

# The Virtual College

Independent learning provider

## Inspection dates

6–9 December 2016

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

## Summary of key findings

### This is a provider that requires improvement

- Managers do not monitor apprentices' progress rigorously enough, or ensure that the system for monitoring progress provides them with accurate data; consequently, too many apprentices make slow progress and do not complete their apprenticeships when they should.
- The majority of apprentices do not experience consistently good teaching and learning.
- Trainers do not place sufficient priority on informing apprentices of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism.
- Too many quality assurance processes are not rigorous enough and require further improvement.

### The provider has the following strengths

- Many of the apprentices who successfully complete their courses improve their salaries, gain extra responsibilities at work and improve their confidence.
- Managers work well with local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) to ensure that the provision meets local and regional skills requirements.
- Apprentices develop good attitudes to work and are highly motivated; many develop good vocational and employability skills, and make valuable contributions to their employers' businesses.
- Managers have successfully developed high-quality learning resources to support apprentices' off-the-job learning.

## Full report

### Information about the provider

- The Virtual College, based in Ilkley, West Yorkshire, was established in 1995 to develop e-learning training materials for the engineering and manufacturing industries. Over recent years, managers have widened the scope to include health and social care and safeguarding. The Virtual College provides apprenticeship and employability training across the north of England, and has held a contract with the Skills Funding Agency since 2007. Managers subcontract all education and training to two partners based in the north east and the north west of England.
- The percentage of pupils in the local area gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C or equivalent, including English and mathematics, is significantly below the national average. Unemployment in Ilkley is relatively low and significantly below the national average.

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

- As a matter of the utmost urgency, managers should ensure that they implement a system to monitor the progress that apprentices make on all component parts of their apprenticeship. They should ensure that trainers use this system diligently and on a regular basis to ensure that they have a good understanding of the progress that apprentices make on their programmes. When apprentices make slow progress, managers and trainers should take swift and decisive action to improve the situation.
- Ensure that the system for observation of teaching and learning is rigorous and challenging by utilising observers with a broader range of skills and a good understanding of teaching strategies. Managers should develop a system of moderation for observation reports so that they can place a greater reliance on the accuracy of the findings.
- Make sure that trainers provide sufficiently challenging learning activities for apprentices, provide helpful feedback, and set specific and challenging targets that leave apprentices in no doubt as to what they need to do to improve and achieve their full potential.
- Ensure that apprentices receive clear and concise information about the risks of radicalisation and extremism in their locality and online, and reinforce this information at appropriate stages throughout their apprenticeship.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management

### Requires improvement

- Senior managers have responded well to most of the recommendations from the previous inspection. They now manage the performance of the two subcontractors meticulously. Contract management, quality assurance and safeguarding are now under the direct control of managers of The Virtual College. In the majority of cases, the responsible manager has developed detailed approaches to managing the key processes in the organisation effectively. While the majority of these are working effectively, some, such as the monitoring and tracking of apprentices' progress and the quality assurance of teaching and learning, are not yet working well enough.
- In the year immediately after the previous inspection, managers improved overall achievement rates to a good level. However, too many apprentices in the current year are not making the expected progress and are behind where they should be, considering the time they have been on their apprenticeship.
- The most recent self-assessment report provides a good structure for evaluating the quality of the provision. Managers make very good use of surveys to gather views from apprentices and employers. However, the resultant report does not evaluate accurately the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Observers of teaching and learning do not identify or report on the inconsistent quality of the work of trainers and apprentices seen during the inspection. They are not yet implementing effectively the provider's revised observation policy and procedure, which rightly places a stronger focus on observing the learning that takes place, rather than what the trainer does in lessons. Following observations, managers do not challenge the majority of trainers sufficiently to improve their practice swiftly to the benefit of apprentices.
- The quality manager effectively monitors issues concerning contract management and compliance with subcontractor managers, using detailed performance indicators. However, managers are less successful in monitoring the progress that apprentices make in their learning. They do not tackle issues that may contribute to apprentices not achieving their qualifications in the planned timescales, such as the frequency of visits to support apprentices or the quality of targets that trainers set apprentices to develop their skills further.
- Subcontractor managers play an active role in a number of LEPs in their regions as well as participating in networks of training providers. They use these links well to ensure that the provision meets local employers' requirements, as well as skills priorities in sectors such as health and social care and childcare.
- Managers have successfully maintained the good promotion of equality and diversity since the last inspection. Through their action plan, they focus well on evaluating the progress and outcomes of different groups of learners. They have developed some imaginative and creative online learning modules that support staff awareness training, annual updating, and refresher training through their 'e-academy'. Although managers expect trainers to discuss equality and diversity with apprentices during their progress reviews, records of these discussions are perfunctory.

