

The Skills Network Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

1–4 May 2018

Overall effectiveness		Good	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good	Adult learning programmes	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good		
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good		
Outcomes for learners	Good		
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Not previously inspected	

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Most learners develop new skills and knowledge that enhance their current work roles and future employability.
- Tutors set high expectations for learners' work, and as a result learners produce work that is often above the required standard for their qualification.
- Tutors provide very thorough and specific feedback that helps learners to improve their skills and knowledge.
- Tutors are highly experienced in their vocational areas, and they inspire and support learners to extend their skills and knowledge through distance-learning courses.
- Individualised and well-planned initial advice and guidance ensure that learners study on courses that are appropriate for their career aspirations.
- Directors and leaders ensure that learners benefit from very well-resourced provision and an expertly designed curriculum.
- Directors, leaders and managers have very high expectations of staff, who as a result deliver effective teaching, learning and assessment.
- Too few learners benefit from the additional learning opportunities that the provider offers to develop their work-related skills.
- Tutors do not support learners sufficiently to develop their skills in mathematics.
- Managers do not provide learners with appropriate levels of careers advice and guidance during their courses to help them prepare for their next steps.

Full report

Information about the provider

- The Skills Network Limited is based in Selby in North Yorkshire and was founded in 2009. It offers distance-learning courses to adult learners across the country. Currently, there are just over 500 learners on level 3 programmes, most of whom are on courses in health and social care, teaching support and accounting. The very large majority of the provision is delivered using online learning materials, and a small but significant proportion through paper-based resources. Learners fund their courses through advanced learner loans.
- As well as delivering provision through its own contract with the funding agency, The Skills Network Limited also acts as a subcontractor for 45 organisations, providing over 100 distance-learning qualifications to over 25,000 adult learners each year. This subcontracted provision was not in the scope of this inspection.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that a higher proportion of learners benefit from the additional learning opportunities that are available to develop their work-related skills.
- Improve learners' mathematical skills by:
 - integrating the development of these skills into all courses
 - providing relevant training to staff so that they have the necessary skills and confidence to support learners in improving these skills.
- Ensure that learners receive effective and impartial careers advice and guidance throughout their courses by:
 - training staff so that they are suitably skilled and knowledgeable about careers advice and able to respond to the individual circumstances of learners
 - integrating careers advice effectively into learners' programmes.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Directors, leaders and managers have an ambitious strategic vision to provide high-quality, market-leading online learning programmes to meet the needs of adult learners in a wide range of industries. They have increased management capacity and recruited more teaching staff to meet their ambitious plans to become an online college.
- Leaders' and managers' meticulous market research and expert product development has ensured that the company is able to deliver high-quality online learning on a national scale. Managers use information from learners and local and national labour market intelligence well to inform curriculum development.
- Leaders and managers have established an effective culture of continual improvement that has had a positive impact on outcomes for learners in the current academic year. They use data accurately to identify strengths and implement effective improvement actions.
- Managers make effective use of learners' views to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. For example, they have recently designed an online 'chat' facility in response to learners' requests. As a result, staff are now able to make more rapid and personalised responses to learners' queries about their courses.
- Managers have a highly developed understanding of learners' progress, and they use this information well to identify areas for improvement. They intervene when necessary to ensure that the large majority of learners achieve their qualifications.
- Leaders and managers use performance management very well to improve the quality of tutors' teaching, learning and assessment. Managers appraise tutors' performance using a wide range of indicators, including the quality and timeliness of their feedback to learners, the accuracy of their marking, and feedback from learners. They then provide robust support for any staff who underperform; those staff who do not improve after receiving appropriate levels of support do not gain further work.
- Leaders and managers recruit highly qualified and experienced staff and ensure that their professional practice remains of a high quality. Managers provide staff with thorough and effective continuing professional development and share examples of good practice that enhance their teaching skills. As a result of the skilled management of staff and a culture of respect, staff turnover is low and tutors are dedicated and committed to their learners.
- Leaders and managers place a high priority on developing learners' English skills, and this has a positive impact on learners' progress. However, their actions to improve learners' mathematical skills are less successful, and this impedes learners' progress in improving these skills.
- Leaders and managers do not ensure that learners benefit from thorough and impartial careers advice and guidance. Learning support advisers provide information about other courses that the provider offers, but insufficient advice on alternative next steps. Managers have taken recent action to improve the quality of careers advice. They have developed an online platform to enhance the advice given to learners and to provide learners with access to employment opportunities nationally and in other parts of the world. They also have plans to implement the Gatsby Benchmarks for careers guidance.

by, for example, providing more individual guidance for learners. However, it is too soon to see the impact of these new developments.

