

# The Virtual College

Independent learning provider

## Inspection dates

27–30 November 2018

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

- Trainers do not establish well enough the starting points of apprentices on standards-based apprenticeships. Consequently, they fail to provide relevant improvement milestones or monitor apprentices' progress sufficiently.
- Apprentices' programmes, including their targets, focus too heavily on the completion of tasks rather than on the development of appropriate skills and behaviours.
- Managers' monitoring of subcontractors has not led to rapid improvements in apprentices' progress or their completion within planned timescales.
- Managers' self-assessment is overly optimistic and fails to identify the key weaknesses in the provision. The quality improvement plan is not precise enough to bring about swift improvements.
- The proportion of apprentices with subcontractors who leave their programmes early is too high.
- Too many apprentices do not receive enough information during their course about further learning and career opportunities.
- Too few apprentices who are not studying functional skills as part of their programme develop their English and mathematics skills.

### The provider has the following strengths

- Leaders have designed a curriculum that responds well to local enterprise partnership priorities and employers' needs.
- Most employers provide their apprentices with ample time to study during working hours.
- A high proportion of apprentices remain in full-time employment after they have completed their programme.
- Trainers use their good subject knowledge to provide helpful feedback that enables apprentices to improve the quality of their work over time.

## Full report

### Information about the provider

- The Virtual College, founded in 1995, provides online learning materials in a range of subjects, including safeguarding and personal development. The head office is in Ilkley with an apprenticeship office in Newton Aycliffe.
- The Virtual College has held a funding contract since 2007. Until recently, leaders relied heavily on two subcontracted partners to deliver their provision. At the time of the inspection, The Virtual College had 44 apprentices in learning across the north of England, of whom 27 were on direct delivery provision. Over three quarters of these were on standards-based apprenticeships in computing-related subjects. A very small number were on frameworks in business administration, health and social care and warehousing.

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

- Improve systems for measuring the progress that apprentices make by:
  - clearly establishing apprentices' vocational starting points
  - setting clear, measurable milestones throughout the apprenticeship
  - improving the quality of apprentices' improvement targets as part of their progress reviews to include the development of skills, competencies and behaviours
- Ensure that the small number of apprentices remaining with the subcontractors make swift progress and successfully complete their programmes.
- Review the self-assessment report to ensure that it includes the key weaknesses in the provision. Ensure that the quality improvement plan has precise targets for improvement that focus on the impact of actions rather than compliance.
- Improve apprentices' awareness of further learning and career opportunities by consistently providing sufficient advice and guidance during apprentices' programmes
- Ensure that trainers put an appropriate emphasis on the development of English and mathematical skills so that all apprentices improve their skills in these subjects.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management

### Requires improvement

- Managers' self-assessment is overly optimistic, is not accurate enough, and fails to identify many key weaknesses. Actions in the quality improvement plan are not precise enough to bring about improvements. As a result, managers are unable to take quick and effective action to address the key weaknesses within their provision.
- Performance management of staff does not identify weaknesses clearly enough. Too often, managers make judgements on the quality of staff performance based on the findings of observations of their practice without considering a wider range of evidence, such as apprentices' progress. Managers fail to challenge staff sufficiently to enable them to improve their practice.
- Managers do not have sufficient oversight of the progress that apprentices make. They do not establish well enough the starting points of apprentices on standards-based programmes to enable them to measure apprentices' subsequent progress. They focus too heavily on what apprentices need to do for their end-point assessment rather than the skills that they need to develop.
- Managers' actions have not brought about swift enough improvements for apprentices with subcontractors, particularly on the proportion of apprentices successfully completing their programmes within their planned timescales. Managers have now taken the strategic decision to stop working with subcontractors and are monitoring closely the wind-down contracts of subcontracted provision.
- Managers plan apprenticeship programmes carefully to ensure that apprentices who need to achieve functional skills qualifications study them early in their programme. The proportion who achieve their functional skills qualifications is high. However, managers do too little to ensure that apprentices who are not studying qualifications in English and mathematics improve their skills.
- Leaders and managers have a clear strategy for their apprenticeship provision. They have built a curriculum that closely aligns to the priorities of the local enterprise partnership and meets employers' needs very well. For example, the chief executive is heavily involved in the Leeds city region local enterprise partnership digital strategy board.
- Most employers contribute effectively to the planning of their apprentices' training. They help to select the additional content that apprentices study, such as journalism in the digital marketer apprenticeship programme. They work closely with trainers to ensure that there is appropriate alignment of on- and off-the-job training. As a result, managers ensure that their curriculum fully meets the requirements of apprenticeships.
- Leaders ensure that apprentices on directly delivered provision receive effective advice and guidance at the start of their course. Well-trained, experienced staff provide careers advice and guidance to potential apprentices before they start their programmes. Managers carefully match apprentices and employers using the information that they have about the job roles within employers' businesses. However, the proportion of apprentices that leave their programmes early on subcontracted provision without achieving is too high.
- Leaders have created a culture of tolerance and respect. They celebrate apprentices'

