

Skillspoint

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 58444

Name of lead inspector: Elizabeth Warriner HMI

Last day of inspection: 10 December 2010

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Information about the provider

1. In 2007, Skillspoint became the trading name for Softmist Ltd, which was incorporated in 2006. Based in Leicestershire, Skillspoint acts as a broker for employers to access training for employees, facilitating contracts for specialist providers and further education colleges and carrying out quality assurance for these contracts. Three quarters of Skillspoint's work is brokerage and the remainder is directly contracted Train to Gain provision.
2. Skillspoint's directly managed Train to Gain contract with East London Learning and Skills Council started in March 2008. This programme enrolled 483 learners in 2008/09 and 537 in 2009/10. Skillspoint recruits learners, carries out induction and screening, and manages the employer relationship. Small specialist providers hold subcontracts to deliver the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3 in construction, warehousing and logistics, or business administration, across England, and qualifications for teaching assistants in Leicestershire.
3. A broadly experienced board, comprising the chairman, managing director and three non executive directors, sets strategic objectives for Skillspoint. The managing director runs the business with a team of 13 staff.
4. Skillspoint has not previously been inspected.
5. The following organisations provide training on behalf of the provider:
 - Construction Skills People
 - Focus Management for Business
 - Lynne Bailey and Associates
 - Office Depot.

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
Employer provision: Train to Gain	537 learners

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision		Grade 2
Capacity to improve		Grade 2
		Grade
Outcomes for learners		1
Quality of provision		2
Leadership and management		2
Safeguarding		3
Equality and diversity		2
Subject Areas		
Construction, planning and the built environment		2

Overall effectiveness

- Skillspoint provides good provision. Outcomes for learners are outstanding in all subject areas, and learners develop good skills that benefit them in their careers. Training and assessment are good overall, although only satisfactory in construction. Assessment and review for teaching assistants are particularly good, whereas learners' portfolios in construction sometimes lack variety. Construction reviews are satisfactory, but targets and actions recorded are insufficiently specific. Skillspoint's provision is exceptionally responsive to learners', employers' and community needs, and its partnership working is outstanding. Support and guidance are good for all learners. Skillspoint's well-thought-out strategy is linked closely to national and local priorities. A very experienced board provides excellent challenge and support to managers. Safeguarding arrangements are appropriately thorough and Skillspoint ensures that learners work safely. Successful initiatives to provide employability training for young people whose circumstances have made them hard-to-reach have been nationally recognised. Equality and diversity are promoted well to employers and learners at induction, but construction reviews do not reinforce learners' understanding sufficiently. The self-assessment process is effective and accurate. Audit procedures are very thorough but insufficiently focused on learning and assessment.

Main findings

- Success rates are outstanding in all subject areas. Learners develop good employability skills, self-confidence and aspiration. Employers report good impact on their business from the training.
- Training for teaching assistants is particularly good. Learners are encouraged to explore, develop and extend their knowledge. Assessment captures particularly rich and detailed evidence. Feedback to learners is very constructive. Planning and target setting in reviews are particularly effective.
- Assessment in construction is satisfactory. Effective use is made of a variety of different assessment materials to ensure learners' needs are met effectively. However, evidence in some portfolios lacks variety or is poorly presented.
- Assessors are very well qualified and highly committed, providing good support to help learners achieve. However, construction reviews are not well recorded. Targets set for these learners are insufficiently detailed or specific. Reviews do not reinforce their understanding of equality and diversity sufficiently.
- Skillspoint has developed very creative approaches with warehousing and logistics employers to devise customised Skills for Life programmes. Integrated provision for first line managers engages them to develop holistically. Plans are well advanced for mentors to support low-skilled workers. However, too few construction learners take up Skills for Life training.
- Provision is exceptionally flexible, responsive and wide ranging. A particularly good range of construction qualifications and a wide variety of options for teaching assistants respond to learners' and employers' needs. Skillspoint also supports Office Depot very well to customise its provision to suit its business.
- Partnership working is outstanding. Skillspoint's very close and productive relationships with a wide range of providers and sector specific bodies benefit learners, employers and community organisations.
- Skillspoint has a clear and ambitious mission to widen participation in well-run programmes. A realistic and well-thought-out strategy links closely to national and local priorities. A very experienced board of directors provides excellent leadership, advice and challenge.
- Skillspoint has led several very effective projects to provide employability training for hard-to-reach learners. Its construction programme gives access to accreditation which could not otherwise be provided. Other projects, some *pro bono*, include productive work with charities for the homeless and for unemployed young people.
- Arrangements to safeguard learners are satisfactory. Staff receive suitable training in protecting vulnerable adults. Measures to vet staff and increase their awareness of child protection are appropriate. Inductions raise learners' and employers' awareness. Learners work safely. However, safeguarding is insufficiently reinforced in construction reviews.
- Audit procedures are very thorough and have led to significant improvement in already high success rates. However, they are insufficiently focused on learning

and assessment. Skillspoint has recognised this and has devised appropriate systems to improve the detail of quality assurance.

