

# Virtual College Limited

## Independent learning provider

<b>Inspection dates</b>		19–23 January 2015
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b>	<b>Requires improvement-3</b>
	Previous inspection:	Good-2
Outcomes for learners		Good-2
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Requires improvement-3

### Summary of key findings for learners

#### This provider requires improvement because:

- quality assurance arrangements, as outlined in an outsourcing agreement between the provider and its main subcontractor to manage its Skills Funding Agency (SFA) contract, are not sufficiently defined. Consequently, the infrastructure to manage the quality of the programme and the impact of proposed changes on learners are not clear
- the designated safeguarding officer had not received appropriate training at the commencement of the inspection.

#### This provider has the following strengths:

- success rates are good and the majority of learners make good progress
- learners receive good support from their employers and from staff who are well qualified and experienced
- information, advice and guidance are good and ensure learners are on the right programmes and understand how they can progress further
- good collaboration with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and other agencies has ensured that programmes meet the needs of learners and employers well and strong partnership working has been successful in securing funding to develop online training resources focused on employability and personal skills development.

## Full report

### What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Continue to maintain and improve success rates, particularly for apprentices.
- Challenge tutors and assessors to achieve outstanding performance in teaching, learning and assessment by sharing good practice and providing staff with aspirational goals.
- Swiftly implement a clear operational structure so that the key responsibilities and monitoring of all aspects of the outsourced training delivery and support services are clearly defined and regularly monitored.
- Ensure that safeguarding responsibilities between Virtual College and its contractor are precisely defined and audited against current legislative and contractual requirements so that learners' safety is prioritised and assured at all times.

### Inspection judgements

<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	Good
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- Approximately half of all learners on programme since September 2014 follow apprenticeships at intermediate and advanced levels in business administration, health and social care, performing manufacturing operations, customer service, management, warehousing, and housing. The vast majority are in health and social care. A similar proportion of learners follow short classroom based courses at level 2 in lean organisational management techniques and warehousing. The vast majority are employability learners who obtain qualifications in warehousing. Virtual College currently has no workplace learners as short courses in business improvement and performing manufacturing operations finished in 2013/14.
- Outcomes for learners are good, which correlates well with good teaching, learning and assessment. Overall success rates and success rates for learners who achieve within planned timescales for both classroom-based learners and workplace learners are high and have been for the past two years. However, the proportion of apprentices who achieved their full framework declined in 2013/14 to below the national average. The proportion of successful apprentices who completed within the planned period for 2013/14 also declined but is above the national rate.
- Data provided by Virtual College indicate success rates for apprentices are currently near the national rate, which is an improvement on the previous year. Success rates for classroom-based learners remain consistently high.
- The majority of learners make good progress. They enjoy their learning and value the support they receive from assessors and tutors and are motivated to achieve. Staff are well qualified and have relevant vocational knowledge and experience that they use well to develop learners' skills and understanding. Learners are well supported in the classroom and in the workplace. A significant proportion of employability learners progress into employment, and business administration apprentices progress well from intermediate to advanced level programmes.
- Learners' work is of a good standard. Employability learners produce work to industry standards. Work done by health and social care apprentices is valued highly by employers. They work independently, sometimes in challenging working environments and are growing in confidence. Most learners develop useful social and work-related skills that enhance their development in the workplace and allow them to move more quickly into positions of trust and responsibility.

- Learners' English and mathematics skills are developed well. Tutors' and assessors' feedback to learners is constructive but their written feedback does not always identify errors in spelling and grammar to allow learners to improve.
- The analysis of the performance of different groups of learners has not identified any significant differences between them; the analysis of the performance of the significant proportion of White British males on programmes is not currently carried out. The provider has prioritised the analysis of leavers from programmes and their destinations, particularly those with learning difficulties and disabilities, and uses the information well to inform improvements in the provision.

