

Inspection of NowSkills Limited

Inspection dates: 22–25 June 2021

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

NowSkills Limited (NowSkills), was established in May 2013. The company offers information and communication technology (ICT) and digital marketing courses in the north-west of England. In May 2017, NowSkills began to train apprentices directly funded through the apprenticeship levy. While tutors teach most of the theory lessons in NowSkills' training centres in Manchester and Liverpool, during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic they have moved most of the delivery online.

At the time of the inspection, NowSkills had 123 apprentices enrolled on level 3 and 4 standards-based apprenticeships. The majority of apprentices are enrolled on the digital marketer and infrastructure technician apprenticeship standards. A small number of apprentices study on either software development technician, software developer, network engineer, business analyst, and data analyst standards. Most apprentices are aged 19 and over with around a quarter who are 16 to 18 years old.

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

Apprentices gain confidence and develop substantial new knowledge and skills through a well-designed curriculum. For instance, apprentices on the digital marketer programme develop effective communication skills in dealing with customers, alongside developing the skills needed to run marketing campaigns using social media.

Apprentices show determination to succeed. They benefit from effective support from both tutors and employers, which helps them to build resilience and independence.

Employers describe how apprentices have developed significantly in confidence and tenacity. They use their initiative more and have belief in their own ideas. As a result, employers give them additional responsibility to lead more complex and larger projects at work from the planning stages to completion.

Apprentices are tolerant and respectful to each other and to colleagues. For example, apprentices understand the value of collaborative working to accomplish business goals. Apprentices' attendance is high and they enjoy their time at NowSkills.

Apprentices demonstrate a good awareness about the risks of working online and how to keep themselves, their clients and the businesses they work with safe. For example, they know the importance of protecting networks and social media accounts safe from hackers and online fraud.

Apprentices strive to achieve to the best of their ability in the workplace. Most apprentices go on to be successful in their chosen careers or move on to further study at higher levels.

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

Leaders have established a culture of high expectations for themselves, their staff and the apprentices they train. The ambitious curriculum ensures that apprentices make good progress in their work and careers.

Leaders support staff to plan and implement successful learning programmes. For example, they work closely with employers to design and deliver apprenticeships that meet the local and regional priorities.

Leaders and staff have developed learning programmes that ensure that apprentices not only meet the requirements of their apprenticeship, but also gain additional skills and qualifications that prepare them well for a career in the ICT and digital sectors.

Tutors use their subject experience and vocational expertise well to teach a relevant and up-to-date curriculum. For instance, tutors use their web coding skills effectively to help digital marketer apprentices develop their own branded and optimised web page.

Tutors benefit from well-planned staff development activities that help them to improve their teaching practice, including when teaching online. They value the support they receive from their leaders and managers. A culture of self-improvement is prevalent among tutors.

Tutors teach the curriculum in a logical order. They help apprentices to build their knowledge, skills and behaviours by planning on- and off-the-job training in conjunction with employers. For instance, digital marketer apprentices learn how to create a website that meets the needs of their employer.

Apprentices develop their understanding of key concepts and can ably apply the theoretical knowledge they gain to their practical work. For example, network engineering apprentices are trusted to update workplace computer operating systems.

Most tutors use a range of effective strategies to assess apprentices' learning and progress. For example, tutors use practice assessments to help apprentices remember new concepts and to prepare them for final examinations.

Tutors prepare apprentices well for the world of work. For instance, business analyst apprentices develop confidence in investigation techniques and in data and process modelling.

Apprentices produce work of at least the expected standard. The quality of apprentices' work improves throughout the duration of the course, indicating apprentices' increased levels of knowledge.

The small number of apprentices who have taken their final assessment have achieved their qualification; however, not all apprentices achieve the high grade they are capable of. In the previous year, the proportion of apprentices who left early was too high. This is improving in the current year.

Staff provide effective initial information, advice and guidance to ensure that apprentices are on the right programme. Apprentices do not always have sufficient knowledge or understanding of the wider range of progression routes, next steps and careers available to them.

Apprentices develop their understanding of well-being, health and safety, safeguarding and 'Prevent'. However, not all apprentices can recall all of the topics covered or why they are important.

Leaders have successfully rectified most of the aspects identified as requiring improvement at previous monitoring visits. For example, apprentices now receive helpful tutor feedback to help improve their work.

Leaders and managers use a range of information to gain an accurate oversight of apprentices' progress. The vast majority of apprentices make at least their expected levels of progress. However, senior leaders and staff do not use the assessment of apprentices' starting points to set or monitor the achievement of high grades.

Leaders' self-assessment processes remain underdeveloped and lack rigour. The associated development plan does not clearly assess the impact of leaders' actions and if they are improving the quality of education.

Governors hold senior leaders to account for the quality of provision. They receive useful reports and information at board meetings to provide senior leaders with the support and challenge they need to continually improve the quality of training for apprentices.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and managers ensure that safeguarding and the safety of apprentices constitute a high priority. The designated safeguarding lead and staff have the appropriate training and experience to carry out their roles effectively. They use links to external agencies, including the regional 'Prevent' coordinator, local authority safeguarding boards and the police force to maintain up-to-date knowledge of any localised dangers of radicalisation and extremism.

Staff benefit from regular training on safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty and have had more recent training on aspects such as mental health awareness. They know how to keep apprentices safe and report any concerns they may have.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Senior leaders should ensure that tutors use the assessments of apprentices' starting points to set aspirational target grades for them to achieve and monitor their progress against these.
- Senior leaders should ensure that apprentices have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the wider range of progression routes, next steps and careers available to them.
- Senior leaders should improve the rigour of the self-assessment processes and ensure that the associated development plan assesses the impact of their actions on improving the quality of education.

Provider details

Unique reference number	1280342
Address	NowSkills Melrose House 183 Chorley New Road Bolton BL1 4QZ
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Website	nowskills.co.uk
Managing Director	Mark Norse
Provider type	Independent Learning Provider
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the operations director as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous monitoring visit 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 face to face and online, scrutinising apprentices' work, seeking the views of apprentices, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

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