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▼ Menu

[Home](#) > [Education, training and skills](#) > [Further and higher education, skills and vocational training](#)

> [Further and higher education courses and qualifications](#) > [Functional skills](#) > [Skills Bootcamps thematic survey](#)



Research and analysis

Skills Bootcamps thematic survey

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Applies to England

[Contents](#)[Background](#)[Executive summary](#)[Findings](#)[Recommendations](#)[List of providers visited
as part of the survey](#) [Print this page](#)

Background

Skills Bootcamps

Skills Bootcamps support the government's 2019 manifesto commitment to help adults learn valuable skills and prepare them for the economy of the future. This will in turn help the government to deliver:

- the Lifetime Skills Guarantee announced in the further education reform white paper, [‘Skills for jobs’](#)
- the priorities in the [‘Green Jobs Taskforce’](#) report
- the Project Speed construction skills workstream, as part of the [National Infrastructure Strategy](#)

Skills Bootcamps are based on a model of accelerated skills training that is often used in the digital industry. They are specifically designed to meet employers' skills needs by enabling employees and self-employed and unemployed adults to learn new skills. The bootcamps aim to help people move into sectors where there are skills shortages, such as digital, engineering, construction, manufacturing, and green and other new technologies.

The short, flexible programmes that Skills Bootcamps provide are becoming a significant part of the government's approach to tackling skills shortages in England over the next 5 years. It is expected that courses run for 12 to 16 weeks and are equivalent to levels 3 to 5. They may include the opportunity for learners to gain accredited qualifications. Skills Bootcamp courses aim to provide adults with applicable digital and technical skills and knowledge. An important feature is the guarantee of a job interview on completion of the course. The aspiration is for 75% of trainees to move into a new job or new role. Wave 2 of the Skills Bootcamp programme ran from July 2021 to March 2022.

Some Skills Bootcamps are designed to address regional skills needs, while others aim to meet national skills needs. The Department for Education (DfE) intends to roll out Skills Bootcamps much more widely from

September 2022, through wave 3.

Purpose of the survey

The DfE needs to know if Skills Bootcamps are providing a high-quality learning experience. With ministerial support, it commissioned Ofsted to carry out a thematic survey of wave 2 Skills Bootcamps before it rolls out wave 3. The DfE specifically requested that this should follow Ofsted's [education inspection framework \(EIF\) and inspection methodology](#).

Scope of the survey

The survey was carried out through visits to 14 of the 36 [providers that were delivering wave 2 Skills Bootcamps](#). The selection of providers took account of the different types of provider, their different arrangements, coverage of specialisms, and whether they offered courses nationally or in their own region. The selected providers included at least one of the following types of organisation:

- general further education college
- independent learning provider
- local enterprise partnership
- mayoral combined authority
- local authority
- higher education institution

The survey visits took place between January and March 2022, during the second half of wave 2.

The survey visits enabled inspectors to gather qualitative evidence through our usual range of inspection activities. The EIF inspection methodology was used on the visits, including 'deep dives' into specific curriculum areas. Survey visit teams included inspectors with relevant sector expertise.

This report is based on evidence gathered from those survey visits. The survey focused on the Skills Bootcamp provision as a whole across all sampled providers. Therefore, the report does not make specific judgements about individual providers, although examples of good practice are included.

Inspectors also gathered quantitative information about the selected providers, from the providers themselves and from the DfE. This included information about their context, provision and learners.

The visits focused on gathering evidence in relation to the following 10 questions:

1. What progress are leaders and managers making towards delivering a high-quality Skills Bootcamp training programme?
2. How clear is the curriculum intent, and to what extent is the curriculum well structured and educationally effective?
3. How well are programmes meeting the needs and expectations of learners, employers and the local, regional and national economies?
4. How well are the programmes taught and assessed?
5. How well are learners making progress on programmes?
6. To what extent are teachers/trainers suitably trained and experienced to meet industry standards?
7. How effective is the support that learners receive to meet their individual learning needs, including support for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities?
8. How well are learners being prepared for their next steps?
9. How well are learners' personal development and professional behaviour needs met?
10. How effective is the provider's engagement with employers?

