

Paragon Education & Skills Ltd

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		28 July–1 August 2014
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement-3
	Previous inspection:	Good-2
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:

- Too many learners do not achieve their qualification.
- Senior managers do not have an effective strategy for the improvement of English and mathematics throughout learners' programmes.
- The observation of teaching, learning and assessment does not focus on the effectiveness of teaching and learning and overly relies on the meeting of assessment criteria.
- Senior managers do not systematically collect data on learners' progression on to further study or careers.
- The provider's self-assessment report does not accurately identify its strengths and areas for improvement. The quality improvement plan does not specify time-bound targets or the impact of planned actions on learning.
- Learners' understanding of equality and diversity does not sufficiently allow learners to explore how equality and diversity topics affect them in the workplace, individually or in their local community.

This provider has the following strengths:

- Good development of vocational skills for learners.
- Good teaching, learning and assessment in childcare.
- Assessors use good up-to-date industrial knowledge and expertise well to enthuse and excite learners.
- Well-developed partnerships with employers and other organisations that support learners.
- Particularly good care and support for learners.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Implement an effective strategy to ensure that learners improve their English and mathematics throughout their course or apprenticeship.
- Increase the rigour of the self-assessment process and make it more specific to the different areas of learning in order to establish a baseline for improvement.
- Ensure the quality improvement plan has specific and timed targets that measure impact and lead to systematic sharing of good practice throughout the organisation.
- Train observers and assessors to focus on learning and the progress of learners during their programmes. Ensure that they provide feedback that tells learners precisely how to improve using specific and measurable targets while challenging capable learners to make more progress.
- Train assessors and tutors so that they are more confident and capable of explaining equality and diversity topics when opportunities arise.
- Collect and analyse information more systematically on learners' progression when they complete their training.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outcomes for learners require improvement. Over the last three years, the proportion of learners who have completed their apprenticeships has increased steadily. More learners are now achieving their qualifications on time. However, success rates remain below national rates in some areas. Business management learners develop good additional skills as well as completing the apprentice framework. However, learners in health and social care achieve less well, with nearly a third of learners not completing their course. Some success rates in engineering are below national rates. In the small amount of classroom-based provision, learners perform less well. In motor vehicle, learners' achievement is poor. ▪ Learners develop self-confidence and vocational skills well and enjoy their courses. Learners on early years programmes make good progress in developing skills in working with young children and produce work of a good standard. A large employer that carefully monitors the performance of its staff reports significant improvements in the quality of customer care by its business learners. Learners on engineering and motor vehicle apprenticeship programmes develop practical skills effectively, but a minority of learners make slow progress and find it difficult to obtain the range of evidence required from their workplace. Health and social care learners develop their employability skills well. ▪ Overall, learners develop good vocational skills that assist them in their workplace. Attention to health and safety and safe working practices by learners and staff is good. Engineering learners ensure that they maintain their workshops to a high standard. The majority of childcare learners achieve their qualification and develop skills, which they use very effectively within their workplace. For example, one learner made eloquent reference to 'grounded theory' and then linked this to the early years framework. ▪ Senior managers do not systematically collect data to monitor whether minority groups such as men in care and childcare or women in engineering perform better or less well than their peers. As a result, they are unable to demonstrate that any gaps in achievement are narrowing. However, they do have informal evidence of individual successes. For example, one female learner in the engineering sector has progressed to become an assistant manager because of the good standard of skills she gained in her apprenticeship. 	

