



Department
for Work &
Pensions



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Research Summary



Sector-based work academies and work experience trials for older claimants: Combined quantitative and qualitative findings

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Background

Between April 2015 and March 2016, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and the Department for Education (formerly Department for Business, Innovation and Skills), trialled enhanced central funding for work experience and training programmes to test their suitability for benefit claimants aged 45 or older. Jobcentre Plus staff in participating districts could refer claimants to take part in one of the following:

- **Sector based work academy (sbwa)** of up to six weeks duration consisting of three elements: pre-employment training (mandatory for everyone who agreed to participate), a work-experience placement and a guaranteed interview for a job or support to help the participant through the application process. This was offered in two areas: Tyne and Wear and Birmingham and Solihull.
- **Work experience (WE)** programme offering participants a work placement generally lasting between two and eight weeks, for 25-30 hours per week. This was offered in West Yorkshire and the Black Country.

Before the trials were launched, Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches (WCs) could refer claimants of all ages to sbwa and WE. However, take-up

among older claimants was low. These trials were designed to understand if take-up of the provision could be increased with greater engagement from Jobcentre Plus staff.

Key findings

- Claimants who volunteered to take part in sbwa and WE responded well to the opportunity to trial working in job roles and sectors that were new to them.
- Participants appreciated the benefits of establishing a working routine and benefited from doing something to demonstrate their motivation and capabilities to host employers.
- Participants experienced high levels of satisfaction with the programmes and the large majority would recommend sbwa and WE to other people in a similar situation.
- There was evidence that both programmes helped participants to overcome age-related and other barriers to work.
- There is evidence that both programmes are appropriate for older workers. In order to maximise the potential benefits of the interventions, it is important that they are well-organised, structured and offer genuine exposure to sector-relevant training and work experience.

Aims

The aims of the research were to:

- Understand why older claimants and employers take part in the trials.
- Understand how host employers viewed the programmes.
- Assess whether the provision was suitable for older claimants.
- Understand any impacts of the provision for older claimants.
- Prepare the ground for an impact assessment, by providing descriptive analysis of a sample of participants and non-participant claimants.

Methodology

The findings are based on qualitative research with 60 trial participants and 19 host employers. This is combined with a quantitative survey with over 1,000 older claimants – 125 sbwa and 386 WE participants and 600 non-participants with similar characteristics to participants. Research fieldwork took place between March and June 2016, after the trials were completed.

Findings

Reasons why claimants and employers took part in the trials

The main reason participants took part in either trial was because they thought it would help them to get a job (mentioned by 25 per cent of WE participants and 44 per cent of sbwa participants). WE participants tended to be further from the labour market than those undertaking sbwa. WE participants typically had less recent work experience and a higher proportion claimed Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Therefore, obtaining more recent work experience (23 per cent), and doing something to get out of the house (21 per cent) were the next most common reasons for taking part. sbwa participants were motivated more by the prospect of improving their skills (37 per cent) and gaining work experience in sectors that are new to them (13 per cent).

Host employers reported taking part in the programmes to meet recruitment needs; to help people back into work for altruistic reasons; and due to positive previous experience of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus.

Experiences of the WE programme

Two-thirds of WE participants, 66 per cent, reported that they had received clear information from Jobcentre Plus WCs about the WE placement prior to making their decision to participate. The large majority, 78 per cent, reported that the work placement was suitable, but a fifth, 18 per cent, did not think that the provision suited them.

Over half of participants, 54 per cent, reported that their work placements had lasted for at least four weeks, including 23 per cent who reported that the placements were longer. Placements in retail were common, as well as care and hospitality.

Seventy-nine per cent of WE participants reported that they had successfully completed their placement, 21 per cent said they left early. The most frequent reason for leaving early was due to an illness (cited by 34 per cent).

Over half of participants, 53 per cent, reported that they had the chance to learn new skills on their placement. Around three-quarters regarded the amount of support they received from their host employer (76 per cent) and Jobcentre Plus WCs (71 per cent) as 'about right'. Four-in-five participants agreed that they were treated like a valuable member of staff (79 per cent) and were satisfied with the quality of the placement overall (80 per cent). Most participants (68 per cent) reported that they had gained benefits from the placement, including increased confidence and self-belief (19 per cent), that it was a good experience overall (18 per cent), and that the experience had increased or helped them to retain their existing skills (18 per cent). One WE participant explained:

'It got me out of the house dressed in shirt and a tie, onto the bus and into work every day – got me into the discipline of getting up in the morning.'

