



Skills Priorities Programme Review

Executive Summary

1. Background

- 1.1 The Skills Priorities Programme (SPP) has been designed to allow the Further Education sector to respond to and develop provision to address job specific, higher-level skills gaps, at a regional level as identified by Regional Skills Partnerships. It also supports Further Education Institutions to develop the skills base of their staff through continued professional development activity.
- 1.2 It is split into three Strands: Higher Level Skills Delivery (Strand 1), Capability Development (Strand 2), and Innovation (Strand 3). In the 2016-17 rounds, all three Strands were delivered, but Strand 3 was dropped for the 2017-19 rounds.

2. Research aims and methodology

- 2.1 In this final report, findings from the research are presented using the following data sources:
 - Review of programme documentation and project plans
 - Review of progress reports from Further Education (FE) consortia and individual colleges
 - Interviews with key stakeholders in Welsh Government (WG)
 - Interviews with key stakeholders in the Regional Learning and Skills Partnerships (RLSP) and the Sector Skills Councils (SSC)
 - Interviews with programme managers in the FE lead institutions
 - Interviews with programme managers and/or academic staff in FE providers
 - Interviews with beneficiary employers

3. Key findings

- 3.1 The key findings from the report are included below:
 - There is a high level of satisfaction among FE providers with SPP.
 - The most consistent problem identified with SPP by all involved in the 2016-2017 round of delivery was the timescales imposed by a one-year call-to-completion cycle. However, the move to a two-year cycle for 2017-2019 has been broadly welcomed.

- There has been divergence of views between the programme management team of SPP and the stakeholder community, on the one hand, and FE providers on the other, as to the relative balance between the three Strands of activities going forward. FE institutions continue to emphasise the benefits to themselves of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities undertaken under SPP.
- The consortium model has been facilitated by existing cooperation through ESF funded programmes, and has stimulated inter-FE patterns of learning and knowledge transfer; however, there is little cross-consortia learning and sharing of good practice to this point.
- FE providers have mainly interpreted the place of SPP in their skills offer as filling gaps in ESF funded provision. In that interpretation, FE institutions see the added value of SPP lying mainly in CPD and innovation activities.
- Less delivery has taken place under strand 1 than expected, due to:
 - Perceived overlaps with ESF programmes
 - Short timescales
 - A perceived lack of potential learner beneficiaries, as beneficiaries are already being reached under ESF
 - A perceived greater return on investment from Strand 2 and Strand 3 activity
- The shortfall in Strand 1 activity left money unspent from the initial budget allocations during 2016-2017. FE institutions have learned from this experience as reflected in their planning for 2017-2019.
- While the consortia-based funding model was contested by some, it may not be as big an issue as previously thought since colleges still have money unspent from their budgets.
- There is a perception in the stakeholder community that there may be (a) some displacement effects associated with SPP and (b) a lack of engagement with employer representative groups and employers.
- The Regional Skills and Learning Partnerships and Sector Skills Councils have been on the periphery of SPP, in contrast to their more central role in ESF funded programme delivery. However, there is evidence that this is changing in the planning for delivery for 2017-2019.
- Uniformly, FE providers see the major advantage of SPP as being its flexibility and adaptability compared to ESF funding.
- The shortfall in delivery under Strand 1 makes it hard to identify businesses who have deeply engaged under that element of the programme; however, businesses are benefitting from SPP and are pleased with the engagement, although not always able to attribute the service provision they have received to SPP by name. Employers specifically cite internal upskilling as one of the tangible benefits of engagement with SPP.
- Co-investment remains a challenge, after a legacy of many years of essentially free skills provision.

4. Recommendations

4.1 From Phases 1 and 2 of the review, and building on the emerging findings previously shared with the programme management team, the report makes the following recommendations:

- Welsh Government should do more to advertise the programme, as promoting these opportunities can at times prove challenging.

- Welsh Government should communicate and distinguish the SPP from similar programmes. This has the potential to help employers better identify the programme and the benefits thereof; and
- Welsh Government should consider operating a more structured and consistent system of data collection regarding outputs and outcomes emerging from activity to support ongoing monitoring and evaluation, as the results reported in the final reports were hard to compare across Wales.

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Full Research Report: Andrew, E., Wilson, P., Wigley, K., and Davies, H., (2018). *Skills Priority Programme Review Final report*. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 64/2018

Available at: <https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-skills-priority-programme/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
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