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Extended and more flexible traineeships: A process evaluation

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Executive summary

Introduction

Traineeships have been integral to tackling youth unemployment since 2013. The programme, which combines training with a substantial sector-specific work placement, aims to support young people aged 16-24 (or aged 25 and with an Education and Health Care Plan) to move into work or an apprenticeship. The number of traineeships increased in the academic year 2020/21. There were 17,400 traineeship starts recorded in 2020/21 – an increase of 43.5% from 2019/20 (UK Government, 2021). In response to the labour market shock caused by the pandemic, in July 2020 the government launched *Plan for Jobs*, which incorporated new flexibilities for traineeships. The flexibilities aimed to broaden the reach of the programme to more young people and employers, and to enable providers to adapt to the labour market challenges. The flexibilities consisted of an extended programme length, extending eligibility to include young people with prior qualifications at Level 3, an employer incentive, a lower minimum duration for work placements, and inclusion of digital skills in the curriculum.

This evaluation aims to understand how these changes were received and implemented, the successes, challenges and lessons learnt, and any effect on trainees' short- and medium-term outcomes. Qualitative interviews with 30 training providers, and interviews with 30 employers, were undertaken between June and August 2021. 30 trainees were involved in the research. Fourteen trainees had recently completed their traineeship and took part in a one-off in-depth interview, and 16 current trainees took part in two 30-minute interviews and kept an online diary for a week.¹

Engagement

The training providers interviewed for the research saw traineeships as a means of bridging the gaps between school, further education, and employment. They were seen as a useful option for young people who required support in developing their core skills to prepare them for entry into employment or an apprenticeship.

The pandemic created challenges in implementing pre-pandemic approaches of building awareness among young people in school settings due to periods of national lockdown and partial closure of educational settings.

Even where providers had large established networks of contacts with employers and had delivered traineeships over several years, interviewees reported **difficulties sourcing placements**. Due to the disruption to business activity caused by the

¹ Full methodological details are provided in the Annex.

pandemic, fewer opportunities were available due to periods of closure for non-essential customer-facing businesses or companies having limited capacity with staff on furlough. Even in sectors where placements were in high demand, more stringent workplace health and safety measures could also place limits on numbers. Providers also felt the **Kickstart** initiative had received a higher national profile in 2020/21 than traineeships, and the greater financial incentives available for these placements meant it could be seen as a more attractive prospect by employers and learners.

Where employers taking part in interviews had previously offered traineeship placements, their primary motivation for supporting the programme was to help **meet their workforce training needs**. These employers therefore made clear that they would have offered opportunities anyway regardless of the incentive payment. However, several employers new to traineeships put a greater emphasis on the incentive as an enabler to providing placements, and stated that the **incentive** allowed them to purchase necessary equipment for trainees (eg laptops), or to pay trainees a wage or reimburse their travel and lunch expenses. Providers agreed that the incentive had been effective in encouraging more Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to offer placements since the flexibilities had been introduced, although some questioned the extent to which it was used to support trainees.

Trainees heard about the programme through a variety of routes including education and training providers, statutory support services such as Local Authority Teams and Jobcentre Plus, as well as national and local charities. Trainees saw the programme as providing a **path to meaningful employment**. The pandemic made traineeships more attractive to some young people as they found it harder to secure an apprenticeship or to find employment. However, some providers noted they had seen a reduced demand for traineeships among young people. This was attributed to fears of exposure to Covid-19 among young people and their parents/carers by undertaking workplace training.

Views on the flexibilities

The extension to maximum duration (from 6 to 12 months): Providers, employers, and trainees were of the view that traineeships should be short and focused on progression into employment as soon as possible. The flexibility to extend the maximum duration was welcomed during the pandemic but was considered to be less appropriate in the longer term. This flexibility was typically used to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the availability of work experience placements and employment opportunities for trainees, enabling providers to keep trainees engaged in learning until they could secure a suitable opportunity. There was limited awareness among employers of the extension to the maximum duration of traineeships.

Broadening eligibility criteria to include prior Level 3 qualification: The expansion of the eligibility criteria to include those with Level 3 qualifications enabled providers to reach **new cohorts of young people** who could benefit from a traineeship. A higher-level qualification did not always equate to work-readiness. The lockdown restrictions had left many young people feeling isolated and requiring additional support to develop their confidence and communication skills, regardless of level of qualifications. This flexibility was reported to benefit young people who had trained in sectors that no longer offered employment opportunities or who had tried other education routes which had not proved successful. Most employers were unaware of this change, and felt factors such as attitude, work ethic and interest in the role were more important than level of qualifications.

