

Skillnet Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

1–4 March 2016

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement
Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
Apprenticeships	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- The proportion of apprentices who complete their programmes successfully has declined sharply over time to below that of similar providers.
- Too many apprentices following programmes other than motor vehicle and engineering do not make the progress of which they are capable.
- Too much teaching, learning and assessment are not good; not enough trainers and assessors plan sufficiently well to meet the needs of all their apprentices.
- Assessors and trainers conduct infrequent visits with apprentices studying administration and health and social care courses. As a result, too many apprentices do not know what actions to take to improve their work.
- Not enough trainers and assessors enable apprentices to develop their English skills well.
- Until recently, leaders' arrangements for improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have not been sufficiently rigorous.
- Leaders do not analyse sufficiently the performance of different groups of apprentices nor plan specific actions to reduce achievement gaps between most groups of apprentices.
- Leaders' performance management of subcontractors has only recently become sufficiently robust to improve outcomes for all apprentices.
- Staff turnover has been too high over time and, as a result, and until recently, a small minority of apprentices had not been receiving the minimum level of tuition, support and guidance as per funding contractual requirements.

The provider has the following strengths

- The large majority of apprentices following motor vehicle and engineering programmes receive good teaching, learning and assessment from well-qualified trainers and assessors; they develop good knowledge and skills and, consequently, enhance their contribution to the workplace, take up additional responsibilities or secure promotion.
- Most apprentices following programmes in motor vehicle and engineering develop their mathematics skills well.
- Leaders work very productively with a range of major national employers within the motor vehicle and heavy goods vehicle industries. As a result, leaders have ensured that motor vehicle apprenticeships provision is very responsive to the changing requirements of the industry and meets the needs of employers.
- Leaders have made a concerted and successful effort to increase the proportion of females studying motor vehicle apprenticeship provision.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Skillnet Limited is based in Watford and provides apprenticeship training for 2,778 apprentices working at 1,063 employers across the country. Just over sixth tenths of apprentices are following programmes at intermediate level and around a third of all apprentices are aged 16 to 18. The majority follow programmes in motor vehicle, health and social care, warehousing and distribution, administration and business management. Subcontractors teach and assess 986 apprentices.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - trainers and assessors use information on apprentices' starting points to plan learning that challenges them effectively
 - assessors extend apprentices' understanding routinely through the use of deeper questioning and challenging extension activities
 - trainers and assessors conduct frequent visits with all apprentices and make sure that all apprentices understand fully what actions they need to take in order to improve their work
 - assessors set targets that challenge all apprentices to extend their learning and reach their potential
 - trainers' and assessors' feedback on apprentices' work is comprehensive and enables them to improve
 - employers' comments at reviews of apprentices' progress are sufficiently detailed to enable apprentices to understand fully what they need to do to improve.
- Improve English and mathematics provision by ensuring that:
 - assessors and trainers have the confidence and expertise to promote these essential skills effectively with all apprentices
 - all staff set high expectations for the standard of apprentices' written English skills
 - all apprentices have the opportunity to develop their English and mathematics skills beyond the minimum level required for their programme.
- Leaders should produce more incisive and self-critical evaluations of the provision in order to identify and plan accurately the required improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Leaders should analyse frequently the performance of all groups of apprentices and plan specific actions to ensure that all apprentices succeed.
- Leaders should ensure that good practice in the teaching, learning and assessment of apprentices following motor vehicle and engineering programmes is shared with all staff teaching and assessing other subjects, including that of subcontractors.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- Since the previous inspection, leaders have expanded the apprenticeships provision significantly into a broader range of subject areas and contracted with an increased volume of subcontractors; leaders have ensured that provision has continued to provide good outcomes for the large majority of apprentices following motor vehicle programmes but the outcomes for the majority of apprentices studying most other subjects have not been good enough.
- Staff turnover has been too high over time and, consequently, and until very recently, too many assessors had 'caseloads' of apprentices that were far larger than leaders' targets; as a result, a small minority of apprentices had not been receiving at least the minimum level of tuition, support and guidance as per contractual requirements. The performance management of staff has recently improved, but for too long was insufficiently robust to ensure that apprentices stayed in learning and achieved; as a result, success rates have declined over time and are below those of similar providers.
- Leaders' arrangements for improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have not been effective. Leaders' self-assessment and evaluation of provision have not been sufficiently incisive and self-critical to secure improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Leaders have not ensured that sufficient observations of teaching, learning and assessment have been conducted to enable leaders and managers to understand strengths and areas for improvement and plan appropriate actions to rectify weaknesses. However, leaders have recently appointed four new directors to spearhead the improvement process, with the result that robust plans have now been established that clearly set out a rigorous monitoring and evaluation process designed to raise the standard of teaching, learning and assessment. Leaders have established the capacity to secure improvement but it is too early to judge the impact of this.
- Leaders have not ensured that the good practice in teaching, learning and assessment of apprentices following motor vehicle and engineering programmes, including the good practice of subcontractors, is shared sufficiently with all staff who teach and assess other subjects.
- Leaders have an accurate understanding of the overall success rates of the provider's direct provision and its subcontractors. Leaders' actions have enabled apprentices with disabilities to perform at least as well as those without. However, leaders do not analyse the performance of differing groups of apprentices sufficiently. Consequently, they do not plan specific actions to reduce achievement gaps between most groups of apprentices and ensure that no apprentice is at a disadvantage because of his or her origin, background and lifestyle.
- Leaders have dedicated resources recently to improve the English and mathematics provision. This includes a mandatory staff training programme designed to ensure that all trainers and assessors are competent in promoting the value of these essential skills. However, leaders have not ensured that apprentices have the opportunity to develop their English and mathematics skills further than the minimum requirements of their apprenticeship.
- Leaders' performance management of subcontractors had not been sufficiently rigorous and, consequently, not enough apprentices completed their qualifications successfully. Leaders were slow to take action to rectify subcontractor underperformance, including aspects of funding compliance identified at audit. However, leaders have recently adopted a more robust approach to improving subcontractors' underperformance. As a result, more timely and effective actions have been put in place that are now beginning to improve outcomes for apprentices on subcontractors' programmes.
- Leaders work very productively with a range of major national employers within the motor vehicle and heavy goods vehicle industries. As a result, leaders have ensured that provision in motor vehicle apprenticeships is very responsive to the changing requirements of the industry and meets the needs of employers. However, leaders have not established sufficiently strong partnership working with employers in most of the other subject areas to ensure that the provision meets industry requirements.
- Managers ensure that the large majority of their staff promote equality effectively. Leaders have played a significant role within a national initiative to promote female apprentices' participation and achievement in traditionally male employment areas. As a result, the proportion of female apprentices following motor vehicle programmes with the provider has increased markedly.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - The challenge that board members provide has yet to bring about sustained improvement. Until very recently, board members did not focus sufficiently on the impact of teaching, learning and assessment on the outcomes of apprentices; scant attention was paid to the impact on the different groups of apprentices or the destinations of all leavers. However, board members are now clear as to their roles and responsibilities and are now providing effective challenge to leaders.