The governance of the provider

- Directors have a range of relevant skills and expertise in further education, business and finance, and quality assurance. They use these skills well to hold managers to account for the quality of provision and to drive forward improvements for learners.
- Directors ensure that highly flexible staffing arrangements enable the provider to be exceptionally responsive to learner demand. As a result, the very large majority of learners now complete their qualifications within planned timescales, and staff respond very quickly to enquiries from potential and current learners.
- The board of directors has no external members to facilitate an independent review of the quality of education. Consequently, the pace at which the board of directors has addressed a few areas for improvement has been slow. These include, for example, supporting the development of learners' skills in mathematics. The directors have appointed recently an independent member to the board to strengthen the scrutiny of quality procedures. However, it is too early to see the impact of this appointment.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders and managers have created a caring culture that ensures that staff place a high priority on keeping learners safe. For example, learning support advisers keep in regular contact with learners, and curriculum support staff send regular information to learners about safeguarding issues relevant to their own courses.
- Leaders and managers have put in place effective policies and procedures to safeguard learners. The designated safeguarding manager has links with appropriate external agencies, including the local authority, which she uses well to inform safeguarding policies and procedures. The safeguarding policy refers to a wide range of potential risks, and procedures for referrals are clear.
- Safeguarding measures are designed well to meet the particular characteristics of provision for learners who are geographically dispersed and who learn online. For instance, staff encourage learners to be aware of safeguarding risks in their own local areas and provide learners with useful information about how to stay safe online, including when using social media.
- Managers use safe recruitment procedures to good effect, and all staff who require it have enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service clearance.
- All staff receive effective and appropriate safeguarding training. The designated safeguarding lead and her two deputies are suitably qualified.
- Managers have put in place a thorough risk assessment and action plan in relation to the potential local and national risks of radicalisation and extremism. As a result, learners have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe from these risks.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Tutors set high expectations for the standard of learners' work. Learners demonstrate a good understanding of their subject and how to apply their learning in their job roles and everyday lives.
- The very large majority of tutors provide learners with thorough, specific and helpful feedback that learners use well to improve their work. Tutors provide early feedback to learners through the online platform, and effective additional feedback and support to learners via email and telephone. As a result, all learners improve their skills and knowledge, including the few who fall below the expected standards.
- The large majority of tutors support learners effectively to improve their written English skills. They provide specific feedback and advice to learners on how to improve their spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- Staff provide learners with a robust and comprehensive early assessment of their abilities when they start a course. They prepare and support learners well for their learning before learners join their courses.
- Tutors are highly experienced in their vocational areas and develop high-quality and relevant online learning resources that inspire learners and support them to extend their knowledge beyond the requirements of the qualification. Consequently, learners improve the depth of their knowledge and make rapid progress.
- Staff use online materials well to promote equality and diversity and fundamental British values. As a result, learners' awareness and understanding of these concepts improves as their courses progress. For instance, staff discuss with learners the ways in which the Equality Act 2010 rests upon British values; they link this legislation with learners' employment in the care sector and, in particular, the importance of treating all people with respect.
- Learning support advisers provide good practical advice and support that learners value highly. They conduct frequent and effective reviews of learners' progress and respond effectively to learners' questions and problems. For example, they advise learners on study skills and arrange extended deadlines for submission of work should learners' personal circumstances necessitate it.
- Learners with additional needs benefit from individual support that helps them in their learning. For example, learners with a visual impairment are provided with learning materials in accessible text, and learners who have difficulties with writing or using a computer are provided with voice recognition software. As a result, learners with additional needs make good progress and achieve their qualifications at a higher rate than other learners.
- Tutors do not develop learners' mathematical skills well enough. They have begun the process of integrating mathematics into course units, but the impact of this on learners' progress has not yet materialised.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- All learners benefit from an extensive range of high-quality vocationally based online

resources. Learners use these resources well. They are supported effectively by tutors, and as a result they improve their vocational knowledge and skills and become more confident learners.

- The large majority of learners develop their English skills well. Their tutors provide good support to develop academic writing techniques that include, for example, the correct use of citations and bibliography.
- Learners benefit from individualised initial advice and guidance. Staff discuss course options in depth with learners to ensure that they are placed on the appropriate programme for their needs and circumstances. The proportion of learners who have remained on their course and achieved their qualification during the current year has improved from 2016/17, and is now high.
- Learners actively and frequently engage in challenging and high-quality online learning activities. The very large majority of learners speak with their learning support advisers at least every two weeks to ensure that they are on track and to check on any practical problems that they are experiencing with the course.
- Too few learners benefit from the additional learning opportunities that are available to develop their work-related skills. Learners have the choice of a wide range of high-quality additional units, such as in time management, personal money management and social communication. However, these units are not integrated well into learners' programmes, and staff do not check learners' progress on these additional units effectively.

Outcomes for learners

Good

- Learners make good progress on their courses. They develop their confidence and gain new skills and knowledge that enhance their current job roles and increase their chances of promotion. For example, learners working as teaching assistants study behaviour management techniques, which they use well to deal with pupils who exhibit poor behaviour.
- The proportion of learners who have completed their courses and achieved their qualifications in the current year has improved significantly from 2016/17 and is now high. In 2016/17, too many learners on the level 3 certificate in supporting teaching left their courses early and did not achieve their qualifications.
- Staff support learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities well. As a result, these learners achieve at a better rate than their peers. In 2016/17, males achieved at a much lower rate than females, but in the current year the gap has closed and males and females now achieve at a similarly high rate.
- Following their courses, a very high proportion of learners improve their work situation, including gaining promotion or new employment. For example, learners have used the skills and qualifications that they have gained to change careers and progress to work in education and the mental health sector, or to continue studying at a higher level. Managers recognise that they need to refine further their collection of data on learners' destinations to give them a fuller evaluation of the impact of courses on learners' careers. They have taken action to improve this, but it is too early to see its impact.

Provider details

Unique reference number	1220396
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	19+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	397
Principal/CEO	Mick Cox
Telephone number	01757 210522
Website	www.theskillsnetwork.co.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 or above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	-	-	-	-	-	520	-	-
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	-	-	-	-	-	-		
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	-							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	-							

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the head of curriculum, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans. Inspectors used telephone calls for group and individual interviews, 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

Richard Ronksley, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Rebecca Clare	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jonny Wright	Ofsted Inspector

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