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Evaluation of Work-Based Learning Programme 2011-15: Traineeships

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting, in association with Old Bell 3, Cardiff University and IFF Research to carry out an evaluation of the Work-based Learning Programme 2011-15 (WBL 2011-15). The evaluation commenced in early November 2013 and continued until November 2015.
- 1.2 The Work-Based Learning (WBL) programme included: Apprenticeships; Traineeships; and, Steps to Employment. The aims of the evaluation were to
 - Assess the effectiveness of the contracting and delivery for WBL 2011-15.
 - Satisfy WEFO's evaluation requirements for projects receiving ESF funding.
 - Carry out specific evaluation of the delivery of Traineeships.
 - Assess the delivery of outputs, outcomes and impacts.
 - Assess the extent to which the programme has secured the participation of individuals according to protected characteristics.
 - Review how Essential Skills Policy has been embedded in the delivery of WBL and how this has contributed to the achievement of WBL 2011-15 objectives.
- 1.3 The methodology involved the following elements: interviews with five Welsh Government officials, external stakeholders and training providers; review of Traineeship management information and programme performance data; document review; telephone survey of 45 employers; telephone survey of 209 past Traineeship participants; case studies with seven employers involved with Traineeships.
- 1.4 The report is for the whole programme with differences for ESF areas, compared to the rest of Wales, highlighted where they are significant.

2. Key findings

- 2.1 Over the course of 2011-2015 there had been around 24,500 leavers from the Traineeship Programme. 19,065 of these young people were funded with 65 per cent (12,450) funded through ESF in the Convergence areas of Wales; exceeding the target of 12,120.
- 2.2 Performance improved in the second and third years, with increased volumes and improved outcomes; reaching 68 per cent positive progression in 2013/14, closer to being classed as 'good', based on Welsh Government criteria.
- 2.3 Overall ESF targets were achieved for total participation, female involvement and numbers progressing into employment. However, targets for qualifications and progression into further learning were not met.

Perspectives of those involved in the programme

- 2.4 All stakeholders and providers generally agreed that young people: were low on confidence at programme entry; had low qualifications and skills; sometimes had negative experiences of learning from school; had the potential to contribute positively; typically just wanted a job with less value placed on learning.
- 2.5 Traineeships were regarded by stakeholders as the right way to deliver support to the client group but with concerns about implementation. Some of the concerns expressed by stakeholders included the size of contracts, lack of flexibility and tailored provision, turnover of provider staff, competence of provider staff, lack of partnership between providers, lack of employer engagement, lack of support for young people with complex needs and lack of involvement by Careers Wales. These issues are explored in more detail in section five of the report.
- 2.6 Most providers perceived a challenging client group, lack of recognition of some types of progression, insufficient resource, lack of national promotion/marketing, completers not ready for Apprenticeships, lower intensity of Careers Wales involvement and disputed the readiness of some young people referred to the Engagement strand.
- 2.7 Former Traineeship participants were generally positive about Traineeships. They valued the support and experience which helped them to find work, gave them confidence and helped them to progress. They were less positive about essential skills/classroom-based learning. This study has not explored in detail the perceptions of young people who drop out or do not start Traineeships.
- 2.8 Employers who have been involved were generally positive about Traineeships. Some employers were remarkably patient and understanding of young people's inexperience, unpredictability and support needs. Where employers had negative experiences they cited a lack of information about the young person's needs, lack of support/preparation (linked to provider role and programme design aspects such as lack of support for transport) and lack of commitment of the young person.
- 2.9 There was a general view amongst stakeholder and providers that the programme and its purpose was not well-understood by parents, young people and employers.
- 2.10 Although the programme appeared to be serving those who participated, there were concerns that a group of young people were often not receiving the support that the

original programme design intended. Such young people often identified as Tier 2 in the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework five tier model¹, required more one-to-one support and additional learning support which providers were not delivering.

3. Issues around programme elements

- 3.1 The Engagement strand worked well for many participants but did not work so well for those with complex support needs. For example, some participants were not ready to move up to 21 hours per week after the first four weeks (when they participate for 12 hours per week); they required a longer period of support at a lower intensity. Others are not ready to engage in centre-based group learning; they require one to one support.
- 3.2 The Level 1 strand generally worked well although some individuals were regarded as needing more support before they were ready to progress to an Apprenticeship.
- 3.3 The Bridge to Employment strand was barely used; a very small number of participants had been involved.

4. Wider programme issues

- 4.1 Wider programme issues identified through this evaluation included:
 - Contract management arrangements were generally regarded to have improved during the programme period.
 - Not all those referred to Traineeships by Careers Wales actually started. This was often the case for individuals with complex support requirements.
 - In many cases Additional Learning Support (ALS) budgets were not used due to perceived risks of not drawing down funds and concerns about the time to make a claim. This was an additional factor limiting the tailoring of provision and support for young people with complex support needs.
 - Delivery of essential skills could be embedded more effectively in some provision.
 - Welsh medium provision was generally being offered and delivered to those participants that needed it.
 - Third sector involvement in the programme delivery and provision of placements could be improved.
 - There was evidence of providers tailoring provision but it was usually done around a core of standard provision for the needs of that type of participant.
 - A good range of vocational options were provided to young people. However, there is no data on how many experience real work placements compared with those that experience simulated work placements environments and how many experience work tasters.

¹ Tier 2 refers to unemployed 16 and 17 year olds, known to Careers Wales, who are not available for Employment, Education or Training

- Overall, providers had good systems in place to support young people during their Traineeship.
- Providers were generally unlikely to involve Careers Wales when they identified a young person is at risk of dropping out of Traineeships.
- Providers were actively involved in planning a progression path for Traineeship participants, supporting them with job search, interview skills and identifying further learning opportunities.

5. Recommendations

5.1 The recommendations for consideration include:

- Providers need to ensure employer engagement is sufficient to identify work tasters and placements required to give participants a good experience of the workplace. In particular, there needs to be a stronger focus on engagement of the third sector/voluntary sector especially as a source for young people with greater need for flexibilities or sheltered work environments.
- The Welsh Government should ensure it understands the balance between placements provided in real workplaces and those in simulated environments. This may be possible using existing data or additional variables may be required within the LLWR dataset.
- Extend the period of support at a lower intensity (12 hours per week) from the first four weeks to the first eight weeks.
- Increase collaboration and sharing of good practice between Traineeship providers, for example, around the embedding of essential skills delivery and managing employers' expectations.
- Clarify the role of Careers Wales and enforce Tier level assessments and referrals that are made.
- Review how the approach to marketing the programme can be improved at a national and local level.
- Review the design of the Engagement element to ensure that it can support all young people in scope and offer genuine individually tailored learning. The Welsh Government should explore further the reasons why providers refuse to accept some participants perceived to be borderline clients.
- Review the Level 1 element of the programme to identify opportunities for improved progression to Apprenticeships. This may require the outcome of an Apprenticeship to be incentivised more significantly in the programme design.
- Review the design of the B2E strand to ensure that it can support young people to progress towards Apprenticeships.
- Explore why the additional learner support aspect of the programme is not utilised and redesign the process to ensure the support is accessed where it is needed.
- The Welsh Government should ensure that data are published and reviewed for all targets set in the ESF Business Plan.

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Full Research Report: An Evaluation of Work Based Learning 2011-2015: Traineeships
Available at: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-work-based-learning/?lang=en>

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

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