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quality standard for information advice and guidance services

Assessment Report

THE APPRENTICE ACADEMY

The Growth Company

The matrix Standard is delivered by The Growth Company on behalf of the Department for Education
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ASSESSMENT INFORMATION	
Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met
Assessor's Name	Alistair Hudson
Evidence Gathering/Assessment Dates	17/3/2026 – 19/3/2026 (3 days)
Client ID and Assessment Reference	C13837 – PN203341
Accreditation Review to be conducted by	26/3/2029

METHODOLOGY	
Evidence gathering	3 days of remote interviews, mostly using Microsoft Teams, with some telephone calls
Staff interviews	26, including the Managing Director
Recipient interviews	16, in small groups with 1 individual telephone call
Partner interviews	2 longstanding employer partners
Document review	Business Plan 2026, The Apprentice Academy website, marketing materials, IAG resources, Self-Assessment Report and Quality Enhancement Plan, IAG policy, coach and trainer job description, performance data, a demonstration of the Aptem system (including learner records, safeguarding resources and Aptem Assess for identifying learning support needs)

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About the organisation

The Apprentice Academy ('TAA' or 'the organisation') is an independent training provider based in central Manchester. With a mission: 'To help employers develop a highly skilled productive workforce; help individuals develop confidence, competence and career capability, achieve pay rises and promotions; and create social value with a positive community impact'. TAA has been offering training, principally through apprenticeships, for around 18 years.

The covid pandemic accelerated an existing trend towards an online delivery model, with the vast majority of teaching and learner interactions now online. TAA views online delivery as a positive feature of its post-pandemic offering, enabling it to expand its geographic reach beyond northwest England, as well as offering agility and flexibility to its staff and, especially, to learners. TAA has also seen impressive business growth. It has now surpassed 1,000 active learners, aiming to reach 1,500 by the end of 2026.

The majority of apprentices are existing employees of organisations ('in situ' learners), though there is also a cohort of school and college leavers ('Future Talent' learners), where TAA also offers a recruitment service. Though Future Talent learner numbers are lower than pre-pandemic, half of TAA learners are 24 and under, which helps towards the organisation's social value ambitions. These are part of the organisation's wider GROWTH values, one of which is 'using our profits to encourage social citizenship and contribution', and includes links to environmental projects, such as the planting of 2,515 trees across Africa and supporting pupils at a school in the Gambia.

TAA's founder remains as Managing Director and a driver for business development. Many staff have been in position for a number of years, though with business growth two new directors have been appointed, along with additional coaches and trainers recruited for their sector specialisms.

TAA's provision currently consists of apprenticeships at levels 2 to 5, with Accountancy and Finance continuing to have the largest numbers. Other main standards offered include Data Analysis. Management, Procurement, Project Management, Business Administration and Property Management.

Alongside its longstanding apprenticeship provision, the organisation is developing shorter courses relevant for its 750 employer partners and their business development such as 'Artificial Intelligence for Business Leaders'. These shorter courses, alongside growth of apprenticeships, form the core of the organisation's growth and business sustainability strategies.

The Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

The organisation's IAG service last met the matrix Standard in 2023 and throughout this 2026 Review, clear links were made by managers and all staff to illustrate the importance of IAG to the achievement of the organisation's strategic aims and its vision and mission. IAG is embedded in all delivery at TAA, with a clear learner IAG journey described by all staff and understood by learners.

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Today, most learners are referred by their employers, so IAG starts with the Key Account Managers building employer relationships and achieving learner referrals, as well as coaches and trainers taking referrals of new learners thanks to their ongoing employer relationships. In some cases, for future Talent learners, TAA undertakes recruitment in conjunction with the employer, but all potential apprentices then follow the same broad journey.

Once a potential new learner is identified, TAA's rigorous enrolment process begins with the dedicated enrolment team. This revolves around ensuring that the learner is on the right programme at the right level to meet their needs and ambitions. All learners undertake an 'Assess' cognitive assessment on the Aptem system, covering eight specific areas of learning, to identify possible additional needs, as well as broader areas where extra support may be needed. The Additional Learning Needs Officer is involved at this stage in the production of an Action Plan, as well as identifying support needs for those who have or have had an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP). An additional Skill Scan and a line manager questionnaire strive to ensure the employer understands their role in the apprenticeship.

With all staff playing some part in the IAG delivery, the Operations Director has the final sign off on all learners as a further check of suitability, and eligibility, before learners are passed to the delivery team of Programme Managers, coaches and trainers where a welcome call clarifies these staff's roles in learner management and support.

