

Skillnet

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 54402

Name of lead inspector: Elizabeth Warriner HMI

Last day of inspection: 15 January 2010

Type of provider: Independent Learning Provider

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Information about the provider

1. Skillnet was founded in 1999 to provide automotive training. Inspections in 2002 and 2005 judged the provision to be satisfactory. The two directors bought Skillnet in 2006, expanding it from 270 learners regionally to nearly 1,500 nationally. The directors are supported by 108 staff. Skillnet has apprenticeship contracts with Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) in Hertfordshire, the South East and London West. Two thirds of apprentices are under 18 years old. Nearly 4% are female. In London and the South East, 141 adults are on Train to Gain programmes. In September 2009, Skillnet began Foundation Learning Tier courses in Eastcote and Watford, where 27 programme-led apprentices also study. Skillnet gained the Training Quality Standard and Matrix awards in 2008/09 and regained Investors in People.
2. Skillnet specialises in badged manufacturer training in vehicle maintenance and related trades. Learners attend block release at Skillnet's own centres in Eastcote and Watford, the Ford college in Daventry, the Scania centre in Loughborough, and self-contained college centres. Provision in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was not inspected.
3. Skillnet provides training on behalf of the following providers:
 - Mercedes-Benz
 - STORT consortium, Bishop's Stortford (Birchwood School)
 - Hertswood School, Elstree
 - Hillingdon Training (Abbotsfield School and West Drayton Centre)
4. The following colleges provide training on behalf of Skillnet:
 - Blackpool and the Fylde, Bridgwater, Manchester, Central Sussex (Ford light vehicles)
 - City of Bristol (DAF HGV)
 - North West London (Body and Paint)

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2008/09
Employer provision:	
Train to Gain	202 learners
Apprenticeships	1,134 apprentices
	323 advanced apprentices

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 1
Capacity to improve	Grade 1
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	1
Quality of provision	1
Leadership and management	1
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	2
Subject areas	Grade
Automotive engineering	1

Overall effectiveness

5. Skillnet provides outstanding provision for automotive engineering learners. Success rates within manufacturer-led programmes are exceptionally high and learners' progress and achievement are improving year on year, although learners in London achieve less well than others. Learners enjoy their courses, and develop excellent engineering and personal skills. Resources at centres are outstanding. Teaching, learning and assessment are very good. Skillnet's response to learners' and employers' needs is excellent, and Skillnet supports learners particularly effectively. Skillnet has high aspirations, and manages change exceptionally effectively. Quality improvement processes are outstanding. Arrangements to safeguard learners' health and well-being are very thorough and effective, particularly for learners on block release. Skillnet's partnership work with large manufacturers, sector bodies and community organisations is outstanding in developing and promoting automotive training. Equality of opportunity is good. However, some reviews do not sufficiently develop learners' detailed understanding of equality and diversity. For some apprentices, the link between on- and off-the-job training is insufficient.

Main findings

- Overall success rates for vehicle maintenance learners based with manufacturers are outstanding and improving. In body and paint operations, success rates are good. Many learners, who previously made slow progress with another provider, have achieved their qualification. Timely success rates for 2008/09 were satisfactory, but recent figures show significant improvement. Progress on independent programmes and Train to Gain is satisfactory.
- Learners develop excellent workplace skills. Their practical skills and theoretical knowledge are outstanding. They work diligently and competently in good quality workplaces, often using their own initiative while maintaining prestigious vehicles. Employers speak highly of learners' skills, specialist knowledge and capability. Learners gain self confidence and many are promoted into more responsible roles.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are very good. Learners receive a high standard of training both on- and off-the-job. The planning of learning and assessment is excellent. The assessment of the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) is particularly good, with frequent workplace assessments which provide thorough feedback to the learner. Assessors thoroughly check the quality of evidence in portfolios.
- Reviews are very productive and set clear targets which learners understand. They are used well to monitor progress and provide good information for employers. Although all include questions on equality, and health and safety, some do not sufficiently reinforce and develop learners' knowledge and understanding.
- Outstanding resources enhance learning for most learners. Manufacturer-led training centres have state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment and new vehicles. Workshops are well equipped. Classrooms have plenty of up-to-date manuals. Excellent information technology (IT) facilities enable learners to use manufacturers' online diagnostic software. Employers have up-to-date premises and tools. Learners practise a wide range of tasks to develop their skills.
- Provision is highly responsive to employers' training needs and learners' career goals. Programme content and planning are outstanding. Excellent communication ensures that employers are well informed and actively involved throughout. Highly productive work with large manufacturers has developed good progression routes to support learners' career aspirations. However, some learners have an insufficient link between on- and off-the-job training.
- Care, guidance and support are outstanding. The service is personal, thorough and highly effective. Comprehensive initial assessment leads to individualised learning. A manager oversees an excellent 'learner at risk' process, ensuring swift and effective action. Tutors and assessors provide excellent support and guidance throughout the programme. Guides for parents and mentors provide clear and useful information.
- Skillnet has high aspirations and communicates them well to its distributed workforce. The directors' clear vision is supported by vigorous and effective