- Managers have introduced the promotion of British values within their provision, and have developed specific training modules for this topic in their 'e-academy'. Trainers reinforce aspects of these values during reviews, and the majority of trainers take relevant opportunities to introduce and explore issues with both a local and national focus during training. However, not all staff integrate these values fully across all aspects of the provision.

### **The governance of the provider**

- Governance of The Virtual College consists of a board made up of senior officers in the business, divisional directors and two non-executive members. Members of the board provide support and challenge for each other by monitoring the performance of each division against key data-based indicators and business growth plans. The board provides an effective forum to monitor progress towards the organisation's goals, and to identify any issues which need to be resolved.
- The board has decided to bring aspects of the business in-house for direct provision of education and training, following a recent successful pilot. Managers have employed a new business development manager, tasked with developing and expanding internal direct provision in order to reduce reliance on subcontracted provision in the future.

### **Safeguarding**

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Staff and learners understand the system for reporting safeguarding concerns. The designated safeguarding officer holds the appropriate level of qualifications for the role, and all staff complete their mandatory safeguarding training and annual updating training. Managers have developed an extensive range of good-quality training modules that are available commercially and free of charge, both nationally and internationally, through their 'e-academy' virtual learning environment.
- Learners report that they feel safe during any training and at work; they know whom to contact should they have concerns or worries. Managers place a strong emphasis on health and safety and staff apply relevant procedures appropriately.
- Managers have implemented the 'Prevent' duty effectively. All staff have completed an online training programme and they understand how to identify any students at risk of radicalisation and extremism. Trainers cover the principles of the 'Prevent' duty during learner inductions using a good range of internally produced resources. However, during the inspection a few apprentices were unclear about the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. A small minority of staff are not confident about how to integrate the requirements of the 'Prevent' duty into their teaching, and do not give it sufficient priority.

### **Quality of teaching, learning and assessment**

### **Requires improvement**

- The Virtual College currently has 163 apprentices, of which the large majority are adult apprentices. Advanced apprenticeships account for around two thirds of all apprentices, with almost all of the remaining apprentices working at intermediate level. Just over a third of apprentices follow programmes in health and social care. The remaining apprentices follow programmes in business and administration, management, children and young people's workforce, information and communication technology (ICT), learning and development, and performing manufacturing operations.

- Too many apprentices make slow progress on their courses and do not accomplish what they are capable of achieving. Trainers do not use the results of the indicative assessments that apprentices complete at the start of their programme to plan learning effectively. Consequently, apprentices do not make rapid enough progress in developing their skills from their starting points.
- Apprentices produce work of an appropriate standard to meet the minimum requirements of awarding organisations. However, apprentices do not achieve their potential; trainers place a disproportionate emphasis on meeting the minimum standards of qualifications, as opposed to challenging apprentices to develop skills at a higher level.
- Trainers do not consistently provide helpful feedback on apprentices' work to enable apprentices' to develop their skills and knowledge. Trainers fail to articulate clearly what apprentices need to do to improve their work; on too many occasions, they accept mediocre standards of work as opposed to challenging learners to produce work of a higher calibre.
- Trainers encourage apprentices to develop their English, mathematical and ICT functional skills further in their workplace but provide insufficient support to help them to improve their skills. On too many occasions, trainers do not identify appropriately spelling and grammatical errors in apprentices' portfolios to reinforce more positive practice and improve their writing.
- Apprentices receive good on-the-job training. They develop new skills in their role and are able to use these skills quickly on their apprenticeship and apply them in their employment, a benefit which their employers value greatly. For example, on health and social care programmes, trainers effectively link the topic of infection control to the apprentices' work setting, aiding application and understanding and supporting the care requirements of patients.
- Apprentices receive and use high-quality learning resources which support their off-the-job training, enabling them to develop new skills, knowledge and understanding. Many apprentices enrolled on ICT and health care apprenticeships, which account for the majority of the provision, explain in their progress reviews how their skills are developing and are helping them to achieve their career aims.
- Recruitment staff provide effective initial advice and guidance to apprentices prior to the start of their apprenticeship and throughout their training programme. They advise apprentices of the most appropriate apprenticeship that will assist them in achieving their career goals. Well-qualified trainers with extensive industrial experience provide ongoing support throughout the apprenticeship, aligned with an extensive range of well-designed and engaging careers guidance modules on the 'e-academy'.
- Trainers provide good support to apprentices to assist them in completing their programmes. Managers have invested well in providing resources to ensure that all apprentices have the opportunity to excel. Many apprentices are very appreciative of this investment by managers and of the support they receive from their trainers through resources, including assistive computer software, audio technology and coloured reading films for apprentices with visual impairments.

