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# Evaluation of the Access Programme 2017 – 2019: Executive Summary

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## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report documents the findings of Wavehill’s independent evaluation of Welsh Government’s Access programme. The evaluation was carried out between January and May 2019 by a team of independent researchers. The aims of the evaluation have been to assess the delivery of the Access programme and to identify the programme’s impacts.
- 1.2 The Access programme is a Welsh Government employability scheme run in the Valleys Taskforce region since October 2017. The programme will run until the introduction of Welsh Government’s new ‘Job Support Wales’ programme, anticipated to take place in April 2020.
- 1.3 The aim of the Access programme is to support unemployed adults to get a job and to stay in work by improving their employability skills. The programme is aimed at unemployed adults who are nearer to the labour market and have a reasonable chance of being ready for employment within six months of the intervention. Where individuals are eligible for ESF-funded employability programmes, they are signposted to these programmes in the first instance.
- 1.4 The programme has been delivered by Welsh Government in conjunction with Careers Wales. Careers Wales is responsible for engaging with potential participants, assessing their suitability for the Access programme and then referring them to the appropriate support. The core content of the Access programme comprises three main elements of support:

- i) A vocational training grant for individuals who need to update their skills to return to work, up to a maximum of £1,500
- ii) Extra support to help remove barriers to vocational training
- iii) A contribution towards wages and help with training costs for recruiting employers.

1.5 Careers Wales is also responsible for working with local employers, Jobcentres and regional representatives to ensure that the skills provided by the Access vocational training grant directly match those sought by recruiting employers. This should facilitate a localised approach to skills training, providing participants with the skills required within the local labour market.

### **Methodology**

1.6 A mixed methods approach was agreed with Welsh Government following a series of scoping interviews with those involved in the management and delivery of the programme. The initial stage of the method involved the creation of a logic model for the intervention: the theory of how the programme should produce the desired outcome (i.e. helping people into employment). Based on the logic model, a monitoring and evaluation framework was developed (included in Annexe B).

1.7 The main research activities included:

- A review of programme monitoring data
- In-depth telephone interviews with four key stakeholders within Welsh Government
- A web-based survey of Access programme participants (68 responses)
- In-depth telephone interviews with a sample of 30 survey respondents
- In-depth telephone interviews with a sample of 11 Careers Wales advisers
- In-depth telephone interviews with five businesses in receipt of support through the Access programme.

- 1.8 It is important to recognise the limitations of the method. The sample of programme participants is small and, given the limitations of programme monitoring data, it has only been possible to sample according to intervention outcomes. Additionally, only five businesses participated in the evaluation.

### **Process Evaluation Findings**

- 1.9 The evidence collected during this evaluation indicates that the Access programme is widely perceived by both participants and stakeholders to be successfully administered and delivered within Welsh Government and Careers Wales.
- 1.10 Multi-agency delivery is seen as key to the programme's success, with Careers Wales providing local delivery and detailed labour market information that Welsh Government would not be able to independently of Careers Wales. Evidence indicates that this labour market information forms a key part of how courses are selected by participants. Information is gathered from formal sources, including Careers Wales job trends data and Jobcentre Plus data, as well as informal conversations with local employers.
- 1.11 Minor issues around the availability of a customer relationship management (CRM) system and monitoring data collected by the programme have not negatively affected the programme for participants, although learning in these areas would improve programme delivery in the future.
- 1.12 A key finding is that Careers Wales advisers frame the intervention in terms of a longer-term journey into employment. During stakeholder interviews, Careers Wales advisers were keen to stress that the support available through Access alone was unlikely to lead to employment and communicating this was important in terms of managing participants' expectations, as well as encouraging participants to develop soft skills such as job search skills and interview skills.
- 1.13 Vocational Training Support is the most-used strand of the support available through Access. Evidence indicates that while Careers Wales advisers are making participants aware of Employer Recruitment Support

and Employer Training Support, these options are not being widely used. Further, although there is wrap-around support for individuals provided by Careers Wales, there is no equivalent wrap-around support for businesses. This may partially explain the apparent low awareness and take-up this aspect of support.