Lower minimum hours duration (from 100 to 70) for work placements and option to complete with multiple employers: Providers tended to be positive about the change to the minimum hours, reporting that it helped improve engagement of both employers and young people at a difficult time. Providers observed that employers had struggled to offer placements during the pandemic and that flexibility was welcomed, as it was a shorter commitment and lower burden on existing staff. They also believed that this shorter commitment was more inviting to young people, especially because the placement was unpaid. Some providers chose not to make use of this flexibility, explaining that their employers wanted a longer time commitment so that the young person could contribute more to the business. Some providers believed that while this flexibility was appropriate during the pandemic, a longer placement was ultimately of more value to a young person. Although providers reported that employers welcomed the shorter placement length, many of the employers interviewed offered placements that were longer, commenting that in their view a 70-hour placement was too short for a young person to gain suitable experience and skills. This was particularly the case in office-based roles. Other employers considered that 70 hours was sufficient time for their needs, particularly those that offered virtual work placements, or that felt they had only limited tasks suitable for a trainee to undertake, such as in the hair and beauty sector. The ability to offer multiple placements was seen by providers and employers as positive for trainees, although very few of the trainees interviewed had experienced or were planning multiple placements.

Inclusion of digital skills in the curriculum: There was variation in providers' understanding and practice of delivering the digital skills element of traineeships. Some did not offer a specific digital skills element, explaining that these skills were embedded in the course because it was delivered online or through blended learning. Other providers assessed young people's digital skills at the outset and offered distinct training programmes or personalised support. However, some providers concluded that the digital skills of their cohort were sufficiently advanced, and that they did not need to provide further training. Reflecting this variation, some trainees reported that they had not

learned any digital skills as part of their traineeship, sometimes because their initial skills assessment scored highly in this regard. Others described learning to use the Microsoft Office suite of software. Trainees generally believed that digital skills would be helpful to them, but several commented that this was largely something they already had and that they would have preferred not to take this part of the course. One group of employers, particularly those in industries such as hair and beauty, and agriculture, commented that digital skills were not relevant to their business, and they had little interest in trainees covering this content.

Increased focus on occupational standards and links to apprenticeships to support progression, and increased capacity: This change did not make much of a difference to providers, since many had set up their traineeships to be closely linked to apprenticeships. For example, the qualifications providers offered were designed to give young people a 'head start' by completing some of the units and skills needed for an apprenticeship.

The employer incentive: The employer incentive enabled providers to engage and recruit employers that they had not worked with previously, broadening the range and type of work experience placements they could offer trainees. Overall, employers were negative about their experience of claiming the incentive after encountering administrative challenges in trying to claim as well as delays in receiving their payments. Only a few employers interviewed did not encounter any issues and found the process relatively simple and straightforward. Some training providers stated that because of these poor experiences, a few employers had been discouraged from offering placements again in future. These were primarily smaller organisations encouraged to deliver traineeships this year because of the incentive.

Outcomes and future plans

Traineeships are a pathway with well-established outcomes for **young people**. In the context of the pandemic, trainees, employers and providers felt that traineeships continued to provide core skills and enhance work readiness, improved **job search skills, insight into a work environment, clarity on both future options and qualifications**. These benefits provided a pathway to apprenticeships and other employment and education outcomes.

The employers interviewed generally expressed **high levels of satisfaction with traineeships** and identified several benefits from offering these opportunities. The primary benefit identified for the organisation (and trainee) was providing a possible **progression pathway to an apprenticeship**. For employers newer to traineeships, other benefits were identified including trainees playing a **positive role in supporting their business operations** as well as providing an insight into offering training and work

opportunities for young people. Based on these experiences, several employers stated that they were intending to continue offering traineeships in future, particularly where they were part of established entry routes and training pathways within the organisation.

Most providers shifted to a **blended learning model** during the pandemic, which involved a combination of in-person and online sessions. This was found to have worked well and helped remove barriers to participation, such as travel costs or access to public transport (particularly in rural areas), which in the past had a negative impact on attendance and completion rates. The best balance of blended learning was something training providers were considering for future delivery.

Trainees generally felt optimistic and prepared for their future, and planned to use their new skills, qualifications, and experience to find opportunities for work or further education. Many planned to work in the same sector as their traineeship, and some planned to try to secure an apprenticeship with their work placement employer. There were examples of this being achieved among trainees interviewed who had recently completed a traineeship. Trainees who were still on their programme reported applying for jobs and apprenticeships, and generally felt confident about their chances of securing a positive outcome given their recent and relevant experience on a traineeship.

