



UK COMMISSION FOR
EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS

UKCES Investments Beneficiary Survey: Feasibility Study

Executive Summary
October 2013

EIF and GIF Beneficiary Survey: Feasibility Study

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Background

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) is responsible for the development and evaluation of two innovative, strategic skills investment funds focussed on developing innovative and sustainable training infrastructure that more effectively meets the skills demands of employers (Employer Investment Fund (EIF) and Growth and Innovation Fund (GIF)). Considerable resources have been allocated over a series of application rounds since 2011: over the first two rounds a total £78.6m in UKCES funding was allocated to 77 investments funded through EIF and 16 funded through GIF.

The funds offer flexibility in scope, coverage and objectives in order to meet business need, making evaluation, and particularly survey design, complex. A beneficiaries employer survey was intended in the original evaluation design, but due to project complexity, UKCES commissioned this feasibility study into the design and conduct of a programme level survey to support an assessment of impact of the funds.

The key focus of the study was to:

- Establish whether a programme level survey is possible, and if so, how issues of accessing contact details and duplication of project level evaluation can be addressed;
- Define the beneficiary groups and topics that would need to be covered in a programme level beneficiaries survey;
- Examine wider survey implementation issues around the timing of survey waves, optimal scale, and mode of delivery;
- Consider how far additionality and deadweight could be measured through a programme level beneficiaries survey.

Feasibility of a programme level beneficiaries survey

A programme level beneficiaries survey is technically feasible although full coverage of investments could not be achieved. Delivery partners collect contact details of the employers and learners they have engaged directly. However, access to these contact details is complicated as data sharing consents have not always been passed on to beneficiaries, and investments are undertaking their own programmes of beneficiaries research that would be duplicated by a programme level survey.

UKCES has sufficient contractual leverage to compel delivery partners to provide details; however, a single data collection process that satisfies both the information needs of the UKCES and delivery partners may be preferable. However, there may be no adequate means of securing access to contact details for learners. Using the Individualised Learner Record may offer an alternative means of establishing a learner sample for those investments involving indirect contact with beneficiaries, but coverage will not be complete.

Beneficiary coverage

There are three beneficiary or stakeholder groups that a survey might need to cover: while the primary group of interest will be employers, both learners and training providers benefit from EIF and GIF in a variety of direct and indirect ways. However, the volumes of training providers involved are small and access issues for learners are substantial. It is suggested the scope of beneficiaries survey is limited to employers.

Content

The main focus of beneficiaries survey would be on establishing the key outcomes of interest: training expenditure and improvements in business performance across a range of metrics. Return on investment would be encapsulated in overall productivity growth and a survey would need to capture other specific measures to capture these types of changes (turnover, profits, wage expenditure, employees).

Timing issues

A range of timing issues need to be considered: infrastructure projects involve continuous accumulation of beneficiaries and have been launched on different dates. Impacts on business outcomes and productivity may only be observed over a period of two years. Survey research taking place in the short term will need to focus on taking baseline measurements for most investments other than those funded through EIF1 and GIF1.

Non Departmental Public Bodies are subject to a Triennial Review process, with the next review of UKCES taking place in early 2014. While evidence is needed to feed into this process, expectations of what this might show in terms of impact and return on investment will need to be carefully managed. A longitudinal design will be needed to demonstrate movements in the outcomes of interest, and follow-up surveys for at least two years are recommended.

Mode

As a high proportion of delivery partners hold named contact details for employers benefitting from investment (including telephone numbers and addresses), a telephone survey would represent the most cost-effective means of delivering the survey. However, it is advised that some flexibility is retained to administer surveys using on-line approaches where project delivery mechanisms prohibit the collection of relevant contact details (e.g. on-line portals).

Measuring additionality

Measuring additionality directly through a beneficiaries survey would imply additional survey content to allow respondents to report the role of their interaction with EIF and GIF infrastructure in bringing about the outcomes of interest. The more questions can be tailored to the activities being delivered by delivery partners, the more they can be used to provide a meaningful assessment of impacts (although there will be difficulties where beneficiaries have benefitted from multiple investments).

Quasi-experimental methods involving a comparison group will be feasible for those investments involving direct interactions with employers. Again, the more closely any methods can be tailored to the specific activities being delivered, the higher the quality of the results. However, some level of aggregation would be needed as only a small number of investments have engaged with sufficiently large numbers of beneficiaries to make such approaches worthwhile.

Given the complexity of the external context in which investments have been delivered, it is also recommended that any quantitative survey is supplemented by a detailed programme of qualitative research in order to maximise the insight offered by an impact evaluation.

Research options

The survey design options range from a single programme level survey (the simplest option) through to separate surveys designed to capture evidence at the level of delivery partner (the most complex and challenging).

There are also supplementary research options based on secondary data that might be used to provide additional evidence. Analysis of the Individualised Learner Record could be used to explore the nature of the training impacts on a broader basis (although this would only cover Government funded provision). Linking records of beneficiaries employers to administrative datasets could also provide a long term view of the impacts of EIF and GIF investments on turnover and productivity (although this would have limited value in the short term).

Preferred option

Given the need for an understanding of impacts and the underlying drivers, an approach that enables both a self-reported assessment of impacts and potentially more risky quasi-experimental approaches (involving a comparison group) would be preferred. Ipsos MORI recommended UKCES moves forward with an option that combines both general and specific approaches to administering the survey:

- **Activity level survey:** A single survey across the population of employers benefitting directly from EIF and GIF investments to generate general insights into the effectiveness and impacts of the Funds. Respondents would be routed through the survey according to the activities they have participated in and answer a core battery of questions to capture key outcomes.
- **Detailed case studies research:** A small number of delivery partners (5 to 10) would be selected for more detailed research. The beneficiaries of these investments would be asked additional questions within the activity level survey tailored to the sector level delivery context and the underlying objectives of the investments concerned to provide a more specific understanding of the role of the programmes in addressing the market failures identified by delivery partners.

The survey would require a **longitudinal dimension** to establish economic impacts and could optionally cover one or two cohorts of beneficiaries. There are a wide range of scale options for delivery of the survey, although Ipsos MORI would recommend working towards larger sample sizes in the baseline year to ensure that large enough samples are available in year 3.

Additionally, a **comparison survey** of non-beneficiaries designed to establish a counterfactual at the level of the activities involved should be considered optional (as there are risks involved in obtaining high quality results). Supplementary secondary analysis of the ILR and administrative datalinking could be usefully incorporated to provide additional insight into the training outcomes of the programme and assess the long-term impacts of the fund.

Issues for UKCES

The feasibility study has identified a range of actions for UKCES to help minimise the risks associated with implementation. Some process enhancements could also be made, and of these, embedding a basic spreadsheet tool to collate contact details alongside existing monitoring requirements would have the greatest impact on the quality of a beneficiaries survey. Aligning the audit process with these processes would also give confidence that the contact details were comprehensive and accurate. The quicker these processes can be enhanced, the larger the potential impact on the effectiveness of a survey in the short term.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills is a social partnership, led by Commissioners from large and small employers, trade unions and the voluntary sector. Our mission is to raise skill levels to help drive enterprise, create more and better jobs and economic growth.

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