It has not been possible to take into account the outcomes of these courses in terms of the numbers of learners who went on to secure jobs or roles at the intended level. This is because the thematic survey took place while the courses were in progress and before most learners had completed them or secured a job outcome.

Executive summary

Strategic management

- Leaders and managers ensure that most trainers have good technical skills and curriculum knowledge in their specialist area and have relevant industrial expertise.
- Retention of learners across most courses is high.
- The arrangements for evaluating the quality of Skills Bootcamps are not consistently effective. In particular, processes for evaluating the quality of training provided by subcontractors are often absent or not effective enough.
- Providers have had mixed success in recruiting learners to their Skills Bootcamps. While many courses generate significant interest, leading to high recruitment, others have not met their recruitment target.
- Leaders do not provide sufficient opportunities for trainers to develop their pedagogical skills, including skills in online training.

Meeting the needs of employers and local, regional and national skills needs

- Leaders at most providers make good use of regional partnerships and labour market intelligence to develop and provide courses that meet identified skills needs.
- Leaders at some providers do not engage effectively with employers to design courses.
- Some leaders have not engaged with employers to ensure that each learner is guaranteed a job interview.
- At a few providers, the overall purpose of the programmes is unclear.

Quality of education

- Most providers organise their curriculums appropriately and plan to teach topics in a sensible and logical sequence. The learning resources and materials that trainers use on courses are, in most instances, of an appropriate standard and are often of high quality. Most providers include useful elements in their courses that help learners to develop their personal and professional behaviours and gain a range of skills, in addition to the vocational content of the course.
- The quality of teaching is not consistently high. Too many of the providers visited did not have a rigorous system in place to identify learners' prior knowledge and skills at the start of their course.
- Assessment practice is often too weak.
- A minority of providers plan courses that do not allow enough time or opportunity for learners to master skills or develop their understanding to a suitable level.
- Many learners have had a poor experience on programmes that are taught exclusively online with limited support from teachers.

Meeting learners' needs

- Most learners are satisfied with the content and quality of their training.
- Learners with identified special educational needs and/or difficulties are usually given effective support.
- However, a few providers do not have in place clear and well-structured strategies to identify accurately learners' additional needs and provide specialist support.
- Staff do not have sufficiently frequent or detailed discussions with learners about the next steps that learners might take. The extent to which staff help learners to find work varies significantly across providers.

Findings

The findings from the survey are grouped into four areas:

- strategic leadership
- meeting local, regional and national skills needs and the needs of employers
- the quality of education
- meeting learners' needs

Strategic leadership

Leaders have developed a range of digital and technical Skills Bootcamps that are responsive to local, regional and national skills needs. Digital bootcamps include courses on aspects of the industry such as digital engineering, coding, cyber security, software development, cloud engineering and web development. Technical bootcamps provide a range of courses in areas such as green energy, electrical engineering, welding and construction.

Leaders at most providers measure the degree to which they achieve the aims of the Skills Bootcamp by analysing the proportion of learners who complete the course and gain job interviews on completion. Retention of learners across many courses is high and remains stable, as most learners value the opportunity to have training and develop new skills and knowledge. It was not possible to evaluate the full impact of the courses because most providers had not yet established success measures relating to achievement of course objectives and progression to employment.

Many providers deliver Skills Bootcamps through subcontracting arrangements. Where this is the case, providers that are prime contractors have appropriate arrangements in place for selecting subcontractors or supply partners that can provide the necessary training. For example, a rigorous selection process enabled one provider to identify and contract with organisations that had shown that they could deliver relevant training in areas such as green energy, engineering, welding and vehicle electrification. However, following selection, too often the prime contractors do not maintain sufficient oversight of subcontractors' and supply partners'

activity. They do not check how subcontractors and supply partners design their courses, how they determine curriculum content and ensure its relevance, or how they liaise with employers.

