

Ixion Holdings Ltd

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 58521

Name of lead inspector: Harmesh Manghra HMI

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Information about the provider

1. Ixion Holdings Limited (Ixion), based in Great Baddow, Essex was formed in January 2004. It is a company limited by guarantee and is owned by Anglia Ruskin University. Ixion is the holding company for a group of companies: Ixion Business Ltd; Essex Business Support Ltd and East of England IDB Ltd. It also works as a partner in the London Brokerage Ltd consortium. It delivers a number of Government funded contracts including Train to Gain contract with the Skills Funding Agency. It offers National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) to learners nationally with the majority of learners in the East of England, the South East and London.
2. Over a two year period until December 2010, Ixion provided learning to 2,135 learners through a consortium of delivery partners. This was a European Social Fund (ESF) contract with Advantage East for delivering level 2 NVQs to learners who were already qualified up to at least level 2. Since the start of its Train to Gain contract, Ixion has delivered training to a further 2,150 learners and 180 employers across a number of employment sectors. Of these, the majority of learners have been in business administration followed by engineering, construction, care, hairdressing and Skills for Life. The provision in business improvement techniques although inspected, was not separately graded.
3. The Head of Training and Business Development manages the contract supported by a team of four. She reports to the board of Ixion through a Divisional Director. In April 2009 Ixion acquired Computer Gym (UK) Ltd which delivers Welfare to Work, Employability and Reducing Reoffending contracts. Ixion, as a prime contractor, holds two employability contracts with the Department for Work and Pensions.
4. The following organisations provide training on behalf of Ixion Holdings Ltd:
 - Any Driver Training Ltd (NVQ 3 in driving instruction)
 - Lota Training (business administration)
 - Results Consortium Ltd (business improvement techniques)
 - First for Staff (warehousing and distribution)

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
Employer provision: Train to Gain	805 learners

Summary report

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

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Grade 2
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	3
Subject areas	Grade
Driving instruction	1
Warehousing and distribution	3

Overall effectiveness

5. Ixion has established a strong base and reputation to develop and improve work-based training. Since the start of the contract, the company has provided a good standard of training and good outcomes to a substantial number of learners and employers in several employment sectors. Learners work in safe learning and working environments. They gain valuable knowledge about their employment sector, their job roles and develop a broad range of new skills. They become confident employees and work well in teams to improve the financial position of their companies. Most learners complete their qualifications within the planned period. However learners on warehousing and distribution have been making slow progress.
6. Teaching on driving instruction and business improvement techniques programmes is fun and challenging. This encourages learners to apply their knowledge to find solutions to their work problems. Assessment feedback is constructive and helps learners ask searching questions. They set high standards for themselves and adopt a more evaluative attitude instead of conforming unquestionably to the accepted work practices. Links with employers are productive. Training is delivered to industry standard or better. However training and assessment are not well planned for the learners on the warehousing programme. Training and assessment are delivered flexibly to

meet the needs of employers and learners alike. Employers and assessors provide good care, guidance and support except the language support for some Eastern European learners who have limited command of the English language.

7. Ixion has successfully improved the rates of achievement of qualifications through strong monitoring of the provision. However it has placed insufficient emphasis on improving the quality of training, assessment, individual learning plans and reviews. Learners have appropriate understanding of equality and diversity including their rights. Ixion is providing good value for money for its learners and employers.

Main findings

- The outcomes for learners are good. All learners on driving instruction and business improvement techniques (BiT) programmes have achieved their qualifications within the planned timescale. The rate of completion of qualifications in warehousing and distribution is high although many current learners are making slow progress.
- Learners develop high levels of self-confidence and motivation. Their self-esteem improves alongside their long-term economic prospects. They have greater awareness of their job roles and how they fit into their organisation. They develop a new mindset and become valuable employees. Working in high performing teams, learners make suggestions for improvements and reducing costs of their employers.
- Learners feel safe in their working and learning environments. They have heightened awareness of safeguarding and reinforcement of health and safety issues through induction into the NVQ programme. Ixion has established thorough processes to monitor the health and safety arrangements of employers and the subcontractors.
- Teaching, training and assessment are good in most of the provision. Driving instruction training is a good mix of instruction, demonstration and reflection. Employers are highly involved in the design of projects and the resulting improvements makes the learning live for the learners.
- Initial assessment of learners is satisfactory but it lacks the depth. Some assessors, particularly in warehousing, do not clearly identify or record the learners' previous learning, experiences and occupational skills. They do not use the individual learning plans to develop lessons or to set and measure relevant learning targets. The progress reviews are therefore ineffective.
- Training and assessment provides a good match of provision to meet the needs and interests of employers and learners. Assessors make frequent visits including during nights to provide training and assess learners' progress. Driving instruction learners benefit from an outstanding range of additional qualifications that puts them at a significant advantage for competing for business.
- Through strong relationships with its subcontractors, Ixion has developed good partnerships with employers in various employment sectors and sector skill

