Inspection of Free to Learn Limited

Inspection dates: 28 to 31 May 2024

Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
The quality of education	**Inadequate**
Behaviour and attitudes	**Good**
Personal development	**Requires improvement**
Leadership and management	**Inadequate**
Adult learning programmes	**Inadequate**
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Information about this provider

Free to Learn Limited is an independent learning provider that offers a range of short vocational courses aimed at adults who are seeking work. These include the level 3 diploma in business, level 3 certificate in business administration, level 2 certificate in customer services, level 2 certificate in mental health awareness, level 2 certificate in preparing for work in adult care, and non-accredited employability courses. Courses take place in Doncaster, Sheffield, Birmingham and Sandwell. The provider receives funding to deliver adult learning programmes from South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, West Midlands Combined Authority and the Education and Skills Funding Agency. At the time of the inspection, 235 adult learners were enrolled, with the majority attending at the Doncaster site.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Learners have insufficient opportunity to develop the skills, knowledge and attributes that they need for the qualifications that they are working towards or to achieve their future aspirations. Leaders do not ensure that courses are planned to provide sufficient time and opportunity for learners to make progress and succeed. Too often, learners are placed on courses that are not appropriate for their needs. For example, on level 3 business courses, too many learners do not have the English language skills that they need to be able to develop their understanding of the concepts taught.

Too few learners gain jobs or further training following their courses, despite the fact that this is the main purpose of the provision. Staff do not provide effective careers guidance or ensure that learners receive support to find jobs. They do not provide opportunities for learners to experience the expectations and realities of the workplace and do not identify clearly enough how learners can move to their next steps. On the level 2 course in preparing for work in adult care, learners do not have the opportunity to apply their learning practically through, for example, visits to care homes and placements. On completion of a pre-employment course that includes the development of skills needed for employment in the security sector, too many learners do not receive the required licence for working in the sector, despite this being their reason for joining the course. As a result, they are unable to progress to employment in the sector.

Learners benefit from working in diverse learning groups with peers who are from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. They learn about the importance of not judging people from the way they look or act, or their beliefs.

Learners feel safe and know who to contact should they have any concerns. Most learners understand what extremism is and how views and actions could be harmful to others. Learners understand the changes in behaviour that a person may display if at risk of radicalisation, such as becoming more withdrawn or expressing unexpected opinions in conversations.

Learners develop good learning habits and understand the importance of attendance and punctuality. Attendance at most sessions is high. If learners miss sessions, they are offered an alternative session to help them catch up.

Learners are keen to gain employment. They feel optimistic about returning to work and their future careers. Despite their poor experience with the provider, learners' attitudes towards their studies are positive. Learners interact positively with their tutors and peers and engage well in learning tasks and assessments. They treat each other with respect and share responsibilities.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders and managers provide a learning programme that is made up of short courses to develop learners' knowledge and skills in a range of sectors and job roles to prepare learners for work. However, tutors do not take account of learners' starting points when planning and delivering courses. As a result, in many instances the content of the curriculum is either not sufficiently demanding for learners or is too challenging, given learners' existing knowledge and skills.

The teaching strategies that tutors use do not help learners to gain an understanding of key concepts that they need to learn. Learners are often unclear about what is expected of them in classroom tasks. Tutors do not plan training effectively to provide learners with the time to reflect on what they have learned. Learners for whom English is not their first language do not have sufficient opportunity to consolidate their understanding of the content of their course before progressing to their examinations.

Although many learners are awarded their qualification, too often they have not acquired the knowledge covered by the qualification by the end of the course. On the level 2 customer service course, for example, activities are limited to the completion of workbooks, and teachers coach all learners to write answers to the assessment questions, with little teaching input. Consequently, many students pass the assessments despite having not gained the knowledge needed. On the level 3 diploma in business, although most learners were awarded their qualification in 2022-23, current learners are not gaining the knowledge and skills that they need to enable them to make progress in their next steps in learning and employment.

Managers and tutors do not take sufficient account of learners' specific needs. They do not use results of initial assessment and progress reviews well enough to set specific targets for learners. They do not identify the progress that learners make from their starting points, or the actions that learners need to take to help them find a job.

Assessment practice is weak across most courses. Tutors do not do enough to identify learners' misconceptions or misunderstandings. Too often, they provide too much support when assessing work, and too many learners are coached to come up with the correct workbook answers in lessons rather than arriving at these independently.

Tutors do not provide opportunities for learners to develop skills and attributes beyond those required by the qualification. They do not plan for or deliver additional training outside of the main curriculum. They focus solely on the core elements of the programme and do not consider how they could develop other skills that would enhance learners' lives and help them to make positive contributions to their communities.

Tutors provide appropriate support for most learners with additional learning needs during sessions. However, in a few instances they do not put in place effective arrangements in examinations to support these learners. A few learners with dyslexia are not given additional time or readers to help them during their examination.

Senior staff do not ensure that the quality of the provision is of an appropriate standard. Although they carry out a range of quality assurance activities, such as visits to lessons and standardisation meetings, these activities do not identify accurately the many weaknesses in the quality of teaching and assessment. As a result, senior staff have not tackled these weaknesses and the provision remains poor.

Governance arrangements are not effective. Leaders and managers have an advisory board in place, which includes members who have experience in the further education sector. However, board members do not receive accurate information about the standard of the education that learners receive and, therefore, are unable to challenge leaders to improve it.

Staff feel well supported in their roles and enjoy their work. Managers are mindful of staff workload and offer support in relation to staff well-being.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Learners are kept safe during their time with the provider. However, too often safeguarding concerns are not recorded accurately enough. As a result, this creates a risk that the follow-up actions from identified concerns are not monitored sufficiently.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Significantly increase the proportion of learners who progress into work by ensuring that learners benefit from learning that meets their individual needs and prepares them for the world of work.
- Improve the initial guidance and assessment processes to ensure that learners are suited to the demands, level and requirements of their programmes and that they understand what their courses involve.
- Provide learners with effective careers guidance so that they can make informed decisions about their potential next steps.
- Ensure that the quality of the taught curriculum improves rapidly and significantly so that all learners can gain the skills and knowledge that they need for their next steps.

- Ensure that governors are able to hold leaders to account for improving learners' experiences and outcomes and that they are routinely provided with the relevant and accurate information they need to challenge leaders.
- Record safeguarding concerns and follow them up quickly and accurately so that actions are implemented and closely monitored.

Provider details

Unique reference number	1247987
Address	65 Hall Gate Doncaster DN1 3PB
Contact number	0208 5259430
Website	www.free2learn.org.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Gabriel Gherscovic
Provider type	Independent learning provider
Date of previous inspection	4 to 6 May 2022
Main subcontractors	Not applicable

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the interim director of education and quality, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the further education and skills inspection handbook and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

Glenise Burrell, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
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Marina Gaze	Ofsted Inspector
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