

B-Skill Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

1–4 December 2015

Overall effectiveness

Good

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for learners	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Success rates for learners on both classroom learning and apprenticeships have been consistently good for a majority of learners over the last three years.
- The well-structured training develops learners' personal and employability skills as well as improving their confidence and self-esteem.
- Quality assurance arrangements are comprehensive and affect all aspects of the provider's work and they are leading to improvements.
- The highly effective pre-enrolment and initial assessment of learners' starting points ensures that they start on the right programme and at the right level.
- Good tracking of learner progress now contributes to their better understanding of how to improve and supports their progression to the next level.
- Most adult learners develop a good range of employability skills and improve their personal and social effectiveness.
- Apprentices develop good work skills, gain in confidence and make progress in the workplace.

It is not yet an outstanding provider

- Although overall success rates for apprentices are high, too many apprentices do not complete within their planned time.
- Not all teaching, learning and assessment is consistently good and not enough is outstanding.
- Not enough trainers challenge learners sufficiently, particularly the more-able apprentices, to extend their knowledge and skills fully.
- The lack of resources in some centres inhibits learning for a significant number of learners.

Full report

Information about the provider

- B-Skill is a private training company established in April 2000 to provide both work-based and classroom learning. Delivery is a combination of direct and subcontracted provision through partners across areas including the North East, North West and the South East. At the time of inspection, there were 377 apprentices and 78 learners on classroom-based provision. B-Skill focuses a large majority of the classroom learning on learners needing employability training; Jobcentre Plus mandate a significant number of these to attend the training.
- Unemployment rates in the North West and North East, where the majority of the provision takes place, are higher than for the United Kingdom as a whole. Achievement of five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C in both areas is broadly in line with those in England.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Take effective action to ensure that more apprentices complete all of their framework requirements within their agreed planned learning time.
- Raise the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that it is consistently good or outstanding.
- Ensure that trainers challenge all learners so that they extend their knowledge, skills and understanding fully, particularly concerning their English and mathematics.
- Provide sufficient resources in all centres to ensure that all learners can access equipment and creative and stimulating teaching materials that support learning effectively.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have increased their focus on improvement. The appointment of a quality manager has resulted in a much more streamlined approach to quality assuring all aspects of the provider's work and this is now leading to tangible benefits. Effective communication strategies are in place that work well with a geographically spread workforce. Managers have an increasingly proactive approach to identifying and tackling weaknesses.
- Self-assessment is thorough and largely accurate. The self-assessment report identifies most strengths and areas for improvement. Leaders have revised and improved their observation process as part of the new quality assurance measures. It is proving effective in improving teaching and learning. This also extends to subcontracted provision. Areas for improvement result in a detailed individual action plan. Subsequent observations note the previous weaknesses and evaluate whether trainers have addressed these effectively. Inspection confirms that most teaching is now good, although a few pockets of weaker teaching remain.
- The company's strategy to determine an appropriate provision offer includes market research to identify new business that meets skills needs in the relevant localities. For example, the company has diversified its offer to include health and social care, noting the need nationally and locally. B-Skill is a member of relevant organisations, such as the Association of Learning Providers, that have links with the Local Enterprise Partnerships and provide up-to-date intelligence. B-Skill subcontracts with a work programme provider to deliver an employability and enterprise award at level 1 to learners who are almost work ready.
- A recent and innovative development is the involvement in new trailblazer apprenticeship in software development. The company noted local high-level digital skills needs and seeks to develop this work with a network of employers.
- Work to develop employability skills for adults is concentrated in areas of high unemployment. This is successful in improving their personal and social skills and progression to employment is good. Learners benefit from additional training and qualifications over and above their funded qualifications such as a nationally recognised health and safety qualification for learners intent on work in the construction industry.
- Collaboration with employers of apprentices is very good and benefits employers and learners well. Employers value the training that B-Skill provides. Apprentices' work adds value to the business. Almost all apprentices gain employment or promotion when they complete their programme. Involvement of employers is less strong for employability provision.
- Clear and effective processes for the performance management of staff are in place, with evidence of effective actions in cases of poor performance. Performance objectives include outcomes for learners and managers carefully review these with trainers. B-Skill has appointed a number of new trainers and new quality assessors are now in post to monitor their work so that they pick up and tackle any weaknesses.
- Managers have taken successful steps to improve the rigour of tracking systems and provide better management oversight of learner progress. When they identified that slow progress with functional skills was a significant contributory factor they appointed a functional skills tutor to work with trainers and learners. This is improving the delivery of English and mathematics and having a positive impact on accelerating learner progress. Increased attention to initial assessment and advice and guidance is now ensuring that trainers place learners on appropriate programmes that fit their aptitudes, abilities and ambitions.
- Significant work has taken place to improve teaching and learning, including many highly effective staff development activities. External consultants have delivered sessions in teaching and learning strategies to trainers and these have successfully raised standards.
- Leaders promote the culture of equality of opportunity and diversity well. Staff promote mutual respect and understanding, starting at the learners' induction. Apprentices have a good understanding of current issues and of how they are relevant to their work. B-Skill has recruited increasing numbers of apprentices from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in recent years. There are no significant variations in the achievement of different groups of learners.
- Managers identified concerns about one subcontractor partner in the South East earlier this year. Directors have taken robust and decisive action to ensure that they support all learners in this area to achieve. They have also appointed a quality monitor in the locality to carry out regular checks on progress and to work with the subcontractor on improvements. She has identified and is addressing specific issues around the delivery of higher-level apprenticeships. The quality of teaching and learning with this

