



## **DIMENSIONS TRAINING SOLUTIONS (DTS)**



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## 1. Assessment Information

Assessment Type	INITIAL ASSESSMENT
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Assessor's Name	CHRIS JAMES AND SUE HARDING
Visit Date	15/03/2019, 18/03/2019, & 19/03/2019
Client ID	C14480
Assessment Reference	PN104257
Continuous Improvement Check Year 1 due by	19/03/2020
Continuous Improvement Check Year 2 due by	19/03/2021
Accreditation Review on-site visit to be conducted by	19/03/2022

## 2. Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives & Outcomes

Dimensions Training Solutions was previously accredited with the **matrix** standard under its own name and underwent a 3-year review in the summer of 2018. They then acquired learndirect (LD) and sold the LD Apprenticeship division. Contracts previously under LD were novated to Dimensions Training Solutions and the name was changed to DTSlearndirect to reflect the provision of both organisations - albeit on a temporary basis. With such significant changes the 'new' organisation was required to undergo a full assessment against the **matrix** standard and the name Dimensions Training Solutions (DTS) - referred to as DTS throughout the report, has now been agreed. The new Senior Management Team was formed in November 2018, and this team is driving the change and strategic plan, with every effort being made to ensure it is 'business as usual' for partners and learners. Staff and associates described 'strong' and 'driven' leaders and were very positive about the communication and support given throughout the transition period. They described leaders having a greater willingness to share information and listen to their views and ideas, including discussions about the new structure and how best to fulfil roles in the future.

DTS still has Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) contracts in place for the delivery of Learner Loans (until December 2019) as well as Work Programme (until March 2019). A small number of apprenticeships are still in place but will cease in April 2019. ESF contracts for those Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), Skills Support for Unemployed, (SSU) Skills Support for Workforce (SSW), and Skills Support for Redundancy (SSR) run until April 2019. DTS has new or extended contracts due to start on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 for the provision of support for young people in the NEET group, and for SSU adults. Around 60% of delivery is through approximately 30 supply chain partners with the remainder being delivered through a mix of around 80 employed and associate staff. DTS achieved the Merlin Standard in January 2019 for its supply chain management.

Learners and (in the main) partners who were interviewed were very positive about their relationship with DTS, and the benefits gained. One partner commented on the transition to DTS as, *'It feels a lot more accessible and approachable now'*. Partners believe the relationship is genuinely collaborative - one described being helped to widen participation for Access to HE through support in setting up an online platform for learners. They described how DTS has produced an excellent information, advice, and guidance (IAG) system for the e-platform to ensure learners make the right decision on their Access course, and where they might go after the course. They commented, *'It really is widening participation and is a fabulous system'*.

DTS has defined its strategy as 'Everyone working together with a collective purpose and responsibility to gain a successful and rewarding working environment delivering value to all stakeholders'. This strategy is underpinned by four principles; The Base - To run our Business, Protect - Our Learners, Drive - Value, and Grow - Sustainably. Each principle has a set of 'enablers' which outline how each principle will be met which focus heavily on values and behaviours. Measurable objectives have been set for each area, relating to performance targets with key performance indicators for managers and their teams. The culture was described by a member of senior management as one of quality, with the learner at the heart of everything. The phrase 'quality belongs to all and is part of everything' was used in their description.

Although growth through quality is the main objective, managers were keen to point out that certain considerations have been taken into account and described this as 'Having the Cash, Competency, and Capacity'.

The IAG Statement of Service describes the purpose as, 'To support individuals to achieve their aspirations, including their learning and career goals'. An IAG Policy sets out objectives which follow the 'learner journey' from recruitment to achievement. Atlas is the bespoke Management Information System (MIS) used by all staff, to track learners, their progress and completion. (IAG is referred to as 'the service' throughout the report). Other systems such as Pearl and PICS are also used to track, monitor and communicate with learners.

Learners described their route to DTS through Job Centre referrals or seeing a member of DTS staff at the Job Centre. *'I met X at the Job Centre. She made me an appointment, I came to see them and haven't left since! They've definitely helped my confidence'*. Other methods of recruiting learners are also used such as Job Fairs, events in community settings, the DTS website and through other stakeholders. Staff spend a great deal of time during the initial interview to ascertain learner goals, barriers, and skills. Most learners interviewed had joined DTS programmes quite recently, although a few Access to Higher Education (HE) and Work Start learners had either completed their programme or were due to complete soon. The majority of learners spoken to were very happy with the initial IAG and ongoing support received, although one or two on Access to HE courses in the North West of England, who started earlier last year, mentioned that support had improved in the last few months with a change of tutor and more frequent feedback on their work. The IAG Policy outlines the process for all learners entering the service with a specific process in place for those studying on-line. The team work hard to ensure learners understand the importance of having a placement agreed (where appropriate) at the start of their course, with many describing a placement 'action plan' being used to help this. The majority of learners are given sufficient information prior to their programme starting and not surprisingly this is easier for those studying in the centres. During induction, they are given information about the start dates, the duration, an overview of the content, expectations on behaviour, who to contact if they are unhappy, as well as the importance of the maths and English initial assessment. Work Start learners complete stage one of a 'distance travelled' log which collects information on for instance confidence and employability skills which is then reviewed at key stages. Relevant policies are also included and a small number of learners said they were much more aware of 'being safe' as a result of for instance Safeguarding sessions. All learners have an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) and they are told how this will be reviewed, and a handbook reminds them about what was discussed.

