

# FRANCESCO GROUP



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## Assessment Information

<b>Assessment Type</b>	Accreditation Review
<b>Assessor's Decision</b>	Standard Met
<b>Assessor's Name</b>	Steve Jackson
<b>Visit Date</b>	16/03/2021 – 17/03/2021
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<b>Assessment Reference</b>	PN200529
<b>Continuous Improvement Check Year 1 due by</b>	17/12/2021
<b>Continuous Improvement Check Year 2 due by</b>	17/12/2022
<b>Accreditation Review onsite visit to be conducted by</b>	17/12/2023

## Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives and Outcomes

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. FG has changed its approach and ethos over the last two years and determined to achieve growth by concentrating on high quality apprenticeship training while separating out the franchisee operation for the Francesco branded salons. FG branded salons (34) still contribute significantly to apprenticeships providing 29% of apprenticeships but increasingly successful growth from independent salons, now provides the bulk of the apprenticeship places — 81 salons and therefore 71%. As part of the focus on quality FG has developed the confidence to ‘say no’ to employers who do not meet its challenge to partner with them to drive up quality and encourage more apprenticeships in the hairdressing sector. This approach has led to independent salon owners switching to FG attracted by the ethos of high quality. For example the Poole Academy now supports 42 salons of which five are FG branded and part of the original footprint of FG in Poole, growth having been achieved by the hard work of staff ‘building the brand’ and making word of mouth recommendations business to business a common occurrence. Currently FG is also exploring funded traineeships and work experience opportunities with a local college, having previously offered unfunded traineeships.

Since the last **matrix** Accreditation Review in 2017, FG has improved in several key areas. Investment in staff and resources has improved capability and capacity and the company’s focus on growth through quality provides new impetus to the company. Strategic planning has improved with the creation of an Education Board to provide challenge and community accountability. This meets quarterly and focuses on performance and innovation. Membership includes the Assistant Principal of a Further Education College, a secondary sector Headteacher and a representative of a Local Authority. The Board scrutinises elements of delivery and agrees action with the company Leadership Team. The Board will also feed into the annual Self-Assessment Review (SAR) and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) with the support of the directors when this process is restarted after the current lockdown. The reset of the ethos of FG is underpinned by an honest appraisal of delivery increasing the responsibility and ownership of Academy staff for their area’s performance. This also mirrors the change in responsibility for former Apprenticeship Framework Assessors as they moved into Educator roles and Apprenticeship Standards are adopted. The company has invested in the new L3 Hairdressing Standard (using experience from being part of the Trailblazer) to create its own Advanced Creative Hair Professional (ACHP) standard. A group of apprentices has already begun the ACHP and are enjoying the challenge and creativity the curriculum provides. The ACHP has been developed with salon owners to ensure it delivers what the industry needs, not least in harnessing creative talent and enabling apprentices to explore their creativity. Apprentices and salon owners interviewed were very enthusiastic about the Standard and early indications are that the ACHP will produce the career path to styling leaders and directors that the industry needs.

It is important to record the commitment of the FG Leadership team to raising standards and the profile of Hairdressing Apprenticeships, and hairdressing training in general. FG is passionate about standards and sees the new L3 as a cornerstone of creating career pathways which promote creativity and will produce the managers and leaders in the future. It is a concern that the fragmented nature of the sector and the need to raise the reputation and leadership levels of the industry are acting as barrier to changing public perception of hairdressing as an ‘afterthought’ or something ‘you do if you aren’t clever enough for office work’. (quote from salon owner frustrated by low opinion of some parents and some schools about hairdressing). FG cannot manage this change by itself but it is establishing good practice and the right business ethos to show what can be achieved. The development and extended use of the ACHP is key to growing the business.

During the **matrix** Accreditation Review there was considerable evidence made available to help understand how FG has revised its approach to training. The scope of the **matrix** Accreditation Review was based on the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) service provided to apprentices. IAG is embedded in the delivery of all FG's learning activities and is recognised as key to performance. An Information Advice and Guidance Policy updated in December 2020 was provided for the **matrix** Accreditation Review and contains the key elements of delivery and the objectives for the IAG service:

To provide excellent quality and impartial IAG to all learners at all stages of their journey.

To provide excellent quality, and impartial IAG to all learners and employers helping them to make informed choices about their options and training.

To provide excellent and impartial IAG to support and enable learners to develop their knowledge, skills, behaviours, and attitudes.

To support our learners to achieve the best results possible their chosen pathway.