Conclusions

The **flexibilities were well-received** by providers. Each flexibility was helpful in specific circumstances and provided a means for providers to adapt to meet individual needs. Together the flexibilities helped to maintain and broaden the training and recruitment opportunities available to young people and employers during the pandemic.

The work placement was reported to be a particularly important way to develop skills and to realise the potential positive benefits of the traineeship. If the flexibility regarding placement lengths continues to be set at a minimum of 70 hours, then given the mixed opinions about its benefit, it will be important to monitor use of this flexibility, and any differential impact it might have on **trainee outcomes** (eg progression to apprenticeships or employment) in the longer term. The quality of the experience rather than the length influences trainees' experience and outcomes: 70 hours of a high-quality placement which supports the development of the young person and offers variety is more likely to have positive benefits than a longer placement lacking these elements.

Referrals from Jobcentre Plus were reported to vary between areas, and by both providers and colleges, with some providers reporting lots of referrals, and others concerned that work coaches referred to **Kickstart** ahead of traineeships. Local differences such as geography and having established relationships influenced referral numbers. Providers also reported that it was difficult to maintain working relationships

with Jobcentre Plus during the last year due to high numbers of claims and restrictions about physical access to buildings. Providers suggested that a 'traineeships champion' in each Jobcentre Plus office would provide a point of communication and partnership with providers. Stakeholders felt that at a national level the skills and employment response articulated in *Plan for Jobs* could have been more clearly communicated across departments, and better co-ordinated, with greater clarity from a national level about how the programmes might align (eg how they differed as progression routes). The planned end of Kickstart recruitment, in March 2022, presents an opportunity for traineeships. There is also scope to co-ordinate with the Department for Work and Pensions to explore how referral routes to traineeships might establish and embed systematically from the Youth Hubs being created.

The **employer incentive** seems to have been effective in bringing new employers (SMEs) forward to offer placements, and in enhancing the quality of placements provided. However, after the experience of claiming and delays to receiving the incentive, some employers were reluctant to offer traineeships in future. The processes and information required for employers to receive payment should be reviewed to ensure it is as smooth and seamless as possible from the perspective of employers.

Consideration could be given to how to **encourage increased uptake of traineeships among large employers**. Some providers felt that large organisations do not necessarily see the benefit of the programme and the financial incentive was not a motivating factor for these employers. Other employer motivations were to support corporate social responsibility agendas or seeking to diversify the workforce which could be used in marketing to (large) employers.

Employers did not tend to be aware of the range of flexibilities that were applied to the programme (beyond the incentive). Some commented that they therefore would have valued greater **information on the flexibilities** so they could consider whether they would like to use them. There could be greater communication of the flexibilities to employers by providers. Inviting employers to determine the length and content of their work placement more explicitly may help to bring forward work placements, particularly in specific sectors where shorter placements were deemed to be sufficient.

Extending eligibility to young people with a **prior Level 3** qualification enabled providers to engage young people who they felt could benefit from a traineeship but who were not work-ready. If there is capacity, there could be a case for eligibility to continue to include young people qualified at Level 3 but not ready for an apprenticeship, supporting them to make the transition via a traineeship.

Providing clarification about what **digital skills** mean in the context of traineeships might help to unify the different perspectives found among providers, trainees, and employers who each had different expectations about the relevance of digital skills. Distinguishing

between essential digital skills (eg applying online for job vacancies, handling data securely, including personal and financial information), and occupationally specific digital skills (eg cyber security, coding) could be considered.

The flexibilities enabled providers to tailor programmes to engage and to support a range of learners from a diverse range of backgrounds. If **remote work placements** continue, then this could offer the opportunity for trainees in areas of the country where there are fewer work placement opportunities to undertake placements with employers in other areas, potentially supporting the government priority of 'levelling up'. Providers were optimistic about the future of traineeships and the potential of the programme to support the economic recovery by addressing skills shortages in key and growth sectors.

There were several findings that could inform the traineeships quality strategy currently in development. For example, employers wanted and expected more communication and support from training providers during the work placement, and this could be considered. The variety and developmental nature of tasks during a work placement are central rather than the length. In cases where the planned progression route does not materialise at the end of the placement, there could be greater consideration of when and how best to start supporting the trainee to consider other options or begin job searching, and how to involve the work placement employer in this process.

Introduction

This chapter details the flexibilities to traineeships put in place to respond to the pandemic and gives an overview of the numbers of young people participating in the programme, before setting out the evaluation aims and an overview of the methodology.