What does Skillspoint need to do to improve further?

- Continue to improve access to Skills for Life training for learners by sharing good practice between subcontractors.
- Improve the learning experience for construction learners by incorporating a wider range of evidence in their portfolios and more specific target setting at reviews.
- Improve the promotion of safeguarding, equality and diversity to construction employers and learners through more active reinforcement throughout the programme.
- Improve the detail and consistency of quality assurance through implementing the systems already planned to capture and record information about the learning process.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the pride they feel in gaining their first qualification
- rapid progress and achieving a qualification to advance their career
- assessment at work that is real and does not disrupt the job
- broad and flexible qualification choices relevant to their job
- an independent person to reassure them they are doing things right
- very approachable assessors who build confidence and explain well
- finding out how good they are at literacy and numeracy.

What learners would like to see improved:

- rushed and stressful literacy and numeracy tests for a few teaching assistants
- the amount of paperwork when they sign up for some warehousing learners
- opportunities to take more qualifications for most learners.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- Skillspoint understands their business and works closely with them to develop their people
- Skillspoint cuts out the bureaucracy and responds quickly
- Skillspoint is highly flexible and extremely responsive
- there is always a polite and helpful person to talk to, who will act swiftly
- feeling that Skillspoint staff make their business a priority

- managers are accessible and have a consistently positive approach
- assessors are very experienced and communicate well with the workforce.

What employers would like to see improved:

- nothing.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

7. Skillspoint shows good capacity to improve. Overall success rates have been consistently high since Skillspoint started Train to Gain. In 2009/10, Skillspoint improved overall success rates to over 97%, with very few learners achieving late. Managers have a clear strategy to widen participation in learning, supported by robust scrutiny from the board. They regularly analyse business risks and assess the impact and effectiveness of strategies. Skillspoint subcontracts all its training and manages the provision very tightly. Targets for subcontractors are challenging, realistic and regularly monitored and reviewed. Audit procedures are rigorous and thorough, supported by good use of performance data. Developing these procedures has improved Skillspoint's management of brokered work as well as Train to Gain, adding value to its role as a facilitator of employers' training. However, quality assurance procedures have insufficient focus on learning and assessment. Skillspoint recognises this and is introducing more formal systems to observe learning processes and record detailed progress.
8. The self-assessment process is honest, inclusive, accurate, and leads to improvement. Subcontractors were closely involved in preparing the report and valued the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas to enhance their programmes. Learners' and employers' views were collated and used to evaluate their experience and improve it.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 1

9. Overall and timely success rates are outstanding. All subject areas have rates significantly above national averages. In 2009/10 97.6% achieved, 91.2% within planned time, increasing by 9 and 15 percentage points, respectively, over 2008/09 rates. Improvement was particularly marked in warehousing. Learners make very rapid progress on their programmes. They thoroughly enjoy learning and they are motivated to work confidently and achieve. Many develop additional subject knowledge and working skills, increasing their confidence and enhancing employment prospects in a difficult economic climate. Learners improve their knowledge of health and safety and work more safely. Teaching assistants, warehousing and logistics learners develop a good appetite for further learning and they are encouraged to study further. Construction learners gain Construction Plant Competence Scheme (CPCS) and Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards, which demonstrate competence in operating plant and machinery and also in carrying out construction operations safely. However, few construction learners progress to advanced level.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

10. Training and assessment for teaching assistants are particularly good. A very skilled assessor has excellent rapport with learners, encouraging them to explore, develop and extend their knowledge. Well-planned workshops promote independent study using a good range of materials to engage learners' interest. Assessment captures particularly rich and detailed evidence. Feedback is very constructive. Planning and target setting in reviews are particularly effective.
11. The quality of construction provision is good. Experienced and well-qualified assessors share their expertise well with learners to extend their knowledge and understanding. They use relevant examples well to demonstrate current construction site practice. A good variety of materials are used during assessment to ensure learners' needs are met effectively. However, the range and quality of evidence in some NVQ portfolios is limited.
12. Assessment and verification on construction programmes are satisfactory. They are accurate, fair and regularly check progress during the programme. Assessment activities are consistently applied and learners receive constructive feedback. Learners are aware of their qualifications, unit content and awarding body requirements. Assessment visits are carried out supportively and are very flexibly arranged to meet both learners' and employers' working patterns over a wide geographical area. However, assessors do not always brief learners adequately when planning assessment, and so miss some opportunities to assess key activities.
13. Progress reviews in construction are satisfactory. Assessors regularly follow up assessment to check progress and to organise learners' next set of actions. However, many recorded actions and targets are vague and insufficiently detailed. Learners do not always know what to do to prepare for the next assessment visit. Employer involvement in reviews is limited. Employers are passive in the review process and they do not participate in setting key objectives for their employees. Equality and diversity are poorly promoted at reviews.
14. Skillspoint has developed very creative approaches with warehousing and logistics employers to devise customised Skills for Life programmes. The employer's powerful whole-company approach blends NVQ learning into career development. An innovative programme for line managers has cleverly integrated Skills for Life into team leader training, providing an appealing programme that improves learners' literacy, numeracy and computer skills while working towards management qualifications. Plans are well advanced for mentors to support low skilled workers in a similar way. Although signposted, support arrangements to improve construction learners' literacy and numeracy are too informal and few learners take up opportunities. Skillspoint recognises this and is developing approaches to deal with it.
15. Skillspoint is exceptionally responsive and flexible. An excellent range of construction NVQ choices meets learners' and employers' contextual needs,