The arrangements for evaluating the quality of Skills Bootcamps are not consistently effective. In some providers, leaders use an appropriate range of measures to monitor the quality of provision and make any necessary improvements. At one provider, leaders have put in place a set of quality standards for Skills Bootcamps, which align with their other, well-established quality assurance procedures. Leaders and governors receive frequent reports on the quality of the provision and intervene to make improvements where needed. They also adapt the content of the curriculum based on feedback from learners. At another provider, leaders carefully monitor the content of the curriculum and ensure that it is adapted as necessary to keep it up to date and responsive to the changing needs of employers. However, in too many other providers, quality assurance processes are not rigorous enough.

Leaders and managers ensure that most trainers have good technical skills and curriculum knowledge in their specialist area and have relevant industrial expertise. Trainers often work as freelance experts on relevant projects or carry out research work with employers linked to their specialisms. Leaders at most providers ensure that trainers maintain suitable links with industry to enable them to keep their knowledge current. At too many providers, however, leaders do not consistently ensure that trainers have up-to-date pedagogical skills, including skills in online training.

Many providers have arrangements in place to provide external scrutiny of the quality of Skills Bootcamps and the extent to which leaders are ensuring that the objectives and targets relating to the provision are being met. Often, this is through a board or group of external advisers. For example, one provider has established a small board that challenges leaders appropriately and supports them to maintain and improve the Skills Bootcamp provision. It has selected board members who have relevant educational experience. In a few providers, however, there is a lack of external scrutiny to hold leaders to account for the effectiveness of the provision.

Providers have had mixed success in recruiting learners to their Skills

Bootcamps. While many courses generate significant interest, leading to high recruitment, others, particularly in construction and engineering, have not met their recruitment target.

Meeting local, regional and national skills needs and the needs of employers

Leaders at most providers make good use of regional partnerships and labour market intelligence to develop and provide courses that meet identified skills needs. Some have worked extensively with stakeholders to enable them to contribute, through Skills Bootcamps, to a regional strategic approach to meeting needs. Examples of strong partnerships include liaison with local enterprise partnerships, local councils, chambers of commerce and Jobcentre Plus. However, at a few providers, it is unclear what the overall purpose of programmes is or what specific needs they are designed to meet.

Employer engagement is not consistently effective. Leaders and staff at a number of providers consult effectively with employers to develop curriculum content that is relevant and meets the needs of employers. A few also ensure that employers contribute to the courses, enabling learners to benefit from their industry expertise. For example, employers often work with learners to provide advice on career options relating to the course. Leaders at one provider have established a formal employer board. This enables them to identify accurately employers' skills needs and ensure that their provision is responsive to these needs. At a few providers, leaders do not liaise sufficiently with employers when designing courses. Therefore, they cannot be assured that the content of the courses enables learners to develop the skills and knowledge that employers need. At a few of the providers that subcontract their provision, the effectiveness of employer liaison varies significantly across the subcontractors that they work with.

Too often, leaders do not ensure that learners have a guaranteed job interview when they complete their courses. This is because they have not developed good enough relationships with employers. As a result, too many learners were still waiting for their guaranteed job interview with an employer at the time of the survey. Where providers already have long-

established links with employers, there are more opportunities for learners to have a guaranteed job interview. Staff at one provider support learners particularly well. They successfully source interviews for learners at the end of the course and then carry out exit interviews to monitor which learners were actually interviewed and how many gained employment or changed employment as a result.

The quality of education

Most providers organise their curriculums appropriately and plan to teach topics in a sensible and logical sequence. Courses are often planned to include the technical skills and knowledge that learners need, as well as the broader skills and attributes required for employment, such as effective teamworking. Many learners carry out relevant projects as part of a well-planned and coherent programme. This gives them the opportunity to consolidate their learning over time. Also, learners often have the chance to compile a portfolio of work that they can use to help them find a job. However, a minority of the providers visited have planned courses that are too short or lack sufficient depth. This means that the courses do not allow enough time for learners to master skills or develop their understanding to a suitable level. On these courses, staff do not do enough to identify the topics that learners need to study, and try to include too much content in too short a period. There is often too little time in lessons for learners to practise and consolidate their skills following input from the trainer.