- 1.14 Extra support to help overcome barriers to participating in training has been used in several instances, although the uptake of this support has been lower than anticipated. There is some evidence that the extra support has enabled individuals to attend training but, in some cases, there is likely to be deadweight with regards to this support.

### **Outcomes Evaluation Findings**

- 1.15 The nature of the data that has been collected from programme participants mean that it is not been possible to track long-term outcomes for programme participants. This means that, in this area, the findings have to be treated with caution. Data from Careers Wales indicates positive employment outcomes for 359 participants (26% of all participants). However, it is not possible to calculate what proportion of the intervention group would have found employment anyway, and the robustness of the outcomes data at this stage is not clear.
- 1.16 While it has not been possible to produce a counterfactual analysis of outcome data, data collected in the participant survey and in-depth interviews indicates a perception that there has been some additionality for those individuals who have found employment.
- 1.17 Vocational Training Support, which has accounted for a significant majority of all programme activity, is perceived to be the mechanism that has had the greatest impact on employment outcomes for participants. Interviews with Careers Wales advisers and participants suggest that the qualifications achieved by individuals have helped these individuals to meet the minimum requirements of jobs. In other instances, the skills (both hard skills and soft skills) developed through participation have been important in moving individuals into employment.

- 1.18 In instances where there have not been successful employment outcomes for participants, there is some evidence that there have been outcomes which have moved individuals closer to employment than they otherwise would have been. The participant survey and in-depth participant interviews indicate impacts on confidence even where successful employment outcomes have not been achieved.
- 1.19 While Employer Recruitment Support and Employer Training Support have been taken up less frequently than had originally been anticipated, there is some evidence that these have produced additionality. There is also some limited evidence that individual businesses have recruited earlier or in greater numbers than they otherwise would have done without Employer Recruitment Support. At the same time, the available evidence suggests that there is likely to be some deadweight as a result of these aspects of the intervention, with some employers reporting that they would have employed Access candidates irrespective of the availability of the wage subsidy and training support.

### **Recommendations**

- 1.20 **Recommendation One:** Welsh Government should work with Careers Wales and other partners (for example, Business Wales) to find ways to publicise the availability of Access-eligible participants to local businesses. Awareness appears to be a key barrier to businesses making use of Employer Recruitment Support and might drive increased uptake of this strand of support.
- 1.21 **Recommendation Two:** The Access programme has been hindered by not having a CRM system. While there is no evidence that this has negatively influenced programme participants, this has negatively affected the management and administration of the Access programme. Providing such resources is important for the smooth-running of the programme and also has knock-on impacts for tracking outcomes and carrying out monitoring and evaluation. Welsh Government should look to develop a CRM for any successor programmes.

- 1.22 **Recommendation Three:** Welsh Government should consider putting a more comprehensive monitoring data collection system in place, particularly with regards to tracking outcomes for participants. This would allow for more effective longitudinal analysis of Access participants and the kind of outcomes they have achieved. It would also permit more granular analysis of which courses and qualifications are effective in producing employment outcomes.
- 1.23 **Recommendation Four:** Welsh Government should consider an approach to support that addresses skills and employability barriers alongside other barriers to employment. Even in situations where there have been employment outcomes for participants, survey and in-depth interview data indicates that there are multiple barriers to employment for individuals. Alongside skills and qualifications, there would be value in investigating approaches to providing employability support that address other barriers such as mental health.
- 1.24 **Recommendation Five:** Careers Wales advisers reported that they framed the intervention as a longer-term journey into employment, and participant outcomes indicate that not all participants move into employment as a consequence of the intervention. There would potentially be value in Welsh Government investigating the impact of continued support for participants once the Vocational Training Support aspect of the programme has been completed. This may help ensure that momentum is not lost for participants as they begin to use the skills and qualifications they have gained to find employment.

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Full Research Report: Marshall and Griffiths (2020) Evaluation of Access Programme 2017-2019, Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report 5/2020

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

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