many in niche subjects such as specialist concrete operations and highways maintenance. Employers and learners greatly value this opportunity to develop their business and contribute to the construction industry's strategic aims for a qualified workforce. Logistics and warehousing learners' productively customised programme is enhanced by corporate training and linked to promotion prospects. Assessors adapt their activity well to learners' work patterns, for instance, accompanying delivery drivers on their rounds and arranging visits to match work shifts.

16. Skillspoint's partnership work is outstanding. Representation on local and regional partnerships is strong and effective. It has very close relationships with a wide range of local providers, strengthened by its brokerage work. Skillspoint has particularly good partnerships with its subcontractors, working very productively with employers at a strategic level to build appropriate and well-supported training programmes for their workforce. Skillspoint took over the Leicestershire teaching assistant contract this year, responding well to local community needs. It works very flexibly with consortium partners to pool budgets so that all teaching assistants can follow appropriate training courses, regardless of eligibility. Effective joint work on several projects with local providers and charities provided homeless people with good employability training.
17. Skillspoint provides good individual support which helps learners to achieve. Learners receive good advice and guidance during induction. Well qualified and experienced assessors support learners well throughout their programme so that they improve their employability and self-confidence significantly, often gaining qualifications for the first time. Flexible individual coaching enhances progress. Some learners at risk of redundancy were very well supported to achieve their qualifications and many regained employment quickly as a result.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

18. Skillspoint has a clear and ambitious mission to widen participation in learning. It sets and achieves high targets for itself and its subcontractors and involves them closely in shaping the provision to meet local needs and link to national priorities. Communication internally and externally is excellent. Programmes are very well organised and successful, based on a highly efficient model of a small core of staff and carefully chosen specialist subcontractors. Skillspoint makes good use of data to plan and measure its performance. A diverse and experienced board of directors provides excellent leadership, advice and challenge.
19. Arrangements to safeguard learners are satisfactory. Skillspoint completes regular health and safety risk assessments for all learner activities and ensures that its subcontractors' staff are appropriately skilled and qualified. Learners report that the programmes enhance their ability to work safely. Staff receive suitable training in protecting children and vulnerable adults. Criminal record checks are appropriately carried out for relevant staff, and Skillspoint ensures that its subcontractors are appropriately vetted. All employers and learners

attend inductions which strongly promote safeguarding awareness. However, construction reviews do not sufficiently reinforce learners' knowledge and understanding.

20. Skillspoint has a strong commitment to promoting social and educational inclusion. Effective partnership work to develop employability for homeless and disaffected young people was nationally recognised. Skillspoint volunteered its services to several charities to support the homeless and deprived communities in Leicester. Its construction provision specifically targets learners other providers found hard to reach and successfully ensures their achievement. Skillspoint's comprehensive range of equality and diversity policies are actively promoted to employers and learners at induction. Regular meetings with employers benchmark their participation rates against national averages. Learner and subcontractor handbooks set out rights and responsibilities very clearly. However, Skillspoint recognises diversity is insufficiently emphasised in formal employer agreements and new paperwork, including an employers' handbook, addresses this. Learners in logistics, warehousing and supporting learning have very good understanding of equality and diversity. Construction learners show satisfactory understanding, but reviews do not sufficiently probe and enhance this.
21. Audit procedures are very thorough and have led to significant improvement in already high success rates. However, they are insufficiently focused on learning and assessment. Although Skillspoint carries out some observations of key processes, these are informal and not systematically recorded. Regular meetings track learners' progress and identify those who may be lagging. However, this information is not consistently recorded across subject areas. Skillspoint has recognised this and has devised appropriate systems to improve the detail of quality assurance.

Information about the inspection

22. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the provider's managing director, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and data on learners and their achievement.
23. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Skillspoint

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners		
Full-time learners	70	70
Part-time learners		
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Capacity to improve	2	
Outcomes for learners	1	1
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	1	
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	1	
How well do learners progress?	1	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2	
How safe do learners feel?	2	
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	-	
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	-	
Quality of provision	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
Leadership and management	2	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2	
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	1	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	3	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2	

*where applicable to the type of provision

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