Acknowledge Social Justice to ensure learners have the equal opportunity to achieve the best results possible, from the least, to the most able of learners.

To enable learners to make positive progression into employment or further education, following successful completion of their pathway.

These complement well the **matrix** Standard and in reviewing evidence for the **matrix** Standard, the **matrix** Assessor found evidence arising naturally that corroborated how the principles were becoming embedded in the ethos of the company and delivery of services. Staff interviewed talked about being part of a family with 'great team work' and always trying to find better ways of improving.

The delivery of the apprenticeships and IAG support has been improved over the last three years too. FG is particularly concerned to improve the quality of applicants for apprenticeships and that they are screened to ensure 'right person, right salon' and this will contribute greatly to retention rates. An effective Recruitment Service has built up around impressive use of Social Media to attract potential applicants. Recently FG has used TikTok in addition to other platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, and Face Book). The use of TikTok seems a real success with current apprentices, some interviewed during the Assessment Review, showing their hairdressing skills in entertaining ways (but with purpose) and nearly 30,000 views demonstrates the emerging popularity. FG wants to improve its website too. At the moment the Apprenticeship message is somewhat submerged in the promotion of the FG salons and the company is exploring the creation of a separate website. Use is made of the National Apprenticeship Service website to advertise specific opportunities and FG offers a recruitment service to salon owners. In the Initial Assessment use is made of BKSB and zoom interviews to filter candidates to present to salon owners. IAG is provided during this period and FG staff were able to evidence referral to other sectors and organisations if candidates were unsuitable. There is clear reference to IAG, ensuring that apprentices know what is expected of them if successful.

Once enrolled each apprentice is allocated an Educator. Apprentices receive IAG at their induction, on course and on exit and this is made clear in the IAG Policy and L2 Learning Journal. Apprentices interviewed confirmed they had discussed career plans beyond the qualification but remained happy with their current employer. Apprentices confirmed they were formally reviewed once/twice a month and regular reviews involving their employer took place and included career IAG discussions. There is a clear articulation of the learning needed and the Journal emphasises target setting and review.

Targets recorded are SMART and this is good practice, with examples provided about expectation. Apprentices' ownership of personal targets is emphasised and apprentices interviewed confirmed these form the basis of each review with new targets set for the following period. The Journal also contains a page devoted to Career Progression Targets with short, medium, and long term goals to be recorded. Apprentices interviewed said this helped them focus and the overall ambition helped motivation. Apprentices must also record their specific daily objectives and reflect on how well these were achieved and what they could improve upon. OneFile is used to record progress and monitor achievement and progression. An innovation during lockdown has been the introduction of 'Pastorals'. These are zoom sessions with small groups designed to focus on IAG support but with a relaxed and shared approach. Topics discussed are often prompted by recent news events and are supplemented by discussions around, for example, lifestyle, fashion, media articles and home and life events. These sessions are then followed up with regular fortnightly checks one to one.

Another key staff role in each Academy is the Relationship Manager, who acts as the focus of the relationship with salon owners. Initially they 'vet' the salon owners and draw up the training agreements and ensure subsequently that employer contributions are made and learning hours recorded accurately. These staff can also support apprentices, but their main role is to provide IAG support to salon owners. Salon owners interviewed said how important these staff are, commenting on the excellent communication, timely information, and advice they received. Some apprentices interviewed also noted the positive impact these relationships have on salon owners own motivation and apprentices had noticed how timely information had led to better understanding of apprenticeship requirements. Another FG development has been the expansion of assessor training (TAQA) to salon owners raising their skill levels and resulting in enhanced levels of understanding about the new hairdressing standards and apprenticeship requirement. Salon owners commented they felt part of the team and welcomed the boost to their own career satisfaction. A further enhancement is the creation of a Face Book closed account for salon owners called 'Coterie' and there are now 107 members sharing information and advice with each other.

FG has put in place a series of targets to raise and maintain achievement and produces regular reports to monitor progress. At the time of **matrix** Assessment Review there were 174 apprentices split as 64 in Year 1, 66 in Year 2 and 36 Year 3 apprentices enrolled on the new ACHP which represents a very good progression rate. Retention remains a key target area and is monitored at the Leadership Team's regular meetings. Retention stands at 87% in 2021 which compares very well to February 2020 rate of also 87% and given the difficulties over the year represents a considerable achievement. Main Key Performance Indicators are focused on achievement, timely achievement, and retention for apprenticeships, and these are subject to scrutiny by the Quality Assurance Manager and other managers. Success rates are very high for the new L2 Hair Professional at 97% for 2021. Significantly the End Point Assessment (EPA) results are improved. In the first set of EPA results in 2019 84% passed (including 23% with distinction) and 16% failed at the first attempt. In 2020 98% passed (including 24% with distinction) and 2% failed at the first attempt. This represents a considerable achievement by FG staff and bodes very well for the future.

