

B-Skill

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		14–18 July 2014
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement-3
	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement-3
Outcomes for learners		Requires improvement-3
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Requires improvement-3
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Requires improvement-3

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider requires improvement because:

- On employability programmes, the number of learners who get jobs or go onto further study is too low.
- Too much teaching, learning and assessment is not yet good.
- Tutors and trainers do not challenge apprentices sufficiently to develop independent learning and higher-level skills.
- Arrangements to develop learners' skills in English and mathematics are underdeveloped.
- New managers are now in place but their actions have not had sufficient time to secure the planned improvements.
- Quality assurance arrangements to improve self-assessment and the observation of teaching and learning lack rigour.
- Operational targets set to improve B-Skill's performance are not clear or measurable.

This provider has the following strengths:

- The proportion of learners who achieved their qualification in 2012/13 was high and according to data provided by B-Skill the proportion of learners who achieved their qualification in 2013/14 is also high.
- Strategies to narrow achievement gaps and improve learner success rates, particularly timeliness, are effective.
- Arrangements to gather both learner and employer feedback are well established. Views are analysed and action taken where appropriate.
- Supportive employers, subcontractors, and partners provide good opportunities for learners.
- Highly committed and professional senior leadership team, managers, and staff with a clear strategic vision focused on meeting learners' needs.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve outcomes for learners by placing greater emphasis on their progression to further education or study. Ensure the initial assessment process places learners on programmes that challenge them.
- Focus improvement work in teaching, learning, and assessment on the following key areas: developing functional skills delivery across B-Skill and its subcontractors ensuring that teaching relates to the learners' job roles; conducting progress reviews that include employers and ensure learners progress well; review target setting to improve learners' progress, broaden their skill base, and raise aspirations.
- Extend learners' understanding of equality and diversity issues as they apply to their industry sector and ensure learners take ownership of their learning through improved online learning resources.
- Improve the quality of assessment by: ensuring all staff are well trained in making good use of initial assessment to plan learning and provide sufficient challenge to learners of all abilities; plan assessment opportunities with employers and ensure written feedback including for spelling, punctuation, and grammar to learners helps them improve their work.
- Improve the quality and performance of B-Skill and its subcontractors by: ensuring that performance and contract management action planning is specific and that identified actions are followed through in order to secure rapid improvement.
- Build on planned management improvements to the observation of teaching and learning and self-assessment processes in order to raise standards. Ensure the board monitors the impact of actions taken to secure improvement in wider learner outcomes, teaching, learning and assessment and overall quality of provision.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Since the last inspection overall success rates in apprenticeship programmes have improved to above national rates. However, the rates of success within planned timescales, while improving, are still too low in 2012/13. B-Skill's own data indicate that significant improvements in both overall success rates and timeliness rates are being achieved in the current year. ▪ Success rates on employability programmes are good, however, only a small minority of learners progress into employment, further training, or on to apprenticeships; according to B-Skill data this has improved in the last year, but it is still too low. ▪ Although achievement rates for functional skills English and mathematics programmes are very high; too many learners on the apprenticeship programme do not extend sufficiently their level of English and mathematics beyond their current skills. For example, learners who have already achieved English and mathematics do not routinely have the opportunity to develop further skills relevant to the workplace. ▪ Overall the quality of learners' work is of an appropriate standard for the qualification being undertaken. The rate of progress that learners are making is improving. Stronger management information processes are enabling B-Skill to more closely monitor learner progress and identify and rectify any slow progress. ▪ Initial assessment to ensure that learners are enrolled on the right level of programme requires improvement. The majority of apprentices start the programme with good levels of attainment and undertake a level too low for their ability levels and this means the work is too easy. For example, over half of apprentices enter a level two programme that already hold qualifications 	

at this level and in a minority of cases apprentices have a level three qualification, for example one apprentice on a business administration course already has a national diploma in business.