subcontractor is weaker than elsewhere but ongoing work to improve it is beginning to have a positive impact.

■ **The governance of the provider**

- The company recently revised its governance arrangements and appointed two non-executive directors to sit with the two directors on the board. The non-executive directors bring a good range of expertise and skills to the company. Although at an early stage, these new arrangements are starting to provide good strategic oversight and challenge to senior managers and other staff.
- One meeting of the newly constituted board has taken place and the record shows that the board gives an appropriate commitment to the quality of provision for learners. The board reviewed the self-assessment report and asked suitably pertinent questions about key aspects of the provision including data and areas for improvement.

■ **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**

- B-Skill carries out appropriate checks on staff. They give health and safety suitable emphasis. Learners feel safe. Provider records show assiduous attention to the follow-up of any potential safeguarding incidents.
- Staff training has included much information about the government's 'Prevent' agenda and staff understanding of this is good. A recent thorough 'Prevent' self-assessment has identified where staff need to do further work to improve all learners' understanding of British values and the risks of extremism and radicalisation.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Learners benefit from robust pre-enrolment, initial assessment and induction arrangements that ensure that programmes meet their development needs. Trainers use these arrangements well to develop learning strategies to provide additional learning support and challenge for learners and provide information, advice and guidance to support learner progression.
- Trainers plan learning effectively and most individualise the provision of training to meet learning needs well. For example, trainers use video clips, photo-imagery and presentation cards to provide memorable and stimulating individual learning.
- Trainers work effectively with learners to develop good occupational skills and knowledge, and learners receive helpful verbal feedback on their work to support improvement. Trainers have high expectations of learners and challenge most of them well in their learning.
- The development of learners' English and mathematics functional skills is effective. B-Skill supports learners with additional learning needs well. Managers provide specialist training and support for their trainers to ensure that learners have a positive and enjoyable learning experience. Trainers' reviews of learners' progress and the correction of errors in their English and mathematics work are inconsistent for a minority of learners and require further improvement.
- Trainers are experienced and provide good teaching and learning because of the high-quality and relevant professional development they undertake. Trainers have very positive working relationships with both learners and employers. They provide good support to learners, for example by using online video communication, adopting flexible working practices and the good use of case studies.
- The highly effective tracking of learner progress and resulting actions to address achievement ensures that trainers support learners well in their progress and understanding of progression opportunities to further learning or promotion in employment.
- Staff promote equality of opportunity and diversity in teaching and learning well and learners have a good level of awareness.
- For a majority of learners there are either too few or underdeveloped learning resources; additionally, they do not sufficiently link to learners' identified learning needs.
- The checking of learning and reinforcement of understanding in a minority of learning sessions requires improvement, so that it better prepares learners for assessment and supports learner progress.
- Trainers do not always provide sufficiently detailed written learner feedback for a minority of learners. Target setting in individual learning plans is not always sufficiently helpful in supporting learner progress and improvement.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are good

- Learners develop good personal skills for work and positive attitudes and behaviours for learning. This supports their employability skills development and contributes effectively to a positive learning experience.
- Trainers provide support early in learning and work productively with learners to develop their self-confidence, self-awareness and communication skills. This is highly effective in supporting learners in their transition to work. The recently redesigned and well-structured training programme develops good employability skills for learners.
- The majority of learners have a good understanding of how to protect themselves from risks including radicalisation, extremism, use of the internet and risks posed by other people. The professional development of trainers has been highly effective in ensuring that the requirements of the 'Prevent' duty are in place.
- Learners feel safe, work safely and have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities in learning and in the workplace.
- Learners' progress into employment is good and improving. B-Skill provides learners with good support and promotes information on accessing further learning opportunities well. However, trainers do not always include, where appropriate, information, advice and guidance in training sessions to enable all learners to consider all of their possible progression opportunities sufficiently.

