

Economic Solutions Limited (Manchester Solutions)

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

4–7 October 2016

Overall effectiveness		Requires improvement	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement	16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement	Adult learning programmes	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement	Apprenticeships	Requires improvement
Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement		
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Requires improvement	

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- Tutors do not monitor the progress of their study programme learners sufficiently closely and too many do not achieve their qualifications.
- Too many apprentices do not complete and achieve their programmes on time and the rate is particularly low for teaching assistant apprentices studying with the largest subcontractor, National Schools Training (NST).
- The links between apprentices' off-the-job training provided by the colleges and their practical training in the workplace are weak.
- Management actions have not yet led to consistently good-quality teaching, learning and assessment across all courses; the quality of provision at NST is poor.
- Governors do not challenge leaders and managers sufficiently to ensure that sustained improvements in the quality of the provision.
- Too many apprentices and learners do not attend lessons regularly and on time.
- Tutors do not ensure that learners on study programmes improve their use of English and mathematics.
- Most apprentices have a superficial understanding of British values because assessors are not skilful enough at discussing relevant topics.

The provider has the following strengths

- The quality of the provision for adult learners is good; many learners achieve and progress to higher-level courses and employment.
- Learners on study programmes, many of whom have low prior achievements and a history of not participating in education and training, develop good personal skills.
- Learners with complex social and personal issues benefit from highly effective support.
- Senior leaders and managers work very well with employers and the local enterprise partnership; courses link well to the training and skills requirements in Greater Manchester.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Economic Solutions Limited (Economic Solutions), known as Manchester Growth Company, is a group of companies that focus on Manchester's economic development. The training arm of the company is 'The Skills Company'. Around 170 assessors, trainers, learning support staff and managers are directly involved in the provision of apprenticeships, traineeships, employability courses, study programmes, higher education courses and specific training programmes for employers. Much of the provision is aimed at meeting the skills needs of Greater Manchester and working with young people who have a poor record of engaging in education and training.
- Economic Solutions subcontracts all or part of the training of around 40% of its apprentices. Eleven subcontractors offer all aspects of these apprentices' training; the remaining subcontractors provide off-the-job training. Around 30% of apprentices are based in Greater Manchester and the rest are training in different regions across England. National Schools Training (NST) is the largest subcontractor, providing apprenticeships in schools. A small minority of adult learning provision is subcontracted.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve the effectiveness of how tutors set learners' targets and monitor their progress on study programmes so that effective academic support is given to those who are struggling so that a greater proportion achieve their qualifications and develop their use of English and mathematics skills.
- Ensure that apprentices' off-the-job training provided by colleges is coordinated with on-the-job training and work tasks so that apprentices' progress and skills development is good and they achieve in the planned time.
- Improve the management of the subcontractor NST so that they deliver high-quality provision and ensure that their apprentices:
 - receive regular workplace visits, training and support to make good progress
 - understand clearly what they need to do next to improve and achieve.
- Ensure that staff improve the quality of teaching, training and assessment that they deliver so that the decline in learners' and apprentices' achievements in 2016 is halted and the improvements made in 2015 are sustained.
- Ensure that governors challenge senior leaders more rigorously.
- Improve learners and apprentices attendance and punctuality to lessons.
- Develop assessors' skills and confidence in being able to apply the concepts of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and respect and tolerance of others in a way that is meaningful to apprentices so that they can apply their understanding in the workplace and their everyday lives.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Senior leaders and managers have taken action to improve the quality of the provision but they have not eradicated all of the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. Too many aspects of teaching, training and assessment are not consistently good. Consequently, the improvements in the proportion of apprentices and learners who achieved successfully in 2014/15 were not sustained last year.
- In spite of their determination and actions, managers have not been successful in improving the performance of the largest subcontractor, NST. The proportion of apprentices who are trained by NST and have achieved their programme in the planned time has been low for the last two years. Without significant and decisive action and support from Economic Solutions, NST does not have the capacity to improve.
- Since the previous inspection, managers have improved the monitoring of the provision of other subcontractors, although this requires further improvement. Managers have not ensured that assessors receive sufficient information from the colleges that offer off-the-job training for apprentices. Consequently, too many apprentices do not recognise the value of off-the-job training to their development and do not attend off-the-job training sessions regularly. Managers respond rigorously to the poor performance of small subcontractors, including the termination of their contracts.
- Senior leaders' and managers' evaluation of the quality of the provision is not sufficiently accurate. As a result, managers have not focused on the key areas that require the most rapid improvement. For example, the quality of apprentices' and learners' progress reviews are not of a consistently high quality to support their learning.
- Managers have not ensured that arrangements to improve the quality of the provision are consistently effective. In their evaluations of teaching, observers do not pay sufficient attention to how well learners develop new skills and knowledge and the pace of learners' progress. Consequently, they do not always identify ineffective practice. Managers ensure that the majority of assessors and tutors have action plans following the observations of their teaching and training. However, the action plans have not led to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning across all courses.
- The strategy to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in English and mathematics has not been successful. Managers have recognised this and employed a new head of English and mathematics, who is implementing a new action plan to tackle the slow development of learners' skills in their use of English and mathematics, but it has not yet had sufficient time to make a positive impact.
- Managers collaborate well with the local enterprise partnership and employers to identify and develop courses in response to employers' skills requirements. For example, as a result of an effective partnership with a large employer, a significant number of adult learners gained employment in the employer's distribution centre. Good partnership with employers has been instrumental in providing many learners on study programmes with good work experience placements.
- The quality of provision for adults, many of whom have overcome significant difficulties in their lives, is good. Managers and tutors have sustained high achievement rates for adults over the last three years.
- Senior leaders and managers promote fair treatment and respect for individuals well.