action. Ambitious targets are set and met. Clear and well-structured reporting mechanisms support regular and rigorous checks on performance. Staff development is well planned, frequent and effective.

- Skillnet manages change exceptionally well. The directors' careful planning has facilitated rapid but sustainable growth with significantly improved success rates and excellent quality. Each section in the clear company structure has a discrete and well-defined role focusing on a particular manufacturer, with enthusiastic specialist staff. Communication with staff, customers and partners is open and interactive.
- Quality improvement and internal verification are outstanding. Regular meetings develop and share good practice. All staff contribute to the effective continuous improvement group. Skillnet monitors its subcontractors rigorously. Standardisation meetings and teaching observations are highly constructive and used well to generate improvements. Sampling and assessment planning are comprehensive. Self-assessment is comprehensive, self-critical and highly accurate.
- Exceptionally broad and productive partnership work promotes participation in automotive training. Skillnet's very close links with large manufactures have developed highly responsive provision. Its well-managed network of college partnerships ensures good training for apprentices and develops capacity. Creative contributions to consultative bodies are developing new learning opportunities. Collaborative projects with schools and community venues are extremely successful.
- Safeguarding is very thorough and effective, particularly for residential apprentices. All staff have regular safeguarding, health and safety training. Appropriate vetting covers staff, accommodation hosts, employers and learner transport drivers. Codes of practice for learners and staff are clear, well understood and strictly enforced. Rigorous risk assessment covers all premises and activities. Machinery and equipment are regularly maintained and tested.

What does Skillnet need to do to improve further?

- Continue to seek partnership opportunities to develop and share good practice in automotive training.
- Continue actions to improve success rates and the rate of progress for all learners.
- Improve the link between on- and off-the-job training for all learners so that opportunities to reinforce learning and develop skills are maximised.
- Improve the use of questioning to develop learners' understanding of equality and diversity and health and safety through the review process.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- teachers make the subject come alive through their experience
- excellent support from assessors and specialist staff to help them to succeed
- the chance to practise tasks on excellent equipment and apply their learning at work
- well-planned training delivering a qualification and skill that helps them make progress in their career
- females value a sympathetic and independent female mentor they can talk to confidentially
- the good focus on keeping them safe
- being treated as an adult and working in a professional environment
- increased confidence in succeeding since Skillnet took over.

What learners would like to see improved:

- longer periods of block release
- the frequency of assessors' visits to their workplace
- more variety in the models of cars available
- more activity in some classroom sessions
- more activities in the evenings on block programme.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- very responsive company that understands their needs
- keeping residential learners safe through good communication and support
- staff who are passionate about the subject and have specialist skills
- assessors who work hard to keep learners on track
- the focus on the brand and added value for their learners
- open and proactive and truthful communication
- marked improvement since Skillnet took over (large manufacturers)
- the way Skillnet works with dealers to encourage them to take on apprentices in a challenging climate (large manufacturers).

What employers would like to see improved:

- more apprentices on the schemes and more centres
- the reliability of information from further education colleges about learners' progress
- less paperwork, especially at start up
- mentors' training in the dealerships.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 1

6. Skillnet has improved substantially since the previous inspection. New owners bought the company in 2006 and won contracts to train learners previously with a failing provider. Careful and significant expansion of the business, based on excellent change management, successfully focused on improvements and raised success rates. The excellent quality improvement plan, widely communicated and understood by all, contains good achievable targets which are carefully monitored.
7. The excellent, clear, concise self-assessment report is central to quality improvement. A highly effective continuous improvement group, representing a wide cross section of staff, contributes to and moderates the report which includes systematically collected learners', subcontractors' and employers' views. Staff understand the process and recognise their contribution. Managers have implemented very good reviews of learners' progress, previously an identified weakness, improved resources, motivated staff through significant change and raised success rates. For Ford apprentices, half the provision, success rates rose from 38% to 99% since joining Skillnet. The directors have introduced an outstanding quality improvement system. Skillnet identified contributory factors for low Train to Gain success rates in London, improved initial assessment, and rates are now improving.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 1