Outcomes for learners are good

- Overall success rates for apprentices and classroom-based learners have been consistently good for the last three years. In a majority of the provision, success has been well above that of similar providers and nationally overall.
- The in-year provider data for 2015/16 indicate that current apprentices are making good progress and the current success rate is significantly higher than at the same time last year. Progression into employment last year was excellent, with nearly all apprentices progressing into permanent employment.
- Many apprentices make good progress in their workplace, achieving either a promotion or additional responsibilities because of their apprenticeship. A majority of the learners develop a good range of skills and knowledge to support them in their work, or to gain employment.
- The number of employability learners accessing and achieving functional skills qualifications in English and/or mathematics is increasing and is good. This provides further good support to these learners and increases their employment chances significantly.
- An increasing take-up by apprentices of a higher-level English or mathematics functional skill than their framework requires is good, and enables them to develop these skills even more effectively.
- Progression of employability learners into employment is good and increasing year on year. Unemployment rates in the areas where B-Skill operates are higher than for the rest of the United Kingdom and gaining employment is a significant achievement in these areas.
- The number of apprentices who completed their framework within their planned time declined significantly in 2014/15. For the very small number of business, administration and law apprentices, success rates also declined significantly in 2014/15.

Types of provision

Adult learning programmes are good

- Adult learners account for 68% of the total number of learners. Most are on part-time employability programmes that include courses in employability, functional English and mathematics, information and communication technology (ICT), and health and safety. Jobcentre Plus refers approximately 650 learners a year to attend these programmes. Last year 1,199 adult learners enrolled on employability programmes.
- Most learners develop a good range of basic employability skills and improve their personal and social effectiveness through the good range of courses that are available to them. Their self-confidence and self-esteem increase and they become more adept at team working, problem solving and time management.

- An overwhelming majority of learners successfully complete the employability award and an increasing number of learners are working towards qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT. Learners who wish to obtain work in the construction industry take full advantage of the provider's health and safety course and the associated nationally recognised, externally assessed qualification. A large majority of learners pass the external test at their first attempt.
- Teaching and learning are good. In the better sessions, trainers challenge and stimulate learners, and they closely match learning to their individual learning needs. For example, in English and mathematics, they make particularly good use of the results of diagnostic assessments to design individual programmes of learning. Trainers give learners appropriate tasks to complete and they skilfully tutor one-to-one and in small groups. Learners enjoy their learning and make good progress. For example, one learner has greatly improved her reading and writing skills, another now teaches her child English and mathematics and another is able to add up in a shop without using a calculator.
- In the small number of weaker sessions, a shortage of resources limits the extent and variety of practical work and results in the overuse of handouts. Trainers do not sufficiently individualise learning to ensure that all learners receive a relevant level of challenge. Staff closely monitor learners' attendance and punctuality and reasons for absenteeism or lateness have to be justified.
- Trainers give too little attention to the importance of integrating English and mathematics into employability courses and to correcting learners' spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. Learners do not receive sufficient advice about improving their poorly developed computer-inputting skills with the result that they are less productive in their lessons. Learners feel safe in the learning centres and they understand health and safety well.
- Managers make good use of local labour market information to identify possible employment opportunities, to link job opportunities with learners' previous vocational experience and to develop further the range of employability courses. A recently appointed member of staff has specific responsibility for liaising with employers and Jobcentre Plus and for continuing to improve job outcomes and to encourage employers to be more involved in the employability programme by providing work experience opportunities. Although it is too soon to judge job outcomes, early indicators suggest that the improved trend is continuing. Learners receive good information, advice and guidance about preparing for, and entering, the world of work.