councils to identify needs and influence the take-up and development of training for small and medium sized businesses.

- Learners benefit from good personal and study support from tutors and assessors. They help learners with additional study support to gather evidence for their portfolios and encourage their development by asking searching questions. Staff provide excessive support to learners who speak English as an additional language to help them complete their tasks. However, this is insufficiently focussed on language development.
- The management of training and subcontractors is proficient. Ixion has provided much timely help and support to the subcontractors. They have identified the employers who value training highly and have worked efficiently to meet this need. Ixion has competently managed the change by reducing the number of providers from 28 to four niche providers to deliver excellent outcomes for learners.
- The board has provided strong strategic direction, sound leadership, expert guidance, timely support and suitable challenge to establish its vision and mission. Management processes and reporting have improved. Standards have risen over the years. A wealth of available data is used rigorously to monitor the overall performance of the contract, however it is not sufficiently analysed for action planning.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. All learners feel they receive fair treatment and support. However, assessors do not sufficiently check the learners' understanding of key aspects such as bullying and harassment at progress reviews. Ixion has produced a range of detailed documents that cover learners' entitlement that are very difficult and cumbersome for the learners and subcontractors to access.
- Quality improvement at subcontractor level is effective. Subcontractors make adept use of learners' and employers' views to make improvements. Ixion however, is heavily focussed on quality assurance and compliance. It does not set clear expectations about systematic improvements to the learners' journey. Audits of external verification and individual learning plans are ineffective as these failed to identify areas for improvement.

What does Ixion need to do to improve further?

- Refine, improve and establish common arrangements for broader initial assessment of learners that includes their previous experience of learning and employment as well as vocational and transferrable skills. Use this information as a basis for the improvement of training, assessment and progress reviews by setting learners relevant interim targets and reviewing their progress accordingly.
- Conduct an in-depth analysis of the language needs of the learners who speak English as an additional language in the context of their employment. Agree and provide clearly targeted language support including interpreting and support from other fellow learners. For developing their skills in the long-term

offer guidance and tutorial support for self-study either in-house or at a local college.

- Improve the collection, analysis and evaluation of data to further improve the provision: by collecting meaningful data; conducting a written analysis of the findings; exploring reasons for variable performance; sharing the findings with the board and the subcontractors; agreeing, setting, monitoring and evaluating targets and other performance measures alongside achievement of qualifications and financial matters.
- Agree realistic expectations of the promotion of equality and diversity for all subcontractors, employers and learners. Produce and disseminate an easy-to-read booklet for learners that must include as a minimum: their rights and responsibilities; protection from unfair treatment; bullying and harassment and development of their skills to challenge bullying and harassment practices assertively.
- Clearly define quality compliance, quality assurance and quality improvement indicators that will lead to continuous improvements to learners' experiences at various stages of their journey. Also conduct thorough audits and analysis of various documents such as initial assessment, individual learning plans and external verification and agree targets for improvement.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the friendly, supportive and highly professional trainers
- the ease of availability of the assessment including on the night shifts
- the high quality and safe venues around the country
- the improved understanding of their jobs and relationship with the rest of the company
- the gains in self-confidence and improved self-esteem.

What learners would like to see improved:

- the speed of delivery of the certificates
- the heavy reliance on downloading materials and excessive printing requirements
- the need for greater challenge for a small minority of learners.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the excellent value for money that provides good quality training at little cost
- the flexibility of the courses and the assessors
- the professional development of the workers into multi-skilled team players
- the cost savings and efficiencies made in the businesses by the workers

- the very professional approach to training and good communications.