8. Outcomes for learners are outstanding, and steadily improving at a time of severe recession within the automotive industry. Overall success rates for manufacturer-specific vehicle maintenance learners, 70% of the provision, are outstanding, ranging from 80% to 100% in 2008/09. Apprentices and advanced apprentices on Ford programmes, that make up half of the provision, achieve exceptionally well at 93% and 99% respectively. In body and paint operations, success rates are good. There are no significant differences between the achievements of different ethnic groups or between genders. Success is celebrated enthusiastically, with awards ceremonies attended by parents, employers, accommodation hosts and manufacturers.
9. In 2008, Skillnet took over 800 apprentices from another provider with very low success rates. Many were making slow or little progress. Timely success rates for 2008/09 are satisfactory. Successful initiatives are improving progress, and recent timely success rates are well above national averages.
10. Learners on independent programmes and Train to Gain make satisfactory but improving progress. Many are in London, which has lower average success rates.

11. Learners develop excellent workplace skills. They progress rapidly, undertaking routine servicing and repairs at an early stage, and becoming confident in the full range by the end of their programme. Employers value learners' newly acquired technical expertise. Additional trade-specific modules, diagnostic procedures, and other technician qualifications outside framework requirements give learners specialist knowledge that benefits co-workers.
12. Learners feel safe and understand how to keep safe and healthy. Their programme focuses strongly on health and safety. Healthy options are available in canteens at the centres. Many learners participate in sports activities. Some learners take part in fundraising for charities.

The quality of provision

Grade 1

13. Planning for the technical certificate is excellent. Learning materials are comprehensive, well written and contain clear diagrams. Assessment on- and off-the-job is very thorough with clear feedback to learners. Key skills are very well integrated into the technical certificate. Learners make good use of well-defined opportunities to gather portfolio evidence in all parts of their programme. Formal key skills tuition is realistic and relevant to automotive studies. Learners' enhanced literacy and numeracy skills support learners well in their learning.
14. Outstanding resources enhance learning for most learners. Manufacturer-specific centres have state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment and current vehicles from the manufacturer's range. Workshops are well equipped with excellent technical equipment to challenge learners' fault-finding skills. Excellent classroom IT facilities enable learners to access online diagnostic software and workshop manuals identifying recognised repair methods. Employers' workshops are also up-to-date and well equipped. Learners complete a wide range of tasks at work to develop their practical skills.
15. Skillnet is exceptionally responsive to employers' needs and learners' aspirations. The range and content of programmes are excellent and closely matched to automotive technological advances both in manufacturer-led and independent programmes. Employers engage actively in planning learning and assessment. Manufacturer-led programmes have clear progression routes between the NVQ and master technician modules, which benefit employers significantly.
16. Strong and effective partnerships develop responsive programmes meeting local needs. Skillnet initiated and led the Institute for the Motor Industry schools forum and develops opportunities for young Londoners through the apprenticeship taskforce. Skillnet's expertise and contacts have helped schools to set up successful and well-equipped young apprenticeships. Employers, initially reluctant to take on young learners, are delighted with their progress and commitment. Disaffected young people are motivated to re-engage and are progressing well. The new foundation course offers good opportunities to learners not quite ready for apprenticeships.

17. Arrangements for information, advice and guidance are outstanding. The service is personal, thorough and highly effective. Comprehensive recruitment and screening handles 10,000 applications annually. Thorough initial assessment, including mechanical aptitude, is used well for individual planning. A manager oversees an excellent, meticulous 'learner-at-risk' process, ensuring difficulties receive swift and effective intervention. Assessors continually guide and support learners, aided by workplace mentors. A clearly explained parents' guide describes programmes and lists essential contacts.