They have provided a good range of resources, such as thought-provoking statements about democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. They have not yet been successful in ensuring that assessors prepare apprentices well enough for life in modern Britain, through thoughtful questioning and debate on relevant topics. Managers have successfully reduced differences in outcomes between certain groups of learners.

The governance of the provider

- Governors do not challenge senior leaders enough to ensure that their actions secure sustained improvements. They have not focused well on the effective implementation of recommendations from the previous inspection. Experienced board members provide effective oversight of progress towards strategic business targets, such as the recruitment of learners. However, they do not focus sufficiently on improving the quality of the provision and sustaining high outcomes for apprentices and learners.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The manager with responsibility for safeguarding and 13 staff who promote safeguarding matters in different curriculum areas have a good knowledge of their responsibilities. For example, they inform learners about the safe use of the internet and social media.
- Managers carry out appropriate recruitment checks on all staff and keep detailed records. Staff have completed appropriate training on how to protect apprentices and learners from extremism and radicalisation. However, managers have not ensured that assessors are skilful enough to extend further apprentices' understanding of the risk of extremism and radicalisation.
- The manager responsible for safeguarding maintains detailed records and investigates thoroughly all safeguarding incidents. Staff act in a timely way, for example, when learners report family issues, to ensure that risks to learners are minimised.
- Managers check thoroughly that employers have good health and safety procedures and apprentices understand the policies well in their workplaces.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is not consistently good. Assessors' and tutors' expectations of what apprentices and learners are capable of achieving are often not high enough. Consequently, too many apprentices and learners do not develop their skills and knowledge to their full potential.
- Training, learning and assessment offered to apprentices by NST is poor. NST assessors do not use apprentices' existing knowledge and skills when planning individual learning. They do not review the progress that apprentices make often enough. Consequently, apprentices do not know how much progress they have made. Apprentices do not receive effective support because of frequent changes of assessor and this impedes their progress. Apprentices' progress at NST is slow, and almost half of them do not complete their programme by the planned end date.
- Most apprentices' and learners' starting points in English and mathematics are identified accurately when they begin their courses. Tutors do not use this information effectively to ensure that learners develop their skills in English and mathematics and their progress in these subjects is hindered.

- Most assessors and tutors give constructive oral and written feedback to their apprentices and learners on the quality of their work and how they can improve. On too many occasions, apprentices and learners do not remember exactly what it is they need to do to improve their work. Consequently, the most able apprentices and learners do not produce the standard of work of which they are capable.
- Most assessors and tutors do not match their teaching techniques well to apprentices' and learners' ability levels. The time that apprentices and learners are set to complete their work is frequently too generous, which adversely affects their rate of progress. Learning targets are often too broad: for example, 'to complete a unit'. Learning targets do not include apprentices' and learners' personal and professional developmental needs and learning is narrowly focused on completion of qualifications. When the most able apprentices and learners complete their tasks quickly, assessors and tutors do not set them additional work to extend their learning.
- Most assessors and tutors have good industrial and commercial experience. They have up-to-date knowledge of modern industrial practices and they use this well in their teaching. Many learners on study programmes benefit from good work placements. A significant number of employers support apprentices and learners well and are keen for them to succeed.
- Learners feel safe. Their knowledge of healthy and safe working practices is generally good. For example, learners on study programmes have a very good understanding of health and safety that they diligently apply when carrying out practical tasks. Adult learners know how to keep themselves safe, including working safely online.
- Most assessors and tutors, other than those employed by NST, provide apprentices and learners with good additional personal support. Assessors visit workplaces regularly for coaching and assessment purposes. Apprentices and learners have good contact with assessors and tutors, if the need arises between visits, through telephoning, texting or emailing them. This contact helps apprentices and learners to stay on their programmes.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