Background

Restrictions imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the employment and education of young people in the academic year 2020/21. Learning providers faced multiple closures of learning environments and moves to and from remote learning, alongside significant disruption to assessments and examinations. Providers and employers had to respond at speed to changing guidance, setting in place new health, safety, and social distancing measures, alongside managing frequently changing national and regional levels of restriction and lockdown.

The pandemic adversely affected youth employment, which fell dramatically at the start of the pandemic. In the twelve months following the onset of the pandemic, people aged 16-24 accounted for 54 per cent of all job losses (ONS, 2021). Young people aged 16-17 were also hard hit, experiencing their lowest ever employment rate, with fewer than one in six working (Wilson and Papoutsaki, 2021). Young people have been significantly overrepresented in jobs that have been most disrupted by the pandemic, mostly notably those within the hospitality and service industries. Accordingly, this created a volatile employment environment for young people, with the youth unemployment rate rising and falling with each lockdown and reopening (Wilson, 2021). Facing instability in the labour market, many young people stayed in education and in July 2021 16-24 year olds' participation in education stood at its highest ever rate of 47 per cent (Labour Force Survey, 2021). As of September 2021, the youth unemployment rate returned to pre-pandemic levels; however, 192,000 more young people were economically inactive than prior to the pandemic, an increase of eight per cent, largely reflecting the shift from employment to education (House of Commons Library, 2021).

The number of people beginning apprenticeships also fell because of the pandemic, with 23,400 fewer people participating in an apprenticeship in 2019/20 than in 2018/19. Though the number of apprenticeship starts fell overall, those under 19 were particularly affected. School leavers experienced the largest drop in apprenticeship starts during this period, with 26 per cent fewer starts for those aged 17 in 2019/20 than in the previous year. In January 2021, overall apprenticeship starts were down 18 per cent on the preceding year (House of Commons Library, 2021b).

In response to the labour market effects of the pandemic, in July 2020, the government announced [Plan for Jobs](#), containing a broad range of measures designed to help people

retain work, get into work, and create new jobs. Plan for Jobs allocated an additional £111 million to expand traineeships in England (HM Treasury, 2020). Traineeships have been integral to the Government's approach to tackling youth unemployment and creating a pathway to apprenticeships since 2013. The programme, which combines training with a substantial sector-specific work placement, aims to support young people aged 16-24 (or 25 for those with an Education, Health and Care plan or Learning Difficulty Assessment) to move into work or an apprenticeship, with funding supplied by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the Adult Education Budget (AEB). Prior to the pandemic, traineeships supported young people qualified to Level 2 or below who wanted to move into employment but who were not yet ready for an apprenticeship. They provided up to six months' support covering numeracy and literacy, employability skills alongside flexible vocational learning, and a work placement of up to 270 hours.

Despite progression data showing that 66 per cent of trainees were in employment or further learning within six months (UK Government, 2020), uptake of traineeships had been declining prior to the pandemic, falling from a peak of 24,100 starts in 2015/16 to 14,900 in 2018/19 (UK Government, 2021). Young people from diverse groups were well represented within the traineeship programme - in 2019/20, 32 per cent of new trainees were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and 23 per cent declared a disability (UK Government, 2021).

Also part of the *Plan for Jobs*, the Kickstart Scheme was a £2 billion fund to create hundreds of thousands of six-month work placements for people aged 16-24 on Universal Credit and at risk of unemployment. The scheme entitles young people to national minimum wage for the duration of their placement, costs for which are covered by the government rather than the employer who also receives a £1,500 incentive for hosting a placement. Young people aged 18-24 can also receive various forms of support via the Youth Offer.

Changes to the traineeships

The *Plan for Jobs* indicated new flexibilities for traineeships, intended to remain in place until at least the end of July 2022. The flexibilities were aimed at encouraging employers to continue to offer high-quality opportunities and investment in young workers, to build a talent pipeline across participating businesses as the economy recovers, and to support positive destinations and participation for young people. Flexibilities in response to the pandemic included an extended length from up to six months to one year, and young people with prior qualifications at Level 3 were eligible for the programme. Additionally, employers were offered an incentive of £1,000 per work placement (capped at a maximum of 10 per English Government region). Other flexibilities included a lower minimum duration of work placements (reduced from 100 to 70 hours), and inclusion of

digital skills in the curriculum. The flexibilities introduced in September 2020 are outlined below.