successes frequently. Apprentices are respectful to each other and to their trainers.

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

- The executive board is responsible for holding leaders to account, and a designated board member is responsible for managing the quality of apprenticeships. The board manages resources effectively and invests well in staff to ensure that there are sufficient resources to enter new apprenticeship markets, such as cyber security.
- Leaders report to the board regularly on the progress of new apprentices and the financial position of the apprenticeship programme. However, board members do not understand the strengths and weaknesses of the provision well enough. As a result, they are unable to intervene swiftly to improve the quality of apprenticeships.

### **Safeguarding**

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders, managers and staff take a very serious approach to safeguarding and deal with the rare safeguarding concerns appropriately. Leaders have strong links with external partners to support apprentices in need.
- Staff, employers and apprentices benefit from accessing high-quality e-learning materials that help to raise their awareness of key safeguarding issues, such as female genital mutilation, child sexual exploitation and modern-day slavery.
- The 'Prevent' risk assessment and action plan are comprehensive and include follow-up actions at all levels of the organisation and subcontractors. Staff ensure that apprentices have an appropriate understanding of the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

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

### **Requires improvement**

- Programmes do not meet apprentices' individual needs and abilities well enough. All apprentices follow the same training programme. Trainers do not use apprentices' individual starting points to identify the skills that they need to develop. They do not set apprentices measurable milestones throughout their programme. As a result, too few apprentices have personalised learning programmes to meet their specific needs.
- When planning programmes and setting targets for apprentices, trainers pay insufficient attention to the development of the work-related skills, behaviours and competencies that apprentices need for their future careers. For example, apprentices who have issues with timekeeping or attendance do not have targets to address these areas of weakness.
- The use of webinars is not effective enough in helping apprentices to make progress. Trainers use group webinars as part of the blended approach to training, and most apprentices attend these well. During the webinars, however, trainers do not make effective checks on learning and too many apprentices fail to take part in the activities during the sessions. Assessment of apprentices' subject knowledge before and after webinars shows that too few apprentices make good progress in their learning.
- Most employers support the well-planned off-the-job training by providing apprentices with plenty of time to study during their working hours. Apprentices diligently record the

hours that they spend completing off-the-job-training. Employers play a vital role in ensuring that apprentices develop the vocationally relevant skills that they need to become valuable employees. However, too few employers take part in apprentices' progress reviews. Too often they provide feedback on apprentices' performance by email. As a result, trainers fail to include employers' views of apprentices' progress when setting improvement targets.

- Trainers on the directly delivered programmes have good subject knowledge and experience that they use well to support the development of apprentices' vocational skills. They provide very good individual guidance and tuition in relation to current workplace trends such as the increased use of social media advertising campaigns around 'Black Friday' sales. Trainers provide apprentices on the directly delivered programmes with guidance on how to improve beyond the expected standard. As a result, most of these apprentices improve the quality of their work over time.
- Apprentices benefit from access to a wide range of high-quality e-learning resources. Staff allocate a range of appropriate modules to apprentices during the induction period to help them to develop the skills that they need to be successful in their job roles. Apprentices complete the modules throughout their programme at various intervals. Most apprentices complete the modules within the expected time frame.
- Employers value the skills and knowledge that apprentices gain during their programmes. Apprentices quickly become valuable employees to their businesses. They produce work that meets the expectations of their employers and contribute to the growth of many businesses through the use of social media marketing. A few apprentices have taken on additional responsibilities, received a pay rise or gained promotion during their apprenticeship.