- Managers and tutors have not set high enough expectations for learners to attend regularly and on time. Too many learners have sporadic attendance, often due to complex issues in their personal lives, but this does not help them to develop the right attitudes for employment. Learners who arrive late often interrupt learning.
- Apprentices cannot always apply their understanding of British values to their everyday lives and in the workplace because assessors ask superficial questions and do not encourage thoughtful debate and awareness. Apprentices' understanding of the risks associated with extremism and radicalisation is too narrow. On study programmes, learners' understanding of safeguarding and the risks associated with extremism and radicalisation is good.
- Many learners have good attitudes to learning and are proud of what they have achieved. Most learners are polite and courteous towards tutors and fellow learners and behaviour is good. Tutors have zero tolerance of bullying, unfair treatment, discrimination and harassment. In a minority of lessons, behavioural problems arise when tutors have not set and enforced expected standards or they are not sufficiently robust in challenging poor behaviour.
- Many learners on study programmes participate in work experience and work-related

activities that give them realistic experience of the world of work. Adult learners progressively gain relevant short- and longer-term employment, which enhances their confidence immensely. Many apprentices grow in confidence and develop a good range of broader skills. For example, they improve their team working and show respect for one another.

- Careers information, advice and guidance for apprentices and learners are good. Learners receive good impartial advice and support in reviewing their career options and in deciding on their short- and long-term plans. The proportion of learners on study programmes who have successfully moved into apprenticeships is high because of the good information and advice they have received.

Outcomes for learners

Requires improvement

- Outcomes for apprentices and learners improved in 2014/15 but this improvement was not sustained; the achievement rates of apprentices and learners aged 16 to 19 declined in 2015/16 and remained static for adult learners.
- The proportion of apprentices achieving in 2015/16 declined to the national rate of similar providers. Too many apprentices do not complete their programme successfully in the planned time and the rate is particularly low for NST apprentices.
- Learners on study programmes have low levels of prior attainment and they do not make sufficient progress. In 2015/16, the achievement rate on study programmes declined and only two thirds of learners aged 16 to 19 achieved their qualifications.
- Learners do not improve their English and mathematical skills sufficiently well; as a result, too few achieve their qualifications in these subjects. Too few learners on GCSE courses in both subjects achieve a grade C or above. Too many current apprentices and learners make slow progress in developing their English and mathematics skills to a higher level.
- The standard of apprentices' and learners' work meets the necessary requirements to achieve their qualifications. However, standards vary considerably between different programmes and groups of learners; too few apprentices and learners produce a high standard of work. Learners on study programmes develop good practical skills. For example, learners on engineering courses use cutting and drilling techniques well to make slot cleaners for milling machines, and learners on automotive courses accurately use callipers within acceptable tolerances to gauge safe brake pad depth.
- The proportion of adults who complete their courses successfully is high. They enjoy their courses and the skills they develop supports them well in gaining employment.
- The large majority of learners on study programmes progress to further study, employment or training. Almost all adult learners on access courses progress to higher education courses; many start on higher education courses offered by Economic Solutions in partnership with two universities. A good proportion of the apprentices who achieve their intermediate-level qualifications progress to advanced-level programmes.

Types of provision

16 to 19 study programmes

Requires improvement

- At the time of the inspection 526 full-time learners aged 16 to 19 were enrolled in nine subject areas, with the largest being preparation for life and work. Two thirds of learners

are on a foundation study programme and the remaining learners are undertaking a pre-apprenticeship study programme.