- Most learners do not develop English and mathematics skills throughout their qualification well enough to use them confidently in their occupations. A few learners transfer their English and mathematics learning to good effect in their professional and personal lives. For example, one learner used her mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) skills to budget effectively for her impending wedding using appropriate tools and methods that she had learnt within her course.
- Senior managers do not systematically collect, analyse and evaluate data on the destination of learners. They do not have an understanding of what impact they have had on their learners' future careers other than remaining in employment. While there are examples of learners progressing on to higher levels of study, such as one childcare advanced apprenticeship learner who progressed to a degree qualification in early years, managers do not effectively monitor the data to identify trends and areas of best practice.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement and these are reflected particularly in the need to improve the outcomes of learners in health and social care and engineering.
- Support for learners is good. Assessors visit their learners regularly and are accessible at other times by telephone and email to support them with their queries. Assessors effectively help learners develop self-confidence and improve their work skills. Early years assessors inspire learners to achieve challenging learning goals. Independent learning is improved through the increased use of electronic portfolios that link well to additional online resources providing support to develop vocational knowledge and improving English and mathematics.
- Trainers and assessors make good use of their vocational expertise to plan learning and assessments, but do not always provide sufficient challenge for the more able learners. Early years learners are provided with stimulating learning sessions and energetic assessment activities that develop good practice in childcare. Assessors of business learners make highly effective use of questioning. Engineering and motor vehicle learners are coached well in developing skills in using lathes, drills and saws in well-managed workshops. Engineering theory is taught less well and features activities that are dull and insufficiently challenging. Questioning in engineering theory lessons does not effectively check understanding.
- Procedures for initial assessment are thorough and generally result in learners being placed on courses at the right level. In most cases learners' additional support needs are identified early and appropriate support arrangements are put in place. Most assessors set learners appropriate targets and monitor well progress in achieving these. However, assessors need to provide more challenging targets for health and social care learners.
- Assessment is good in most areas. Early years assessors make effective use of a range of assessment tools, such as reflective journals, audio recordings and an electronic portfolio. Assessors review the progress of health and social care learners effectively and provide good feedback on assessed work, but do not involve employers sufficiently in progress reviews.
- The tracking and monitoring of engineering learners' progress require improvement. Assessment of portfolios in engineering is undertaken too late in the programme. Written feedback to learners does not adequately enable them to have a clear understanding of their progress and what they need to do to improve their work.
- Support for the development of English and mathematics is inconsistent. Assessors and trainers of childcare learners identify and correct spelling and grammatical errors in assessed work using a variety of strategies to improve learners' English. Mathematical concepts, where appropriate, are explored in realistic contexts. In business programmes, English and mathematics are assessed and supported well; however, a minority of assessors make mistakes in their own English and some spelling and grammar errors are not corrected.
- Engineering tutors do not sufficiently help learners to improve their English. Spelling and grammar in engineering and motor vehicle learners' coursework and portfolio evidence are often

not corrected. Assessors support health and social care learners to achieve their required qualifications in English and mathematics, but do not identify spelling and grammatical errors when marking assignments.

- Information, advice and guidance are good. Prospective learners are put at their ease and given clear advice about course and employer requirements. Learners are inducted well onto their programmes and many benefit from additional online resources that support their understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Assessors provide learners with appropriate guidance on progression opportunities on completion of their course.
- The promotion of equality and diversity requires improvement. Equality and diversity are embedded securely in the childcare apprenticeships and learners confidently debate both historical and contemporary issues in a meaningful and professional manner. In business, there is a good promotion of equality and diversity. However, the promotion of equality and diversity requires improvement in engineering and motor vehicle. Health and social care assessors place insufficient emphasis on encouraging learners to reflect fully on equality and diversity issues beyond that required for a module on their course.

Health and social care

Requires improvement

Apprenticeships

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement, which is reflected in the low success rates. Too many learners do not complete their full qualification.
- Assessors use their good vocational knowledge and practical care experience well to motivate learners. This ensures the majority of learners give high priority to their training and remain focused on completing assignments. For example, in specific care homes, assessors are regarded by employers and learners as experts, making them highly credible in the workplace.
- Initial assessment is thorough and used effectively by assessors to help learners set appropriate individual targets. Assessors monitor learners' progress closely and respond quickly with further support when concerns arise. However, assessors do not encourage learners sufficiently to develop independent learning skills, such as analysis, research techniques, enquiry or finding new ways to use and develop their initiative. Assessors do not encourage all learners to improve their English and mathematics.
- Assessors visit learners regularly in the workplace, which ensures they progress well. However, a few learners wait too long for their assessor to make initial contact with them. Verbal feedback is effective and ensures learners and their employers develop a clear understanding of the progress made and what they have to do to improve. However, written feedback is often less effective because it lacks detail about how the learner can improve.
- Learners understand the importance of ensuring standards of care remain high so that older and vulnerable people are safeguarded. Assessors make sure learners understand how to report concerns about the safety or welfare of residents. For example, learners develop good awareness of planning care that respects an individual's independence and dignity. Assessors make good use of national campaigns to raise awareness of illnesses such as dementia. This inspires learners, helping them to develop greater awareness of the principles and values, which underpin effective care. High priority is given to ensuring learners keep themselves and each other safe in the workplace.
- Assessors provide effective support to ensure learners complete their functional skills qualifications. However, the vast majority of assessors do not routinely correct spelling, punctuation or grammar in learners' written assignment work, nor do they correct regularly mispronounced words.
- Strong links with the vast majority of employers ensure learners receive good support for their learning. Most employers are kept fully informed of learners' progress. However, employers are not routinely involved in selecting optional units or planning training and assessment schedules

