

Digital Skills Solutions Limited

Monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 1278565

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Inspection dates: 23–24 January 2019

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

From October 2018, Ofsted undertook to carry out monitoring visits to all newly directly funded providers of apprenticeship training provision which began to be funded from April 2017 or after by ESFA and/or the apprenticeship levy. This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of those arrangements and as outlined in the *Further education and skills inspection handbook*, especially the sections entitled 'Providers newly directly funded to deliver apprenticeship training provision' and 'Monitoring visits'. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

Digital Skills Solutions Limited (DSS) is an independent training provider wholly owned by Newham College of Further Education. It was set up to provide commercially funded training and publicly funded education and training as a subcontractor. In May 2018, it gained a contract to provide levy-funded apprenticeships. At the time of this monitoring visit, two apprentices are on framework-based apprenticeships and five are on standards-based apprenticeships in information communication technology, all at level 3.

Themes

How much progress have leaders made in ensuring that the provider is meeting all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision?

Reasonable progress

DSS is a well-established provider that has recently undergone a major restructuring of its staff to place greater emphasis on teaching and learning and improve the quality of provision. Its managing director was appointed in January 2018 and its director of learning and apprenticeships joined the company six months later. These new leaders have a clear strategy for their provision. They aim to work with large employers in public and private sector organisations to provide apprenticeships that meet employers' needs for staff. These leaders make suitable use of labour market information to identify skills gaps and to find meaningful jobs for apprentices. Almost all DSS's current and completed apprentices filled vacancies at their employers.

Leaders and managers have been successful in setting up systems for recruiting candidates and placing them in suitable apprenticeships. They have well-structured training programmes, monitor apprentices' progress carefully and take effective action if apprentices fall behind. However, they have not yet tested these systems and training on large numbers of apprentices. Since the start of the contract, managers have recruited 14 apprentices to levy-funded apprenticeships. Of these, two left the programme without completing, one at an early stage of the programme and the other to alternative employment. Of the six apprentices due to finish in 2018/19, five have completed on time and the sixth should complete shortly and on

time. The remaining apprentices are due to complete in 2019/20 and are making good progress.

Managers work closely with employers to make them aware of their responsibilities and the demands of the apprenticeship. They make sure that employers are involved in training and supporting their apprentices. Managers at DSS monitor this involvement carefully and ensure that apprentices have the required time off work for their training. Apprentices use this time well for study or to work on their assessed projects and portfolios of evidence. They understand the assessment methods and the graded awards available to them.

DSS has a well-structured board of non-executive directors who provide suitable challenge and support for leaders. Directors have helped shape DSS's strategy and ensure that its leaders focus on improving the quality of provision.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices benefit from high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes for apprentices? Reasonable progress

Managers' apprenticeship recruitment processes are thorough. They identify candidates' skills and knowledge to match them to apprenticeships at the appropriate level. Trainer-coaches provide effective training to prepare candidates for interview and employment as apprentices. Managers are careful to match employers' job descriptions to apprenticeship frameworks or standards so that apprentices are in positions that will enable them to complete their awards successfully.

Leaders and managers have well-structured programmes of study so that apprentices gain the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for their qualifications and careers. Apprentices talk enthusiastically about the things they have learned and can do as a result. For example, they describe how they can now research and analyse data from retail websites, prepare reports for clients or resolve computer network problems. Apprentices attend their off-the-job training sessions regularly and make good use of their independent study time. They benefit from the training sessions provided by their employers, and learn, for example, about 'pay per click' or developing their presentation skills. In a short space of time, apprentices become young professionals whose work and contribution to their companies is valued by their employers.

Managers have thorough arrangements for monitoring apprentices' progress and identifying those that are at risk of falling behind or leaving. They make effective use of electronic records and frequent staff meetings to ensure that apprentices are on track. If staff are concerned about apprentices' welfare or progress, managers quickly take the remedial action needed to support apprentices or help them catch up. As a result, apprentices previously at risk have remained on programme and improved their progress.

Apprentices develop good attitudes to work and enthusiasm for their industries. They learn to manage their time well and to balance their work and study commitments. Apprentices gain in confidence so that they contribute effectively to meetings and discussions at work. Their written English improves so that they make better use of professional language and use an appropriate tone when writing emails. Their telephone skills improve and they become adept at communicating successfully with a wide range of clients and colleagues.

Leaders and managers have a detailed quality improvement plan that makes suitable use of data, observations of teaching and progress reviews, and feedback from apprentices and employers. Managers are responsive to the need for improvement. For example, they revised the sign-up and induction programme following feedback from apprentices. Leaders and managers have self-assessed their provision and accurately judge the progress they have made in setting up these apprenticeships.

The quality of apprentices' progress reviews requires improvement. Trainer-coaches' discussions on topics such as equality and diversity or safeguarding are too superficial. Apprentices are correct when they say that their reviews are not as helpful as they could be in enabling them to make progress. For example, trainer-coaches' feedback on apprentices' project work does not give apprentices the guidance they need if they are to improve. Managers identify this area for improvement in their self-assessment report and in their quality improvement and training plans.

How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that effective safeguarding arrangements are in place? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have thorough recruitment processes in place to ensure that staff are suitable to work with young people and vulnerable adults. Managers are careful to keep records of the various and appropriate checks that they carry out. Policies and procedures are clear and detailed. Trainer-coaches cover safeguarding in detail at apprentices' induction.

Two senior staff at DSS are trained and have oversight of safeguarding matters. Managers ensure that staff are trained in safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. They refresh this training regularly. An intervention officer acts promptly and beneficially to provide additional pastoral support or guidance for apprentices who have welfare problems, or who are otherwise at risk.

Apprentices have a suitable understanding of how to keep themselves safe and how to protect themselves from radicalisation or extremism. If apprentices are in jobs that need heightened understanding of safeguarding, such as those in schools, employers are very effective in developing this understanding. Apprentices know who to contact if they have a concern about themselves or others.

Trainer-coaches cover safeguarding, the dangers of radicalisation and extremism and British values in their progress reviews with apprentices. However, these discussions are not sufficiently meaningful to improve apprentices' understanding of these topics. In their self-assessment, leaders and managers correctly identify the need to improve the way in which they develop apprentices' understanding of safeguarding.

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