- Initial assessment is accurate in identifying apprentices' literacy and numeracy needs. However, the results are not used effectively to personalise learning sufficiently and, as a result, a minority of apprentices do not make progress in developing these skills to a higher level. For example apprentices with prior experience in the sector, have the ability to make quicker progress, or study in more depth, yet fail to do so.
- Over the last three years, the gender achievement gap in adult learner responsive provision has narrowed significantly. In the same period, the gap in achievement between White British learners and those from Black and minority ethnic groups has largely closed. For apprentices, achievement gaps are not significant.
- The development of learners' English and mathematics skills requires improvement. While tutors are keen to support learners to improve these skills, they are not all yet sufficiently trained or experienced to do this effectively.
- Apprentices demonstrate appropriate skills in the workplace. A minority of apprentices are acquiring good gains in taking extra responsibility, independent thinking, and confidence. The standards of apprentices' theory work are at the standard expected. Apprentices work in a variety of settings and the large majority benefit from supportive employers who are keen for their apprentices to succeed. However, workplace managers are not routinely involved in planning learning and contributing to the review of apprentices' progress. Apprentices develop good personal and social skills in most programmes.
- Learners on employability programmes gain in self-confidence and improve their personal and social skills. While B-Skill has informal information about a few learners who progress to further learning or gain enhancements to their employment, it has not established formal arrangements to ensure that they collect and analyse sufficiently the progression and destinations data when learners have completed their programmes. This means that B-Skill does not have an accurate picture of learners' progression to courses at higher levels or into work that meets local and national needs.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning, and assessment requires improvement, which is reflected in outcomes for learners. As the result of too little good teaching, learning and assessment, learners do not develop knowledge and higher skill levels. Senior managers have more recently introduced initiatives to improve the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment, such as, the introduction of an electronic portfolio system. However, some of these initiatives have not had time to improve learners' experience yet. Trainers provide apprentices with good personal support. For example, learners contact their assessors at any time to arrange assessments or visits to meet the demands of the workplace.
- Tutors and trainers and, including the staff in the subcontractors, use good demonstrations, individual coaching, and effective verbal feedback to help learners improve. For instance, as the result of good coaching one learner on business administration used conflict management techniques well in a school kitchen to improve working practices. In the better sessions, tutors plan sessions effectively to ensure all learners participate fully in productive activities and tasks, which effectively develop their knowledge, personal skills, and confidence.
- Tutors are vocationally qualified and use their experience well to coach learners on particular tasks, for example, to construct a 'presentation' using a computer software package. Learners benefit from classrooms, learning resources and accommodation that are generally of a good standard. B-skill has developed an intranet for staff to help them improve their teaching practices. However, this is not yet available to learners and tutors and trainers do not use information learning technology resources sufficiently to plan exciting learning experiences.

- For too many learners, tutors and trainers do not use their initial assessment information sufficiently well to plan challenging tasks to extend their existing knowledge well. For instance, on employability courses, learners self-assess their employability skills. However, tutors do not use this information well to plan activities to improve the identified employability skills. They do not set learners sufficiently clear learning targets and encourage them to take more responsibility for their own learning; this results in learners not developing sufficiently good independent learning skills.
- Tutors and trainers provide learners with good verbal feedback about their work and how they can improve. However, not all tutors and trainers provide learners with written feedback that is sufficiently detailed or helpful so they can refer back to the feedback to reflect on their work. The better plans identify targets and show good monitoring however many targets are insufficiently specific or measurable, for example, to improve current skills.
- Too many apprentices start on courses that do not develop their skills sufficiently beyond their starting points. For example, too many apprentices start on programmes that are at the same level as the existing qualifications. A small minority are on courses that are below their previous academic qualifications or their job role experience and responsibility. However, there are a number of apprentices who successfully change job roles as the result of taking qualifications at the same level as their existing qualifications. For example, apprentices with level 2 qualifications in catering, undertake level 2 qualifications in team leadership to move to management.
- Initial assessment is effective in identifying apprentices' starting points for English and mathematics. Tutors and trainers do not use these results to set and agree targets with learners. The monitoring, review and recording of learners' progress in developing their skills in English and Mathematics is not good enough. Tutors and trainers focus well on helping learners achieve qualifications, but, they do not pay enough attention to the development of learners' skills in using English and mathematics.
- On employability courses, tutors do not use initial assessment well to develop learners' English and mathematics. They do not focus enough on the link between poor written skills and a learner's employment chances. Consequently, far too many errors in written work are being overlooked by tutors and learners are not given constructive feedback and guidance on how to improve the quality of their work.
- The quality of advice for progression to employment or signposting for further training for adult learners on employability programmes is not consistently effective. The majority of learners receive useful information, advice, and guidance before joining their courses.
- The promotion of equality and diversity in teaching, training, learning, and assessment is variable. In a small minority of sessions, this is done particularly well. However, the extent to which all trainers promote actively relevant equality and diversity issues requires improvement.