What employers would like to see improved:

- the review of learners' progress midway with the assessors and to identify further support needs
- the continuation of training for the rest of the team in the companies.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

8. This is the first inspection of Ixion. Since the start of the contract, the company has provided training that has led to good outcomes for a substantial number of learners and employers in fields such as care; engineering; construction; hairdressing; education and training; literacy and numeracy and business administration. Success rates for qualifications have been high for most learners except for learners in care and literacy and numeracy who made slow progress.
9. Ixion has a very clear strategy and vision to meet the training needs of the emerging employment sectors as well as to promote training to those that have poor record of training or high staff turnover. The self-assessment process is thorough and mature. The recent position statement is accurate and is based on an extensive range of evidence gained on an ongoing basis. The continuous improvement plan is substantial and has improved the provision overall. Inspectors awarded a higher grade for driving instruction and the leadership and management of training than those proposed by the company.
10. After rapid growth in its early stages, Ixion has since consolidated its provision in selected employment sectors. Through good management of change, Ixion has developed the capacity of its specialist providers to a considerable degree. Ixion has enhanced its own capacity for training through acquisition of a well-established national training provider. The management structure, the number of staff and their experience is appropriate. Ixion is in the process of recruiting a quality manager. This gap is filled by highly experienced interim consultants. The subcontractor staff are highly competent and experienced. All staff make a significant contribution to improving the provision in all subject areas except in warehousing and distribution. Ixion is well aware of the issues and has established a pragmatic course of action to improve the external verification processes.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

11. Outcomes for learners are good in all employment sectors. Driving instruction learners make outstanding progress and achieve excellent results. Achievement of qualifications has been excellent for 15 cohorts of learners in business improvement techniques (BiT). The rates of achievement for qualifications are high for warehousing and distribution learners. Most learners achieve their qualifications within the agreed timescale. However learners in the current year on warehousing and distribution programme are making slow progress. Attendance and retention rates are good.
12. Learners on driving instruction and BiT programmes thoroughly enjoy learning and exceed their expectations. They feel more secure in their employment as they become more competent in their job roles.

13. White male learners outperform female learners and learners from minority ethnic groups. The outcomes for female learners, although much improved, still lag behind male learners. The outcomes for a very small number of learners with learning difficulties and/ or disabilities are also lower than the rest of the learner groups.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

14. The quality of teaching, training and assessment is good for BiT and driving instruction learners. Staff make apt use of learners' previous experience to build on their learning with relevant examples, activities and projects. Learners enjoy learning from their peers. Many prefer the reflective style of training to the more technical training provided by their employers. Lessons are interactive and highly participative with ample use of information learning technology. Assessment is beneficial as the learners are given instant feedback on their performance with ample suggestions for improvement. Learners use the feedback to critically examine their work and to set high standards for themselves. Most learning and assessment is well planned except for warehousing.
15. The programmes meet and exceed the expectations of the employers and learners except in warehousing. Assessment is available flexibly including on the night shifts. Driving instruction learners access training from safe venues near their homes. They feel more confident at teaching and in securing work from companies and new learner-drivers. They become adept at providing a good mixture of instruction and teaching to their learner-drivers. Learners on warehousing and distribution programmes improve their performance in storing products in a safe manner. The BiT learners make substantial improvements to their employers' businesses through improving work-flow processes, eliminating problems and faults, developing attitude and mindset to inspect their own work at every stage, cost reduction and improvements to delivery by problem solving.
16. The partnerships with various employers and subcontractors, based on mutual trust and respect, are sound. These are used to identify training needs, design programmes and provide support to the learners. Some employers of international repute and household names design relevant projects that develop learners' skills and raise their expectations. Learners have opportunities to acquire a range of transferrable skills. Subcontractors work diligently to share good practice to improve the quality of training.
17. The support for learners is of good quality. Tutors offer considerable individual support to learners to gather evidence and compile portfolios. Some assessors use other learners to interpret for their colleagues who are not fully competent in English. Learners on BiT and driving instruction programmes do not require literacy and/or numeracy support.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