to make sure each learner has access to a sufficiently broad and varied range of learning experiences. Employers are not involved sufficiently in reviewing learners' progress.

- Information, advice and guidance are satisfactory. Learners are clear about the demands of their programme and their progression opportunities.
- Assessors do not sufficiently promote learners' understanding of equality and diversity. Learners have a satisfactory understanding of the importance of ensuring everyone has equal access to care services and that different needs are recognised and respected. They understand the cultural and religious requirements of an individual receiving end-of-life care. However, learners are less clear about the ways in which equality and diversity affect them as individuals or within their local community.

Early years and playwork

Good

Apprenticeships

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good and lead to good outcomes for learners. Assessors plan learning sessions very well, using an extensive range of activities that help learners to illustrate their competencies. Assessors use a range of tools to engage learners in assessment activity, such as the use of e-portfolios, a resource-rich virtual learning environment, reflective journals and audio recordings of professional discussions. As a result, learners make good progress, produce work of a good standard and achieve their learning goals.
- Support for learners is good. The challenging targets set by assessors inspire learners who value the rigorous monitoring of their learning. This effective monitoring ensures learners remain on target to achieve and most learners complete their apprenticeship in the planned time.
- Learners benefit highly from their assessors' good vocational knowledge and experience. They develop a good understanding of complex theory and practice and are able to apply these to their work settings effectively. Assessors are very knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subject area. In learning sessions, they encourage good discussions in which learners analyse and evaluate research evidence and case studies, and develop a thorough understanding of the range of complex themes within the early years sector.
- Initial advice, information and guidance for learners are good. Outcomes from initial assessment, and diagnostic tests in English and mathematics, form the basis for effective action planning. Challenging targets encourage learners to aim for higher achievement throughout their studies. Assessors and support staff are very effective in working together to support learners at risk of underachievement to remain on programme and succeed.
- Learners receive detailed, regular feedback on their work so that they fully understand what they have completed well and what they need to do to improve. Tutorial sessions provide highly effective and focused support when learners ask for additional help. As a result, learners develop portfolios of a high standard that illustrate their learning and achievements. In a small minority of sessions, assessors do not fully exploit questioning opportunities to elicit more elaborate answers from the learners.
- Learners use English and mathematics well. Spelling and grammatical errors in learners' work are corrected routinely. Learning activities effectively incorporate reading, writing and numerical reasoning tasks that develop learners' knowledge, understanding and confidence to support practical activities, such as calculating the formula for a baby feed, as well as promoting literacy and numeracy activities within an early years context.
- Assessors promote equality and diversity well. They skilfully and sensitively expose learners to a wide range of cultural and diverse experiences in the learning sessions and in their work settings. They use inspirational material, which provokes a good level of discussion and investigation underpinning essential early years practice. In one setting, a learner had negotiated their observation to take the form of a circle time activity to encourage the children to identify colours and shapes using both the English and Punjabi names.