### The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment are good, as reflected in the consistently good success rates. Learners benefit from good training, coaching and individual guidance that increases their confidence very effectively and supports the development of good employability, personal and social skills. Apprentices quickly take on additional responsibility and make good contributions in the workplace providing, for example, very good customer service for clients at the financial advisory service or in specialist dental supplies.
- Learners are highly motivated and readily engage in their learning as a result of the high expectations of tutors. They benefit from good care and support, which helps them to make good progress. Apprentices develop their practical work skills very effectively in the good workplaces where employers provide very good training and support. Assessment practices are good. Tutors use a wide range of very effective and responsive methods to provide a good variety of evidence.
- Tutors are knowledgeable about their subjects and use this effectively to improve learners' skills. They plan a range of varied learning and assessment activities using varied, interesting and practical approaches that develop learners' knowledge and understanding well. As a result learners are able to make good progress. Tutors' skilful questioning techniques and well-considered discussions ensure that apprentices' understanding and expertise improve quickly.
- Learners are generally well supported by good-quality resources. Apprentices develop their knowledge and understanding through effective use of well-designed workbooks. The increasing use of online materials benefits learners and employers and contributes very effectively in providing a flexible curriculum. Electronic resources are not currently available to support all aspects of the apprenticeship framework nor are they yet used by all learners. Accommodation for learners on employability programmes is not always suitable to support their learning.
- Initial assessment of learners' prior knowledge and experience is timely and highly effective. Tutors provide good support for learners who are working below the levels required for their apprenticeship framework or to improve employability prospects. Progress reviews are thorough and have a positive impact on learning and progress. The majority of employers provide good feedback at reviews so that learners are clear about their progress in the workplace and how this links with their vocational qualifications. Learners have clear and appropriately challenging targets that staff monitor closely.
- Tutors provide thorough and constructive oral feedback so that learners are clear about what they do well and where they can improve. Written feedback is less effective in identifying how learners can improve the quality of their work.
- Tutors manage the functional skills needs of learners well to plan and develop their English and mathematics. As a result they quickly improve their skills and are able to apply them in the workplace. For example, learners accurately calculate the number of saws and knives produced during working sessions. Not all tutors routinely identify and correct spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. The standard of work in the majority of apprentices' portfolios is good.

- Tutors provide good initial advice and guidance at programme entry and, as a result, learners are recruited to the right course at the right level. The work-based units chosen match the interests of apprentices and their job roles well. Guidance for progression from intermediate to advanced level programmes is very effective and tutors and workplace supervisors engage in regular discussions with apprentices about how they can progress their careers. Induction is detailed and highly effective in introducing learners to the key aspects of their programme using a good variety of interesting electronic resources.
- The culture of respect between learners and tutors is very strong. Learners gain a good understanding of equality and diversity, which are promoted well at induction and in the vast majority of progress reviews.

## Health and social care

### Apprenticeships

Good

#### Teaching, learning and assessment in health and social care are good because:

- success rates are high and the majority of apprentices remain on programme and gain their qualifications within the agreed time; they make good progress in their learning and skills development and apply this practically in the workplace
- assessors use engaging techniques and skilful questioning to help apprentices make strong links between theory and practice; one apprentice used their knowledge of promoting dignity to service users by involving a young person with autism in decisions about their own medication
- strong professional development provides apprentices with up-to-date knowledge that is crucial for working with service users who have a variety of medical conditions and needs
- highly effective, individualised support given to apprentices builds confidence quickly; observations and assessments are carried out flexibly to fit in with shift patterns so that apprentices maximise learning opportunities
- employers and assessors work together well so that apprentices at risk of leaving are quickly identified; highly effective strategies are put in place to ensure apprentices remain engaged on the programme
- comprehensive tracking of the programme ensures that progress is clearly recorded and shared; staff, apprentices and employers have a precise understanding of individual progress
- apprentices have a clear understanding of their next steps through regular reviews and individualised targeted support; specific programmes tailored to individual workplace roles support the development of highly relevant workplace skills
- the importance of English skills is routinely reinforced through emphasis on using correct spelling and grammar; apprentices are supported and encouraged to develop further the skills needed by carrying out further reading and research
- apprentices have a good understanding of the individual rights and needs of service users with different characteristics; they apply this well in the workplace
- learners are tolerant and supportive and respect and value the opinions of others.

#### Health and social care is not yet outstanding because:

- apprentices and employers are not fully informed and aware of their current progress in English and mathematics and do not always see the value of these subjects.

**Manufacturing technologies****Apprenticeships  
19+ learning programmes**

Good

**Teaching, learning and assessment in engineering and manufacturing technologies are good because:**

- apprentices and other learners make good progress; they develop good occupational skills, become more confident, work independently and produce a high standard of work; one apprentice manufactured all the components of industrial window blinds to a good standard
- apprentices benefit from high expectations of their tutors and assessors; competent and knowledgeable tutors and assessors motivate apprentices well; they use a good range of teaching and learning methods to interest apprentices and to increase their awareness; tutors and assessors use good, probing questions to check apprentices' knowledge and understanding
- tutors and assessors support apprentices well; in a session for production in manufacturing the tutor produces a pen picture of each learner based on their assessment and this is updated daily to record support and learners' progress
- realistic and challenging targets are set at reviews to improve apprentices' performance; progress is monitored well using charts that demonstrate clearly progress that is made by each apprentice in each module
- emphasis on health and safety awareness is strong; apprentices have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities; they are well informed of their company's regulations and procedures, and responsibility for its employees; they have a good understanding of the importance of working safely in the manufacturing industry
- assessment of apprentices' work is good; assessment of subcontracted apprentices is enhanced by the use of videos and is incorporated in their e-portfolios
- apprentices' mathematical skills are developed well in vocational work; they interpret sketches and drawings ably, measure aluminium components accurately and build sections of vertical blinds for windows to the required dimensional tolerances
- equality and diversity are covered well in learning sessions.