18. Leaders and managers set ambitious targets for improving learners' outcomes and to improve the company's own capacity and presence in the training field. The chief executive officer is highly effective and plays an active role in shaping a clear strategy to link the training to meet the needs of the businesses at regional and national level. Ixion has well-considered plans to develop apprenticeships in employment sectors that are expanding such as logistics, business administration and green technology as well as returning to training in the sectors that it withdrew from.
19. Ixion has a successful history of delivering business support including brokerage services to local businesses. It has closely monitored the performance of the Train to Gain contract. This included conducting meticulous checks on the selection and ongoing performance of the subcontractors. It has taken firm action to improve success rates rapidly. Target setting is effective. Data collection and monitoring have improved, however managers do not conduct analysis of data for action planning. For example, Ixion has not devised an action plan to improve the outcomes for female learners.
20. Safeguarding arrangements are good. Ixion has placed safeguarding at the top of its agenda. It has trained all its staff, including subcontractor staff, on safeguarding matters. Thorough checks on all its staff, including subcontractor staff, have been conducted to ensure that young or vulnerable learners are well protected. In addition, Ixion conducts in-depth risk assessments and health and safety checks in the workplaces and in the training venues.
21. The promotion of equality and diversity overall is satisfactory. It is outstanding for driving instruction learners and good for learners on BiT programmes. The quality of support and care for the learners depends on the awareness, care and commitment of the subcontractor. They are well protected from harassment and bullying. Some of the learners have tackled issues of unacceptable behaviour assertively. Ixion has disseminated basic training on equality and diversity that contained information on the legal obligations for the employers. It has produced a range of lengthy and dense documents that cover employees' rights and duties and do not relate to learners. Learners are unable to negotiate their way around such wordy and lengthy documents. Ixion is not fully clear about the minimum standards that it expects from its employers and learners in relation to promoting equality and diversity on short training programmes.
22. Subcontractors make extensive use of the views of the learners and employers to successfully improve the provision. Inspectors learnt about a range of improvements that were implemented by the subcontractors. Ixion has been successful at sharing the best practice among its subcontractor to bring about sustained improvements. It has further plans to refine independent feedback it sought from learners to obtain an overall view of its own performance.

Subject areas

Driving instruction

Grade 1

Context

23. Currently 135 learners from across England are undertaking NVQ level 3 training in driving instruction. The course lasts for three months. All learners are self-employed and often recommended by their colleagues. Any Driver, the subcontractor for this provision, delivers five sessions of off-the-job training and some assessment from rented premises. Learners are further assessed in their vehicles and through completion of workbooks. Most of the associate trainers are ex-learners.

Key findings

- Success rates are outstanding and well above the national averages for the whole sector. All learners complete their main and additional qualifications rapidly within the planned timescale. Since the start of the programme in 2009/10 all 118 learners from the six cohorts achieved their NVQ and the additional Fleet Driver Trainer qualification.
- Learners thoroughly enjoy their training. They become more effective instructors by combining both teaching and instruction skills. They encourage the learner-drivers to reflect on their driving skills and to find their own solutions, thus fostering sound driving skills.
- Most learners take additional qualifications in assessing and training by becoming members of Any Driver partnership. This gives them an advantage when applying for work in a highly competitive market where up to 1,100 people a week are applying to become driving instructors. Many of them become freelance trainers for Any Driver.
- Learners feel extremely safe. Any Driver hires good quality venues such as golf-clubs or local authority offices. The manager personally checks each venue for the good learning environment, access, parking and lighting. Learners receive very useful information on personal safety and health; particularly valuable in an industry where people are largely working alone in sedentary conditions.
- Teaching and learning are good. Trainers are highly experienced and they share their experiences well. Learners enjoy the sessions and the chance to meet other instructors. A few trainers do not make sufficient use of the prior experiences of learners. They focus on instruction and do not use effective questioning or reflection to help learners to learn from each other.
- The programme exceeds the expectations of the learners. All learners are self-employed and time to attend training is often difficult to arrange. Group sessions are held at convenient locations at times to suit all learners. Trainers provide highly effective individual sessions for those who need extra language support or are not able to attend the main sessions.

- Support for learners is excellent. Many have not engaged in formal training since leaving school. Trainers work well to put learners at ease and promptly respond to email or phone requests including technical support to set up a website to promote their business activities. Learners, who lack the confidence to give presentations, are given high quality support and guidance.
- The management of the programme including the support for the subcontractor is outstanding. Any Driver, a new company, has grown rapidly over the last two years. It has set and maintained high standards rather than expand indiscriminately. It is investigating apprenticeships in customer service following the demise of the NVQ in driving instructor training.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The provider has taken extreme care to ensure that it deploys male and female trainers to attract higher numbers of female and minority ethnic learners than are found in the industry as a whole. All learners achieve equally highly. Support for learners who speak English as an additional language is outstanding.
- Learner engagement to seek feedback is excellent including through social networking sites. Any Driver staff are clearly reflective and evaluative of their provision, constantly striving to make improvements to training, assessment and the learners' experience.