Traineeship flexibilities introduced in September 2020

- An extended maximum duration (up to 12 months).
- Eligibility of young people with a Level 3 qualification.
- An employer incentive of £1,000 per trainee (capped at ten per employer).
- A lower minimum hours' duration (70) for work placements and option to complete with multiple employers.
- Inclusion of digital skills in the curriculum.
- An increased focus on occupational standards and links to apprenticeships to support progression, and increased capacity.

The number of training providers offering traineeships increased during the academic year 2020/21, with new providers for young people aged 16-18 and those aged 19-24 procured by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. There were 17,400 traineeship starts recorded in 2020/21 – an increase of 43.5% from 2019/20 (when there were 12,100 starts). The number of traineeship starts in 2019/20 was a fall of 18.3% from 2018/19 (UK Government, 2021).

Research aims

This process evaluation is focused on the implementation of the traineeship flexibilities. The three overarching research questions are:

- How have the changes to the traineeships programme been received and implemented?
- What are the successes, challenges and lessons learnt from participating in and/or delivering the expanded, more flexible programme?
- What can we learn so far about the short- and medium-term outcomes for trainees since 1 September 2020?

Overview of methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen to gather in-depth reflections on individual experiences from a range of stakeholders. A total of 90 interviews were carried out with providers, employers, and trainees.

- **Thirty in-depth interviews with traineeships providers** were undertaken, each lasting one hour. A sample was selected from contact details of traineeship providers held by the Department for Education (DfE), to ensure representation from different types of providers and regions. Further details on the nature of the sample are provided in the methodological Annex of this report.
- **Thirty interviews were conducted with employers**, each lasting 30 minutes. Leads were sourced from the DfE-held data noting employers that had applied for the incentive. The sample for these interviews was selected to reflect a broad range of characteristics including employer size, geographical location, sector, and prior experience of hosting a trainee. Additional interviews with employers were sourced via a snowball approach with providers interviewed. This mixed approach to sampling enabled consideration of how the experiences of providers and employers influenced one another. Further details on the employer sample are provided in the methodological Annex of this report.
- **Thirty trainees were engaged with the research**: fourteen via a single in-depth interview and sixteen via the three-stage research process. Following a consent process, contact details for trainees were provided by training providers. Trainees who had already completed their traineeships took part a single in-depth interview of 45 minutes to one hour. Trainees undertaking their traineeship during the research period took part in a three-stage research process in which two 30-minute interviews were conducted, with a one-week diary-style engagement via mobile phone app AppLife in between. Trainees were asked to record their daily experiences in a format of their choice – text, photos, pictures, or video diaries – alongside specific questions aligned to the research questions, throughout the week. This method enabled insight to be gained into trainee destinations and outcomes, alongside current programme experience. An incentive was provided to trainees to encourage and thank them for their participation. Further details on the sample are provided in the methodological Annex of this report.

All interviews were completed between June and August 2021 and were completed via telephone or video call. All interviews were conducted used a semi-structured question guide. Trainees who were completing a traineeship during the research period also engaged with AppLife, a mobile phone app designed to capture real-time diary-style data. Data was written into an analysis framework to enable comparative evaluation.

Training providers that supported the research were invited to take part in an online workshop at the end of the analysis period. The purpose of the session was to convene providers and representative bodies (eg Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP)), together with representatives from the Department for Education (DfE), the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), and the research team, to discuss the research and consider the conclusions and implications for future policy and delivery. Thirty participants attended the session which lasted an hour and a half.

Though care has been taken to gather views from a variety of stakeholders, as a small-scale qualitative study, the data reported is illustrative of issues relevant to the research questions but does not make claims of causality. Sampling trainees via providers may mean that the evaluation has engaged young people most likely to have had a positive experience of traineeships.

Engagement

This chapter explores engagement with traineeships, from the perspectives of providers, employers, and trainees. It covers their various motivations for offering placements or undertaking the programme, before detailing the challenges providers experienced in managing capacity during the academic year 2020/21 because of the restrictions in place to manage the pandemic and economic uncertainty.

Provider engagement

Providers were positive about the contribution of traineeships to young people and employers. Among providers that had offered traineeships prior to the 2020/21 academic year, they were seen as a coherent and core component of their existing provision, helping to bridge the gaps between school, further education, and employment. Providers viewed traineeships as a useful option for young people who wanted a short programme of work-based training, and who wanted to undertake a pathway onto an apprenticeship.

Providers offering traineeships for the first time were largely drawn to the programme as a means of strengthening their provision for young people who had been negatively affected by the pandemic. It was felt that traineeships, particularly considering the additional flexibilities, were well-suited to learners who would find it difficult to enter employment or an apprenticeship directly. The flexible nature of a traineeship was seen as being of particular use when supporting learners with higher level needs and those who had become disengaged from education.