(WE participant)

Among the minority who reported no benefits, 25 per cent, this was because their expectations had not been met or the placement was not well-structured or tailored to their needs. Overall, 79 per cent of WE participants felt positive about taking part in the programme, and 82 per cent would recommend it to someone else in their situation. Satisfaction levels are comparable to previous DWP WE research with 18 to 24-year-old claimants.¹ This high degree of satisfaction, across age groups, indicates that the WE programme is appropriate for both younger and older claimants.

Experiences of the sbwa programme

All sbwa participants reported that they had received the training element of sbwa. Only 16 per cent reported a follow-up work experience placement and 42 per cent said that they had a guaranteed job interview. Overall, 13 per cent of sbwa participants had experienced all three elements – lower than reported in the 18 to 24 research (40 per cent). Evidence from qualitative research with claimants indicates that these figures, based on self-reported reflection, may underestimate actual proportions who experienced placements. In some cases work placements were blended into workplace training. Some older participants interviewed were unable to distinguish between the two. Research indicates that some older participants were offered the training element only. Others expected a work placement when agreeing to take part and were disappointed when all three elements of the sbwa did not happen.

Two-thirds of sbwa participants, 68 per cent, reported speaking with their Jobcentre Plus WC about what the programme would involve, before they decided to take part. Almost three-in-ten (29 per cent) said that they did not. Most, but not all participants, believed that they had full information about the programme. The vast majority, 81 per cent of participants, said that the training offered to them was suitable.

Eighty-eight per cent of sbwa participants reported successfully completing the training. Forty-six per cent experienced courses lasting three weeks or longer, meaning a significant minority, 41 per cent, undertook training that was for one or two weeks. Two-thirds of sbwa participants trained with a private provider; a smaller proportion received training in the workplace or at a further education (FE) college (13 per cent each). Participants were enrolled on a variety of sector-based training courses; the most common were in customer service roles (23 per cent) followed by care work (20 per cent).

Seventy per cent of sbwa participants reported that the experience had enabled them to develop new skills. Two-thirds, reported gaining a formal qualification at the end of their course, such as Level 1 or Level 2 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Most sbwa participants, 78 per cent, experienced a number of wider benefits from the training, in particular increased or refreshed skills (24 per cent) and greater confidence (19 per cent). A minority, 17 per cent, said the programme delivered no benefits for them.

Satisfaction levels with the quality of the sbwa training were high at 90 per cent. Seventy-nine per cent were positive about taking part in the sbwa – a similar satisfaction level to participants in the earlier survey of 18 to 24 year olds. The vast majority, 90 per cent of older participants, would recommend the sbwa to someone else in their situation. Illustrated here:

'I would do the course again and encourage others to do it. It's the best thing the Jobcentre ever did for me.'

(sbwa participant)

Movements into employment and soft outcomes

The following analysis is based on qualitative and survey research data. It is descriptive and should not be used to infer employment impacts related to either trial. DWP will conduct a separate impact assessment exercise to measure the net benefits of both programmes in 2017.

¹ This report includes comparisons with survey results from research with 18 to 24-year-old participants in WE and sbwa: Customers' Experiences of the Youth Contract, DWP Research Report No.865, 2014.

Forty per cent of sbwa participants reported being in paid work following the trial. Seventeen per cent of WE participants interviewed reported being in paid work reflecting greater distance from the labour market. Self-reported employment outcomes for older participants were lower compared to the earlier survey of 18 to 24-year-olds (45 per cent of young sbwa participants and 36 per cent of WE participants were in-work).

Both sbwa and WE participants were positive about the soft skills that they had developed through their placement or training. Around three-quarters of each group felt that their personal confidence had increased, and that they were now better able to demonstrate their skills and experience to potential employers.

Two-thirds of sbwa participants, 65 per cent, reported that they were more motivated to find work, including looking for work in a new sector they had not previously considered. A similar proportion, 68 per cent, had applied for a job in a sector new to them. Both sbwa (66 per cent) and WE participants (62 per cent) were confident that their placement or training had improved their chances of getting a paid job.

Conclusion

This research provides evidence that both programmes can help participants overcome age-related and other barriers to work, become more job-ready, improve confidence and wellbeing and support claimants to move closer to the labour market or into work. Claimants who remained unemployed following the trials continued to see age as a barrier to employment. However, this finding was not substantiated by the research with host employers.

In order for the provision to be most effective it is important that referrals are appropriate and that well-structured, relevant provision is delivered. Earlier research with 18 to 24-year-old claimants highlighted that sbwa is most effective when claimants experience all three component elements.

These refinements aside, this research provides evidence that both programmes are suitable for older workers. The majority of participants interviewed reported that they had benefited from the provision. Satisfaction levels were high and participants would recommend taking part to other people in a similar situation.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 911003 62 5. Research Report 938. February 2017).

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