Apprenticeships

are good

- Apprenticeships include health and social care, business administration and management, and cleaning programmes for all age groups. Of the 384 apprentices, the large majority are studying health and social care. B-Skill subcontracts just less than half of all learning and this is mostly in the South East and the Midlands. Most apprentices are adults.
- Staff at B-Skill and at the subcontractors have good background experience, are well qualified in their specialist fields and most have teaching qualifications. They set high expectations for learners so that they produce good work on time and have a strong willingness to learn and achieve well.
- Trainers identify learners' starting points accurately. In addition to an accurate and early assessment of their English, ICT and mathematics needs, they explore the learners' preferred learning styles and they agree possible optional units to suit their work roles with employers. However, trainers do not always use the results of learning styles assessments to full effect, for example in planning sessions or suggesting use of the electronic portfolio to meet learners' preferences.
- Teaching and learning for the vast majority of learners are good and learners gain good technical knowledge and skills. Trainers combine theoretical learning with discussion and written work well to develop learners' understanding; for example, in health and social care learners gain a strong grasp of key subjects such as dispensing medication and moving and handling techniques. In most sessions, trainers make good use of technology such as tablet computers to promote stimulating learning. In a minority of sessions trainers do not use a sufficient variety of learning materials, either online or textual, to make sessions more stimulating and engaging for learners.
- The majority of learners complete high-quality independent work due to the encouragement of their trainers. Two apprentices who are deputy care managers completed in-depth research into regulations and dementia care and improved services for their residents. Induction learning, occasionally in groups, is very effective and supported by a well-presented and comprehensive handbook for learners. Trainers do not always challenge the few learners that are more able in teaching sessions. For example, in health and social care sessions the level of difficulty of questioning by trainers is insufficient to extend the knowledge of experienced care assistants.

- Learners have a good understanding of their progress and targets. Verbal feedback from assessors is very clear and effective and provides learners with a good awareness of their strengths and areas for improvements. Trainers conduct detailed progress reviews with learners. For example, following her assessment for English-speaking skills an adult apprentice received detailed and highly motivating feedback from her assessor.
- B-Skill and subcontractors engage the majority of employers effectively in all stages of the apprenticeships including group inductions, planning of learning goals and during feedback and goal setting. A majority of employers support apprentices particularly well, for example in domiciliary care, where they build creative learning opportunities into a learner's rota.
- B-Skill and subcontractor staff support learners' English and mathematics learning well; they plan support following effective initial assessment, provide coaching, workbooks and practice tests accordingly. Most trainers effectively integrate learning for English, information technology and mathematics into vocational learning. For example, one team leader is developing her knowledge of spreadsheets as she develops improved methods of managing her staff's performance. The advanced level vocational workbooks effectively include exercises designed to engage learners' mathematics skills. Many learners are achieving functional skills qualifications at a higher level than is required for their framework. However, not all learners in residential care settings understand fully the relevance of the need for mathematics skills.
- Trainers' teaching and reinforcement of equality and diversity topics, particularly during reviews, are very productive and learners acquire a good awareness, knowledge and understanding.
- Staff give clear and helpful information and guidance about the programmes and progression pathways and learners have a suitable understanding of what they need to do to complete their programmes. Staff are responsive throughout the apprenticeship programmes when learners have questions or difficulties with their work.
- Learners develop a good range of suitable employability skills. All learners are improving their levels of self-confidence and their communication skills. They also have a higher regard for their own capabilities, especially in English and mathematics and in using computers.
- Learners acquire a very sound understanding of safeguarding issues and priorities. They are expanding their knowledge of radicalisation because of the training they have received on the 'Prevent' agenda. Learners are more vigilant and are able to apply this learning to their workplaces, including, for example, public services and high-tech manufacturing.

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	2,212
Principal/CEO	Mr Paul Wileman
Website address	www.b-skill.com

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	0	76	0	2	0	0	0	0
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	13	225	2	107	0	30		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	0		0		0			
Number of learners aged 14–16	0							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aytun Vocational College ■ Divine Motions ■ Sensible Training ■ Triage Central Ltd ■ Be a Better You Training Ltd ■ Essex Academy 							

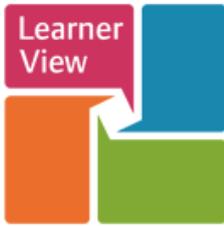
Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Tim Gardner, Lead Inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Ruth James	Her Majesty's Inspector
Derek Williams	Ofsted Inspector
Steven Sharpe	Ofsted Inspector
Jonathon Wright	Ofsted Inspector
Ken Fisher	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the quality assurance manager, as nominee, and carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of students and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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