Many providers, including those where staff have previous experience in teaching short courses for adults, have responded effectively to the requirements of Skills Bootcamps. These providers ensure that learners benefit from good-quality teaching, either through face-to-face lessons or through live online sessions. Learners value the flexibility to study through a mixture of taught sessions supported by high-quality resources and a variety of activities designed to help them reinforce key concepts. At one provider, for example, learners on a data scientist course attend lectures that cover key concepts and theories, and then move on to independent learning tasks where they can apply their new learning in a practical context. At another provider, tutors make good use of a range of virtual tools and platforms to teach complex topics such as coding. They use screen-

sharing and breakout rooms well to provide one-to-one guidance on coding. Learners benefit from using innovative online collaborative spaces where they can share ideas.

However, the quality of teaching varies considerably across providers and, in too many instances, is not high enough. Weaker teaching was identified in a number of providers visited. Too often at these providers, trainers lack high-quality teaching skills. Furthermore, where leaders have planned programmes that take place exclusively online, with limited support from teachers, many learners have had a poor experience. In a small number of providers, the quality of teaching is very weak, with poor planning, few opportunities for learners to practise and consolidate skills, and trainers who lack relevant industry experience.

Staff at most providers carry out appropriate checks before learners start the programme. These include learners' employment status, their motivation and their aspirations. Staff have useful discussions with prospective students during initial interviews to ensure that they are recruited on the right programme. However, too many of the providers visited do not have a rigorous system in place to identify learners' knowledge and skills at the start of their course. This means that leaders and staff cannot fully or accurately measure learners' progress, from their starting points, in acquiring new knowledge and skills.

The learning resources and materials that trainers use on courses are, in most instances, of an appropriate standard, and are often of high quality. Leaders at one provider have worked closely with industry experts to create comprehensive and high-quality teaching resources that all their trainers use on their digital bootcamp courses. The resources are frequently updated to capture emerging trends and to reflect changing skills needs. Providers offering construction and engineering courses have high-quality training facilities that give learners access to resources of a similar standard to those that they will find in the industry.

Most providers have included useful elements in their courses to help learners develop personal and professional behaviours and skills, in addition to the vocational content of the course, that will help them to gain and sustain employment. This aspect of the curriculum includes supporting learners to prepare for job applications and interviews and helping them

develop the personal attributes that they will need in their chosen sector. One provider includes group projects and presentations in its courses to develop learners' confidence and communication skills. This was in direct response to employers' requests. Another provider's courses include a range of activities to develop learners' ability to work well in a team, communicate effectively and work under pressure. Learners reported that this aspect of their course helps them to gain confidence and feel better prepared for employment. In the few providers that do not offer this, learners do not receive enough support to develop the broader skills that they need for work.

Assessment practice is often too weak. At too many providers visited, the criteria that staff use to assess learners' progress and achievement are often unclear and insufficiently rigorous. Trainers do not do enough to assess learners' progress and understanding. This means that they do not know how well learners are progressing and cannot adjust their teaching to take this into account. Too often, assessment does not accurately identify the knowledge and skills that learners have gained or identify gaps in learning that need to be filled. Many learners do not receive feedback on the quality of their assessed work. As a result of weak assessment practice, some learners struggle to keep up, and leaders do not have clear or accurate oversight of the progress that learners are making.

As a consequence of the inconsistent quality of training and assessment, the success of learners in developing new and relevant knowledge and skills is mixed. In several providers visited, learners develop appropriate knowledge and skills that will help them in their future employment. However, in some providers, learners gain only a superficial understanding of the subjects that they are studying and do not acquire the in-depth industry-specific knowledge and skills that they need to pursue relevant job roles.

A few providers offer opportunities for learners to gain relevant qualifications through their Skills Bootcamps. At one provider, for example, learners can gain a digital marketing qualification as part of their course. Learners explained how this opportunity attracted them to join the course. They clearly value the opportunity to achieve an accredited qualification that will help them to secure employment or move to a higher-skilled job.

