



matrix[®]
quality standard for information
advice and guidance services

Assessment Report

FRANCESCO GROUP



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	Maintaining
Assessor's Name	Steve Jackson
Evidence Gathering/Assessment Date/s	27/11/2023-28/11/2023
Client ID and Assessment Reference	C11329 PN202201
Accreditation Review to be conducted by	17/12/2026

METHODOLOGY	
Evidence gathering	Remote via Zoom and phone and visit to the Stafford Academy
Staff interviews	9
Recipient interviews	10 apprentices including first and second years and L2 and L3
Partner interviews	7 including members of the FG Governance Board and employers
Document review	Delivery Plan 2023, SAR 2023, Learner Journey chart, Personal Development Calendar, IAG Policy, Safeguarding Policy, Learner Journal and Handbook, website and social media

About the organisation

Francesco Group (hereafter FG) is a private hairdressing training provider operating three training academies in Stafford, Birmingham, and Poole in Dorset. It also operates a commercial arm running its own branded salons and franchising the FG brand. Since the last **matrix** Accreditation Review held in 2021 (delayed by Covid) FG has achieved growth by concentrating on high quality apprenticeship training while separating out the franchisee operation for the Francesco branded salons. The apprenticeship offer is built around the L2 Hairdressing Professional (HP) Standard and the relatively new L3 Advanced & Creative Hairdressing Professional (ACHP) Standard. Some growth can be attributed to the uplift of funding from ESFA per

learner from £7k to £11k but FG has focused on canvassing new salons, while FG's excellent reputation in the hairdressing sector ensures brand loyalty and secures repeat business at increased levels. FG has decided to formalise its tele-marketing operation and build on an emerging partnership with a specialist tele-marketing company which will focus on salon owners, highlighting among other benefits the reputation for high quality commercial delivery and the no-cost recruitment service. Growth has been achieved with recruitment for September 2023 being higher than ever before. There are currently 265 apprentices enrolled compared to 180 in 21/22.

The Apprenticeship arm is led by a Managing Director and Director of Operations and Director of Finance, and each Academy is headed up by a local manager. The company aim is 'Inspire, excite, influence the next generation of hairdressers...educate apprentices to be the best they can be for themselves, their employers and fulfil future inspirations.' Since the company is family-owned the whole organisation is driven by family values and this ensures that staff own the ethos of 'You [the apprentice] will always be at the centre of everything we do'.

The Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

IAG is embedded in all of FG's processes and the pre-enrolment and enrolment phases have been strengthened to improve learner retention. FG has developed a new IAG Policy that captures how and when IAG is provided very well:

'Pre-Learning – on application for an apprenticeship IAG is delivered to ensure programme suitability, apprenticeship vacancy suitability, vacancy location, course content, prior experience, learning and delivery needs, entry requirements, programme duration.

Pre-Screening learners and employers to holistically match the right applicant to the right employer.

Enrolment and Induction – Important information advice and guidance is given, in regard to, the programme, qualification, learning styles, safeguarding and prevent, facilities, FG Hub, OneFile and learner support.

During Learning – IAG is provided during bi-weekly academy sessions, 10 - 12 weekly reviews carried out in the workplace with the employer and regular pastoral sessions.

Post Learning – A final progress review and exit interview are carried out to support learners with chosen progression route.

Ad hoc – IAG can be provided to learners and employers at any time. Referrals to other services can be made at any point for further IAG.'

These IAG stages were described during interviews in full by managers, the Recruitment Manager, Lead Educator and other Educators, and Relationship Managers. Interviews with apprentices confirmed these interventions took place and the effectiveness of these interventions. Apprentices also confirmed that the ad hoc

interventions were often prompted by day to day issues that apprentices were able to 'sort out' by email or phone.

Support for the End Point Assessment is also crucial and no apprentice is allowed to go through to the Gateway process until they are ready. IAG qualifications have been taken by numerous staff. For example the Recruitment Manager has L3 IAG and is taking L6 Leadership and Management. Tele-marketing staff will also be taking IAG qualifications. There were numerous examples provided where FG provides excellent opportunities for CPD and access to online courses that strengthen the quality of IAG provided.

The difference the IAG makes to recipients and the overall impact

FG monitors and reviews the performance and impact of its IAG very well, with clear aims and KPIs. The FG IAG Policy sets out how monitoring and review takes place and includes: 'learner feedback and questionnaires at key times throughout training, employer surveys, analysis of recruitment, retention and outcomes for learners, annual review and update of promotional materials and observations of reviews and pastoral sessions.' Examples of learner surveys were provided for the **matrix** Accreditation Review and appeared overwhelmingly positive from a survey with a 15% response rate (national return rate is around 12%). The Annual Employer survey was still very positive but from an 8% return. That said the Relationship Managers' role is to maintain healthy partnerships with employers and any issues can be rapidly picked up and addressed. Employers interviewed were clear they would speak to a manager if they were unclear or, rarely, unhappy about an issue.