Engineering and transportation and operations maintenance

Requires improvement

Apprenticeships

- Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement, particularly in transportation and operations maintenance where achievement has declined over the last three years.
- In the better learning sessions, tutors plan well, making good use of initial assessment outcomes. This results in learners making good progress. Where teaching of theory is less successful, tutors do not select and use appropriate materials that sufficiently engage learners. For example, learners spend too much time unproductively copying answers displayed on a whiteboard. Learners completing their work early have to wait for others to catch up before the session progresses.
- Good resources and equipment enable learners to develop appropriate employability skills using industry-standard equipment. However, a few motor vehicles do not represent the current technology that learners will experience in the workplace.
- Learners benefit from staff who are knowledgeable, vocationally experienced and enthusiastic about the engineering industry as a good place to work and learn. Trainers use their industrial expertise well to link learning to the workplace.
- Learners enjoy their work and gain new skills in the engineering industry. In practical sessions, learners work independently with confidence and develop good hand skills on a variety of engineering tasks using a wide range of mechanical equipment including saws, lathes, and milling machines, road wheel alignment gauges and engine diagnostic equipment.
- The monitoring of learners' progress requires improvement. Learners' portfolio evidence is not systematically assessed throughout the programme and learners are not always provided with written feedback to enable them to have a clear understanding of their progress and what they need to do to complete the occupational aspects of the apprenticeship.
- In theory sessions, insufficient attention is given to formative assessment through the use of directed questioning to systematically check on the learning that is taking place. Learners' achievement is not always recorded and updated, which makes it difficult to monitor and identify those learners at risk of not completing within targeted timescales.
- The majority of learners' portfolio evidence is well presented and clearly referenced. However, the range of evidence is limited to work logs and job cards of work carried out. Some evidence lacks sufficient detail of work carried out, for example recording of measurements or fault diagnosis results.
- Tutors do not sufficiently help learners to improve their English. Insufficient attention is given to improving learners' written work through the correction of their spelling and grammar. Mathematics is routinely reinforced in workshop sessions with, for example, the calculation of gear ratios, measuring engine cylinder bore wear and working out close limits of tolerances of machined components.
- Workplace assessment is satisfactory. Workplace visits are frequently at short notice to fit in with the learners' work when suitable opportunities arise. Assessors make accurate decisions on learner performance and complete detailed observation reports, although these are sometimes too descriptive. Assessors use skilful questioning that effectively checks learners' knowledge and understanding.
- Information, advice and guidance are adequate. Learners benefit from frequent and productive workplace progress reviews from experienced training officers. Trainers engage quickly with the demands of the learners' work role and support their learning needs well through discussion and provide good advice and guidance on types and opportunities for skills development. However, short-term targets are not sufficiently challenging to promote and aid learner timely progression. Employers are not routinely involved in discussions on progress.

- Health and safety practices are good and appropriately reinforced within the training centre and particularly in the workshop areas. Learners wear appropriate personal protective clothing and use hand tools and equipment safely. Learners quickly learn to identify potentially hazardous situations, minimising risks to themselves and others.
- The promotion of equality and diversity requires improvement. Although all staff have received training, some do not ensure that learners fully understand how equality and diversity apply within their workplaces during welfare and progress reviews. There is an overreliance upon asking learners if they are treated fairly and staff do not explore opportunities for discussion of workplace scenarios.

