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Evaluation of Essential Skills in the Workplace, 2010-2015

Executive Summary

1. Introduction and Method

- 1.1 Essential Skills in the Workplace (ESiW) was a Welsh Government programme that offered training in essential skills. Essential skills includes reading, writing, communication, numeracy and computer skills. The programme offered learners the opportunity to study Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). It was funded through the European Social Funding (ESF) from April 2010 to April 2015.
- 1.2 This report presents the findings from an evaluation conducted from April 2013 to September 2015, but covering the entire ESF period. The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach which included: a survey of 300 employers; analysis of 1,284 ESiW learners' data generated from the ESF Leavers Survey; 20 employer case studies (including interviews with learners, line managers and employers); a counterfactual impact study using data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), interviews with 20 providers and an e-survey of 17 subcontracted providers; interviews with Wales TUC and five unions, and analysis of ESiW programme data . We also conducted a focussed literature review on other countries' approaches to improving essential skills.

2. Overall Conclusions

- 2.1 The programme has performed well and was highly valued by all key stakeholders (providers, employers, and learners). The programme was well managed and key learner engagement and attainment targets were achieved for less money than was originally allocated. Awareness of essential skills needs is now much stronger among employers and the workforce, and demand for training is likely to continue. A positive impact on businesses was observed by employers in terms of improved staff morale, confidence at work, skills developed and productivity.

2.2 One of the benchmarks of success was to report on the impact of the ESiW programme on raising the levels of essential skills in the employed workforce in Wales. Data gathered by the Welsh Government on previously held qualifications, showed that three fifths of learners already held qualifications at Level 2 or above and, therefore did not increase their skills level on this programme. However, the Adult Skills survey, 2010, found that some individuals with a high level of qualifications, when tested, were found to have low/lower essential skills. The basic skills target was for level 1 literacy and numeracy skills.

3. Key Findings

3.1 The programme’s overall performance was measured through a set of key targets which were designed to both motivate providers and monitor progress in the engagement of learners and employers, and in the attainment of qualifications. Programme performance is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: ESiW Performance Against Key Programme Targets

	Target	Actual
Participants Engaged	24,847*	21,589 (87 %)
Employers Engaged	5,002*	5,046 (101 %)
Participants Gaining qualifications	11,659**	13,947 (119 %)
Number of Qualifications Gained	18,022**	24,410 (135 %)

Source: WEFO 2007-15 European Funding Claim Reports. See Section 4 for more detail on targets.

* This target was amended in 2015.

**This target was set in 2012.

3.2 The balance of participants gaining qualifications and employers engaged on the programme mirrored targets for Convergence (two thirds) and Competitiveness (one third) .The target as set out in the Welsh Government Strategy, Words Talk Number Count (2005) was for 80 per cent of adults to have at least Level 1 literacy skills and 55 per cent to have at least Level 1 numeracy skills (by 2010). By 2010, 88 per cent of those surveyed were assessed at Level 1 or above for literacy and 50 per cent for numeracy. Three fifths, 60 per cent, of the ESiW learners already had qualifications at Level 2 or above, when they started the programme (there were no targets set for learners’ prior qualifications). However, qualifications are only one measure of a person’s skills and many learners increased their range of skills across the literacy, numeracy and computer skills areas.

3.3 ICT had the highest level of uptake from learners (42 per cent), followed by AON (30 per cent), Communication (27 per cent) and ESOL (1 per cent). Delivery of ESOL over the whole programme was not a priority.

- 3.4 During the early phase of the programme (2010) there were a number of difficulties in engaging employers, and Menter a Busnes were contracted to identify employers who had a need for essential skills support. This contract was terminated in 2014 due to low numbers of employers being identified. Some providers were more successful at engaging employers than others and private training providers (PTPs) actually delivered the bulk of learner engagements (71 per cent of all learners were engaged through PTPs) and 79 per cent of all qualifications achieved were delivered through PTPs.
- 3.5 Going forward, essential skills provision will be commissioned via a regional delivery model and the Welsh Government will no longer deliver a national essential skills programme for employed people. The regional programmes are currently in development and, in the absence of the finer detail of how they will work, there was a general concern among some providers regarding issues relating to working with employers across geographical boundaries and the ability to maintain current relationships with employers where delivery is Pan-Wales.
- 3.6 Qualification attainment rates differed considerably across providers with some providers achieving an 80 per cent conversion rate and a number achieving below the mean of 65 per cent. Where volumes of learner engagement were high among some providers, this resulted in many hundreds of learners (in two cases, thousands of learners, not achieving their qualification(s).
- 3.7 All providers stated they could deliver through the medium of Welsh if needed, but that demand was low. However, one lead contract holder stated that there was a need to increase their providers' capacity to deliver through the medium of Welsh as they could not always respond to demand. There was some evidence of this through the employer survey with a small number of employers (n=18) stating that they would have preferred to have received learning through the medium of Welsh but that it was not offered.
- 3.8 Some providers were involved in piloting the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST). This was a standardised, on-line tool being rolled out to all Welsh Government providers. WEST was launched on 1st October 2014 along with a programme of scheduled updates and releases. Although there was support for the tool, there were a number of challenges and delays in its development and rollout, mainly related to the revision of ESW qualifications.

Impact on employers

- 3.9 Employers recognised the benefits of the essential skills training that had taken place in their business (Figure 1).