FG makes good use of its resources and its staff are its principal asset. They are highly motivated towards the company's ethos and those staff members who had experience of other training organisations were able to reflect that they were happy working for FG suggesting the size of the organisation and ethos were very positive differences. All staff interviewed felt the line management support was very good and that they could share issues without stigma. Team working featured strongly as may be expected, and this is a very important element of the company's success. Facilities in the academies are very good as indicated by the apprentices as no physical visit could be made by the **matrix** Assessor.

The introduction of Zoom-enabled meetings had been very well received with the Poole Academy in particular benefitting from equal access. Indeed all academies had benefitted greatly from online learning and the ability to share expertise in each academy. An example was the Maths Tutor at Poole who was cited several times for helping apprentices in all the academies understand and succeed better at Maths. IT support has increased considerably, and the introduction of online learning and IAG had gone well. The establishment of the FGhub for apprentices enables uploaded content such as revision material, assignments, quizzes, cutting videos, ACHP videos and mood board material, and this was positively commented on by apprentices interviewed.

A survey of apprentices' views about online learning was very helpful in understanding the impact of going online with very helpful comments that will help inform future decisions about the company's next steps. Apprentices interviewed confirmed that working online was managed well by FG. It is recognised by FG staff how important high quality IAG is to achievement and there is appropriate emphasis on 'front-end' support.

Examples were provided of high quality information provided to apprentices through website referral, particularly to reputable organisations and product manufacturers. Recruitment staff were able to give examples of where they had referred apprentices to other career sector websites for progression information. The Learning Journal contains up to date information on other sources of help such as mental health and addiction, and there were further examples provided by Educators of information sources on careers. Educators themselves are valuable sources of career information, but the value of impartial sources was also recognised.

FG operates a number of mandatory training programmes and regularly audits staff skills and knowledge. Regular team meetings and standardisation meetings provide many opportunities to build on knowledge and skills and identify emerging good practice. Examples of mandatory training included Prevent Strategy, British values, safeguarding and health and safety.

Continuous professional development (CPD) is monitored by the Quality Assurance Manager. Most of the educators now have professional teaching qualifications and staff can access online training easily, including 'inspirational sessions' some produced by product suppliers such as L'Oréal, GHD and Wella. Staff gave many examples of on-line training they had undertaken, some recommended by line managers. There is enormous potential for enhancing CPD through webinars, blogs, vlogs and sharing of learning and IAG materials and it is well worth the company exploring how it can make thematic teaching units or sections available.

Ongoing training has been very beneficial and other measures shared during the Assessment demonstrated forward thinking and the need to ensure staff are aware of mental health conditions and potential solutions. Several training sessions have been identified as part of the training calendar. CPD is used to ensure staff remain vigilant and competent in meeting the Safeguarding duty. Processes and procedures are robust, and each event is followed up and learning used to inform future action. Referral to other agencies was evidenced, particularly to local organisations supporting young people with wellbeing and mental health issues, and this has helped with capacity issues. There is a dedicated team for mental health issues and FG staff have completed training with Respond Training to become certified First Aiders for Mental Health supporting colleagues, apprentices and customers who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. There is a comprehensive list of referral agencies in the Learning Journal. Additional needs support is identified during the initial Assessment process, and this helps target identified adjustments and extra tuition requirements. FG has a strong commitment to supporting communities and has identified women's refuges as an important development to support. FG hopes its salons are regarded as safe places for clients to talk about concerns.

FG places a high priority on feedback from apprentices. At the end of each session Educators ask what one thing went well, and what one thing could have gone better as well as contextualising sessions around targets. Apprentices confirmed that their feedback is sought regularly and feel they have a voice in the organisation. Survey Monkey is used extensively to capture apprentices' views. The FG Education Board member interviewed was impressed by a presentation to the Board by a group of apprentices reflecting apprentices views. This was very well received and the Board now includes Learner Voice on every Board agenda. FG decided that feedback from employers is best managed through Relationship Managers and salon owners confirmed they are always able to provide feedback and are regularly asked for their views. Apprentices interviewed noted that they could provide feedback including responses to surveys and they confirmed that their Educator always asked them for feedback after every session. High levels of satisfaction with support on apprenticeships were evidenced and there were many comments about extra support and FG staff always being responsive quickly. 'Going the extra mile' was a frequent comment made by apprentices and employers. The IAG service is delivered effectively to meet apprentices' needs.

