

# Virtual College

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## Background information

### Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

#### Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

### Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report ([www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)), reports from the inspectorate's monitoring visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Engineering and manufacturing technologies

## Description of the provider

1. Virtual College is a company limited by guarantee, based in Ilkley, West Yorkshire. It was established in 1995 to develop e-learning training materials for the engineering and manufacturing industries. In 2006 it operated a subcontract as a consortia member to provide Train to Gain National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training. In 2007 it was awarded direct contract status by LSCs in the North East, the North West and Leicestershire. It is also a member of the West Yorkshire Learning Network consortia. LSC funded provision comprises 28% of Virtual College's revenue.
2. Virtual College offers NVQs to 306 learners on its Train to Gain programmes mainly in the manufacturing industry. Currently 199 learners are working towards NVQs in business improvement techniques (BIT) at levels 2 and 3, and 32 are working towards NVQs in performing manufacturing operations (PMO) at levels 1 and 2. Eighteen learners are working towards the recently introduced level 2 team leadership award and seven are on skills for life programmes.
3. The chief executive and a board of four directors oversee the strategic direction of the company. A divisional director is responsible for the operational management of LSC funded provision. All training and assessment is provided on employers' premises by a team of seven full-time and four part-time tutor assessors. They are supported by a team leader and a training manager who both internally verify the provision. An administration manager and three assistants provide support for the team.

## Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

## Sector subject area

Engineering and manufacturing technologies	Good: Grade 2
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## Overall judgement

### Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

4. The overall effectiveness of the provision is good. Achievement and standards, the quality of the provision and leadership and management are good. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory.

### Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

5. Virtual College's capacity to improve is good. The board of directors and senior managers in the company provide strong strategic direction that has developed and improved provision effectively. Good working relationships with local and regional employers are established well.
6. Management of programmes is good. Tutors and employers support learners well. Overall success rates are high and timely success rates are satisfactory. Training and learning are good. Learners benefit from very frequent assessment visits. Skills for life provision is incomplete. Too few learners are improving and formally accrediting their literacy and numeracy skills. However, informal literacy and numeracy support from tutors and assessors to help learners achieve their NVQ is adequate.
7. The company has developed satisfactory quality improvement processes which have yet to complete an annual cycle. It has concentrated its efforts on improving the learner experience effectively. Assessor skills in training and learning and outcomes for learners have improved. Evaluation of some of the quality systems is insufficiently analytical for the provider to effectively measure improvements. The self-assessment process is inclusive for learners and staff but is less so for employers. The self-assessment report is the third the company has produced. It is critical and evaluative and judgements matched inspection findings. However, some sections of the report contained conflicting statements with those in the main findings of the report.

## Key strengths

- High overall success rates
- Very good acquisition of social and workplace skills
- Good training and learning
- Good support for learners
- Strong strategic and operational management
- Particularly good partnership working

## Key areas for improvement

- Insufficient planning and recording of individualised learning
- Incomplete skills for life provision

## Main findings

### Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

8. Achievement and standards are good. Overall success rates in 2007/08 are high at 90%. Learners on PMO and BIT programmes succeed well with overall success rates at 90% and 91% respectively. Progression rates from level 2 to level 3 on BIT programmes are good. For the small number of skills for life learners, overall success rates are satisfactory but timely success rates are low.
9. Overall timely success rates are satisfactory. In 2007/08, just over half of the learners on BIT level 2 programmes completed their programme on time. Some learning was delayed due to external factors at employer sites. In 2008/09, of the 47 learners who have left their programme, 38 completed successfully and of these 29 did so on time. On the newly introduced team leadership award, learners are on target to complete their award on time.
10. Learners acquire very good social and workplace skills, a strength identified through self-assessment. Learners on BIT programmes demonstrate improved team working and better communications between work departments. On completion of the course learners have more self-confidence and a greater awareness of their company's business. They are able to translate theory into operation, improve their employer's business and improve their own working environment.

### Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

11. The quality of provision is good. Training and learning are good. Sessions are planned well and clear aims and objectives are shared with learners. Tutors regularly check learners' understanding using a range of methods. The provider has developed some innovative learning materials including computer and web-based activities, practical tasks and quizzes which interest and motivate learners. In one company an e-learning course leading to the BIT level 3 qualification is being piloted. Assessment is frequent and most tutors visit learners every week. Learners are inducted into NVQ programmes satisfactorily. Learners' progress is good and monitored well through an electronic system that all tutors and managers have access to. Learner performance is colour coded showing learners who are on target or causing some concern. When learners make slow progress, appropriate action is taken to help them improve.
12. The planning and recording of individual learning is insufficient. The results of a range of initial assessment tools are not used effectively to record individualised target dates for completion of units. Some learners could progress much more quickly than the courses are allowing. Learner reviews are frequent, but targets set are often too vague and insufficiently challenging.