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is not good enough across all subjects. Tutors' expectations of what learners can achieve are not always sufficiently aspirational. They do not plan sufficiently demanding and stimulating work to enthuse learners. Consequently, learners do not engage well with their tasks, lose interest and make slow progress. Tutors do not ensure that learners have an adequate grasp of the knowledge and skills required to complete subsequent learning tasks. As a result, less-able learners fall behind. A minority of tutors are not skilful in managing disruptive classroom behaviour and this impedes the learning in these lessons.
- Most tutors do not use learners' starting points in English and mathematics to adapt their teaching so that it develops learners' skills in these subjects. Tutors do not ensure that learners can apply their English and mathematics skills to their vocational work well. For example, construction learners with a weak understanding of English and metric measurements struggle to use drawings and written instructions to complete joinery tasks. Learners who require support for dyslexia are not routinely given the help they need to learn effectively.
- Tutors do not set specific enough individual learning targets that are appropriate for their different needs and abilities. Learners' targets are often too broad to help them develop or improve specific aspects of their work and make good progress. Tutors do not review and monitor learners' progress frequently enough to enable them to understand their progress and know what they need to do to complete their qualifications.
- In courses where tutors set clear and challenging expectations, their learners have a good understanding of the standard that they must reach and are motivated to succeed. Learners make good or better progress in these classes and participate enthusiastically in learning tasks. For example, learners engaged in an animated discussion as they were encouraged to reflect on how to use social media securely. They were able to identify and apply their knowledge to a wide range of examples, from news reports and their personal lives, to illustrate how to stay safe.
- Tutors focus well on developing learners' good understanding of health and safety. Learners apply this understanding particularly well when carrying out practical tasks. For example, learners on a gas installation course used appropriate industry-standard health and safety practices when connecting a range of household appliances to a gas supply. Learners checked their work diligently and recorded the outcomes of the tests to ensure full compliance with industry standards. Learners on an electrical course correctly identified safety hazards when presented with a mock-up of a construction site and could demonstrate how they would successfully make the area safe.
- Learners receive good-quality careers advice and guidance that helps them clarify their short-term future options. They receive impartial information and advice which allow them to identify effectively how they can move to the next stage of their chosen career.
- Learners develop good practical skills in workshops, often at an early stage of their programme, that allow them to create a high standard of finished work. For example, carpentry learners produce good-quality demonstration models using an appropriate range of joints.
- A good proportion of learners participate in work experience and work-related activities that effectively support their future career and employment ambitions. Staff have good working links with employers and carefully plan the experiences to give learners a realistic

understanding of the demands of industry. For example, Economic Solutions offers retail placements that expose learners to the demands of working at weekends and during busy trading days.

- Learners undertake a good range of extra-curricular activities that extend their personal and social skills well. All learners participate in a range of physical activities that effectively enhance their team working and independent thinking skills. In addition, learners are involved in a wide variety of projects designed to inspire them to contribute to civic life. For example, learners helped prepare a fundraising day for a community centre that acts as a food bank for local families. They prepared and managed a wide range of fundraising activities and raised the profile of the centre in the local community.

Adult learning programmes

Good

- At the time of the inspection, 527 learners attended a range of courses, including courses in English, mathematics, employability, vocational subjects and access to higher education. The large majority of learners are on short and part-time courses and study alongside learners aged 16 to 19. Economic Solutions also offers specific courses in response to employers' demands.
- Managers and tutors provide well-designed programmes that equip learners with the necessary skills for employment. They use labour market information well to ensure that training matches skill shortages and job opportunities in Greater Manchester. For example, 80 learners are on a short course to increase their prospects of gaining a job at local call centres and support the employers in filling these vacancies.
- Managers are particularly successful in recruiting learners who are unemployed and have few qualifications, and those who have previously been reluctant to participate in education and training. Most learners become very motivated and value what they learn, improving their self-esteem and job prospects.
- Tutors have a good knowledge of learners' starting points and any difficulties they have which inhibit learning. They use this information well to plan lessons to meet learners' individual developmental and skills needs. Tutors are particularly skilful in using their good subject knowledge and recent industry and business experience to make their lessons relevant to learners' interests and employment aspirations. Tutors draw on this expertise extensively to develop learners' understanding and skills and to illustrate key learning points, for example when tutors emphasised the value of good surface preparations before tiling. A minority of tutors do not use learners' starting points well enough to plan learning. Consequently, they do not ensure that the most able learners can make the best possible progress.
- Tutors offer learners good information, advice and guidance and pastoral support so they can progress successfully into employment. Managers and tutors have developed good partnerships with a number of organisations, such as recruitment agencies, to ensure that the information that they offer learners is up to date. Tutors coach learners to improve their prospects for employment. For example, on a scaffolding course they help learners develop teamworking skills, so that they are better prepared to gain employment with a large construction employer.
- On access to higher education courses, learners develop their study skills in carefully structured lessons that prepare them well for higher education. Tutors help learners to develop effective research skills, time-management skills and teamwork experience.

Tutors focus well on developing learners' skills in improving their use of English and mathematics.

- Learners develop good attitudes to work. Most learners improve their understanding of people's differences effectively, as a result of which they are well prepared for life and work in modern Britain. However, a minority of tutors lack the expertise to challenge stereotyping and intolerance.
- Tutors do not place high enough expectations on learners to attend their lessons regularly and on time. Many learners have been unemployed for some time and a significant number have complex personal circumstances. Tutors do not challenge learners with sporadic attendance to develop solutions to improve their irregular attendance and improve their punctuality.