Feedback from salon owners confirmed positive interventions and respect from those interviewed for the professionalism of FG staff. Phrases such as 'FG are amazing' and 'fantastic staff' were used by salon owners while the Board member interviewed described FG as a more 'sophisticated' organisation which 'has always been about the learner and not following the funding.'

There is an effective Quality Assurance approach taken to IAG that demonstrates how the **matrix** Standard has been used positively to improve the IAG service and provide clarity to staff about service expectations. Management control is strong but relaxed.

Even though the **matrix** Accreditation Review was carried out remotely the wealth of evidence encountered in interviews, and the quality of evidence provided to the **matrix** Assessor demonstrated that FG is operating at a high level of competence and effectiveness. Reviews of service and performance were shared extensively and generated considerable confidence that these processes are very customer focused and clearly support the evolving ethos of the company. The commitment to continuous improvement built into the **matrix** Standard was obvious. The impact on apprentices was clear and unequivocal, and those interviewed were confident and positive about their future as a result of their apprenticeship with FG.

FG's resilience will be tested in the aftermath of the coronavirus, particularly the effect on the labour market though there were positive signs of salons indicating a need to recruit apprentices. The IAG support in place is testimony to the professionalism of staff and their determination to enable students to achieve the best possible outcomes from their experiences with Francesco Group.

## Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment, which are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- FG provides clear strategic leadership and management with very good direction, communication, and decision making. FG managers provide very good management support to staff. (1.1,1.2)
- Salon owners interviewed consistently praised the quality of delivery and the high standard of candidates for opportunities. Salon owners cited the professionalism and enthusiasm of staff and their 'can do' attitude and noted that FG is a consistently high performer and that the reputation of the company was a key part of their remaining with FG. One salon owner noted the high level of understanding about the hairdressing sector and knowledge about the changing nature of the industry. He further commented on the professionalism of tutoring staff and their support for apprentices.(1.8, 3.2)
- IAG activity is very well embedded in the delivery of apprenticeships and apprentices interviewed felt they were well supported and received very good IAG. (2.1, 3.2)
- Use of data and proactive use of analytics gives the company a valuable source of analysis to draw on and provides a strong and verifiable database of progression. Coupled with the strong compliance and quality culture FG maintains a robust Quality Assurance system. The commitment to continuous improvement is embedded in all activities in delivery and reinforced by its values. The establishment of the Education Board gives the company the capacity to 'dig deeper' into issues and advise managers on operational issues more systematically. (4.2, 4.3, 4.8)
- FG's responsibilities are discharged effectively and consistently with regard to safeguarding and health and safety. FG's approach to the coronavirus lockdown demonstrated absolute commitment to safe working practices and procedures that ensured risks were minimised and apprentices and learners would feel safe and be safe. (1.4)
- Since the last **matrix** Accreditation Review FG has maintained and improved its ethos. The focus on high quality delivery is underpinned by very good internal CPD and sharing of good practice gives FG an edge in determining what works well. Shared values and a commitment to help apprentices progress well enhances delivery. The company provides excellent opportunities for staff and apprentices to acquire new skills. (2.4)
- The introduction of the ACHP is exciting and demonstrates FG's commitment to raising standards in the hairdressing industry. (2.1, 3.2)

## Areas for Development

Areas for development 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 areas for development. 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.

The annual **matrix** Continuous Improvement Check will allow the organisation to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the developments they are continuing to make in order to support individuals. These may include the Areas for Development above. <https://matrixstandard.com/assessment-journey/continuous-improvement-checks/>

Please note that annual Continuous Improvement Checks are mandatory and non-completion within the required timescale will impact on your organisation's accreditation, please see the section Assessment Information for dates.