Managers and staff clearly described how their objectives link to those of the service which include retention rates, progression rates, achievement rates, job outcomes, response times to learner queries, re-engaging 'at risk' learners, as well as learner satisfaction. Other objectives specific to individual roles include, a manager to do a self-assessment report and quality improvement plan for their area, and a team leader to complete monthly one to ones with their staff. Job coach targets include 15 initial IAG sessions a month, and to progress at least 5 learners a month into education, employment, or voluntary work (the latter for the NEETs group only). Work Start Advisor targets include 7 programme starts a month and 3 job starts.

Minimum performance levels are in place for other areas of delivery for instance 90% achievement for the Access to HE Diploma. Atlas, PICS, spreadsheets, and monthly Performance Management Review (PMR) discussions, are used to monitor progress against these objectives. The vast majority of the team could compare where they currently are against these targets - some set for the team as opposed to individually.

The service is delivered effectively, with the team, and learners describing what works well. *'I think we're brilliant at referring, we never just take people anyway, we're realistic at what we can and can't do. We have a really good signposting document with all the agencies and contacts in'*. The Holistic Assessment Plan (HAP) previously developed to re-engage learners has had a positive impact on achievement rates and is expected to continue. Learners participating in Access to HE complete an IAG unit prior to starting their subject which helps them to consider how their programme (and University) will support their career aspirations. *'I was nervous starting something completely new. Enrolling on course was quite easy. I had various different assessors at the start, but my assessor now has been brilliant. We have regular calls and talking to someone is so much better than just online feedback. She's given me the motivation to continue, and suddenly there's an end in sight.'* Learners have a two weekly formal review against their initial targets to monitor their progress. Learners described their tutor offering to support them prior to going for interviews. Another described their tutor emailing them jobs they thought they'd be interested in. Learners securing employment are given 'in-work' support to ensure the transition is as smooth as possible. One learner was offered a temporary role at the end of 2018 but was undecided and felt 'anxious'. Their Work Start tutor offered them support and guidance to 'ease them in' and they remain in employment. Learners gave many positive comments about the support they received including, *'They're very much about what you can do and not what you can't', 'I've got more out of it than I anticipated - the tutor has brought their own experiences into it which has given me really good ideas about hospitality', 'I've got 2 CVs now - one for catering and one for retail so I've got both areas covered', 'I was only about 50% confident before the course but now I'm about 90%.'*

Achievement against objectives is good in the majority of areas, with the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) being used to identify and track planned improvements. Since the start of the NEETs contract in Bristol, over a two-year period, 18% of participants gained paid employment for 16 hours or more a week, 39% are continuing on the programme, and approximately 16% went onto further training or to an apprenticeship. For SSU, 14% of participants went into paid employment for 16 plus hours a week, 3% into employment for less than 16 hours per week and 1% into self-employment, with 11% still on the programme, 65% are not in paid employment and available to start work, and 6% went on to further education. Work Start achievement is slightly down in year 2 compared with year 1 but remains positive. In year 1 out of 256 who started the programme, 72 gained employment, and 23 sustained that employment, in year 2, of the 125 who started, 77 gained employment with 43 sustaining that employment. Sector-based work academies have been run in Bristol, with 5 learners who started on a training course for Nando's gaining employment. Another for McDonalds is currently running, and others include those for a security company. A 'Cheat List' has been developed for staff conducting initial IAG interviews to ensure sufficient information on a learner's individual goals - helping them to make more informed choices. The introduction of more regular contact for learners accessing learner loans (10, 20, 40, days) ensures the vast majority (97%) move into HE at the end of their diploma.

Staff and associates described an improved atmosphere since the transition, and a culture of supporting each other, *'We're 100% behind each other to make this work'. 'The team is tighter and better since DTS took over. There's a more flexible and responsive attitude that feels really supportive'*. Process improvements have also been made such as strengthening safeguarding, as a result of considering how many safeguarding officers were needed and what training was required, to *'ensure the 'Base' is strong and the structure tight'*.

