

Vision Express

Employer

Inspection dates

25–27 July 2017

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

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- A high proportion of learners make good progress, achieve their apprenticeship and continue in full-time employment with Vision Express.
- Apprentices make good gains in confidence, which enhances their personal lives and future employability.
- Apprentices receive good support and care that help them to succeed to their full potential.
- On- and off-the-job training and assessment are good and ensure that apprentices quickly become effective in dealing with a wide range of customers' queries.
- Throughout their training, apprentices acquire a good range of industry-standard skills and knowledge that make them more effective in their optical retail career.
- Leaders and managers have high expectations for apprentices, who are an important part of the company's recruitment strategy.
- Leaders and managers have established a culture that ensures that quality improvement focuses well on raising standards for all apprentices.
- Managers have not evaluated the performance of all assessors. Opportunities to share good practice between assessors are limited.
- Assessors do not routinely challenge all apprentices to achieve their full potential in English and mathematics.
- Not all apprentices receive impartial information, advice and guidance prior to starting their apprenticeships. In a small number of cases this means that they do not have a good understanding of the programme prior to joining it.
- Apprentices have a good understanding of fundamental British values. Not all of them know how to raise concerns relating to the 'Prevent' duty should the store manager be unavailable.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Vision Express is an optical retail group with 389 stores across the United Kingdom. It operates 301 stores in its own right, with a further 85 offered as joint ventures and three on a franchise basis. Vision Express is part of the GrandVision group of companies.
- Runway Training provides English and mathematics functional skills training and assessment as part of subcontractor arrangements. Vision Express provides the remaining on- and off-the job training. All learners are following an intermediate apprenticeship in optical retail.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that existing quality assurance arrangements evaluate the performance of all assessors. Use the outcome of this process to inform an action plan for improvement. Ensure that all assessors both share and use the identified good practice.
- Provide all apprentices with independent information, advice and guidance prior to commencing their programme.
- Ensure that assessors challenge all apprentices to improve their English and mathematical skills so they attain to their highest potential.
- Raise apprentices' understanding of how to raise concerns related to the 'Prevent' duty if the store manager is not available.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders and managers have a clear and ambitious vision for apprenticeships that they have communicated well to all staff. The apprenticeship programme is closely aligned to the business priority of recruiting retail staff to work in opticians' stores. Leaders and managers use apprenticeships as a vital part of their succession planning strategy. Since commencing the apprenticeship programme, the company has promoted a significant number of former apprentices into more responsible roles.
- Leaders and managers know the provision well and have a realistic understanding of what needs to improve and how. Self-assessment arrangements are good. The associated report is evaluative and appropriately self-critical. Judgements in the report reflect those found during the inspection. The quality improvement plan effectively supports the achievement of raising standards for all apprentices.
- Managers and assessors use data well to aid very effective tracking and review of apprentices' performance, which promotes their success. Assessors intervene appropriately to prevent apprentices failing to meet agreed targets. As a result, the vast majority of apprentices have completed their programme in the current year.
- Leaders and managers have acted decisively to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment received by apprentices. They have made good progress in improving the performance of the large majority of assessors since the previous inspection. Managers and assessors use detailed and specific action plans to drive up standards. As a result, the large majority of apprentices are making good progress. Managers have not observed all assessors to evaluate their performance as part of the planned quality assurance arrangements. The sharing of good practice between assessors requires improvement.
- Performance management of the subcontractor has been enhanced and is good. This has resulted in improved arrangements for the delivery of qualifications in English and mathematics, which are benefiting apprentices. However, assessors do not routinely challenge all apprentices to attain higher standards when compared with their starting points.
- Managers recognise that the current system of using store managers as assessors does not ensure a consistently high-quality experience for all apprentices. In response, senior managers have implemented an organisational restructuring to ensure that dedicated specialist staff provide assessment. The restructure is not yet complete and therefore it is too early to make a judgement on the impact of this initiative.
- Leaders and managers have given an appropriately high priority to the promotion of fundamental British values. Assessors use a wide range of stimulating and pertinent learning materials that challenge apprentices to consider British life from a critical stance. This ensures that apprentices demonstrate a good understanding of relevant British values.

The governance of the provider

- Members of the executive board effectively hold managers to account for the performance of the apprenticeship programme. The progress of apprentices is reviewed regularly and frequently by senior leaders, using accurate and detailed data about apprentices' performance. Senior managers visit stores on a weekly basis and apprentices' progress is an important focus of these visits.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Managers have ensured that suitable safeguarding arrangements are in place and used to protect apprentices and staff. The associated policies are both current, and frequently reviewed. All staff receive regular and relevant updating training. As a result, learners feel safe. They know how to report any safeguarding concerns and are confident that these will be properly dealt with.
- Managers continue to develop a culture that strongly focuses on taking swift action to strengthen safeguarding practice. For example, managers have introduced significantly more effective chaperoning of apprentices for overnight stays when they are away from home.
- Apprentices demonstrate a suitable understanding of the dangers posed by extremism and radicalisation. However, too few have an adequate understanding of how to report any concerns identified in the workplace or personal life if the store manager is not available.
- Leaders and managers carry out appropriate recruitment vetting of staff working with young people.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Apprentices receive good-quality training. Consequently, apprentices develop a wide range of technical and personal skills that reflect good industry standards. Store managers very effectively support apprentices' progress by providing a varied programme of learning activities linked to the apprenticeship.
- Off-the-job training is well planned and delivered. It allows apprentices to link appropriately theory they have learned to practical situations they may encounter in their work. Apprentices value the opportunity to apply this learning within a range of scenarios prior to using it when dealing with customers.
- Support for apprentices is good. It very effectively meets apprentices' needs through the provision of tailored support, advice and pastoral care. Consequently, apprentices demonstrate increased self-reliance and independence in managing their learning programme and work activities. Apprentices appreciate the help they receive from the store team and other apprentices, which enriches their employment and personal lives.