**Manufacturing technologies is not yet outstanding because:**

- tutors and assessors do not routinely help apprentices to improve their English skills; they overlook apprentices' grammatical and spelling mistakes.

**Employability training****Employability**

Good

**Teaching, learning and assessment in employability training are good because:**

- a large majority of learners successfully complete their qualifications; learners make good progress and gain personal skills, such as team building and better health and safety awareness in preparation for employment; all learners have a guaranteed interview with an employer or recruitment agency and a significant minority are able to gain employment

- tutors make accurate assessments of learners’ starting points and use them extremely effectively to identify learners’ support needs; tutors identify the current skills and experience of learners well and use this to maximise peer and group learning
- individualised learning support is good; highly experienced and skilled tutors convey their knowledge well to learners in the workplace and the classroom; learners enjoy sessions and are confident that they are developing skills reflecting industry standards
- tutors make good use of a range of assessment methods; learners are able to demonstrate their learning in their preferred way and they are clear about the progress they are making; verbal feedback to learners is clear and motivating
- learners receive good information and advice prior to their course to confirm their suitability and this helps to ensure retention of learners is very high; learners understand the requirements of employers and know their options for progression and further development well
- tutors respond very effectively to employers’ requirements and in some instances include special additional training for learners, such as using equipment for ‘voice pick’ in warehouse work to meet local needs
- all sessions are highly inclusive, particularly for females who are underrepresented in this industry, ensuring they participate and contribute fully in sessions
- learners develop their English and communication skills well as an integral part of their course
- equality and diversity are covered well during learning sessions in preparation for work.

**Employability training is not yet outstanding because:**

- tutors do not provide learners with sufficiently detailed written feedback to know how to improve their spelling and grammar
- cold and cramped classrooms are not always suitable to facilitate concentration and learning.

<b>Administration</b> <b>Customer service</b>  <b>Apprenticeships</b>	Good
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**Teaching, learning and assessment in administration and customer service are good because:**

- a high proportion of apprentices, particularly at advanced level, successfully complete their qualifications; they are making good progress and producing a good standard of work that reflects their understanding of business principles and best customer service practices
- assessors and employers have high expectations of their apprentices; the large majority develop particularly relevant vocational and personal skills to advance their roles, responsibilities and opportunities to progress within the organisation
- assessors are knowledgeable and experienced and deliver well-planned individual learning sessions that ensure previous learning is checked and consolidated and new learning is linked and understood
- assessors design a good range of task-focused activities that are delivered at a good pace and develop problem-solving and independent thinking; assessments enable apprentices to show how they are meeting their learning goals; verbal feedback is particularly constructive and detailed

- apprentices advance their understanding, skills and confidence and are successful in achieving English, mathematics and information and communication technology qualifications; these skills are well integrated in the individual learning sessions
- apprentices have a good understanding of the progress they make; regular reviews capture this very effectively; apprentices have clear targets to achieve and homework tasks to complete before the next planned visit
- apprentices are well informed about the programme and its requirements through a good induction process; thorough information, advice and guidance combined with particularly effective initial assessment, ensures apprentices are on the right programme at the right level and supported thoroughly with their progress
- learning is well supported by good-quality resources; apprentices value the workbooks and how the content helps to develop their knowledge and understanding
- equality and diversity are promoted well through resources, workbooks and discussions; apprentices work in safe and respectful environments.

#### **Administration and customer service are not yet outstanding because:**

- assessors do not always provide detailed written feedback or correct spelling and grammatical errors to improve further the quality of apprentices' work
- assessors do not consistently complete their review of individual learning plans promptly to ensure apprentices are clear about their next steps.

### **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

**Requires improvement**

- Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have successfully maintained the high outcomes achieved by learners. An outsourcing agreement with Virtual College's main subcontractor to manage responsibilities for its SFA contract is now partly in place; this requires improvement. The day-to-day management of the contract, management of quality assurance systems and of safeguarding arrangements are now the responsibility of the subcontractor. Leaders have not given sufficiently detailed consideration in specifying the operational infrastructure needed to provide effective contractual oversight and ensure the quality of provision. During the inspection, leaders put into place a revised process to manage the outsourced contract, but it is too early to judge the effectiveness of the proposals.
- Quality assurance arrangements to strengthen teaching, learning and assessment are now much more reliable in evaluating the overall quality and standards of teaching, learning and assessment. Previously, lesson observation records varied considerably in quality. Many judgements were not sufficiently evaluative and the evidence to support them was inconsistent and too variable, particularly in the judgements about the progress that learners make.
- Managers have recently revised and strengthened the observation process by rightly focusing on the impact of learning rather than on the methods of teaching. As a result tutors and assessors now benefit from sharper and more precise observation feedback and managers have a realistic picture of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The judgments made by inspectors are in close agreement with those made by managers in their own observations. The lesson observation system has identified very little outstanding teaching, learning and assessment.
- Leaders have established robust procedures to manage the performance of staff to remove weak or inconsistent practices. All staff receive an annual appraisal and review that links individual performance to previously agreed targets and focuses on areas of strength and what they need to do to improve further. Staff are well qualified for their roles. They benefit from the high level of commitment shown by leaders to support their continuous professional development, including the incorporation of English and mathematics, and equality and diversity

