

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: IPS International
Date of visit: 27 January 2009

Context

IPS International Limited (IPS) is a privately owned training and consultancy business. Originally part of Sheerness Steel, IPS became a limited company in 1997 and was bought by three senior managers in February 2000. The head office and main training facilities are on a large industrial estate close to Rochester.

IPS contracts with Kent and Medway Learning and Skills Council to offer training for apprentices, advanced apprentices and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) for adult learners in health and social care, engineering and manufacturing technologies, information and communication technology, customer services and business administration. IPS is a Centre of Vocational Excellence for advanced maintenance engineering.

At the previous inspection IPS's overall effectiveness was satisfactory. All aspects of IPS's provision, including training in engineering and manufacturing technologies and health and social care, were found to be satisfactory. Since the inspection IPS has recruited a further 9 staff into new roles and doubled the number of Train to Gain learners to around 300.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made in raising timely and overall success rates on apprenticeships?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection low timely success rates on apprenticeship programmes was a key area for improvement. In engineering and manufacturing technologies success rates for apprentices were low, whereas in health and social care success rates were poor for advanced apprentices. In both sector skills areas inspected, timely success rates were identified as an area for improvement. Overall IPS has made reasonable progress in improving success rates. For engineering the success rate for advanced apprentices has improved considerably from 56% in 2006/07 to 85% in 2007/08, which is significantly above the 2006/07 national average. The success rate for apprentices has also improved but at 27% for 2007/08 it remains well below the national average. Timely success rates for both engineering apprentices and advanced apprentices remain below the 2006/07 national average.

In health and social care the high success rates for apprentices have been maintained. Success rates for advanced apprentices have improved considerably from only 20% in 2006/07 to 50% in 2007/08 but remain below the national average. Timely success rates have also improved and although just below the 2006/07 national average for apprentices they are better for advanced apprentices.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in the collection and analysis of management information?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection IPS was not using management information sufficiently to compare the performance of different groups of learners or to identify trends. Since then IPS has made reasonable progress in improving the way it collects and uses data for improvement. Trainers monitor the progress of learners thoroughly and carefully. Those learners who are at risk of falling behind with their assessments are identified early. Trainers take prompt action to remedy any poor performance. Information about the performance of different groups of learners, assessors, trainers and employers is now collected and analysed by senior managers. IPS now pays greater attention to identifying trends and recognising good practice which can be shared across its work. In some cases the collection of this data is at too early a stage to allow meaningful conclusions to be drawn. IPS is steadily building up a useful bank of data which it can use to inform management decisions. IPS also uses data effectively to compare its performance to other providers in the south east.

How much progress has IPS made in improving the management of its engineering subcontractors?	Reasonable progress
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IPS has made reasonable progress in improving the management of its engineering subcontractors. Since the previous inspection, it has reduced the number of subcontractors by offering a greater range of in-house learning. Its main subcontractor is Dianne Smith Associates (DSA) which provides training and assessment for Train to Gain learners in fenestration. At the previous inspection, IPS staff were not monitoring learners' progress adequately and had failed to identify some weak assessment practices. Since the inspection, IPS has revised its contract with DSA. The new contract specifies each party's roles and responsibilities more clearly. IPS has also re-structured its staffing arrangements and recruited additional staff, one of whom has been allocated the role of monitoring learners' progress and checking and verifying the standard of assessment at the subcontractor. This new member of staff has a good knowledge of the fenestration industry, and has recently gained accreditation to internally verify national vocational qualifications in fenestration. Links with the awarding body have been strengthened to ensure thorough verification, and dates for the first verification visit have been set for early February 2009. It is too early to be sure whether weak assessment practices have altogether ceased at DSA.

How much progress has been made in the implementation and evaluation of improvements?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection some of IPS's arrangements for quality improvement were not sufficiently well implemented. Since then IPS has made significant progress in this area of work. A number of quality improvement initiatives have been implemented and evaluated. All learners are now allocated a trainer who is responsible for monitoring all aspects of their progress. Major changes have been made to the way in which key skills are taught. IPS now ensures apprentices achieve their key skills early in the programme. A very successful pilot of short intensive key skills courses is now being applied to all of the apprenticeships. IPS has improved its mechanisms for identifying and sharing good practice. Communication is frequent and effective, with a strong focus on raising success rates. Trainers now carry out comprehensive reviews of learners' progress which are used very effectively to highlight areas for concern. The observations of teaching and learning now have a strong focus on assessing the quality of learning. All of IPS's trainers now have, or are working towards, the Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) award.

How much progress has been made in improving the promotion of equality of opportunity in the engineering provision?	Reasonable progress
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IPS has made reasonable progress in promoting equality of opportunity in the engineering provision. Since the previous inspection, IPS has revised and improved its policy for equality of opportunity, and has reviewed its arrangements for inducting learners. Staff development sessions have helped to ensure that assessors take a more in-depth approach to equal opportunities when reviewing learners' progress. IPS has also improved its monitoring of learners' understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Reviewing staff check with learners whether their employer has carried out its responsibilities in respect of equality of opportunity. Learners' understanding of their rights and responsibilities is now developed by the use of information booklets and work-based assignments. Some learners' literacy and/or numeracy skills are too low to enable them to achieve the requirements of their job or qualification easily. In these cases, IPS staff continue to adopt an approach of assisting learners, rather than helping them to improve their literacy, numeracy or language skills. Staff promote the advantages of a career in engineering strongly to school-girls. Since the inspection, IPS managers sought advice from a company specialising in equality issues, to improve their promotion of equality and diversity.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has been made in improving the quality of self-assessment and action planning?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection IPS's self-assessment process was judged to be inadequate. Since then IPS has made reasonable progress in improving the quality of its self-assessment and action planning. The most recent self-assessment report is much more evaluative and objective. Staff led the judgement making, with less direction from managers. Learners' views are taken into account, particularly the views of apprentices. The self-assessment report still does not cover all the key questions of *The Common Inspection Framework*. Some of the data presented is potentially misleading. The engineering section omits achievement data in respect of the motor vehicle engineers, where success rates are low.

Progress in planning improvements has been substantial. The quality improvement plan addresses all of the areas identified at the previous inspection as well as some additional ones. Progress with the plan is monitored frequently and carefully. Shortly after the previous inspection, managers took the view that many areas for improvement were partly caused by over-stretched staff and insufficient staff resources. Staff roles were restructured and additional posts were created. Following staff team meetings, action notes are now produced, rather than minutes as was the case before the inspection.