

Report summary

Skills for employment

The impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment

Helping people to improve their chances of finding work, especially those who have few or no qualifications or specialist vocational skills, is a vital task for the further education (FE) and skills sector and one which presents considerable challenges. These challenges have intensified during the current economic downturn as unemployment has risen and competition for available job opportunities has increased. In August 2011, the government launched a new initiative which invited providers in the further education and skills sector to prioritise labour market-focused training that will engage more people who are out of work and help them develop skills that will support their progression into employment.

This report assesses the efficiency of systems in matching unemployed adults to training provision and the effectiveness of this provision in developing the employability skills of participants and supporting their progression into sustained employment. It is based on visits between September 2011 and May 2012 to 45 further education and skills providers including colleges, independent learning providers and local authority providers of adult and community learning.

Of the 58 providers initially contacted to arrange survey visits, 24 had been slow to respond to the new policy initiative and funding arrangements to support people on active benefits. In the visits that took place between January and April 2012, the volume of provision had started to increase but was still at an early stage of development in about one quarter of the providers visited.

Two thirds of the providers visited identified that direct marketing to Jobcentre Plus was the key to increasing referrals to their provision for the unemployed. However, the time and resources required to attend jobcentres and work with Jobcentre Plus staff were not always rewarded with a higher number of referrals. The quantity and the appropriateness of the referrals to specific courses that would meet participants' needs often varied considerably between different jobcentres.

Providers generally used labour market information well to identify local need, often in collaboration with Jobcentre Plus. The most common vocational areas selected were retailing, customer service, hospitality, care, construction, stewarding and security. Twenty-one of the providers had made good use of the infrastructure and

capacity they had developed through previous contracts for provision aimed at progressing participants into employment. The characteristics of the particularly effective provision seen included:

- development of close working partnerships with Jobcentre Plus to increase referrals, especially referrals to short vocational courses
- the capacity to respond quickly to requests for short provision from employers and other partners
- effective use of the qualifications credit framework to develop accredited vocational training especially at level 2, often in subject areas new to participants
- the development of short vocational courses, especially when linked to an employer's specific recruitment drive, that developed participants' basic vocational skills to good industry standards
- purposeful work experience that enabled participants to develop their skills in a real work environment and gave them an opportunity to show the employers their skills and potential
- collaborating with employers to design training in jobsearch skills focusing on CV writing, interview skills and using websites to identify relevant job vacancies
- community-based outreach work to increase access to provision for those in greatest need, such as developing links with housing associations, probation trusts and other specialist agencies, creating high street drop-in venues and providing buses to transport participants from rural or other isolated areas.

According to the partial data available from 31 of the providers sampled, the overall job outcome rates for participants who had left programmes between 1 August 2011 and April 2012 were low, at approximately 19%. Progression to employment was higher at 27% on bespoke programmes linked with individual companies looking to recruit staff. Again, based on information from providers.

The use of initial assessment was weak. Only 15 of the 45 providers visited had effective systems for initially assessing and recording participants' prior knowledge, barriers to employment, and employability skills to inform training. Participants' low levels of literacy, numeracy and/or language skills typically prompted referral to mainstream provision based on the need to achieve a qualification. Inspectors only saw two programmes that were particularly effective at developing the work-related literacy, numeracy and language skills that could directly enhance participants' employability.

Inspectors judged that very few of the employability courses which were not directly linked to actual job vacancies were effective in ensuring that participants fully understood their responsibility for increasing their chances of sustained work. Participants on the employability provision visited had too few opportunities for

purposeful work placements or work trials. Providers and participants too often saw the provision primarily in terms of progression to further training such as qualifications at a higher level, as part of a programme of longer-term development. Although this may be appropriate for individuals with significant barriers to employment, not enough participants had clear employment goals or an action plan that provided them with clear direction on the path to employment.

Key findings

- Providers' initial response to the new policy initiative to support people on active benefits was slow in 24 of the 58 providers initially contacted. The development and implementation of a strategy for this area of work had generally improved in the providers visited since January 2012, although this was still at an early stage at about one quarter of them.
- The funding allocation system of 2.5% of a provider's adult skills budget for capacity building resulted in considerable discrepancies in the amount of money available, ranging from less than £17,000 to £450,000 in some cases. The amount of funding allocated was not a reliable indicator of the level of commitment to the initiative in the providers visited.
- Just under half of the 45 providers visited reported difficulties in recruiting participants to specific employability provision, often resulting in cancelled courses or low numbers. The providers that were more successful at recruiting participants either made good use of partnerships and systems already developed for existing provision for the unemployed or they were quick to develop partnerships with Jobcentre Plus or other relevant partners.
- The most successful provision in getting people into jobs involved bespoke programmes set up in collaboration with Jobcentre Plus, local authorities, Work Programme providers or employers. Short vocational training programmes typically led to either a work trial or guaranteed interviews linked to specific vacancies.
- Participants had too few opportunities for purposeful work placements or work trials. Those interviewed typically said that they would like the chance to try out their skills at work and show employers what they could do.
- Progression to employment was not a high enough priority. Too many programmes focused on the achievement of qualifications and the funding did not extend to training which led to job-focused licences. While the employability programmes provided good support in jobsearch skills, they generally failed to tackle participants' often deep-seated barriers to employment.
- The provision visited did not focus well enough on developing participants' literacy, numeracy and language skills for work. Just over half the providers referred participants with low level skills to their existing long-term programmes. Although this provision often provided good teaching and learning towards qualifications, it typically failed to provide intensive training in work-related skills required for specific job roles.

- The English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision visited did not adequately identify participants' practical skills and develop the language skills that would increase their employability quickly and effectively.
- Twenty-six providers used partnerships with local communities and specialist agencies very well to identify the support needs of those furthest from the labour market. However, very few of the providers visited had specific strategies for supporting participants who perceived that their ethnicity may be a barrier to employment, especially those of Black African and Black Caribbean heritage.
- One third of the sessions observed did not provide participants with sufficient clear direction or training to support progression to work. Providers' recording of participants' personal barriers to employment was generally weak. The recording of participants' long-term career goals and related plans for further training was not sufficiently detailed.
- Too many providers did not have effective systems in place to track job outcomes and record if, or how well the jobs had been sustained. Only 31 of the 45 providers visited were able to provide data on job outcomes for programmes that had been completed.
- According to the data received from these providers, overall job outcomes ranged widely, from 1% of 416 leavers at one provider to 46% of 443 leavers at another. The overall proportion of job outcomes, across all 31 providers, for a total of 10,270 participants who had left a specific course was low at 19%.
- As part of the longitudinal component of the survey, inspectors interviewed 75 participants individually between September and December 2011. Of the 55 participants successfully contacted for follow-up interviews between January and March 2012, 10 had gained employment; of the 41 participants who completed the third interview, 15 had either sustained their job or found employment for the first time. This amounts to one fifth of the 75 participants originally contacted.

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