13. Courses meet employers' and learners' needs well. Through negotiation with the employer, the provider tailors programmes effectively to contextualise and reflect the work experience of the group. The relationship with employers is good.
14. Support for learners is good. Employers support learners well by providing dedicated classrooms at work and giving learners time during the working day to complete their programme. Tutors are very flexible and provide training and assessment activities to best suit learners' shift working patterns. Learners can also access tutor support by email and telephone outside the working day.
15. Information, advice and guidance are satisfactory overall. The company holds Matrix accreditation. On BIT and PMO programmes, learners receive good information and advice. Learners on the team leadership award receive insufficient information about progression opportunities. Learners receive insufficient information about how they can improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

## Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

16. Leadership and management are good. As identified in the self-assessment report, strategic and operational management are strong. The board of directors provide clear direction and focus for the company's growth and improvement. The strategic and business plans set clear objectives and targets that are shared and understood by staff. Long-term planning is highly responsive to the employers' and the sector's needs. Staff are consulted about and informed of management decisions and their views are valued. Operational management is good and programmes are planned well. Communication is good. Technology is used well to keep tutors informed. For example, online meeting facilities allow staff across a wide geographical area to meet regularly without travelling to the head office. Staff development is good. Staff are well qualified and access a wide range of training and development to meet industry, organisational and personal development needs. The appraisal system effectively reviews staff performance against their job description, links training and development to meet business needs and sets key measurable performance targets.
17. Partnership working is particularly good. The company is represented effectively by the chair of the board and the chief executive at a broad range of sector forums. Through Virtual College's engineering academy, other providers are brought together to network and contribute to developments within the industry. Employer relationships are strong, and they benefit learners. Virtual College host regular employer meetings at a range of different employer sites to network and allow learners to showcase what they have achieved through their training. Employers have a strong commitment to training and strongly support development opportunities for their staff through the Train to Gain programme.

18. Virtual College's approach to equality and diversity is satisfactory. Equal opportunities are discussed at induction with learners. Tutors promote equality and diversity adequately at learners' reviews. Employers' approaches to equal opportunities are reviewed as part of a pre-training check. Support is provided to employers to develop a policy if they do not already have one. Initial assessment activities, which include a broad range of assessment tools, take account of the diversity of the skills, knowledge and needs of individual learners. The results of the assessment however, are not always used effectively to ensure that programmes are tailored to meet learners' individual needs. The company is responsive to identified additional learning needs, for example, supplying a scribe for a dyslexic learner. As identified in the self-assessment report, data is not analysed sufficiently to review the progress and achievement of different groups or to contribute to management decisions. The equal opportunities policy is regularly reviewed and adequately states the company's position on fair treatment for all. It does not explicitly outline some key aspects of equal opportunities or relate it to the workplace.
19. Quality improvement is satisfactory. Since securing a direct contract for training in 2007, the company has redefined their quality procedures. A quality improvement strategy is now in place. The company has appropriately prioritised implementation of quality procedures and systems that directly influence and improve provision for learners. Tutors and assessors have completed mandatory training to ensure that they have the appropriate skills to deliver good quality training. All training and learning materials are available online to assure consistency of delivery for learners. Evaluation of specific quality procedures is identified on a monthly quality calendar. The system has not yet completed a full 12 months cycle. Some quality processes have been evaluated, but not analysed sufficiently to identify and measure improvement effectively. The observation of teaching and learning process is thorough. It identifies strengths and areas of improvement in provision well, but fails to define best practice or how it can be shared. The procedures for safeguarding meet current government requirements. The provider is updating human resources procedures to ensure they fully comply with best practice in relation to safeguarding.
20. Arrangements for internal verification are effective. Standardisation meetings are regular. Learners' work and assessors' activities are sampled according to a clear plan. Assessors receive good feedback on their assessment activities.
21. The skills for life provision is developed insufficiently. Learners and employers are not accurately informed about the company's approach to skills for life. No skills for life strategy is in place to guide the management, delivery and evaluation of literacy, numeracy and language training. All learners are required to take initial assessments in literacy and numeracy but the results are not used effectively to determine which learners need to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. Some learners receive insufficient information about their test results. Learners are not diagnostically tested to further investigate their areas for improvement. Too few learners are receiving literacy and/or numeracy tuition despite being

below level 2. The number of qualified skills for life tutors is insufficient. Vocational tutors do not routinely embed literacy and numeracy into NVO programmes. Where dedicated skills for life sessions are delivered, they are not contextualised to the learners' vocational area. Too few learners are preparing for, and taking, national tests in literacy and numeracy.

## What learners like:

- 'Very enjoyable course, I'm glad I did it'
- 'Very helpful approachable tutor'
- Developing a wide range of team leadership skills such as coaching, team-working and appraising staff
- 'I loved every minute of the course from start to finish'
- 'The course helped improve our work practice'
- 'We had more appreciation of how other aspects of the company worked and stopped blaming each other when things went wrong and worked out solutions instead'
- 'Tutors listened to us and questioned our views. We had some great debates'
- 'Gaining more confidence in my abilities'
- 'I learned refreshing new stuff'
- Gaining more awareness of health and safety
- 'I liked having the time to do the course at work'
- 'Doing this course has benefited my job and my life outside of work; I have a tidy garage now'
- 'The course made me think about how I can do things differently'

## What learners think could improve:

- The length of the course – especially the time spent in the classroom at the beginning of the course
- 'I had done some of the course previously but had to repeat it which was a waste of time'
- 'The course was not clearly explained at the beginning and I did not know what I was letting myself in for'
- 'Not enough on-the-job training to back up the theory training'
- Help with IT skills before starting the e-learning courses
- 'Information about what I can do next'