Employer engagement

Provider engagement with employers

Training providers were asked to give feedback about how employers had engaged with traineeships from September 2020. Providers generally spoke of finding employer engagement more difficult compared to previous years due to the disruption to business activity caused by the pandemic. This was even the case for training providers with large, established networks of employer contacts.

Employers were limited in their ability to provide placements primarily because of business closures and employers furloughing staff over the course of the year, as well as businesses having more limited capacity to support trainees. Some providers noted sectoral differences. For example, placements in retail and hospitality (aside from large supermarket chains) were challenging to source during periods of closure. In contrast, sectors such as childcare and social care were in high demand for trainees, although

providers noted that the stringent health and safety measures operating in these settings during the pandemic could still restrict the number of placements available.

In terms of employer size, several providers noted that many organisations they had engaged this year were SMEs. In some areas this reflected the composition of the local labour market. In others, providers commented that large organisations do not necessarily see the benefit of the programme: for example, as an 'extended interview' for an apprenticeship placement, given that it is less of a commercial risk for these companies if apprentices disengage from their programme. Similarly, providers highlighted that the financial incentive to take on trainees is not large enough to encourage bigger companies to provide placements and compensate them for any costs incurred.

Employer reasons and motivations for engaging with traineeships

Employers reported several motivations for engaging with traineeships and offering work placements. Their rationale was often influenced by whether they had experience of hosting trainees before the pandemic. One group of employers with prior experience of offering training and work experience opportunities in their organisation, including hosting apprentices, felt these apprenticeships were supported by traineeships, which were viewed as a natural progression route for younger age groups or those lacking prior work experience. Having a strong ethos around providing training and development opportunities for young people and looking for a range of provision to support these aims was also a motivator for engaging with traineeships for employers. As well as apprenticeship and traineeship placement opportunities, this included providing work experience opportunities to school age children and supporting placements via the Kickstart programme.

Employers were asked why they were motivated to provide traineeships from September 2020 and the relative influence of the incentive payment. Given their organisational background, several stated that their primary motivation was to support their business and workforce training needs. As above, commonly traineeships were viewed as a potential stepping stone to an apprenticeship. Many employers highlighted that they use the programme to support young people to become familiar with the demands of a work environment and develop confidence in this setting. It also enables trainees to see if a particular working environment is the right one for them, which reduces the risk of attrition if they do decide to progress to an apprenticeship placement. Other reasons provided for giving a work placement included employers identifying a job opportunity within their business and seeing a traineeship as a means of training a young person to their bespoke requirements to undertake this role.

The training providers interviewed highlighted that the employers they work with also had altruistic motivations for supporting traineeships over the past year. Several saw it as a

way of supporting young people during the pandemic and giving something back to the local community by offering an insight into the world of work and providing work experience during a period of high youth unemployment. A few very small employers in the sample echoed these views, and occasionally had a specific individual in mind that they wanted to support. This included young people who had previously completed voluntary work with them or a family member.

Influence of incentive

Based on the feedback outlined above, several employers in the sample were clear that they would have still engaged with traineeships regardless of the incentive payment. However, these employers were keen to state that the incentive was still appreciated and was helpful to the business during a disruptive year where some organisations had lost income. A few also noted that the incentive partly helped to cover their costs in terms of staff time spent supervising and supporting trainees. These views were expressed across the sample and did not differ notably by organisation size; all the employers that expressed these views had a long-running and established training offer for young people within their business.

Other employers interviewed put a greater emphasis on the relative influence of the incentive payment in supporting their engagement in traineeships and the nature of the opportunities they were able to offer. In general, these tended to be organisations that were delivering traineeships for the first time from September 2020. There were instances where employers acknowledged that the incentive made a difference to them being able to offer traineeship opportunities. For example, one organisation stated that the incentive enabled them to afford laptops for the trainees, which was a prerequisite for the work placement to take place.

Another smaller employer highlighted that the incentive enabled them to pay their trainees a wage. They were not comfortable providing an unpaid work placement, so were clear that they would not have gone ahead with the traineeship without this support. Others used the incentive to pay trainees' expenses to ensure that they were not out of pocket because of the placement in terms of bus fares and lunch expenses.

Other employers reported using the incentive payment to pay for trainees to undertake training modules related to their business, which they reported that they could not have afforded in its absence. Again, employers were more comfortable providing placements in these conditions, with the incentive, as they knew they could provide trainees with a better quality work placement as a result.

