

Vision Express

Employer

**Inspection dates**

17–20 November 2015

Overall effectiveness**Requires improvement**

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Outcomes for learners

Require improvement

Apprenticeships

Require improvement

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- The apprenticeship programme is new to Vision Express and members of the apprenticeship delivery team have been unable to resolve initial problems quickly enough because they have not yet fully developed the necessary expertise.
- Apprentices do not receive enough help and guidance with functional skills. Although only a small minority of apprentices are required to complete these qualifications, few learners pass, especially in mathematics.
- Tutors and assessors do not assess apprentices' written work frequently enough or give written feedback that is sufficiently detailed to help apprentices to develop their understanding as quickly as they are able.
- Tutors and assessors do not do enough to personalise learning activities within off-the-job training, and a few learners, especially the more knowledgeable and experienced, become bored and distracted.
- The proportion of apprentices who successfully complete their programme is not yet high enough.
- Quality and performance monitoring at all levels is not yet fully effective. As a result, managers have been unable to clearly identify staff training needs and establish a development programme that leads to the necessary improvements.

The provider has the following strengths

- Vision Express staff care well for their apprentices; apprentices enjoy their studies, develop good personal and practical skills and grow in confidence as a result.
- Almost all successful apprentices progress into permanent positions within Vision Express. They establish clear career goals and are supported well to develop their skills to achieve them.
- Managers have established the apprenticeship programme as part of a carefully considered strategy to develop the workforce of Vision Express. They value greatly the contribution apprentices make to the organisation.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Vision Express is a large optical retail group that began trading in 1988. In 1997, the company was acquired by Europe's largest optical retail group, GrandVision. Vision Express has 392 stores across the United Kingdom, 303 of which are owned and operated by Vision Express itself, three through franchises and 86 through joint venture arrangements. The Vision Express brand is also present in a number of other countries.
- The company began recruiting apprentices in February 2014 as part of their broader recruitment strategy. The aim of the programme is to attract young people to a career in the business and to support succession planning. So far, the company has recruited a total of 97 apprentices.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Conduct a thorough review of functional skills within the apprenticeship programme, including the timing of functional skills delivery within the overall programme, recruitment processes, assessment of apprentices' starting points, and methods of teaching, learning and assessment. Develop a new model of delivery that leads to a far higher proportion of apprentices successfully completing these qualifications.
- Allocate clear responsibility for all aspects of each apprentice's programme so that their progress in all elements is monitored very effectively, problems and delays identified at an early stage, and actions implemented swiftly so that a greater proportion of apprentices successfully complete the full framework.
- Train all assessors, possibly using assessor qualifications, so that they fully understand different approaches to assessment and their responsibilities for ensuring that apprentices know how well they are doing and are able to make rapid progress.
- Train all trainers so that they understand how to make best use of information on apprentices' progress to develop training that challenges each individual, especially the most able and experienced, so that all apprentices remain fully motivated in sessions.
- Develop all team members' understanding of apprenticeships through, for example, the use of good practice guides, partnerships with more experienced apprenticeship providers, and attendance at good practice seminars.
- Implement more robust quality monitoring processes such as a programme of observation for assessors and trainers, learner file audits, improved internal verification processes, and the establishment and monitoring of clearer targets for all staff. Use the information this provides to plan a detailed staff training programme.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

