner progress. 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 RAG rated statistical data on learner progress, 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, and staff frequently referred to how the culture enabled much good practice sharing throughout the organisation.

Review of recent performance statistics highlights overall achievement rates of 68%, and cohort rates consistently above the national average; English L2 success rates were 28% above national average for reading and 14% above for writing. These figures, along with learner testimony, demonstrate the effectiveness of the service in achieving its objectives.

Performance measurement is further enhanced by the wide range of quality improvement and business development processes in place, in which all staff are involved. As well as the processes described they include the development of the Annual Strategic Plan, based on the Draft Strategic Plan (agreed at the Board annual strategy day, to incorporate changing policies and economic developments), and further informed by feedback from a range of sources. For example, as a founder member of the local Group Training Association (GTA), Alliance has frequent contact with a large number of local businesses, which, along with additional feedback from Apprentice employers, enables provision to be tailored in line with current and anticipated skills needs.

Membership of UBG enables the development, at Group level, of a range of progression options for learners of all members, utilising and integrating the range of specialisms available across the group, which helps maximise use of resources and avoid duplication of provision.

Membership of Team Bolton, the Bolton and Bury Apprenticeship Working Group, Chambers of Commerce, and the Greater Manchester Learning Providers Network provides comprehensive Labour Market Information on emerging skills needs, and programmes are planned also to align with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Skills Strategies and the Local Skills Improvement Plan.

The consequent Business Plan to deliver agreed programmes is constructed with each curriculum team consulted extensively as to capacity, resources (available and needed), and ability to adapt to changes in demand or to new techniques and processes in use in their sectors.

The Self Assessment Review (SAR), which, in line with the increased emphasis on CEIAG, now incorporates the Gatsby Benchmarks, and the resulting Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) are constructed at team level, with each team carrying out a SWOT analysis of its own offering and resources, and identifying 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, including regular updates on progress via the Position Statement. 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 reviews mentioned, along with regular supervisions and weekly 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, including IAG qualifications and bespoke teaching training for tutors recruited from industry. They referred also to the requirement for teaching staff to go into an industry/sector setting once a year to update on evolving techniques and processes, to ensure their teaching remained relevant.

Internal quality assurance ensures 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. Internal compliance monitoring and audits from ESFA, ensure programmes adhere to funding rules, and 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 is actively sought, through formal surveys, learner forums and at progress reviews or in classroom sessions, and this, along with staff suggestions, is evaluated and implemented where appropriate, for example, topics for enrichment sessions requested by learners.

## What is working particularly well

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

The Review highlighted excellent communications channels, formal and informal, across the organisation, along with close inter-team collaboration, that ensures all are aware of the position and priorities, and the direction of travel, and universal commitment to the Alliance values. This engenders a culture of support, sharing of good practice and flexibility, with staff able to cover for colleagues at times of pressure, and fosters a caring environment, with staff commitment, well-being and professional development at the forefront. (1.1, 1.4, 2.4, 2.6)

The quality monitoring, improvement and programme development processes are similarly all-inclusive, and are comprehensive, multi-layered and very effective at driving improvements, of which the Review highlighted many examples, and the supportive culture referred to encourages improvement and innovation by all. (2.5, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 7.1, 7.2)

The IAG on offer is comprehensive, with the Review highlighting the increased focus on learner well-being, career and personal development, and learner success and progression, delivered in a co-ordinated, flexible and highly personalised approach, by professionally qualified staff. The personal outcomes cited by learners, and the performance statistics, demonstrate its effectiveness in achieving its objectives. (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7)

Networking and partnership underpin and facilitate the Alliance offer, with close working and long standing relationships with an array of partners contributing to curriculum development, promotion of services, learner recruitment, personal development and progression, and the provision of specialist learner support. (2.7, 4.7)

## Development suggestions

Development suggestions 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 development suggestions. 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 Review highlighted how visits by learners to university facilities enable them to gain experience, skills and knowledge of state-of-the-art machinery and processes, and generally broaden their skills bases. Alliance may wish to explore the efficacy and practicality of setting up similar arrangements with appropriate employers to create a loose network of companies specialising in particular techniques or processes within the sector, that would enable Apprentices to access the full range of skills learning, applications and environments. (2.7, 4.1, 4.7)

The Career Road Maps are excellent visual representations of the progression and final destination options available to learners, and Alliance may wish to consider enhancing them with depictions of stop over points, to show the possibility of a pause before embarking on the next step of the journey, and junctions, to depict routes to potential alternative destinations. (3.1, 4.1, 4.4)



## Conditions of Accreditation

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

1. Maintain and continually improve upon their services.
2. During 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](mailto: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.



© The Growth Company Limited 2023

The **matrix** Standard logo and all intellectual property rights in it are Crown property.

The **matrix** Standard logo is a registered trademark of the Secretary of State for Education.

[www.matrixstandard.com](http://www.matrixstandard.com)