The team described the outcomes they would like to see on behalf of learners and although they are varied there are a number of common themes. Understanding what will be expected of them and progressing within their learning or career goals are expected regardless of the learners' programme of support. For those on Work Start outcomes are softer in nature and include for instance, increased confidence, improved employability skills, and working in groups. These outcomes are also referred to within the IAG Statement of Service and displayed on notice boards. The PMR process, learner reviews, team meetings, are all used to monitor these outcomes. Monitoring of distance travelled logs is also used to report on the difference the service is making.

Learners commented positively about the service, and in many cases how it exceeded expectations. *'They sorted out my CV for me and helped me look for jobs. They gave me interview prep. Without their help with my CV and pushing me to find a job I wouldn't have one - I start Monday! They've been brilliant'*. All described the effectiveness of the action planning process and how the Job Coach spent time to find out about their goals, lifestyle, and any barriers or considerations. These included hospital visits and times to fit around school hours, before helping them look at options such as employability, accredited courses in retail, hospitality and IT, and more support with job search, CVs, and interview practice. *'I've been on Work Start since January. They've helped me with my CV, how to approach employers and put yourself over. They're starting to build me back up – I'm not there yet but I'm getting there. Their attitude towards people is fantastic. They genuinely bend over backwards to help you'*. The transition has had a positive impact on distance learning learners, through a more considered approach to recruitment of assessors. Surveys and feedback from learners show improved job search and job application skills, as well as confidence. The increase in staff with IAG relevant qualifications has also had an impact on the learner, *'I've got a lot from doing Advice & Guidance Level 2 - the difference between signposting and referral for one thing'*.

### 3. Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment. These are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

Although the DTS strategy is still new, improvements have already been identified and acted on. Examples included, the production of a 'Cheat List' for staff conducting initial IAG interviews to ensure sufficient information on a learner's individual goals - helping them to make more informed choices, and the introduction of more regular contact (10, 20, 40, days) for learners accessing learner loans. Results are monitored through staff observations and an audit of action plans as part of the quality cycle. **(1.1, 4.1)**

Staff and associates described 'strong' and 'driven' leaders and were very positive about the communication and support given throughout the transition period. They described a greater willingness to share information and listen to their views and ideas, including discussions about the new structure and how best to fulfil roles in the future. **(1.2, 2.1)**

Learners participating in Access to HE Diploma's complete an IAG unit prior to starting on their course. This encourages them to consider how the qualification and potential time at University will support their career or life goals, resulting in them having a greater level of understanding and the ability to make more realistic choices. **(3.2, 3.4)**

The personal development policy is implemented effectively and all staff, including associates, confirmed that they had ample access to CPD. One commented, '*Whichever way you turn you've got support*'. The majority of those interviewed said they were currently undertaking some form of development, particularly IAG qualifications. Associates (many who work for other organisations also) described a thorough and supportive introduction to the organisation and were 'impressed' by how open the managers were to share information. **(1.2, 2.4, 2.5)**

One of the key elements of the new strategy is 'putting the client at the heart of what we do,' and there is clear evidence that learner feedback is used to inform improvements. There are numerous examples of this including; 9 new computers in Bristol to better meet learner requirements, organising the 'Hub' to bring in external organisations to talk about key topics such as 'Gangs and Knife Crime', awareness sessions from the Fire Brigade, as well as Prevent and Universal Credit. **(4.3, 4.8)**

## 4. Areas for Development

Areas for development are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and a way for an Assessor to add value e.g. where the service is of a high-quality, development areas are offered to help the service be even better than it already is; or to give insight to practice seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and areas for development. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice, and guidance service is in anyway lacking. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty-four months from the date of this Assessment, along with any other notable developments.

The new DTS strategy is clearly understood and sets out how it links to staff objectives. The team (including associates) are aware of their performance expectations and all could relate them to the 4 principles. The strategy does though need time to bed in further in order to demonstrate its full effectiveness. Progress against all the objectives (for instance those around standardisation of systems and processes, and sustainability) could be monitored further during the 12-month CIC. **(1.1, 4.1)**

Management Information reports demonstrate progress against specific performance targets such as retention, progression, and destination. With multiple funders and reporting formats though, it is difficult to produce one overall report than shows progress against all these objectives in a clear format. It may be beneficial to consider if Atlas could accommodate this which could then enable data to be easily accessed when required. **(1.1, 4.1)**

Everyone is clear about the difference they want the service to make to learners with common themes including; confidence, improved employability skills and communication. A distance travelled tool is used on Work Start, and it may be beneficial to consider extending the use of this or something similar to other programmes which could provide a 'fuller picture' of the impact across the whole provision. **(1.5, 4.2)**