requires improvement

- Senior leaders have an ambitious vision for apprenticeships and see the intermediate-level apprenticeship in optical retail as an integral part of their strategy for people development and succession planning. There is a clear expectation that apprentices will move into permanent employment within Vision Express and senior managers expect apprentices to develop into the managers and skilled technicians of the future. The programme has been well resourced. Apprentices feel part of the Vision Express team and most become permanent full-time employees of the business.
- Managers of the apprenticeship programme have not always responded sufficiently quickly or effectively to emerging problems with the programme. One of the reasons for this is that they have limited experience of apprenticeship programmes and, although they have sought guidance from appropriate sources, they have not yet developed fully the skills they need to manage the provision successfully.
- Trainers and assessors have not yet developed fully the range of skills they need to support all apprentices effectively. Assessor training has been insufficient and the support provided by internal quality assurance staff, themselves new to apprenticeships, has not led to sufficiently rapid improvements in the programme. As a result, assessors have not monitored apprentices' progress across the full range of programme components. This has led to delays in the progress of a minority of apprentices.
- Managers do not systematically monitor the performance of staff and, as a result, managers are unable to establish a staff development programme that fully supports the improvement of apprenticeships. For example, managers do not observe trainers and assessors at work, and the satisfaction of apprentices is only gauged on a sporadic and informal basis. Review meetings between store managers, who also fulfil the role of assessor, and their regional managers do not capture sufficiently details of the training and development assessors need to enable them to work more effectively with apprentices. Existing good practice is not identified and shared with other members of the apprenticeship team.
- Managers have given insufficient priority to helping apprentices achieve English and mathematics functional skills qualifications. They are aware of the problems in this aspect of the apprenticeship programme but have been slow to resolve them. As a result, only a small minority of apprentices who need to achieve these qualifications actually do so, particularly in mathematics.
- Vision Express has engaged the services of a consultant to help them assess the quality of their provision, and the resulting self-assessment report captures accurately many of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. Managers have developed a coherent quality improvement plan in response to the self-assessment report but it is too early to assess its impact. A small number of strengths and weaknesses are overstated in the report and a few weaknesses, such as the quality of assessment of written work, are not identified.
- Managers have given careful consideration to the structure and content of the apprenticeship programme. This meets their needs as an employer and of the sector as a whole. As a result, apprentices are well equipped to work in the optical retail business and are sought after by other employers.
- Vision Express managers promote a very positive culture and apprentices learn how to interact with different team members and respond to the diverse needs of customers. However, managers and assessors do not do enough to help apprentices understand the applicability of this knowledge to their lives outside work or the fundamental British values they should apply to their daily lives.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - Senior managers are responsible for providing oversight of the apprenticeship programme and providing support and challenge to managers.
 - They meet frequently with managers responsible for the apprenticeship programme to review progress but, as with other staff involved in the programme, they are not yet sufficiently knowledgeable about apprenticeships to provide enough help to improve the provision.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - Apprentices are safe because Vision Express managers take great care over arrangements for them. For example, staff adjust rotas to make sure that young apprentices do not travel alone and in the dark and they arrange chaperones for apprentices visiting the Nottingham support centre.
 - Managers maintain detailed records of incidents and take prompt and appropriate action to address the few concerns raised.
 - The provider carries out appropriate checks on staff and workplaces and keeps up-to-date records.
 - Staff are aware of their responsibilities to identify and report concerns about radicalisation and extremism.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

requires improvement

- Staff have not done enough to ensure that apprentices successfully complete all components of their programme. In the past, staff have not routinely set targets or monitored progress in off-the-job learning and apprentices make slower progress in these elements of their programme. Assessors have recently agreed improvement plans with apprentices and the large majority of apprentices now make adequate progress towards successfully completing their framework.
- Apprentices undertaking functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics make slow progress. They receive too little support to complete online learning materials and their progress is not monitored adequately. Assessors develop apprentices' English and mathematics skills well in the workplace but do not link these skills sufficiently to the requirements of functional skills qualifications. Trainers do not reinforce English and mathematics skills sufficiently in off-the-job training sessions. Staff do not routinely support apprentices to improve the quality of their writing by, for example, correcting errors in their written work.
- The majority of assessors check apprentices' completed work frequently for progress and provide appropriate written feedback. This is one reason their apprentices make adequate progress. However, a minority of assessors leave too long between reviews of their apprentices' written work, depriving them of the opportunity to receive feedback and discuss progress. In a few cases, apprentices are not clear about who will assess their work and when this will happen. As a result, a minority of apprentices do not progress from their starting points as rapidly as they are able.
- Assessors help apprentices to develop their knowledge of equality and diversity within the store environment and understand the sensitivities that can arise when dealing with customers. For example, one learner demonstrated discretion when a nervous customer, with a language barrier, visited the store with an interpreter by providing a discreet space in store and by putting the customer at their ease. Another learner enabled a physically disabled customer in a wheelchair to undertake an eye test by prearranging adequate space. However, many assessors do not regularly raise diversity themes in discussions with apprentices and during progress reviews, which prevents apprentices from debating and exploring a range of appropriate topics and issues.
- Trainers use their good vocational knowledge and experience to provide off-the-job training sessions that link theory to apprentices' job roles well. This enables apprentices to strengthen their technical knowledge about optics and become more effective at work. However, trainers do not always check ongoing learning in these sessions thoroughly enough to confirm the extent of apprentices' progress. As a result, trainers do not develop learning and assessment activities that challenge all apprentices, especially those who are more knowledgeable and experienced. This results in a few apprentices occasionally becoming bored and losing interest.
- Assessors provide good help for apprentices to develop the practical skills that are specifically linked to their job roles. As a result, apprentices make good progress in developing skills such as carrying out pre-screening tests and frame adjustment.
- Assessors are well qualified and experienced in optical retail, many being dispensing opticians and experienced store managers. They are good role models for their apprentices and inspire them to follow a career as an optical assistant, technician, dispensing optician or manager. They use their experience well to make on-the-job learning real and relevant. As a result, apprentices are enthusiastic about their learning and are keen to improve quickly and achieve their qualifications. Apprentices welcome the frequent face-to-face contact they have in store with assessors and respect their expertise and knowledge.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is good