- Governance has recently become more effective, strengthened by the appointment of four new directors with considerable expertise and experience in managing apprenticeships provision. Leaders' reports are now focused on raising the standards of teaching, learning and assessment and improving outcomes for all apprentices; however, it is too early to judge the impact of this.

■ **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**

- Managers conduct appropriate checks when recruiting staff and maintain an up-to-date record of all staff in relation to safeguarding concerns. The safeguarding policy is effective and comprehensive procedures are in place to ensure the safety of all apprentices. The referral procedure for any arising safeguarding concerns is established across the organisation but lacks clarity.
- The provider's designated safeguarding officer works well with the local safeguarding board in the Watford area but has yet to develop appropriate partnership workings with safeguarding boards in 'Prevent' priority areas where apprentices reside or work across the country. All staff have completed appropriate 'Prevent' training and the majority promote the dangers of extremism with their apprentices effectively. Leaders review subcontractors' training and policies on tackling radicalisation regularly.
- Apprentices are respectful of each other and their colleagues at work and, where any instances of perceived bullying and harassment are identified, managers ensure that prompt and appropriate action is taken.
- Leaders have established a comprehensive reporting process for the health and safety of all the provider's direct provision, including the detailed assessment of all resources, facilities and robust monitoring of accidents and near misses. Leaders review subcontractors' health and safety policies and procedures regularly.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment are not yet good enough to improve outcomes for all apprentices. While the large majority of apprentices following motor vehicle and engineering programmes benefit from good teaching, too many apprentices studying other subjects do not make the progress of which they are capable because too much teaching focuses solely on the minimum requirements to complete the qualification.
- Too often, trainers' and assessors' planning of learning activities pays insufficient attention to ensuring that all apprentices are able to make good progress. Not enough trainers and assessors use the information on apprentices' starting points sufficiently well to plan learning that challenges apprentices effectively. Not enough assessors extend apprentices' understanding routinely through the use of deeper questioning and setting challenging extension activities beyond the requirements of the qualification. As a result, too many apprentices, particularly the most able, become bored quickly and not enough apprentices reach their potential and excel.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is too inconsistent across the different apprenticeship programmes. For example, the large majority of apprentices following motor vehicle and engineering programmes receive good teaching and assessment from well-qualified trainers and assessors; they complete tasks that are highly relevant to the motor vehicle sector and, consequently, master and extend their industry knowledge and skills. In one lesson, a trainer planned a broad range of stimulating tasks that enabled apprentices to understand the relevance of thermodynamics to heat transfer in vehicle engines and apply scientific principles fully. Mentors and coaches provide excellent guidance and support to apprentices on engineering programmes at level 4. As a result, these apprentices make swift progress and further enhance the contribution they make to the workplace.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are weak in other subjects. Assessors and trainers conduct irregular and infrequent visits with too many apprentices studying administration and health and social care programmes. Consequently, too many apprentices do not know what actions to take to improve their work. Employers are often not aware of what further training their apprentices need to undertake. Leaders have only recently rectified the high turnover in staffing in a number of subject areas and tackled the instability in the tuition and assessment of programmes effectively; as a result, too many apprentices have made slow progress.
- Most apprentices studying motor vehicle and engineering programmes improve their mathematics skills because trainers promote the relevance of such skills to 'everyday' motor vehicle industry contexts adeptly and set apprentices tasks that challenge them to solve problems effectively. However, leaders do not ensure that apprentices following other programmes, for example in warehousing and team leading, have the opportunity to develop their mathematics skills. As a result, not enough make swift progress.
- Not enough trainers and assessors enable apprentices to develop their English skills well. Too many trainers and assessors lack confidence in promoting the value of English skills and fail to set