Business management

Good

Apprenticeships

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good and support learners' success rates, which are just above the national rates. Advanced apprenticeship learners achieve less well than those at intermediate level. However, managers have recognised this problem and have significantly increased the monitoring of learners' performance. This has improved learners' motivation.
- Care and support are good. Assessors and employers have high expectations of learners, resulting in high levels of motivation. Learners comment on the very effective support they receive from both assessors and employers. Assessors have a good rapport with their learners.
- Inspirational learning and assessment lead to excellent learner engagement. Assessors make highly effective use of questioning techniques to develop learners' research, self-reflection and independent learning skills. Assessors use faith events such as Ramadan to illustrate sensitivities in staff management, considering frequent breaks for staff observing fasts. Homework tasks and marked work are used well to reinforce and build learners' employability skills.
- Assessors provide good verbal and written feedback. Feedback is frequent, timely and constructive and helps learners work independently. Learners find the assessment feedback useful in improving the standard of their work. In a small minority of lessons, however, assessors do not encourage learners to develop and improve their study skills, for example by not highlighting the need for them to take notes.
- Assessors initially assess learners' starting points and monitor their progress by setting challenging tasks with incremental steps leading to completion within the planned time. The progress learners make is tracked and monitored well, enabling assessors to provide support when required. Learners appreciate the regular reviews of their progress and updating of their learning plans.
- Initial advice and guidance are good. Learners receive early initial and diagnostic assessment in English and mathematics to identify their support needs. The learners find induction useful, enabling them to understand the qualification requirements and Paragon's expectations of them.
- Learners' abilities in English and mathematics are assessed promptly and support is provided when required. Learners are actively encouraged to develop reading, speaking and listening skills. However, a small minority of assessors make errors in their own writing on learners' work. Spellings and grammatical inaccuracies are not always corrected and learners repeat their assessors' mistakes.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good in the majority of learning sessions. However, in a minority, opportunities are missed to build on learners' prior knowledge and experiences gained from their nursery settings. Learners feel safe and know whom to speak to if they have concerns about safety. They understand their responsibilities for health and safety and wear the appropriate personal protective equipment.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Senior managers are very ambitious for the learners and staff. A recent reorganisation has given strong impetus to improving quality and standards. Senior managers have carried out a key recommendation from the last inspection to implement and monitor appropriate quality assurance arrangements. Staff demonstrate their commitment by energetically working in the interests of learners. However, the impact of all the new measures is not yet evident in improving success rates nor the overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The formation of a central quality team is recent and its impact is yet to be seen.
- Senior managers and the board regularly and systematically monitor the performance of learners and of business objectives. This regular scrutiny and accountability lead to some improvements being made in a strategic and well-considered way. For example, the introduction of an online system of assessment facilitates early and direct feedback to learners. However, targets from the quality improvement plan are not yet fully integrated with business objectives.
- The observation of teaching, learning and assessment does not concentrate sufficiently on improving learning and assessment. Its main focus is on ensuring adherence to assessment procedures and not on improving learners' experiences. Observers have not yet received sufficient training to give them greater expertise in evaluating learning when carrying out observations.
- The process of self-assessment and quality improvement is not fully established or understood throughout the company. The self-assessment report accurately identifies the majority of areas for improvement. However, it does not prioritise key actions nor assess how impact will be measured and good practice shared and built on. For example, tutors' sensitivity and understanding of learners' cultural and religious practices in one area are not followed in other areas. The self-assessment report does not explain why aspects of teaching and assessment are successful and how weaker practices, such as ineffective teaching of English, will be improved.
- Assessors receive regular observations of their assessment and teaching sessions and find the feedback useful to help them improve their assessment practices. Good use is made of meetings to monitor learners' learning and progress. Assessors find professional development very helpful in building their confidence to do a better job, through, for example, the use of online packages, equality and diversity and safeguarding training events.
- Performance management and continuous professional development are well considered and robust. Managers and assessors regularly review assessors' and tutors' targets and learners' performance. This leads to assessors undertaking good professional development and updating their professional practice. It also ensures that managers tackle poor and unacceptable performance promptly.
- The company works very well with employers and other stakeholders. It has formed several strong and vibrant partnerships that enable it to meet local and national priorities to improve the skills and qualifications of the workforce. For example, a large national company was delighted with the improvement in confidence and skills of the learners in the first cohort. This company is making the training available more widely to its managers, promoting the benefits of studying flexibly and improving their management skills and knowledge.
- Subcontractor management is good. Subcontractors benefit from the support and regular scrutiny from Paragon's managers. Other effective partnerships help learners to take part in training who might otherwise not engage in employment or training.
- Managers promote equality and understanding of diversity well. Learners with different needs, such as mental health issues or temporary homelessness, are looked after very appropriately and supported with understanding and good resources.
- Paragon meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. All staff receive good, regular training and updating on safeguarding. Procedures are robust and sound. Managers pay good attention to health and safety. Welfare and risk assessment arrangements for both staff and learners are good.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Paragon Education & Skills Limited

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	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-
Outcomes for learners	3	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	3	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-
The effectiveness of leadership and management	3	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Health and social care	3
Early years and playwork	2
Engineering	3
Business management	2

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider							
Age range of learners	16+							
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	10,734							
Principal/CEO	Managing Director, Dan O'Keefe							
Date of previous inspection	January 2011							
Website address	http://www.paragonskills.co.uk							
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+
	10	2	51	115	-	5	-	-
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	563	2523	251	2099	-	-		
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	-		-		-			
Number of learners aged 14-16	62							
Full-time	-							
Part-time	62							
Number of community learners	-							
Number of employability learners	-							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Liverpool College ■ Chichester College ■ Sarina Russo ■ Green Inc 							

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Paul Cocker HMI

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and six additional inspectors, assisted by the Group Quality Director 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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