- Apprentices develop a wide range of vocational and personal skills that enhance their performance at work and their future employment prospects. They use technical equipment well, including precision measuring equipment and a range of different optical instruments. They use their skills very effectively to meet the needs of customers. For example, they use a combination of customer service and technical skills when conducting pre-screening tests such as retinal imaging and pressure testing.
- Apprentices value their education and the opportunities available to them at Vision Express. They aspire to progress to a higher level and more specialist roles within optical retailing, such as store manager and qualified contact lens optician. They grow in confidence and work well as team members within their store.

- Store managers provide their apprentices with consistently high-quality care and support. They provide a high degree of flexibility to support the personal, employment and academic development of apprentices. For example, work timetables are structured to ensure that learners can travel to and from work safely and also that they can attend off-the-job training when required. Assessors carefully manage the on-the-job programme of their apprentices so that they have access to a wide range of workplace opportunities to develop the whole range of their practical skills.
- Assessors and trainers promote clear messages about expected behaviours and conduct including the use of insensitive and derogatory language. Apprentices appreciate this and respond with enthusiasm and commitment. They are punctual, appropriately presented and communicative.
- Apprentices are safe and feel safe, and have a good understanding of how to raise concerns if they do not. Apprentices recognise the importance of following appropriate safety procedures at work. For example, they use safety glasses and equipment correctly and unprompted when using specialist laboratory equipment to alter frames for customers.
- Apprentices receive good advice and guidance about the apprenticeship programme before they start and assessors provide them with clear information about careers within Vision Express. Apprentices use this information well to develop appropriate career plans. Staff encourage apprentices to progress as far as they can, and training and progression routes through to dispensing optician roles or store management are well signposted. However, the small number of apprentices who decide that a career in optical retailing is not for them receive too little guidance on alternatives.

Outcomes for learners

require improvement

- Too few of the small minority of apprentices who need to complete functional skills qualifications are successful, particularly in mathematics. Although most of these apprentices remain in employment with Vision Express, they do not complete their full framework and a few leave the organisation without having gained these important qualifications.
- The large majority of current apprentices make progress that is in line with expectations given their starting points. The proportion who achieve their qualifications within planned timescales is slightly lower than for providers nationally but is rising steadily. Apprentices who are currently on the programme have experienced some delays in their progress but recent changes to assessors and clear action plans have helped most of them get back on track.
- Almost all apprentices remain in employment at the end of their programme. The rare occasions where this is not the case are those where an apprentice shows a poor attitude to work. The apprenticeship programme is aligned to the bronze level of training provided by Vision Express to all its optical assistants. Apprentices subsequently move on to the silver and gold levels of training, completion of which brings greater responsibility and financial reward. However, there are currently no opportunities for apprentices to progress to an advanced apprenticeship.
- Apprentices develop good practical expertise and consequently perform tasks in the workplace with confidence and skill. They are also helped to develop well a range of softer skills such as the ability to communicate effectively as a member of the team. For example, they successfully resolve problems for customers, convert prescriptions accurately and measure spectacle frames with precision. Apprentices complete a series of workbooks that develop and test their knowledge and their written work is satisfactory.
- Apprentices are enthusiastic about their programme and the opportunity it gives them to progress in a career in optical retailing. They are able to describe in detail the expertise that they have developed and there is a genuine note of pride in their voices as they describe the tasks they are able to carry out. They are able to describe the function of equipment such as fundus cameras and can explain the application of mathematics to problems such as calculating the total prescription needed by a customer by combining the spherical and cylindrical power of the prescription.
- There are no discernible differences in the outcomes of different groups of learners such as those from different ethnic backgrounds.

Provider details

Type of provider	Employer
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	54
Principal/CEO	Jonathan Lawson
Website address	www.visionexpress.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	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)								
	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	42	15						
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
Number of learners aged 14-16								
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:								

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Russell Henry, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Christine Blowman	Ofsted Inspector
Maureen Deary	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the Recruitment Manager – Future Talent, as nominee, and carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of students and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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