Feedback is gathered using paper-based surveys, phone surveys, and forums and in the main this is very positive. As surveys start to go online, this will provide more measurable quantitative data as well as the qualitative data gathered via the current systems. It may be useful though to review some of the feedback questions to ensure they fully capture data relating to the service objectives as outline in the IAG Statement of Service and IAG Policy. Learners could for instance be asked if the initial IAG prepared them for their 'programme of support', whether it enabled them to make 'informed choices / consider next steps'. Programme specific questions could also be included which, when collated could be used to make further improvements as well as reporting on the progress towards the strategy, in particular '*ensuring client needs are consistently met*'. **(1.5, 4.2, 4.3)**

All staff, including associates, confirmed that they had ample access to CPD, and the majority of those interviewed said they were currently undertaking some form of development, particularly IAG qualifications. It may be beneficial to extend the offer of IAG qualifications across a wider selection of roles as well as considering higher level IAG qualifications for those who are currently qualified to Level 2, to ensure the service continues to be delivered consistently. **(2.4)**

Learners who take out an Advanced Learner Loan to pay for their study are contacted at regular intervals to ensure they are making progress and happy with the next steps. Once the 40-day deadline has passed though there is only minimal interaction until they come to the end of their study period. It may be beneficial - especially for those wishing to start University the following September, to be contacted half way through this period to ensure they are still happy and clear about their options and next steps. Depending on timings, this could be done in the Spring before enrolment. **(3.2, 3.4)**

The majority of learners said they were given sufficient information prior to participating, in particular those on courses run 'in-centre'. For those who embark on 'remote learning' their experience is a little less positive with some describing being unaware that they would not have access to a tutor '*at the end of a phone*' or being unaware of timescales and length of study. It may be beneficial to review how these learners are inducted to their programme and ensure that the details outlined in the Learner Recruitment process are adhered to. The initial IAG call and subsequent '10 day' catch up could also be used to ensure learners are clear about the next steps. **(3.1)**

The annual **matrix** Continuous Improvement Check will allow the organisation to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the developments they are continuing to make in order to support individuals <http://matrixstandard.com/continuous-improvement-checks/>. These may include the Areas for Development above.

Please note that annual Continuous Improvement Checks are mandatory and non-completion within the required timescale will impact on your organisation's accreditation, please see Section 1 for dates.

## 5. Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process.

- Initial planning conversations with the Director of Quality
- A total of three days (two days - Chris James, and one day - Sue Harding) were spent visiting two different sites, one in Bristol and the organisation's Head Office in Sheffield
- Face to face interviews with 12 members of staff, and 4 learners (in pairs)
- Informal conversations with 3 learners during the course of the day in Bristol
- Telephone interviews with 17 members of staff, 1 associate tutor, 3 partners and 15 learners including Work Start, Access to HE, NEETs and SSU
- Review of documentation including relevant policies i.e. H&S, E&D, GDPR, the IAG Policy and IAG Statement of Service, SAR and QIP, extracts from Management Information, learner induction documentation, job descriptions, observation reports, fact sheets on CV writing
- Information on display at the Bristol centre and Head Office in Sheffield also included; boards with job vacancies, Apprenticeship vacancies and volunteering opportunities, boards with learner comments, and 'you said, we did' feedback posters

Brief feedback was provided at the end of day one to the Director of Quality, on day two to the Director of Quality and Quality Improvement Manager, and at the closing meeting to the Director of Quality, Quality Improvement Manager, and Director of Central Services

## Conditions of Accreditation

Holders of the **matrix** Standard Accreditation must:

- Maintain and continually improve upon their services.
- Throughout the period of accreditation satisfy Assessment Services Ltd that the organisation continues to meet the requirements of the **matrix** Standard via the annual continuous improvement checks and the three-year accreditation review.
- Complete annual continuous improvement checks in a timely way, it is expected these will be carried out annually by the accreditation anniversary date.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd or their Assessor if the key contact name/contact details change.
- Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the **matrix** Standard at least 3 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre-on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment, and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 3 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email: [matrix@assessmentsservices.com](mailto:matrix@assessmentsservices.com).
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd immediately if they wish to extend or reduce the scope of their accreditation.
- Inform Assessment Services Ltd of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received (within the scope of the accreditation).
- Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause Assessment Services Ltd and/or the **matrix** Standard to be brought into disrepute.
- Only use the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines. For example, if a certain department is successfully **matrix** accredited, the Quality Mark can only be used on that department's letterhead or on that department's page on their internet homepage.
- Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for accreditation review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by Assessment Services Ltd and do not display the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark nor refer to being a former holder of the **matrix** Standard.
- Be aware that Assessment Services Ltd reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.

Whilst accredited the organisation will be signed up for IAGonline - a community website for all **matrix** holders. Once signed up, any employee of the organisation can join the community and access regular posts and join specialist interest groups for support and discussion.

	
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