Feedback from providers largely supported these views. Several providers interviewed stated that the incentive had been effective in encouraging more SMEs to offer placement opportunities. A few providers specified that these companies felt they could

offer a better experience with these additional funds, for example, by ensuring they could purchase relevant equipment for trainees or reimburse their expenses. However, in the workshop session, providers felt on balance employers did not use the incentive payment to enhance the trainee experience and instead used it to cover the staff costs of supervision.

Despite the benefits of the incentive payment, smaller employers still spoke of being restricted in terms of the number of traineeship placements they could provide. Specifically, they noted finances, and capacity within the organisation, as well as social distancing restrictions in the workplace limiting the number of trainees that they could take on at any one time.

Trainee engagement

Training providers and trainees indicated there was a lack of publicity and awareness about traineeships (among young people, organisations and in schools), especially compared to other routes and qualifications, such as apprenticeships. As a result, providers engage in marketing to attract trainees, distributing literature and participating in events at schools, via Jobcentre Plus, and via community-based organisations. The pandemic made some of these marketing strategies more difficult and affected established referral routes. Providers adapted and held information events online, but found these to be less fruitful, especially in accessing hard to reach groups such as digitally excluded young people. Some trainees saw information about traineeships on social media platforms such as Facebook, and providers also mentioned targeting candidates' families through adverts on social media, alongside local newspapers, and local radio.

Trainees were referred by a range of people and organisations and they reported hearing about traineeships from mentors, careers advisers and work coaches. Local Authorities were identified by providers as key sources of diverse and harder to reach young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET), with referrals coming from young offenders' teams, care/housing teams, substance misuse teams and teams dealing with Education Health Care Plans (EHCP). Trainees were also referred through charities, careers services and local education providers. For example, one trainee living in care was supported to sign up for a traineeship by the Prince's Trust after the Trust's representatives visited their supported living centre. Another national charity referring young people was MIND. However, referral organisations were also local, and there were examples of referrals by local youth groups and other community-based organisations, as well as employment support organisations and housing centres. Providers reported developing relationships with potential referring organisations in their local area.

Jobcentre Plus was a source of referrals for providers, especially where they had built strong relationships with staff at local offices. The extent of referrals was variable, however. Other providers reported that referrals from Jobcentre Plus had been low due to the increased claimant caseload during the pandemic, and other providers felt there had been a tendency for young people in contact with Jobcentre Plus to be referred to Department for Work and Pensions provision, such as Kickstart. Providers attending the workshop supported improving engagement between training providers and the Department for Work and Pensions. They suggested a nominated 'traineeships champion' in local Jobcentre Plus offices could provide a point of communication and partnership between local Jobcentre Plus offices and traineeship providers.

Referrals to traineeships also came from teams within the training provider, typically from young people who had applied for apprenticeships but who were not felt to be ready. Providers also mentioned employers referring young people they wanted to hire but who needed to obtain a certain qualification first.

Trainees saw traineeships as a path to meaningful employment. They were interested in learning work-relevant skills and gaining work experience, alongside qualifications where necessary. Some trainees said they had a clear idea before embarking on a traineeship of the career or job role they wanted but needed more experience, qualifications and/or guidance. For example, a trainee on a business administration traineeship wanted to work in this field and was attracted by the opportunity to gain work experience. Other trainees felt they needed to use their time to do something productive and were told by their college or a family member that a traineeship would look good on their CV. For example, a trainee studying customer service hoped that the qualification and experience they gained would have universal application and be useful for whichever path they chose. For trainees with specific needs, the adaptability of the traineeship to meet an individual's needs was attractive.

The pandemic made traineeships more attractive to some young people, as it became harder to get an apprenticeship or to find employment; the pandemic had shifted the options available to them. While some trainees would have applied for jobs and apprenticeships without the traineeship opportunity, they reflected that it would have been more difficult without the right experience or qualifications. Other trainees said they would have applied for a college course or further education, funded by part-time jobs. Other trainee motivations for taking part in a traineeship included wanting to be in a social environment after the isolation of lockdown.

Trainees had diverse characteristics, but often said they lacked confidence, and this was echoed by providers. Providers said that trainees could have high, complex needs and have faced challenges, including behavioural and educational difficulties. They may have had poor prior experiences within education and have little prior work experience. Several providers reported seeing an increase in trainees with mental health and anxiety

issues since the pandemic, and that supporting these young people effectively required flexibility in provision, which a traineeship was able to offer.