Employability training

19+ Learning programmes

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning, and assessment require improvement and reflect the outcomes for learners which also require improvement. Learners benefit from high expectations and care from tutors to complete their qualifications, but tutors do not have the same high expectations of learners to gain employment. Learners achieve very high success rates in their target qualification, and create very good curricula vitae. Job entry rates are very low but improving in 2013/14. The large majority of learners have very low levels of prior attainment and are long-term unemployed. For a large minority of learners, this is the first qualification they have ever achieved. All learners improve their self-esteem and personal confidence.
- Tutors use their skills well and in better sessions they lead particularly effective small group work which develops ideas of business enterprise and cooperation. For example, learners

develop their knowledge of company procedures by agreeing and writing procedures for a new company. These activities help learners' identify existing and new skills gained through effective teamwork, and how these are useful in employment. Tutors are adept at rapidly building a positive rapport with learners which overcomes initially negative attitudes to course attendance. However, in weaker sessions not all learning activities effectively engage all learners. For example, in group learning sessions more confident learners dominate to the exclusion of those less confident.

- Teaching accommodation is bright, spacious, and welcoming. Information technology equipment is up to date, and good use is made of online resources to develop learners' information technology (IT) skills. Tutors display learners' work on the walls, demonstrating to learners that their work is valued, and creates an atmosphere conducive to learning.
- Initial assessment activities are comprehensive but insufficient attention is taken of results to plan learning sessions that accurately meet individual needs. Tutors set effective short-term targets to meet qualification requirements but long-term target setting to progress towards employment goals requires improvement. Employer involvement does not sufficiently influence the planning of learning in the majority of the provision, although this is outstanding in one recent subcontractor.
- The integration of functional skills in English, mathematics and IT into course topics is good. For example, learners calculate travel distances and costs, and develop sufficient IT skills to search and apply for jobs online. However, learners miss many opportunities to improve their English because they do not receive thorough written feedback from their tutors.
- Initial advice and guidance requires improvement. Learners receive accurate pre-course advice, but not all advice to learners ensures they join courses appropriate in length relevant to their need. Learners do not receive enough advice to help them understand why they are not being invited for interviews by employers, or not succeeding at them. Reviews provide information on progression or further training opportunities. Learners receive good support to overcome financial barriers for example by the provision of mini-bus transport and free lunches. For a minority of learners, pre-course information is good because it extends to planning progression routes into employment.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Learning activities and referral interviews actively promote equality and diversity very well. For example, interviewees are encouraged to describe in their own words what equality and diversity means to them, while groups of learners carry out a similar task creating posters illustrating a company's approach to equality and diversity. However, reviews of progress do not thoroughly reinforce learners' understanding of equality and diversity.