## Personal development, behaviour and welfare

## Requires improvement

- The majority of current apprentices are not making the progress that they should on their apprenticeship and do not achieve their qualifications within the planned timescales. This lack of progress impedes their personal and professional development.
- Trainers do not sufficiently promote equality, celebrate diversity or help apprentices to understand what it means to be a citizen in modern Britain. Despite the good standard of training that they receive, too many discussions on these subjects in sessions and progress reviews are cursory and fail to make them relevant to apprentices by linking them to apprentices' job roles.
- Apprentices do not develop English, mathematical and, where appropriate, ICT skills sufficiently well, from the start of their apprenticeship. Trainers too often require apprentices to take practice tests as opposed to helping them to extend their skills and develop their knowledge.
- The majority of apprentices take pride in their work, enjoy their courses and submit appropriate standards of work in their portfolio to meet the requirements of their qualifications. However, many trainers do not challenge apprentices to attain higher standards of work, achieve better grades or develop additional skills to make them more employable in the future. Consequently, the most able do not achieve their potential.
- Apprentices feel safe in their work placements and know whom to contact should they have any concerns. They have a good understanding of the risks of social media, the internet and mobile telephones through the 'e-academy' virtual learning environment at induction, and can articulate clearly the safeguards that they follow when using these technologies.
- Apprentices develop positive attitudes and behaviour throughout their apprenticeship. They grow in confidence and the majority develop appropriate social skills, which they use to perform effectively in their role. All apprentices seen by inspectors had clearly established high standards of behaviour.

## Outcomes for learners

## Requires improvement

- Managers do not use electronic portfolio systems effectively to track and monitor apprentices' progress on their apprenticeship. Trainers do not keep these systems up to date, resulting in many of the reports that managers receive being imprecise. This lack of accurate progress data prevents managers and trainers from intervening swiftly and supporting apprentices who do not make good progress.
- Managers do not ensure that trainers use apprentices' pre-course assessments to plan learning programmes to meet their individual learning needs. Trainers do not receive the results of assessments completed at enrolment, so that many apprentices are working towards the same targets in spite of their differing starting points. Consequently, the most able apprentices do not receive sufficient challenge to achieve their potential.
- Managers and staff have improved achievement rates steadily since the previous inspection, with more than three quarters of apprentices achieving their apprenticeships in 2015/16. However, too many apprentices fail to complete their programmes within the planned timescales; approximately one third of all apprentices failed to complete their apprenticeship on time in 2015/16.

- Managers have not succeeded in improving outcomes for underachieving groups of apprentices since the previous inspection. For example, male apprentices continue to achieve less well than female apprentices, and 16- to 18-year-old apprentices achieve significantly less well than adult apprentices. Managers have a good understanding of which groups are underachieving, but their actions to tackle this problem have yet to show any discernible impact.
- On too many programmes, current apprentices make slow progress on their programmes, mainly because of mediocre teaching and insufficiently challenging personal learning targets. Advanced apprentices on ICT professional programmes, which account for a small minority of apprentices, make good progress and achieve their qualification within the planned timescales.
- Managers have been successful in monitoring apprentices' destinations after completion of their apprenticeship. Apprentices progress well into employment or further education. The large majority of apprentices remain in existing employment or gain new jobs after completing their apprenticeship. When surveyed, half of all apprentices refer to the impact of their programme on increases in their salaries, while two thirds gain enhanced responsibilities at work and almost all improve their confidence. Apprentices acquire good employability skills that are used in the workplace, which employers value greatly.

## Provider details

Unique reference number	54946
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	645
CEO	Rodney Knox
Telephone number	01943 605976
Website	<a href="http://www.virtual-college.co.uk">www.virtual-college.co.uk</a>

## 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	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	1		27					
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	4	56	11	90			2	
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16								
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding								
Funding received from:	Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Baltic Training Services Ltd. NTG Training Ltd.							



## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the contracts and quality manager, 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 and telephone calls to gather the views of apprentices 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

Paul Cocker, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Tim Gardner	Her Majesty's Inspector
Bev Cross	Ofsted Inspector
Derek Williams	Ofsted Inspector
Tracey Mace-Akroyd	Her Majesty's Inspector

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