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# Formative evaluation of the Employability Skills Pilot Programme

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## Summary

### 1. Research aims and methodology

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of a formative evaluation of the Employability Skills Pilot (ESP) programme, a Welsh Government programme to support unemployed adults to get a job and stay in work.
- 1.2 Arad Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an independent evaluation of the design and initial implementation of the programme. This report presents findings from the evaluation fieldwork undertaken between October 2016 and January 2017.
- 1.3 The aims of the ESP are to support unemployed adults into sustained employment by improving their employability skills. It specifically targets unemployed adults who are within six months of reaching the labour market. The programme is delivered by four main training providers who offer work preparation training, essential skills if required, and a work placement or employer specific training to those referred to them by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and others.
- 1.4 The aim of this evaluation is to provide a formative assessment of the design and initial implementation of the ESP in order to inform the future development of the programme.
- 1.5 The qualitative evidence used to inform the evaluation findings were gathered from desk-based research; interviews with the four main training providers and four subcontractors; interviews with Welsh Government, JCP and Careers Wales; interviews with 11 participating individuals and three employers.

## **2. Key findings**

### **Delivery models**

- 2.1 The delivery models adopted by each of the providers were based on a common approach of receiving referrals (mostly from JCP); reviewing the employability support needs of those referred; providing them with support to increase their employability and guiding them towards sustained employment.
- 2.2 A key feature of the ESP was that providers were given the flexibility to deliver elements of the programme in ways they considered best to engage and support the individuals they worked with. Delivery approaches, therefore, varied across training providers. Two of the delivery models were based on fairly standardised approaches, offering all participants similar support which built on training support models delivered during previous employability programmes. The other two providers offered more tailored approaches delivering support aimed at the specific needs of individual participants.
- 2.3 Providers who offered a highly flexible and tailored approach, planning all aspects of the delivery around the bespoke needs of participants, offered a closer match to the aims of the programme to 'deliver differently' - as outlined in the ESP delivery specification. However, these providers appeared to find it more challenging to promote their offer to JCP and, therefore, gain referrals.

### **Recruitment and participation**

- 2.4 Each of the four training providers was allocated target numbers of participants to be recruited on to the programme. These comprised mainly of mainstream participants i.e. unemployed individuals on Job Seekers Allowance but also included some individuals who were recipients of support through the Lift programme (which provides training and employment for people living in households where no-one is in work. Allocations were also made for offenders serving their sentence in the community to participate in essential skills training. Almost all participants during the evaluation period came from the mainstream category – none came from offenders in the community category.

### **Supporting routes to employment**

- 2.5 Training providers were tasked with supporting participants into good-quality work placements or employer specific training with a view that these would lead to sustained employment opportunities. Providers were given a programme outcome target of supporting 55% of their participants into employment. Most providers considered this to be a challenging target.
- 2.6 Engaging with employers was, therefore, a key aspect of the delivery requirement placed on each provider. Some of the training providers already had established previous links with employers. Other providers had less established links and therefore had to invest more time making those links and encourage employers to participate in the programme. However, in most cases, at the time of writing, the employer engagement process remained at an early stage of development. As such it is not possible to draw firm conclusions relating to how the programme has influenced the nature and direction of the employer engagement process.

## **Commercial viability**

- 2.7 Training providers received funding for delivering specific areas of training and support across two support strands (support into employment (strand 1) and support during the first three months in employment (strand 2)). As such the delivery agreement did not include a set contractual value for each participant. Most of the training providers had not previously delivered programmes funded in this way and this created some commercial challenges for them. The main challenge was planning and allocating resources to deliver a programme that was associated with several commercial unknowns.
- 2.8 Most training providers did not expect the delivery of the pilot phase of the programme to be a commercially viable venture for them. This was mainly due to the need to invest in front-loaded costs such as recruiting staff before they could access any funding.
- 2.9 The ESP emphasises access to employment as its primary objective, and the main programme performance measure set for the providers is the 55% of participants into employment target. However, the balance of the funding arrangements available is weighted more heavily towards supporting pre-employment training and support as opposed to employment outcome and in work support. While this encourages providers to deliver the training and support individuals require to gain the sustained employment outcomes, it also incentivises providers to deliver centre based training as a means of ensuring commercial viability.

## **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1 Recommendation: If providers are to be supported to 'deliver differently', the Welsh Government may need to support providers to promote and market these delivery approaches to JCP and other organisations who support referral routes to the programme. Delivery approaches that meet the criteria of delivering differently may also need more time to establish.
- 3.2 Recommendation: If more than one training provider delivers ESP in the same geographical area, the Welsh Government may want to consider ways to encourage JCP to refer participants to the providers that offer a delivery approach that best suits the needs of individuals.
- 3.3 Recommendation: The Welsh Government may need to continue to work with JCP to ensure that all work coaches fully understand the ESP eligibility criteria and apply a consistent approach to assessing the suitability of potential participants, particularly in relation to their proximity to the labour market.
- 3.4 Recommendation: The Welsh Government may need to support the process of clearly identifying and defining the roles of all stakeholders in relation to how they can support individuals towards future ESP participation referral routes.
- 3.5 Recommendation: When considering the future funding model for the ESP, the Welsh Government should consider the extent to which the commercial uncertainties, currently associated with its delivery, impacts on the ability or willingness of training providers to bid for future delivery contracts. The ability to spread any commercial risk associated with the programme across a range of other commercial training delivery activity will vary across providers. This is likely to have implications on the type (and possibly size) of provider likely to tender for future contracts.

- 3.6 Recommendation: The Welsh Government should consider undertaking further formative evaluation work once the programme has had longer to embed, in order to better understand the facilitators and barriers to delivering a more holistic and individualised service. Future summative evaluations of the ESP should consider whether or not employer specific training delivered through the programme, support employment outcomes that would not otherwise have been achieved. Future evaluations should also review the extent to which employers enable or restrict the mentoring support providers can offer participants during their first three months in sustained employment.

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Available at:

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-employability-skills-pilot-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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