Apprenticeships

Requires improvement

- At the time of the inspection, 3,459 apprentices were training in a wide range of vocations; the largest areas are health and social care and business administration. Around half of apprentices are on intermediate-level programmes, just under half are advanced apprentices and a few are higher-level apprentices. Subcontractors provide all or part of the training for around 1,300 apprentices. Around 20 colleges were subcontracted to provide off-the-job training for apprentices. NST was the largest subcontractor, providing all aspects of training to around 65% of those apprentices whose provision is subcontracted. Most apprentices trained in NST are teaching assistants working in schools.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment that NST offers is poor. Apprentices at NST do not receive sufficient off-the-job training to achieve their full potential. Most NST assessors provide copies of the documents from awarding bodies to apprentices and direct them to research and complete tasks without sufficient training and guidance.
- In many instances, NST assessors do not use apprentices' starting points and prior experience to plan training. Consequently, apprentices do not learn new skills quickly enough and their apprenticeship does not benefit them in their work in the school in which they are employed. NST assessors do not provide apprentices who complete their units of work ahead of schedule with additional extension work and so the apprentices do very little in the remaining months of their programme.
- Apprentices at NST do not receive adequate support. Frequent changes of assessors have resulted in repeated cancellation of visits to apprentices in their school, leaving them uncertain about their progress and what they need to do to complete. Many apprentices have tried to contact NST to arrange assessor visits, but they have not been successful; their progress is slow and they feel demotivated.
- Assessors, including assessors at subcontractors, do not set detailed and useful learning targets for their apprentices. Consequently, apprentices cannot monitor their progress sufficiently. Too often learning targets set by assessors are too broad, and do not take into account apprentices' prior experience. Where Economic Solutions has subcontracted apprentices' off-the-job training to colleges, assessors do not have sufficient details of this training, and so cannot support their apprentices in linking theory to workplace practices.
- Most assessors do not equip apprentices well enough for life and work in modern Britain. A minority of assessors use real-life situations well to develop apprentices' knowledge and understanding of British values, for example, in a discussion about the results of the recent referendum about Britain's membership of the European Community.

- The majority of apprentices benefit from effective support to help them to improve their English and mathematics skills. Most assessors provide apprentices with good feedback, including the identification of common spelling and grammar mistakes, to enable apprentices to develop strategies to improve their written work.
- The large majority of apprentices develop good practical skills in the workplace. For example, advanced apprentices develop good skills in vehicle fault finding and how to communicate their findings to customers. Intermediate hairdressing apprentices can demonstrate good techniques when cutting hair.
- The majority of assessors and managers develop good relationships with employers. This enables them to plan learning with employers and discuss the tasks that apprentices need to complete as part of their qualifications. Employers value apprentices' contributions to their businesses.
- The majority of apprentices benefit from effective careers information, advice and guidance. They receive helpful information regarding opportunities for employment and progression. As a result, most apprentices gain permanent employment after completing qualifications. However, a minority of apprentices with a high level of prior qualifications start on apprenticeship levels that they find too easy.

Provider details

Unique reference number	53233
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16–18 and 19+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	6,000
Managing director	Ms Jayne Worthington
Telephone number	0161 233 2628
Website	www.theskillsco.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 or above	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	546	243	290	109	62	13	8	1
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	792	919	505	1094	16	133		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	3							
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	N/A							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	N/A							
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"> ■ National Schools Training Limited ■ Dutton Fisher & Associates Limited ■ Partnership Training Limited ■ Terence Paul Enterprises Limited ■ Utility & Construction Training Limited ■ Lean Training Solutions Limited ■ The Link Training Academy Limited 							

- Joseph Lanzante Training Limited
- The Manchester College
- Practical Refrigeration Training Centre Limited
- Tameside College
- Salford City College
- Bobbles Hair Limited
- Reform Hair Academy Limited
- Accrington And Rossendale College
- Attitude Men's Hair Academy
- Wigan and Leigh College
- Veronica Maximillian-Green
- The Oldham College
- Jayco London Limited
- Fibre Hairdressing Ltd
- Liverpool Community College
- Bolton College
- Reaseheath College
- Warrington Collegiate
- Simian Risk Management Limited
- St Helen's College
- Stockport College of Further and Higher Education
- Highbury College Portsmouth
- Exeter College
- Leeds City College
- Myerscough College
- Hybrid Training
- The College Of North West London
- Teesside Samaritans
- Leeds College Of Building
- Hopwood Hall College

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of learning, 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 learners 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.

Inspection team

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