Customer service and administration

Requires improvement

Apprenticeships

- Teaching, learning, and assessment require improvement and reflect the outcomes for apprentices which also require improvement. From information provided by B Skill, current apprentices are making good progress towards the achievement of their frameworks. A small minority of apprentices develop confidence when dealing with a wide range of customers at work. Apprentices are not being challenged enough to achieve qualifications at a higher level or to develop their knowledge and skills at a level higher than their prior attainment.
- A significant majority of apprentices are already employed when they start their apprenticeship. Very supportive employers provide opportunities for apprentices to develop a wide range of skills. A small minority of apprentices develop enhanced skills which employers' value and provide increased responsibility at work.
- Apprentices benefit from individual and small group coaching sessions. However, the planning of these sessions is not always done well enough to ensure that learning is linked to all aspects of

the apprenticeship framework or the precise needs of apprentices. Little use is made of information learning technology and apprentices have little access to resources to enable them to learn independently between sessions.

- Effective learning sessions develop apprentices' understanding of body language well and apprentices develop a good understanding of how to interpret customer behaviours. Apprentices are able to explain how they can identify the mood of colleagues and customers by reviewing their body language.
- Trainers are appropriately qualified and most have significant experience in business roles. Assessments are mostly well planned and detailed holistic observation records confirm apprentices' competence. In professional discussions, apprentices are not always well prepared and are unaware of the learning outcomes they need to achieve. B-Skill is introducing the use of e-portfolios. A group of apprentices in one workplace, who have been on programme for four months, do not yet have access to an electronic or paper-based portfolio and do not understand the criteria they need to meet.
- Written feedback to apprentices is detailed and confirms their competence. However, trainers do not always identify apprentices' spelling and grammatical errors to enable them improve their business skills at work. Trainers monitor the progress apprentices are making towards the achievement of units and framework well.
- Initial and diagnostic assessments identify apprentices' development needs in English, mathematics and information and communication technology but individual learning plans as a result of these assessments are not effective in developing English and mathematics skills. Apprentices who already have obtained GCSEs in English and mathematics are not supported to develop their skills further. Trainers set targets at each visit but these are not always linked to the apprentice's individual learning plan. Employers are not sufficiently well involved in the planning and assessment of learning.
- Apprentices with no prior attainment in mathematics develop their confidence and skills and apprentices value the individual support they receive. Apprentices who previously lacked confidence to help their children with mathematics now feel able to do so and have gained confidence in calculating their shopping bills. Apprentices recognise the importance of developing mathematics skills to help them at work.
- Information advice and guidance require improvement. Too many apprentices do not receive appropriate career advice to ensure they are on the best programme to meet their prior learning and future career aspirations.
- Apprentices and assessors have a very basic understanding of equality and diversity. Learners' knowledge and understanding are not sufficiently well checked or extended.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Significant investment since the last inspection has resulted in the appointment of staff to lead key areas such as functional skills and quality improvement. An electronic portfolio system has also been purchased; however, it is too soon to see the impact of these initiatives on the quality of learning. Managers promote B-Skill's vision and values, effectively to staff and partners. A broad range of strategies provides clear guidance for staff. Communication across B-Skill and with subcontractors is good.
- A business plan sets out general direction for the company but does not provide clear, measurable targets and there is no supporting implementation plan for the current year. Programme expansion since the last inspection, has occurred without effective consideration of resource implications, resulting for example, in trainers being responsible for the development of too many apprentices. Although directors regularly monitor all aspects of business performance, they do not assess sufficiently the impact of emerging issues, such as high staff caseloads, on the quality of the learner experience.

