

Vocational Skills Solutions Limited

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Andrea Machell, Her Majesty's Inspector

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Interim visit

Context and focus of visit

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out 'interim visits' to further education and skills providers. Interim visits are to help learners, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of learners and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below and the findings are based on discussions with leaders, managers, staff and learners.

Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we made this visit remotely to reduce pressure on the provider.

Information about the provider

Vocational Skills Solutions Limited (VSS) was established in 2012. At the time of the interim visit, there were 2,163 adult learners. More than half of these are studying entry level courses in English and mathematics. The remaining adults study on a range of vocational programmes at levels 1 and 2. The large majority of these study courses in warehousing, construction, security, and health and social care.

The vast majority of adults are unemployed when they start their course. VSS works with a range of partners across the country, including Jobcentre Plus, to help adults get into work.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of learners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

Leaders and managers reviewed the teaching and learning strategies usually in place and adapted these to deliver most of the teaching online. Leaders provided tutors with training that enabled them to teach online and to support learners throughout the pandemic. Tutors continue to maintain regular telephone contact to help learners with any mental health issues and personal anxieties.

Since May 2020, leaders have implemented a phased opening of face-to-face classroom teaching. To keep learners safe, leaders reduced class sizes, increased the number of classes and introduced extra hygiene measures. Initially, leaders prioritised those learners who needed to learn about the practical aspects of their course, for example, in warehousing, business administration and fork-lift truck driving.

Senior leaders and staff promote a culture of social responsibility. Senior leaders have made sure that help was given to learners who encountered financial difficulties, for example by providing them with essential food items or paying for their transport into the centre. Staff are very proud to support community groups. For example, they provide food to local food banks.

Leaders continued to use the processes already in place to monitor the quality of teaching and learning and the progress that learners make. Leaders set up a new electronic system, so they could monitor online attendance and engagement. Any learners identified as being at risk get extra support from their tutor.

Leaders collaborated with regional partners across the country to identify what skills adult learners need to access available jobs. They adapted the curriculum accordingly. For example, they now provide more courses in security and warehousing. Partners say that this has resulted in more learners gaining a job.

Leaders say that there have been difficulties in learners being able to complete their examinations and gain a qualification due to awarding body restrictions.

What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of learners?

Tutors currently use a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching. Learners attend the provider's learning centres for courses that include practical elements, such as health and social care, and construction. Courses such as customer service are taught remotely.

Tutors feel that online teaching has been beneficial as they are able to deliver courses more flexibly. For example, they now offer twilight, early morning and weekend teaching sessions. They have been more creative in their teaching. For example, in health and social care, learners usually visit care homes for job shadowing. Owing to the pandemic, care homes are not allowing non-essential visitors onto the premises. Learners now watch care workers demonstrate activities through live-streaming.

Learners have received training in how to use digital technology. They are becoming more proficient in using online learning platforms and in developing their digital skills. For example, where learners previously completed tasks such as creating posters and leaflets using paper-based resources, they now use computer software to produce these electronically.

Learners receive information, advice and guidance about courses before enrolment. They talk with tutors about the expectations of the course, progression to other courses, employment and potential careers. During their course, learners receive support for CV writing and interview skills.

During the first few weeks of the initial COVID-19 restrictions, learners on several courses did not attend online sessions or arrived late. Tutors quickly realised that they needed to adapt their teaching, so they changed the length of sessions. They split three-hour lessons into two sessions and made sure that learners had enough breaks away from their computers.

Learners who did not want to enrol onto online learning courses or who had no access to a computer joined a waiting list for face-to-face teaching. Most of these learners have now been able to join courses that have face-to-face teaching.

How are leaders ensuring that learners are safe and well informed about potential risks, including from online sources?

Senior leaders and managers place a high priority on keeping learners safe. Leaders ensure that learners remained safe during the pandemic, including when learning online. Teachers use telephone communication, where appropriate, to monitor the safety of vulnerable learners and refer them to external agencies if needed. Learners said that they felt safe.

Tutors have had additional training so they can teach online safely and so they have a better awareness of safeguarding concerns that may affect their learners. Tutors make sure that learners are made aware of online risks such as phishing scams, fake news and online gambling.

Staff explained how they support vulnerable learners. For example, each training centre has a foodbank so that learners are able to provide meals for themselves and their families. Staff refer learners to external agencies for financial and housing support. At weekends, they contact learners who live alone to reduce feelings of isolation.

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