Once the learner is on programme, there are regular meetings with their coaches, at least every 4 to 6 weeks, but often more frequently and up to weekly based on learner need. In addition, coaches undertake a 12-weekly tripartite reviews with learner and employer.

Many apprenticeship standards also include group work in the form of workshops (usually virtual). Trainers go beyond subject delivery, getting to know their learners and providing IAG support, including discussions around progression, as needed.

Throughout the assessment it was clear that there is also a good deal of ad hoc contact between learners and their coaches and trainers, based on learner need, with extra sessions arranged as appropriate. Coaches and trainers get to know their cohorts of learners well, thereby identifying and supporting with any issues faced by the learner, making referrals internally and externally. Safeguarding is also central to IAG delivery, with the service given a high profile in resources as well as being well known and used by learners.

Towards the end of their apprenticeship, learners now have access to a Progression Pathways tool on the TAA website, with all learners also confirming that progression discussions are a key part of the IAG they receive.

The difference the IAG makes to recipients and the overall impact

Since the last assessment, TAA has developed its emphasis on learner outcomes still further, with the longstanding 3 Cs now complemented with the 3 Ps. TAA has also introduced robust feedback methodologies with employers and learners to record learner outcomes against these six measures. Of the 544 completers in 2025, 3 C outcomes included:

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Confidence – 100% of learners say their confidence increased

Competence – 99.5% of learners say their professional competence has increased

Career Capability – 100% reported increases in capability at work

For the 3 Ps:

Productivity – 77% of employers reported increased productivity from their apprentice

Pay rise – 71% received a pay rise

Promotions – 54% of learners were promoted at work

TAA aims to improve these outcomes still further, with a 100% target for 2026 for each of the 3 Cs, and targets of 80% for Productivity, 75% for Pay rises and 60% for Promotions.

Employers, TAA staff and learners themselves all emphasised the importance of soft or personal development outcomes achieved through a TAA apprenticeship journey. A demonstration of the Aptem system showed how apprentices see their progress with individual outcomes recorded, with outcomes closely matched to the 3 Cs and 3 Ps, as well as to the Behaviours required by the relevant apprenticeship standard, and include self-awareness, confidence, resilience, emotional intelligence and also the career development and employability skills needed to progress in the apprentice's chosen career.

In addition, staff and learners described how learners had achieved positive outcomes from IAG on subjects including mental health, housing, finances and caring responsibilities.

At an individual level, learners were all keen to highlight their positive experience of TAA. All described feeling safe, happy and supported, with feedback that included:

"They really took time at the beginning to find out about me and work out what was the best course for me. I wanted level 3, but they showed me how it was best to start at level 2. Level 3 is next!";

"My coach is very good and has been with me through level 2 and level 3. I can contact them any time and the support is great";

"It's been really good to meet others at the virtual classroom sessions. That, combined with the work with my coach, means I'm really able to develop myself through this qualification";

"They are much more than study sessions. We start off each session talking about mental health and wellbeing. It's really wide ranging support".

Overall performance measures are constantly monitored, and presented to management and staff in regular briefings, and via a series of dashboards. The most recent data shows successful completion at 79%, with an aspirational target of 80% for 2026, all well above the national average for apprenticeships of around 60%. End

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Point Assessment pass rates are at 92.8% with a new target of 95%, while timely completion stands at 84% with a target of 90%.

In line with its ethos of social impact, TAA also measures learner volunteer hours, which stand at 2,273, with a new target of 3,000 hours.

Management and staff made a clear case for high quality IAG throughout the learner journey being a key driver for the achievement of all the above impressive data.

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 criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- Staff from across the organisation all described a holistic IAG service covering topics well beyond the course subject matter, and how their role is key in delivering positive outcomes. Staff praised a sense of coherence and belonging, and happily described their personal and wider organisational values, or as one senior staff member said, “The learner is front and centre of what we do. By not focusing on the money aspect but on the learner and their needs we are definitely more successful”. Staff also praised organisation-wide communication (“No-one’s frightened to contact each other, including the MD”), the range of staff meetings and events, which further promote the sense of a united service with a strong purpose in line with the TAA value of ‘One Team’, part of the organisation’s wider GROWTH values. (1.1, 2.4)
- Staff universally praised wellbeing support they had received. While there are formal support policies in place, staff described wellbeing practices that go beyond this, with examples provided of support for staff with issues including cancer and other illnesses, family health issues and unexpected caring responsibilities. Several staff described how this support and flexibility had enabled them to stay at work through adverse events when they might otherwise have had to leave. As one said: “There’s a sickness policy but you’re treated as an individual first”. (1.4)
- Initial IAG has been strengthened, with robust processes ensuring learners are on the right course for them to meet their goals and needs. Learners in particular confirmed the strength of initial IAG, including those who, following initial IAG, had started their apprenticeship at a lower level than they hoped. Management demonstrated the positive impact of robust initial IAG, with the withdrawal rate after the first six weeks being 8% compared to an industry average of 18%. (4.2)
- TAA is making good use of the new Aptem Assess tool to identify learner support needs and create action plans to meet these needs. Staff and management described how the system does not just pick up ‘official’ diagnoses like dyslexia, but learning styles, strengths and potential weaknesses, enabling a bespoke support programme to be drawn up. As one senior staff member said, “It really