Leadership and management

Grade 1

18. Skillnet's high aspirations are communicated well to its distributed workforce. The directors support their clear vision with effective action. Skillnet sets and meets ambitious targets through its excellent quality improvement cycle. Clear and well-structured reporting mechanisms support regular and rigorous progress checks. Managers measure staff performance effectively through monthly individual review meetings. Staff development is well planned, frequent and effective.
19. Change management is outstanding. Skillnet's rapid growth has been accomplished without compromising its excellent quality, with significantly improved success rates. The directors planned carefully and effectively, ensuring sustainable phased growth. The company structure is very clear and transparent, with a discrete, well-defined role for each section focusing on a particular manufacturer. Section staff are enthusiastic specialist brand experts. Managers and staff benefit from regular meetings to share ideas both within sections and company-wide. Communication with staff, customers and partners is open and interactive.
20. Skillnet works effectively with an exceptionally broad range of partners. The board is well informed by representatives from industry and training. Skillnet participates extensively and actively in employer and industry consultative groups to develop the sector and promote learning. Skillnet was instrumental in developing accreditation for previously unregulated garage workers. Useful peer review groups generate improvements to learners' experience. Skillnet welcomes feedback from learner and employers using it effectively to improve.
21. Quality improvement is outstanding, as are arrangements for internal verification. The strategy is described in an exceptionally clear manual that staff understand. Productive monthly continuous improvement group meetings review progress and propose improvements, for instance the key skill exemption guide adopted as good practice in the sector. Clear process charts for all learner activity aid the excellent communications. Good practice is shared well in monthly staff, learner and employer newsletters. Managers hold rigorous quarterly contract review meetings with subcontractors, raising standards effectively. Internal verification is exceptional. Verifiers are well managed, meet monthly and improve assessment continuously, supporting assessors well. Regular standardisation meetings are highly constructive. Sampling and assessment planning are comprehensive. The system to observe teaching and

learning is effective. Comprehensive audits monitor the quality system. The self-assessment report is comprehensive, self-critical and highly accurate.

22. Safeguarding procedures are very thorough and effective, led by the quality director. Policies are clearly displayed. All staff have regular, appropriate training, some for advanced accreditation. Staff, employers, accommodation hosts and transport drivers are appropriately vetted. Codes of conduct strongly emphasise safe behaviour and are strictly enforced. Parents and learners receive clear information including 24-hour contact numbers. Staff regularly check and monitor accommodation. They respond swiftly to concerns. Health and safety procedures are rigorously enforced. Risk assessment is comprehensive, including all premises and tasks. Equipment is scrupulously maintained. Learners and staff wear appropriate protective clothing. Skillnet helps employers to develop risk awareness.
23. Equality of opportunity is strongly promoted. All staff receive frequent training. Equality champions promote and share good practice effectively, attending a range of fora to develop sector good practice. Comprehensive up-to-date policies and procedures promote equality and diversity. Managers promptly implemented the recommendations of a recent expert audit to prevent discrimination in company systems. Skillnet promotes employers' understanding of diversity through assistance with developing equality policies and contributions to manufacturers' newsletters.
24. Skillnet sets ambitious targets to expand participation, particularly amongst people underrepresented in the automotive industry. Staff frequently attend school events, particularly targeting girls' schools. Female and ethnic minority apprentices and staff present good role models for potential recruits. Female participation, although still small, has increased significantly, particularly amongst young learners. Half of Young Apprentices are girls, some progressing into full apprenticeships. Skillnet appoints female employees as mentors for all female learners, offering good confidential support. Productive work with large manufacturers has developed employer advice packs to support females better. Complaints are recorded clearly and followed up thoroughly.
25. Equality and diversity training at induction is reinforced throughout learners' programmes. Recent initiatives include a question bank, used by all assessors. However, not all use it consistently to extend learners' understanding and knowledge.

Information about the inspection

26. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and six additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's director of quality, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local LSC or other funding bodies, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
27. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed on behalf of the provider. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Skillnet

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	16-18 Learner responsive	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners			
Full-time learners	1,431	19	1,412
Part-time learners			
Overall effectiveness	1		
Capacity to improve	1		
Outcomes for learners	1	-	1
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	1		
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	1		
How well do learners progress?	2		
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	1		
How safe do learners feel?	2		
Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	2		
How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	-		
Quality of provision	1	-	1
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2		
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1		
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1		
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	1		
Leadership and management	1	-	1
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	1		
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	-		
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2		
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2		
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	1		
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	1		
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	1		

*where applicable to the type of provision

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