### Personal development, behaviour and welfare

### Requires improvement

- Too many apprentices do not receive enough information throughout their course about further learning and long-term career opportunities. Apprentices receive information on possible progression routes at the start of their programme, but too often they do not receive ongoing advice and guidance. While a high proportion of apprentices remain in employment on completion of their programmes, too many do not know what other job roles or further training they could consider in the future.
- Apprentices who do not need to study English and mathematics as part of their programme do not develop these skills well enough. Trainers do not develop apprentices' skills in English and mathematics in their vocational lessons. During progress reviews, trainers routinely check that apprentices are using their existing skills but do not put enough emphasis on the development of new skills.
- The small number of apprentices studying at NTG Training do not attend well enough. Too often, apprentices cancel or re-arrange appointments with their assessor. This contributes to their slower than expected progress. As a result, too many apprentices with NTG Training are continuing in learning beyond their planned end dates and make slow progress.
- Apprentices have a narrow understanding of British values. While they recognise the importance of mutual respect, they are less familiar with other values. Trainers do little to

improve this understanding during progress reviews. They use cursory questioning and do not probe apprentices' understanding well enough.

- Apprentice develop good levels of confidence and personal skills that they use well in the workplace. They take pride in their work and act on the feedback that they receive to improve the quality of their work. They recognise the skills that they are gaining. They quickly become confident in applying their new skills and knowledge in the workplace.
- Apprentices feel safe. They understand how to stay safe when using the internet, computer programmes and software. Many apprentices complete e-learning modules relating to issues in broader society, such as forced marriage and honour-based violence. Most apprentices have an appropriate understanding of the risks of radicalisation and extremism.
- Apprentices behave professionally and respectfully to staff and to each other. They demonstrate a good understanding of equality issues at work and in their everyday lives. Most apprentices attend sessions promptly, are ready to learn and bring the equipment that they need.

### Outcomes for learners

### Requires improvement

- The proportion of apprentices who remain on their programmes is too low. Too many apprentices who were due to complete their programme in 2018/19 left early and without achieving. Around one third of apprentices enrolled on standards-based apprenticeships have left early. Managers have started to analyse the reasons why apprentices leave their programmes early and have taken action where appropriate. However, it is too early to see the impact of these actions.
- Too few apprentices on frameworks complete their apprenticeship within their planned timescales. While overall achievement rates are high for framework programmes, only around half of apprentices achieve their apprenticeship within the planned timescale. For those continuing beyond their planned end date, many remain in learning for too long.
- The proportion of apprentices with the subcontractor Baltic Training who have successfully completed their standards-based apprenticeship is too low. While only accounting for a small number of current apprentices, too many apprentices do not pass their end-point assessment at the first attempt or they leave their programme early without completing.
- Apprentices at the subcontractor NTG Training make very slow progress. Although managers work with apprentices well beyond their planned end date to ensure that a high proportion successfully complete their apprenticeship framework, too few apprentices do so within the planned timeframe. Managers do not ensure that those who fall behind quickly catch up. Consequently, only a very small number achieve their apprenticeship on time.
- Apprentices produce work that meets industry expectations. Most apprentices complete tasks at work that meet the expectations of their employer. The standard of apprentices' written work is appropriate to the level of the programmes that they study.
- The proportion of apprentices who pass functional skills qualifications is high. Apprentices take functional skills qualifications at an appropriate level to meet the requirements of their apprenticeship. A high proportion of apprentices pass their English and mathematics

functional skills examinations at the first attempt. The small number of apprentices studying information technology functional skills achieve well.

- Almost all apprentices remain in full-time employment or self-employment on completing their apprenticeship. A very small number are not in employment, education or training. Managers gather thorough information about what apprentices are doing after completing their programme and they have analysed this carefully to help inform their curriculum planning. However, the sample on which this is based is too small and accounts for only around a third of leavers. Managers recognise they need a broader sample to make this information more useful.

## 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	503
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+
	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	–	1	14	23	–	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	–							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Baltic Training Services Ltd NTG Training Services Ltd							



## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of operations for apprenticeships, 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

Ken Merry, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Sarah Stabler	Her Majesty's Inspector
Bob Busby	Ofsted Inspector
Pat Hornsby	Ofsted Inspector

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