- Management information has improved since the last inspection. Useful performance reports track apprentice success rates well although analysis is at a headline level with insufficient scrutiny of individual programme performance. Arrangements to track and analyse the progression of unemployed adult learners require improvement.
- Performance management arrangements are well established. However, staff development provided does not focus enough on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Regular meetings evaluate staff progress towards targets linked to both learner success and the quality of their work; agreed targets provide appropriate challenge. Staff, including those employed by subcontractors, receive useful information about best practice through B-Skill's intranet. Identified staff act as 'champions' and lead on areas such as the promotion of equality and peer observations.
- Arrangements to assure the quality of learning vary too much in effectiveness. While quality assurance of assessment is sound, observations of learning lack rigour, resulting in over-grading. They do not extend to all processes, for example, induction or progress reviews. Observations do not evaluate the impact of strengths and areas for improvement on learning adequately. Development needs around aspects such as the quality of written feedback or improvement in classroom techniques, are too often overlooked. Audit arrangements do not prevent inconsistencies in the standard of learner documents.
- Self-assessment is not an effective process. Some sections of the report are overly descriptive and too many judgements lack supporting rationale or performance data. Strengths are often overstated. The quality improvement plan, which is a much more effective document than at the last inspection, steers change well. Actions have, for example, led to more apprentices completing their programmes within the planned time. However, targets within the plan are often insufficiently measurable.
- Arrangements to gather apprentice and employer feedback are well established. Views are analysed and action taken where appropriate; for example client relationship managers were introduced to improve employer understanding of programme requirements. Managers monitor the impact of changes made to ensure their effectiveness. The usefulness of feedback gathered from unemployed adults varies.
- Since the last inspection, B-Skill has strengthened links with strategic partners and subcontractors, recruiting additional subcontractors to support business growth. Meetings with subcontractors are supportive; however, agreed targets do not routinely drive improvement in their performance. Review meetings focus insufficiently on the quality of learning. Work with partners and subcontractors have increased opportunities for learners resulting, for example, in more vocationally focused programmes for unemployed learners in administration and construction. Successful work with employers has broadened apprentice provision but further action is needed to better involve employers in employability programmes, both to improve the relevance of the curriculum and to establish progression routes.
- The management team analyses the performance of different groups of learners well. Successful strategies have narrowed achievement gaps between male and female learners. Staff understand procedures to promote equality and diversity; equality logs encourage them to reflect on how they apply their knowledge in practice. However, not all staff confidently develop learners' understanding of how equality and diversity applies to the world of work.
- B-Skill meets its legislative requirements to safeguard learners. Particularly effective strategies have been implemented to protect both staff and learners who are lone workers, for example through a buddying system. Health and safety is monitored carefully.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Provider name

Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	14-16 part-time provision	14-16 full-time provision	16-19 study programmes	Traineeships	19+ learning programmes	Apprenticeships	Employability	Community learning
Overall effectiveness	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A	N/A
Outcomes for learners	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A	N/A
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A	N/A
The effectiveness of leadership and management	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A	N/A

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Employability training	3
Customer service and administration	3

Type of provider	Independent learning provider								
Age range of learners	16+								
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	1,452								
Principal/CEO	Mr Paul Wileman								
Date of previous inspection	January 2013								
Website address	www.b-skill.com								
Provider information at the time of the inspection									
Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above		
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	
	N/A	50	N/A	N/A	N/A	5	N/A	N/A	
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher				
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+			
	10	285	1	45	N/A	N/A			
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total				
	N/A		N/A		N/A				
Number of learners aged 14-16									
Full-time	N/A								
Part-time	N/A								
Number of community learners	N/A								
Number of employability learners	N/A								
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)								
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ultima ■ Triage ■ Divine Motions ■ Essex Academy 								

Contextual information

B-Skill Limited's head office is in Newcastle upon Tyne. The type of provision offered by B-Skill has changed significantly since the last inspection with the company now offering a range of apprenticeship programmes in a number of subject sector areas. The provider delivers 16-18 and 19+ work based apprenticeships as well as classroom employability and learner loans. The 16-18 apprenticeships are based mainly in the professional and business services sector. Adult apprentices in the main are from the support services and more recently health care sectors. There are separate funding partnerships for the delivery of offender learning and European Social Fund (ESF) workplace learning. The company has long established relationships with employers. Direct delivery extends from the midlands northwards and is a blend of directly employed trainers and associates. This direct provision is complemented by subcontracted delivery partners based in the south east and the north west. The executive team includes the two owner directors and is supported by a team of managers, trainers, and assessors.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Andrea Machell HMI

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the quality assurance manager as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject areas listed in the report above.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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