Meeting learners' needs

Most learners told us that they are satisfied with the content and quality of their training. They appreciate the opportunity to participate in training that they recognise would normally be prohibitively expensive for them. They consider that their course includes the topics that they expected to study and that the coverage of the course will help them to secure employment or progress to higher-skilled roles with their current employer. However, in a small number of providers, courses do not meet learners' expectations.

Most learners benefit from access to a range of support to meet their personal development needs. This includes access to mentors, pastoral staff, careers staff and online training resources to help them build their confidence and resilience.

Learners with identified special educational needs and/or difficulties are usually provided with effective support, which often includes access to dedicated learning support staff. Staff at one provider give helpful individual support to learners through frequent individual reviews and by providing an employer mentoring programme. At most providers, learners who self-declare additional learning needs benefit from frequent discussions with staff, access to support services and general advice on specialist agencies that can support them. In a few instances, however, leaders have not established a clear or well-structured strategy to identify learners' needs accurately or provide specialist support, such as support to improve their English language skills.

At some providers, staff do not discuss next steps with learners frequently enough or in sufficient detail. They do not take enough account of learners' long-term aspirations to make their discussions about next steps sufficiently meaningful.

The extent to which staff help learners to find work varies significantly across providers. In the more positive cases, learners receive good support to prepare for interviews and are matched well to suitable potential employers. In the weaker provision, learners do not develop their technical skills to the level they need to secure employment and do not have enough opportunities to secure job interviews.

Recommendations

The following recommendations relate directly to the weaknesses in Skills Bootcamps that emerged from the survey visits.

It is recommended that leaders of organisations currently providing Skills Bootcamps and those planning to do so in the future:

- have a clear rationale for the Skills Bootcamp curriculum that explains fully how it meets identified skills needs and is responsive to likely employment opportunities
- ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to measure the success of Skills Bootcamps, including how effectively learners achieve the objectives of their course and the proportions who gain a job interview and secure employment
- maintain effective oversight of subcontractors' and supply partners' activity, including: how well subcontractors and supply partners design their courses; how they determine curriculum content and ensure its relevance; how they liaise with employers; and how they ensure that provision is of high quality
- ensure that rigorous arrangements are in place for evaluating the quality of training, identifying strengths and weaknesses and taking appropriate action to rectify weaknesses
- ensure that trainers have up-to-date pedagogical skills, including in online training
- work closely with employers when designing courses to ensure that the course content enables learners to develop the skills and knowledge that employers need
- ensure that all learners are guaranteed a job interview
- provide courses that are of sufficient length and depth and give enough time for learners to develop their skills and

understanding to an appropriate level

- review the delivery of online courses and take any action needed to ensure that these courses are of high quality and that they include effective and sufficient tuition and support
- put in place a rigorous system to identify learners' knowledge and skills at the start of their course, so that staff can accurately measure learners' progress from their starting points
- ensure that all learners benefit from a planned curriculum that helps them to develop the personal and professional behaviours and skills that they need to be successful at work
- ensure that assessment practice is of good quality, so that staff can accurately identify the progress that learners are making and take action to improve progress where needed and so that learners know how well they are doing on their course
- ensure that a clear strategy is in place to identify accurately learners' additional needs and provide specialist support
- ensure that staff have meaningful discussions with learners about their next steps following completion of the course to increase learners' awareness of opportunities that are available

We recommended that the DfE:

- sets expectations and requirements for providers to address the matters referred to above, and helps to ensure that providers give all learners a high quality of education to the appropriate level; this may include expectations concerning the coverage and depth of the curriculum, initial and ongoing assessment of learners' progress and professional development of staff
- takes appropriate measures to ensure that providers assure the quality of training provided by subcontractors or suppliers
- sets expectations to help ensure that providers develop effective relationships with employers, so that learners are helped towards their next steps
- sets expectations to help ensure that providers support all

learners to meet their learning needs and reach their next steps

List of providers visited as part of the survey

The thematic survey involved visits to the following 14 wave 2 Skills Bootcamp providers:

- Black Country Training Group
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership
- Croydon College
- Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Local Enterprise Partnership
- Founders and Coders
- Gateshead College
- Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
- Northcoders Limited
- QA Limited
- School of Code
- Somerset County Council
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