An area of good practice is the annual meeting between Apprentice Ambassadors and the FG Governance Board. The minutes of this Board meeting were provided and evidenced active participation from the Apprentice Ambassadors with a good topic range. Apprentices interviewed confirmed they knew about the ambassadors and had been asked for views.

Regular monitoring of Learner Journals and Review Books were also mentioned by Educators as a source of progress and where IAG provided can be recorded. The FG Hub has been created as a digital platform where sources of personal issues IAG can be accessed and details of referral agencies are provided. Apprentices confirmed they used it regularly, but employers appeared to prefer asking their educator or other FG staff.

Throughout the interviews with apprentices there was much evidence of strong support being provided by Educators and other staff. It should also be noted that apprentices mentioned the positive roles of In-salon trainers and salon owners in providing IAG and this confirmed the coordination of support provided between FG staff and employers. There was clear evidence of transformation, with some apprentices interviewed pointing out that the encouragement received was essential in keeping them on track and motivated. This supports the model of training based in the academies, on-site in salons and the roles of FG staff in providing high levels of quality IAG. Apprentices interviewed who had just completed their apprenticeships

said they had received very good preparation for the EPA and were positive about the IAG support around preparing them for EPA. FG reported a good level of distinctions achieved: 61% of HPs in 2023 (national rate 32%) and 12% of ACHPs (national rate 7%). There is a stated intent to improve these rates and actions identified in the SAR to raise awareness among employers to encourage greater aspiration.

Post activity questionnaires are undertaken and satisfaction with training and IAG support is very high. Employer comments from these were backed up by interviews with the **matrix** Assessor. For example; “FG staff are really supportive, they give quick responses, and provide really good feedback. FG is a brilliant training provider and their staff have excellent knowledge of the sector”; “FG are exceptional, we're a long standing client. They are efficient and flexible. Superb support one to one! Most delivery is face to face. There's nothing I'd change". "FG works really well for us. Our apprentices feel supported. It's the family feeling - I wouldn't go anywhere else".

Similarly apprentices interviewed said: “Really happy with FG – it gives me extra confidence knowing how well the training is thought of by salons”, “FG are brilliant – I always know where I am and the advice they give me is great. I went to a college and I didn't enjoy it there. With FG I feel more like a person not a number – they care.” “My salon owner was trained by FG and she says it's even better training than when she was with them in the early 2000s. That makes me feel I'm part of a special family!”

FG has robust monitoring arrangements which give considerable confidence that the organisation is responsive and committed to continuous improvement. There are monthly Operations meetings and Quality Assurance meetings that examine the data collected and the messages from the data. Evidence in the SAR appeared well researched and conclusions appeared realistic and appropriate, founded on robust data. Governance Board members confirmed they felt well informed and that FG is Ofsted- ready (last inspection was 2018 so another is due in the next year), KPIs are clear. For example the Recruitment Manager is focused on improving enrolment and onboarding IAG and noted how important the retention rate is as a measure of the impact of these stages of IAG. In October 2022 the retention rate was 85% while in October 2023 the retention rate had improved to 93%.

Impact on learners from the range of IAG opportunities available was clear from the evidence presented and arising naturally in interviews with apprentices and employers. It is gratifying to see FG continue to develop so well over the last six years and with such strong impact. FG is in a very good place to continue this positive growth, but not at the expense of the factors that have made it successful to date. It still needs to be more assertive in promoting this success and owning it.

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.

- Leadership and management is strong and staff feel well supported by managers. There is clear direction and strong and regular communication which gives staff confidence that they know how the organisation is performing and they believe the leadership team is transparent and operates with integrity. The organisation's values appeared to be well embedded in practice. (1.1)
- The IAG Service is well developed and the 'front end' of the operation across Apprenticeships is well established and increasingly effective. Targets and intended outcomes are well defined. (4.2, 4.3, 5.1)
- The Relationship Management process is an excellent model and salon owners are given strong IAG support that informs business outcomes and strategy. Salon owners cited the attention to detail and negotiation that resulted in a tailored solution to their training and succession planning needs. (3.2, 4.3)
- The No-cost Recruitment Service continues to be successful and results in effective screening and high acceptance rates. (2.8, 4.2)
- Quality assurance and high-quality delivery characterise the organisation and provide an edge in knowing what works well. (4.6, 5.2, 7.1)
- Wellbeing and welfare of apprentices is promoted very well and staff work hard to ensure that apprentices are well supported. Apprentices interviewed felt that staff cared about them as individual apprentices and 'helped build trust'. Learners also felt well supported over mental health issues which is vital in those areas where this feels at a premium among vulnerable people in particular. (1.4, 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 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 criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- Apprentices interviewed recognised the value of the IAG support provided by their Educators and other staff. Most apprentices were likely to progress into permanent jobs at the end of the apprenticeship. However two of the apprentices interviewed were not completely clear about their prospects although this had been given consideration by their Educators. It is suggested that all apprentices should have a clear understanding of their career options at the end of their apprenticeship and this should be agreed by at least two thirds of the way into their apprenticeship. Further those who could not be certain of their prospects should have a 'Plan B' in place. It is good practice to ensure that apprentices are clear of their options and