sufficiently high expectations for their apprentices. Consequently, apprentices' written work is often not of the required standard. Not enough staff promote apprentices' research and evaluative skills in their written work or correct apprentices' written work for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.

- Most assessors set targets with apprentices on motor vehicle programmes that challenge them to work hard, extend their learning and make good progress. However, assessors in too many other subjects set targets that focus solely on the completion of qualification units and not on advancing apprentices' development of skills and maximising their potential; too many targets simply state 'complete assessment for unit' and fail to plan fully the development of skills that apprentices need to acquire.
- Trainers' and assessors' feedback on apprentices' marked work is often too cursory and fails to identify areas for further improvement. Staff ensure that most employers in the motor vehicle industry play a full part in the planning, monitoring and review of apprentices' progress. However, in other subjects, such as childcare and business management, not enough staff ensure that employers' contributions at reviews of apprentices' progress are sufficiently detailed to enable apprentices to understand fully what they need to do to improve their work and make a greater contribution in the workplace.
- Apprentices following motor vehicle and engineering programmes benefit from high-quality resources that enable most of them to extend their practical skills development well; for example, apprentices work on new and prototype engines using the very latest diagnostic equipment. In one lesson, apprentices demonstrated their advanced knowledge and skills by using computer-aided resources to make an accurate diagnosis of engine faults and explain the consequences of low and high pressure imbalance on the flow of fuel through vehicle turbo chargers successfully. However, leaders have not ensured that all other subjects have similar high levels of resources to enhance apprentices' learning.
- Most trainers and assessors promote most apprentices' understanding of equality and diversity effectively through well-conceived 'hot topics' that stimulate structured debate, reflection and recording. The majority of staff know how to identify signs of radicalisation and plan tasks that enable apprentices to develop a good understanding of the dangers of extremism.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

require improvement

- Not enough apprentices develop their English and mathematics skills sufficiently because too few staff promote the value of these essential skills to the workplace and industry effectively. As a result, not enough apprentices understand the contribution good English and mathematics skills make to their future career aspirations.
- Attendance by the large majority of apprentices is high because the majority of staff set high expectations on attendance and punctuality. Until recently, leaders had not ensured that all apprentices were receiving at least the minimum level of tuition, support and guidance as per funding contractual requirements. As a result, a minority of apprentices do not place sufficient value on their off-the-job training or attend their reviews of progress frequently enough for them to make good progress. Not enough apprentices study outside the time set aside for their learning and improve the standard of their written work routinely.
- The majority of apprentices demonstrate a positive attitude to their practical skills training. However, more able apprentices are often given the same practical tasks irrespective of their work role and as a result are not involved or challenged sufficiently by the learning process.
- The majority of apprentices acquire a good understanding of industry standards in their main qualification, which they then apply; as a result, employers value the contribution that the majority of apprentices make in the workplace. For example, apprentices following programmes in motor vehicle develop their vehicle fault diagnosis skills fluently.
- A majority of apprentices develop good customer skills and exhibit a good understanding of why the quality of their work is important to their employer. Apprentices following motor vehicle programmes benefit from a broad range of enrichment activities that develop their employability, personal and social skills effectively; however, a significant minority of apprentices do not have the opportunity to develop these skills sufficiently because too many staff do not plan teaching, learning and assessment to meet the needs of all their apprentices. Too many assessors set targets with apprentices that focus solely on completing units and do not focus on developing wider employability or study skills sufficiently.
- The large majority of apprentices develop a good understanding of diversity in wider society and Britain. However, a few apprentices do not have sufficient awareness of the dangers of radicalisation and extremism.