- Assessors use good personalised learning strategies to promote apprentices' competence in helping customers who have specific barriers to accessing optical services. For example, apprentices demonstrate sensitivity when dealing with customers who are wheelchair users or who speak English as an additional language.
- Assessment practice is generally good. Frequent and well-structured assessment activities enable apprentices to progress at a suitable pace. In a few cases, apprentices have not made the progress expected due to missed or insufficiently frequent assessments. Managers have identified this performance shortfall and implemented appropriate remedial actions.
- Apprentices who are working towards a qualification in English and/or mathematics receive relevant and helpful training. Where apprentices do not have grades A* to C at GCSE, they receive appropriate support to practise these skills in preparation for examination. Assessors do not sufficiently challenge apprentices to develop their English and mathematical skills beyond those of the apprenticeship requirements. Verbal and written feedback received by apprentices does not consistently stretch the most able to attain to their full potential.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- Apprentices make good progress in developing their self-assurance and maturity. In addition, they enhance well their verbal communication skills. Most apprentices quickly settle into their role and develop a sound work ethic. This helps them to deal more confidently with customers and work colleagues. Apprentices take pride in the help they provide. Consequently, they become committed to improving their skills further to enhance their professional effectiveness.
- Apprentices are meticulous in their work and pay particular attention to detail when advising customers. As apprentices become more capable, store managers provide them with challenging tasks so that they gain wider proficiency. This allows apprentices to deal with a broader range of situations where customers seek assistance. For example, apprentices learn how to conduct detailed eye-screening tests, undertake retinal imaging and dispense prescriptive lenses. They undertake health service administrative tasks, including processing grant applications so young people can have free spectacles and repair.
- Apprentices appreciate the importance of good attendance and punctuality in sustaining employment. They are respectful of work colleagues and customers. All apprentices have a good understanding of the need for confidentiality in maintaining professional relationships with customers. Apprentices exhibit good levels of respect towards others.
- Apprentices have a good understanding of the next career steps that they can take on completing their training. Apprentices receive effective support to widen their understanding of other career options when they leave before completing their programme. However, not all apprentices routinely receive sufficiently independent information, advice and guidance prior to commencing their programme.

- Apprentices adopt safe working practices and feel safe when at work. They understand the safe use of potentially toxic substances when working with lenses and spectacles. Apprentices routinely use appropriate health and safety practices when using eye-screening equipment. However, in a small minority of cases, apprentices are not always sufficiently encouraged to monitor their own health and welfare needs, for example in checking their posture when sitting or standing for long periods.

Outcomes for learners

Good

- Apprentices develop a wide range of industry-standard optical retail skills and knowledge. Consequently, they become more useful and valued employees. For example, apprentices become proficient in making lens recommendations based on customers' lifestyle and prescription. Apprentices quickly gain effective customer care skills that allow them to successfully resolve queries. For example, apprentices are able to articulate how their personal or customers' 'body language' can affect productive communication.
- In 2015/16, the proportion of retained learners who achieved their apprenticeship within the planned end date was high and well above provider and national comparator rates. For the current year, data supplied by the provider indicates that high rates have been maintained. The large majority of current apprentices are making good progress and on target to complete within the planned timescale. Different groups of apprentices attain at a similar rate. Nearly all learners stay employed by Vision Express on completing their apprenticeship.
- A high percentage of learners advance to more responsible roles within the company on completion of their apprenticeship. Many successfully undertake in-house training programmes that support their career development. Managers have yet to implement fully planned progression opportunities, including an advanced apprenticeship programme.
- Apprentices successfully achieve functional skills in English and mathematics at a high rate. They confidently apply their learning to work situations. For example, apprentices can appropriately take measurements to check that lenses are compatible with a customer's prescription and preferred spectacle frame. They can accurately use and record optical terminology to describe customers' needs. Apprentices have the opportunity to gain English and mathematics functional skills qualifications above the level required by their apprenticeship. However, take-up is low and pass rates require improvement.
- The percentage of apprentices who stay on programme has declined since last year, but remains high. Managers closely analyse the reasons why learners leave before achieving their apprenticeship. Learners who fail to complete their programme mainly do so due to personal circumstances beyond the provider's control. Managers have introduced changes to apprentice recruitment arrangements to raise retention rates. However, it is too early to evaluate the effect of these improvement initiatives.

Provider details

Unique reference number	59218
Type of provider	Employer
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	58
Principal/CEO	Jonathan Lawson
Telephone number	01159 882480
Website	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 or above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	24	8	0	0	0	0		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	0		0		0			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	0							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	0							
Funding received from:	Education and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Runway Training							

Information about this inspection

The learning and development manager, as nominee, assisted the inspection team, which carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report, development plans and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of apprentices; these views are reflected within the report. They scrutinised a wide range of documents, including those concerning learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

Inspection team

Nigel Bragg, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Richard Ronksley	Her Majesty's Inspector
Susan Gay	Ofsted Inspector
Maureen Deary	Ofsted Inspector

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