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enhances our aim to provide the right programme, at the right time, and with the right support". (1.2, 4.2)

- TAA has continued to ensure business growth is achieved without compromising quality, or as the Managing Director said, "without popping the balloon". Growth has been managed alongside the recruitment of new Directors, delivery and administrative staff to ensure the same, or even better, individualised service to learners and employers is the centre of TAA's practice. One senior staff member described how "there is a focus on quality when making decisions, including expansion". Longer serving staff members are also pleased that the organisation's ethos and culture have been preserved through this period of growth: "I'm still feeling the same vibe we had when we were smaller". (2.8)
- TAA has continued to enhance outcomes based practices throughout the learner journey. It's longstanding 3 C outcomes have been enhanced with the addition of the 3 Ps, and staff described how their support focuses on achieving these as well as other more individualised personal development outcomes. This support beyond the achievement of qualifications was summed up by one staff member as: "Achievement on its own doesn't mean the learner journey was impactful". Staff and management take great satisfaction is seeing wider learner development, or as one said: "Soft skills development is my favourite part of this job". (5.1, 5.2)
- Throughout the assessment, all management and staff showcased a highly learner-centred culture and ethos and to this effect an organisation wide embracing of Aptem and its AI functionality has centred upon enhancing the learner experience and aiding coaches in their work. Coaches and learners described in particular the 12-weekly triparty reviews with learner and employer, where the use of AI to record the outcomes of the intervention frees up coach time to concentrate on the learner and their needs. The organisation is currently developing other AI possibilities, not to automate the process and dispense with staff, but to personalise and enhance the service to learners. (2.8)

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 along with any other notable developments will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) which will be conducted at both the twelve, and twenty-four months points, to coincide with the original anniversary date of the accreditation. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

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- TAA has started to develop its Careers IAG service, along with adherence to the Gatsby benchmarks. A manager is studying to be the level 6 Careers Lead and a careers strategy is in development. Careers advice is now much higher profile, and a career progression tool is available on the TAA website. Nonetheless staff said they would welcome further embedding of Careers IAG across all services, such as more personalised career-focused interventions for learners. A further staff suggestion was the introduction of 'read and reflect' career related resources on Aptem as already used for safeguarding topics. Internal training on Careers IAG would be one way to increase capacity, and TAA will wish to look at how Careers can be further embedded, and its profile raised, across provision. (4.3)
- TAA has worked to increase the profile of IAG as a service, with the IAG policy and staff job descriptions now describing the full range of whole person IAG. Nonetheless, coaches and trainers do not always fully value their own IAG service, thinking of it more as "just what we do". The organisation could seek to raise the profile of IAG within TAA, perhaps through more staff taking IAG qualifications or specific IAG training. This could also help with the recruitment of employers and learners, with TAA's high quality IAG service acting as a key differentiator from other providers which do not offer such fully rounded support. As one staff member said, "We need to shout more about what we do!". (3.2)
- Aptem Assess has been very successful in identifying additional needs in learners and indeed TAA's business plan states an expectation that over 20% of learners will have identified needs going forward. While all staff welcome this tailored support, there was some unease around the extra resource – specifically coach time - that will be required to ensure these learners receive the support they need. TAA will wish to be aware of these resource implications when caseloading for coaches to ensure a high quality service is fully maintained. (2.6)
- TAA has good staff retention and low turnover and indeed a number of learners described working with the same coach as they progressed through different levels of apprenticeship. Inevitably though there sometimes needs to be a change of coach, and at least two learners described differing styles between coaches or as one said, "My first was like a teacher, and the second was more of a coach and mentor". While each coach will have a different style and personality, TAA may strive to ensure a certain level of standardisation and prepare apprentices more robustly for any change of appointed coach. (2.8)

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