- Apprentices feel safe and know how to report their concerns if they do not feel safe. Leaders' arrangements to ensure the safety and welfare of apprentices on 'block release' off-the-job training residential stays are well planned and executed.
- At the outset of their programme, most apprentices receive good information, advice and guidance that enable them to make appropriate choices about their apprenticeship programme. Leaders have strengthened the information, advice and guidance in the majority of subject areas but not all; as a result, too many apprentices drop out of learning or make too slow progress.

Outcomes for learners

require improvement

- The proportion of apprentices who complete their programme successfully has declined sharply over time. Leaders' data indicate that, in 2014/15, six tenths of all apprentices who left their programme completed successfully; this was below the proportion for similar providers. Just under a half of all apprentices completed their qualification within the planned timescale in 2014/15.
- The majority of apprentices following programmes in motor vehicle, around a third of all apprentices, make good progress and the standards of their work are high. However, not enough apprentices studying most other subjects make sufficient progress from their starting points; their work often does not extend beyond the minimum requirements of the qualification and their progress is too slow.
- Leaders have recently implemented a more rigorous approach to improving subcontractors' underperformance. As a result, outcomes for apprentices on subcontractors' programmes, over a third of all apprentices, are now beginning to improve.
- Subject performance is too variable; for example, a high proportion of apprentices following programmes in manufacturing technologies succeed but too many apprentices studying administration do not.
- While leaders have made a concerted and successful effort to increase the proportion of females studying motor vehicle apprenticeship provision, the achievement gap between female apprentices and their male peers has increased over time. Leaders' actions ensure that apprentices with disabilities perform at least as well as those without, but those with learning difficulties do not achieve as well as their peers. Adults, particularly those aged 24 and over, do not achieve as well as younger apprentices.
- Most apprentices following programmes in motor vehicle develop their mathematics skills well. However, leaders do not ensure that apprentices studying other subjects have sufficient opportunity to continue to develop their mathematics skills beyond the minimum level required for their programme.
- Not enough apprentices develop their English skills sufficiently. Too many apprentices produce written work that lacks sufficient analysis and contains too many examples of inaccurate grammar and spelling.
- Leaders' data for 2014/15 indicate that of the apprentices who completed their programmes successfully, almost all progressed to employment or higher-level study. A majority of apprentices who achieve on programmes in motor vehicle take up additional responsibilities, secure promotion or take on enhanced roles in the workplace. However, leaders do not know the destinations of a large proportion of the apprentices who failed to complete their learning.

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	5,037
Principal/CEO	Lee Acton
Website address	www.skillnet.org.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	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	0	0	0	1	0	4	0	0
	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	771	957	179	686	14	171		
	Number of traineeships		16-19		19+		Total	
			1		0		0	
	Funding received from		Skills Funding Agency					
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:		<div><div></div><div>Alpha Care Agency Institute Ltd</div><div></div><div>Barking and Dagenham College</div><div></div><div>Barnet and Southgate College</div><div></div><div>Blackpool and the Fylde College</div><div></div><div>Bridgwater College</div><div></div><div>British Industrial Truck Association Ltd</div><div></div><div>Carshalton College</div><div></div><div>City of Bristol College</div><div></div><div>College of Northwest London</div><div></div><div>Fleetmaster Training Ltd</div><div></div><div>JGW Training Ltd</div><div></div><div>Pursuit Training Ltd</div><div></div><div>South Essex College of Further and Higher Education</div></div>						

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Matt Vaughan, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Shane Langthorne	Her Majesty's Inspector
Mary Aslett	Ofsted Inspector
Martin Bennett	Ofsted Inspector
Patricia Collis	Ofsted Inspector
Michael Addison	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the chief executive, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. 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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