into learning. The impact of the new outsourced arrangements on performance management of staff, their annual appraisals and professional development is not yet clear.

- The self-assessment report contains an appropriate level of self-criticism and the majority of the grades are accurate. Although managers now have a much clearer understanding of the quality of their provision and know what they need to do to improve it further, some aspects of quality assurance still remain underdeveloped and require improvement. For example, the views of staff, employers and learners are not always fully considered. Although managers monitor data relating to the recruitment and performance of different groups of learners, they do not analyse the performance of significant groups, for example, those of white British heritage.
- Leaders and managers understand their local labour market well and work closely with the Leeds City Region LEP. As a result of this partnership, they have been successful in securing funding to develop online training resources focused on employability and personal development skills for those who are furthest away from the labour market.
- Managers make effective use of their membership of a wide range of network groups and use their understanding of local priorities to provide a range of programmes that closely align to local needs and national initiatives. For example, managers work well with local employers and other local agencies to ensure that learners on employability courses have access to relevant job opportunities and gain a range of useful vocational qualifications; as a result a significant percentage subsequently secure employment. Virtual College has developed an extensive suite of online courses to meet the needs of its learners, but they are not used by all learners.
- The promotion of both equality and diversity is good. Staff benefit from good access to relevant and up-to-date training materials to support and extend their knowledge in promoting inclusion, equality and diversity in learning sessions. In addition, relevant policies and procedures are in place and well established. As a result learners have a good understanding of tolerance and respect and are well aware of how to deal with bullying, harassment and discrimination. However, managers' monitoring of performance against the targets outlined in the equality action plan has not been kept up-to-date.
- Safeguarding arrangements require improvement. The day-to-day oversight of safeguarding is now the responsibility of a subcontractor. Leaders failed to ensure at the point of contractual agreement that the appointed designated person at Virtual College with overall responsibility for safeguarding held an appropriate qualification. As a result the provider did not have a suitably qualified person appointed to the role. During the inspection leaders took action to ensure the appropriate person was suitably trained. Learners' understanding of safeguarding is reinforced during online training and planned reviews. Incidents of safeguarding concerns are very rare and learners say that they feel safe.



## 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	3	N/A
	Outcomes for learners	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	N/A
	The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	N/A
	The effectiveness of leadership and management	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	3	N/A

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
<b>Health and social care</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Manufacturing technologies</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Employability training</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Administration</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Customer service</b>	<b>2</b>

## Provider details

<b>Type of provider</b>	Independent learning provider							
<b>Age range of learners</b>	16+							
<b>Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year</b>	1,269							
<b>Principal/CEO</b>	Rod Knox							
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	January 2009							
<b>Website address</b>	www.virtual-college.co.uk							
<b>Provider information at the time of the inspection</b>								
<b>Main course or learning programme level</b>	<b>Level 1 or below</b>		<b>Level 2</b>		<b>Level 3</b>		<b>Level 4 and above</b>	
<b>Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)</b>	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	N/A	N/A	N/A	22	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age</b>	<b>Intermediate</b>		<b>Advanced</b>		<b>Higher</b>			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	72	76	4	82	N/A	N/A		
<b>Number of traineeships</b>	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		N/A			
<b>Number of learners aged 14-16</b>	N/A							
<b>Full-time</b>	N/A							
<b>Part-time</b>	N/A							
<b>Number of community learners</b>	N/A							
<b>Number of employability learners</b>	275							
<b>Funding received from</b>	Skills Funding Agency							
<b>At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Baltic Training Services Ltd</li> <li>■ NTG Training Ltd</li> </ul>							

## Contextual information

Based in Ilkley, West Yorkshire, Virtual College was established in 1995 to develop e-learning training materials for the engineering and manufacturing industries. Virtual College provides training across the North of England. It has held a direct contract with the Skills Funding Agency since 2007. A divisional director supported by a training manager, an independent audit and compliance director, two full-time tutor/assessors, one part-time tutor/assessor and an administrator support the delivery of the contract.

## Information about this inspection

<b>Lead inspector</b>	Robert Hamp HMI
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Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the training 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. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used 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:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/handbook-for-the-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-from-september-2012](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/handbook-for-the-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-from-september-2012)

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