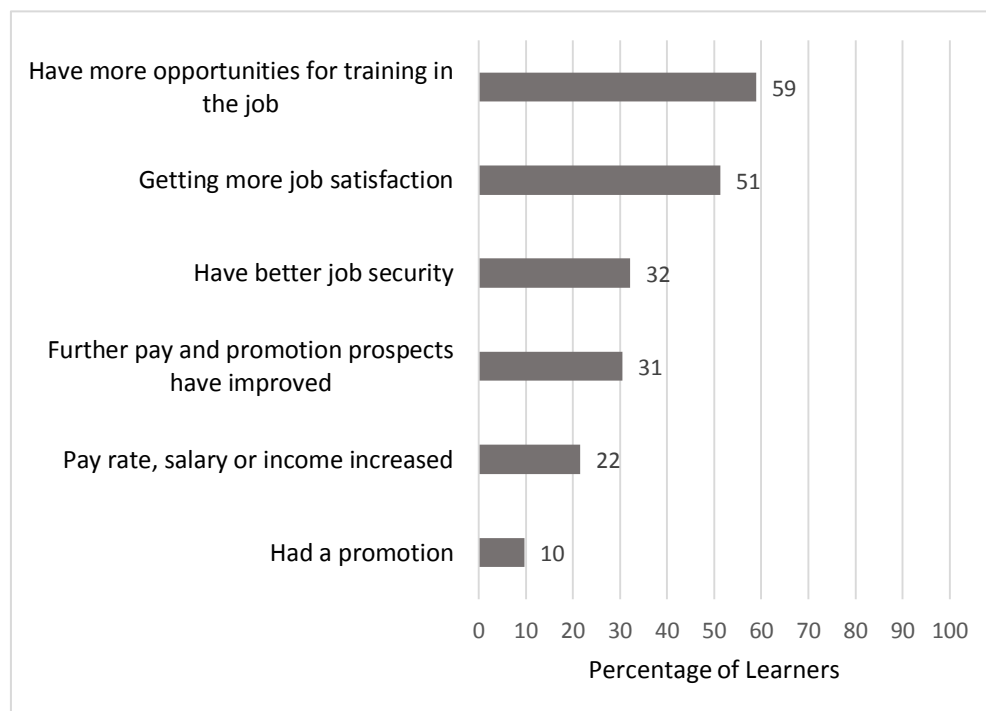
Figure 1: Benefits of Essential Skills Training



Source: essential skills in the Workplace (ESiW) Evaluation, Employer Survey. Base: All (300) Employers were asked 'Have you observed any the following impacts to organisational performance as a result of your involvement with the ESiW programme?'

- 3.10 Four fifths of employers considered the attainment of essential skills qualifications as valuable to their business.
- 3.11 This was further substantiated in the case study visits where learners stated they had improved their ability to work more independently. The majority of learners were more confident in their abilities, and importantly were more enthusiastic about learning. The skill that most learners stated they had developed were in ICT, followed by communication skills and problem solving skills. Learners reported they were able to use their improved skills in administrative tasks as well as more specialist tasks relating to occupations such as manufacturing and teaching. Figure 2 shows that over half of all learners surveyed reported that they were getting more job satisfaction at work since attending the course and three fifths of learners reported having more opportunities for training on the job.

Figure 2: Impact on Current Job



Source: 2013 Welsh ESF Leavers Survey. Base: 1,054 Sample Learners. Learners were asked 'Have any of the following happened at work since completing the course?' Closed Question, options listed given choice of Yes, No, Don't Know.

- 3.12 When considering issues of equality, it is clear that the ESiW programme, by design, offered opportunities to learners who, due to their low levels of essential skills were at risk of unequal opportunities at work. By delivering learning in the workplace, providers were able to work with each learner and to tailor support to learners' needs to ensure they gained maximum benefit from the free training.
- 3.13 Wales Trade Union Congress (WTUC) developed strong support structures/networks for Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) to provide information and advice about essential skills which helped engage learners.

Cross Cutting Themes

- 3.14 The Welsh Government has monitored participation of learner groups in order to reflect the extent to which ESiW has effectively engaged learners who, for a range of reasons, may be less likely to engage in learning. Data shows that providers were successful at engaging BME learners (5 per cent were BME learners) and female learners represented 65 per cent of the learner population. This was an over representation of female learners with regards the original target of 45 per cent. Only 15 per cent of older learners (aged over 55) were engaged against the original target of 35 per cent. Conversion rates were slightly lower than the mean (65 per cent) for learners aged between 15-24 years (61 per cent), and for learners older than 65 (59 per cent).

4. Recommendations

- **Recommendation One:** Review the performance of providers with regards conversion rates to understand why rates differed quite considerably from provider to provider.
- **Recommendation Two:** Review the status of learners' prior qualifications and consider including a target for training providers to engage learners with no qualifications.
- **Recommendation Three:** If a regional delivery model is adopted, consider the feasibility for providers to operate Pan-Wales to ensure continuity of provider/employer relationships.
- **Recommendation Four:** Review the low level of provision for ESOL to ensure that learners who have a language need can be supported appropriately.
- **Recommendation Five:** Understanding whether delivery through the medium of Welsh met demand, was difficult. The Welsh Government should monitor the demand for, and review the provision of learning through the medium of Welsh in any future delivery of essential skills.
- **Recommendation Six:** Future programme design should determine the key aspects of the programme which could effect change in outcomes around equalities and sustainability, and integrate these aspects throughout the delivery to well-defined outcomes and targets. How this can be evidenced should also be considered.

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Full Research Report: Evaluation of Essential Skills in the Workplace

Available at: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-delivery-quality-assurance-post-16-basic-skills-provision/?lang=en>

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

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