- FG has managed the lockdown arrangements very well and apprentices interviewed recognised that they had been enabled to complete units and apprenticeships successfully. Educators were uniformly praised for their dedication and commitment. FG could consider holding a 'what we have learnt' event for staff and find out from apprentices and employers what had gone well with online learning and IAG to inform future decisions. FG will need to determine the future of its teaching, learning and IAG delivery methods, and this should be done while experiences are still fresh. The Survey carried out of apprentices' views about online learning was very helpful formative evaluation but it is important to check out views again with the benefit of hindsight. It should be noted that a 'blended' approach with one to one personal sessions was popular with apprentices interviewed. (1.2, 2.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2)
- The wider use of social media is a very welcome development. It is suggested that FG continues to invest in facilities that ensure all apprentices are digitally aware and capable of adapting to using new forms of technology to promote on-line learning, employability and IAG. A separate apprenticeship website is being considered and this is a sensible move since the current website is very 'busy' and apprenticeships are rather submerged in other themes. Whatever company website develops FG should celebrate the success of apprentices more overtly and use 'Talking Heads' more widely on social media. In particular this should focus on demonstrating how well apprentices can succeed. (1.2, 2.1, 3.2)
- There was evidence of using former apprentices' experience for marketing to provide inspirational evidence that apprentices from FG can and do succeed, perhaps unexpectedly. It is suggested that FG adopt a more consistent approach by creating an Alumni Strategy that harnesses the talents and loyalty of former apprentices to add impetus to acquiring career management skills and help raise aspirations especially for those apprentices from 'socially deprived' areas. FG could explore using webinars and recorded masterclasses to share these experiences. Tracking the destinations of former apprentices may provide some excellent examples of success to share with potential apprentices. Some current salon owners are former FG apprentices who could record their experiences of setting up their own business and what it is like to be a salon owner. (1.8, 2.1, 3.2)

- There was evidence of development in promoting the Learner Voice, with the use of Survey Monkey. It may be more helpful to use quick focus groups to gain better quality feedback e.g. at the end of classroom based activities rather than surveys, though these remain useful in identifying consistency and apprentices' 'happiness'. (4.1, 4.3, 4.5)
- It is further suggested that a 'You said, we did/did not' approach might raise awareness among apprentices that FG is keen to learn from their experiences and respond as positively as it can. (4.1, 4.3, 4.5)
- It is suggested that FG could widen its 'Pastorals' activity themes around 'hot topics' similar to other learning providers, through monthly briefings and webinars etc. Such topics could include LGBT and green or environmental issues as well as capturing apprentices' concerns to help understanding the context of such issues e.g. Black Lives Matter, obesity, climate change. Dealing positively with such issues will help motivation. (4.3, 4.8)
- The Recruitment Service is well respected by the salon owners interviewed. It is suggested that this should be promoted more positively on website(s) particularly the social media reach and the fact the service is free. Some training providers cost out the service to demonstrate the value of the service to them and use examples of how long it can take to fill vacancies conventional ways, particularly salon owners themselves trying to recruit. The Recruitment Service can also help find candidates from underrepresented groups. (2.1, 3.2)
- As always there is 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. Developing better role model examples might encourage applicants from underrepresented groups. Since FG is inevitably reactive to applicants through social media it may wish to consider targeting specific groups and using differentiated messaging to drive traffic to specific recruitment campaigns. These comments can also apply to gender issues. During the **matrix** Assessment a male apprentice was interviewed who would be an excellent 'apprentice ambassador' at Careers events or online. For the Birmingham Academy in particular there is always the challenge of appealing to BAME communities and this could be explored with apprentices for their views. (1.5, 2.1, 3.2)
- Although FG is targeting growth in the L2/L3 market it should be mindful of the opportunities to expand L4/L5 in Leadership and Management. Further the establishment of FG Man brand and salon (as well as winning Barber of the Year 2020) gives FG credibility in entering the barbering apprenticeship market. In the next few years there may also be potential growth in retraining from career changers caused by the huge changes in retail and hospitality sectors, who may be attracted by the more stable hairdressing sector. (1.6, 2.1, 3.2)

## Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process. The **matrix** Accreditation Review took place during Lockdown 3 and was carried out remotely by Zoom and telephone.

Initial discussions with the Operations Director to identify scope

Opening meeting with the Operations Director

One to one interviews with:

Managing Director

Operations Director

Education Managers in Stafford and Poole

Quality Assurance Manager

Two Educators in Stafford and Poole

Two Relationship Managers in Birmingham and Poole

Two staff responsible for Recruitment and Social Media content

Six Employers

Two Partners including one Board member

Ten apprentices

Closing meeting with the Operations Director

Desk research including Learning Journals , Policies including, IAG, Equality and Diversity and Prevent Strategy, Apprentices learning support materials, Website, Social media including Face Book, Instagram, and TikTok.

## Conditions of Accreditation

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

1. Maintain and continually improve upon their services.
2. Throughout 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.