these should be explored impartially. This will have to be handled sensitively with employers, who may choose to believe apprentices are being lured away or encouraging them to consider rivals even, but apprentices will be more settled and positive knowing they have examined options before choosing to stay with their employers. This is also a theme picked up by Ofsted under personal behaviours and attitudes. (3.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

- There remains the challenge of how to attract more apprentices from BAME backgrounds, particularly as FG serves areas with significant BAME communities, usually in areas of deprivation in key cities such as Birmingham, Wolverhampton and parts of the Black Country, and nationwide. The interview with the new Educator at the Birmingham Academy was very helpful around this topic. He has much experience of working in central Birmingham and knowledge of the African Caribbean community: the targeted use of taster days and open days may be a good starting point. It is also suggested that the non-executive member of the Governance Board who is the Awarding Body VTCT EQA may be able to provide good practice from elsewhere in the use of VTCT's short courses such as Afro Textured Hair and Bantu knots. (1.2, 2.1, 3.2, 4.1)

- Similarly FG is well aware of the continuing challenges around gender imbalances across the hairdressing sector. The prevalence of strong cultural stereotypes makes stereotyping very obvious. The increasing use of case studies on the website and social media by FG is welcome where these challenge conventional thinking and use of in-house photos in publicity that showcase good role models is another excellent idea. It is suggested that better use of alumni should be considered to demonstrate to potential applicants and existing learners that opportunities can be offered and taken up through learning with FG. Some training providers use 'master classes' or 'super skills' events run by alumni to encourage aspirational thinking and encourage progression. FG has examples of these approaches, but it may create more impact using targeted approaches especially from ACHP apprentices who will begin to move into new creative careers or their own businesses. Some apprentices said their first few days were 'difficult' and it is suggested that some older apprentices could produce a TikTok on 'Your first day at work' to help alleviate some of the stresses this can build up. (1.2, 3.2)

- Enrichment activities have begun to develop well alongside Personal Development activities. It is suggested that some topics could be further strengthened: for example types of abusive behaviour with specific reference to domestic violence and online bullying, and additional topics such as gambling addiction (particularly online gambling) and financial literacy and personal budgeting. (4.1, 4.3, 4.4)

- FG has become more active in attending careers fairs and careers events in schools to promote apprenticeships and challenge mythologies around apprenticeships. Some comments from apprentices interviewed suggested their school teachers had very 'blinkered' views about hairdressing and apprenticeships and it is suggested that targeting school teachers (not just careers teachers) may help create more positive thinking about opportunities. It is further suggested that

specific targeting of Careers Hubs may help promote work around world of work, self-employment and the benefits of apprenticeships generally. The work of the Poole Academy has begun to make FG an important part of the IAG landscape and this could be capitalised upon by targeting key 'feeder' schools. (3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

- Most staff supporting apprentices and learners have the opportunity to obtain L2/L3 IAG qualifications. Given the success of the L4 IAG qualification among advice agencies it is suggested that public facing staff could be given access to this qualification. This may help other staff to reflect on their IAG support for learners and support the ongoing development of coaching. (2.5)
- FG has made very good progress in raising the skill levels of some staff to support apprentices with wellbeing issues. It is suggested that the organisation works towards all staff taking the Mental Health First Aid course to give confidence about differences between conditions and the right language to use when discussing wellbeing and mental health. The course is easy to access online and is free. Over time all safeguarding staff could increase their knowledge by obtaining L2/L3 mental health awareness. It is further suggested that Mental Health and Wellbeing is strengthened as part of the Safeguarding Policy, perhaps with a separate reference or policy to emphasise what FG is doing around Wellbeing, and how this strengthens FG' s position in discharging its duty of care responsibilities to staff and to learners. (2.3, 2.5)
- FG is well aware of the need to ensure employers value its input. To guard against employer complacency it is suggested that DBC cost some of its services, such as the free recruitment service as part of a Return on Investment exercise that will evidence the added value FG provides. This could show salon owners how their investment in apprenticeships is providing strong bottom line performance and securing skillsets that will keep them up to date in the highly competitive market they operate in.(7.1)

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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.
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