What does Ixion need to do to improve further?

- Make greater use of initial assessment findings to encourage more reflective and varied learning activities enabling all learners to make a greater contribution to classroom discussions.

Warehousing and distribution

Grade 3

Context

24. Currently 48 learners are working towards an NVQ level 2 in warehousing and distribution. Four of the learners are women. Some 36 learners are working at one employer. Nearly all learners are employed on a night shift. The delivery of the NVQ programme is subcontracted to First for Staff. Two assessors market the programme to employers and carry out the assessment. All training and assessment takes place in the workplace.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory. Nearly all learners complete their qualifications. However they do not complete the qualifications in the planned timescale. For example, 70% of learners in 2009/10 completed their qualifications in the planned timeframe. Although some current learners are making satisfactory progress, too many are making slow progress towards achievement.
- The development of learners' vocational skills and confidence is good. They use their improved skills and knowledge of health and safety aspects to improve their performance of job tasks such as 'picking' and storage of deliveries. They work well in teams and enjoy better relationships at work.
- Assessors use learning packs well to enhance learners' knowledge and understanding. However, many learners are making slow progress at the largest employer. Assessors do not plan assessment visits effectively and make insufficient use of the training provided by the employer to inform learning and assessment. Learners do not have sufficient understanding of their progress and their NVQ portfolio.
- The planning of training and assessment is not effective. Initial assessment is weak as assessors do not ascertain learners' previous learning, occupational competence and literacy, language and numeracy needs. Individual learning plans contain insufficient information, with inadequate target setting. Reviews of learners' progress are poor. Employers have insufficient involvement in the design and delivery of the NVQ programme.
- Ixion meets employers' needs very well. Assessors undertake very flexible visits at nights to take into account the business needs. Where NVQ programmes are well established, employers report improvement in learners' job performance. However, employers and line managers do not provide sufficient assessment opportunities by releasing learners from work for assessor visits.
- Partnerships are satisfactory. Partnerships with new employers are continually sought to improve the offer of NVQs to potential learners. However the company has not developed links with the trade unions that have a legitimate interest in the development of its members.

- Support for learners including provision for information, advice and guidance is satisfactory. Assessors make frequent visits to the employers and provide good personal support to help learners progress. However, many learners who have English as an additional language need are not offered good quality professional support. Their progress is slow.
- Ixion have strongly focussed on overall completion of qualifications to the detriment of the overall quality of the learners' experience. It made several changes to the subcontracting arrangements during which the quality of provision suffered. The awarding body raised serious concerns about the quality assurance resulting in severe delay of qualification achievement for 81 learners.
- Quality arrangements are inadequate. Ixion does not currently have effective tracking systems to monitor learners' progress and relies on the subcontractor to ensure quality of delivery. The company is aware of this shortfall and has implemented more rigorous quality monitoring and improvement arrangements.

What does Ixion need to do to improve further?

- Improve the planning of training and assessment by better coordination with, and more involvement of, employers and the trade unions to ensure faster progress for all learners.
- Develop better quality individual learning plans that take into account learners' individual needs, setting them measurable targets and evaluating them at regular intervals to ensure their progress.
- Improve learners' understanding of their NVQ by giving them more responsibility in organising and building their portfolio.
- Improve rates of progress for learners with English as an additional language by more timely use of initial assessment results and further additional support.
- Improve leadership and management of the programme, by more rigorous quality monitoring of the subcontractor and improved communications with all parties.

Information about the inspection

25. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's Head of Training and Business Development, as nominee, carried out the first inspection of the provider. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local Skills Funding Agency or other funding bodies, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the start of the contract.
26. 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 visited workplaces, observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected and used evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the provider offers including those programmes that had ended.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Ixion Holdings Ltd

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	Employer responsive Train to Gain
Approximate number of enrolled learners		
Full-time learners	0	0
Part-time learners	210	210
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Capacity to improve	2	
Outcomes for learners	2	2
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2	
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2	
How well do learners progress?	2	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2	
How safe do learners feel?	2	
Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	n/a	
How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	n/a	
Quality of provision	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
Leadership and management	2	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2	
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	2	
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?	3	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2	

*where applicable to the type of provision

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