The providers said that since young people tended to have little awareness of traineeships, they required a lot of information, advice, and guidance prior to enrolment. Trainees could also come with unrealistic aims and therefore providers found it important to outline expectations, and progression routes, alongside the support available. This included ensuring trainees understood the level of commitment required by an employer. During information giving, providers stressed that a traineeship is unpaid as this was a key question for the trainees, and some young people requested work placements close to where they live to reduce commuting costs. However, some employers offered financial support to trainees where this was not offered by the provider, ranging from travel and lunch expenses, and training costs (such as exam fees), to wages. In some circumstances trainees also had the opportunity to earn tips and bonuses (see also 'Influence of incentive' which details how employers used the incentive).

Some providers reported seeing more qualified candidates for traineeships this academic year, including those with Level 3 qualifications. Providers reported that young people with Level 3 qualifications tended to have more alternative work and learning options open to them, such as Kickstart or apprenticeships. Nevertheless, some young people with Level 3 qualifications were attracted to a traineeship as they struggled to secure an apprenticeship or work because they lacked relevant experience or lacked confidence when it came to job applications. The availability of traineeships for those with Level 3 qualifications was particularly useful for young people who had already tried one career path and were looking to try a new one, sometimes after being made redundant. They were interested in obtaining industry specific qualifications as well as work experience.

Managing capacity

While at a national level the number of traineeships has expanded, several individual providers reported that they offered fewer traineeships than expected, or than they had previously, and found it challenging to match young people to work placements in the context of the pandemic.

Young people and employers felt uncertain about the future, which made decision-making difficult. Where providers reported low demand from young people and low numbers of referrals of trainees, it was attributed to competition with other programmes, and some methods of engaging trainees being difficult to undertake remotely. In the 19-24 age bracket in particular, the lack of payment for a relatively long programme made other pathways seem more attractive. Referrals to traineeships from Jobcentre Plus varied between offices, but some providers experienced significant competition from the Kickstart programme, which was considered to have been given a higher national profile

and publicity in recent months with greater financial incentives available to both learners and employers for their engagement.

Providers felt that, despite it being an established programme, many employers lacked awareness of traineeships. Explaining and 'selling' the programme to employers took considerable time and some providers felt they did not have sufficient staff resources to inform employers of the benefits of the programme on an individual basis.

Fears around Covid-19 also played a role, with parents and young people unwilling to risk exposure by attending face-to-face traineeships. Uncertainty also meant more young people stayed in education. Sometimes employers were keen to take on trainees due to the incentive but were unable to get candidates, such as one agricultural employer, who wanted to offer a work placement, but was unable to find a provider in the local area to do so.

Where providers reported low demand from employers, it was similarly due to Covid-19 risks and certain sectors such as retail and hospitality being closed during lockdown. Employers were hit hard financially by the pandemic, leading to low business confidence and lack of capacity to take on trainees, even with the financial incentive. A private provider specialising in health and social care was unable to place any trainees this academic year. Their largest employer partner, an NHS trust, was unable to spare the resources to host trainees in such a challenging environment.

Providers needed to be responsive and agile in their delivery to manage capacity. Often providers underwent a juggling act to match demand with supply, especially with fluctuations resulting from outbreaks and lockdowns. Once trainees were engaged and in a suitable placement, stakeholders worked together to accommodate last minute changes. Providers enabled remote placements and teaching, which stakeholders often adapted well to. In some cases, providers experienced or anticipated increased opportunities for trainee work placements. Although employers such as hair and beauty salons were not taking on trainees during lockdowns, pent-up demand for these services once lockdown conditions were lifted meant a high demand for trainees later in the academic year. It was suggested that as small organisations were trying to rebuild in the context of economic uncertainty, work placements offered an inexpensive route to find the right recruits, with employers keen to hire trainees over apprentices because a placement required less initial commitment in terms of wages and length of placement, during which they could determine the suitability of the candidate for a role.

The flexibilities

This chapter first presents the views and experiences of providers, employers and young people on the flexibilities introduced to traineeships, before discussing the trainee experience of the programme with the flexibilities in place.

Views on the flexibilities

Six new flexibilities were introduced to traineeships in September 2020. They aimed to broaden the reach of the programme to a wider range of young people and employers, and to enable providers to adapt their provision in response to challenges faced because of the pandemic. This section reports the views of employers, providers, and trainees on these flexibilities, covering how they responded to each and the resultant effect on delivery.

Views on extension to maximum duration (from 6 to 12 months)

Providers, employers, and trainees were of the view that traineeships should be short and focused on progressing young people into employment as soon as possible. The flexibility to extend the maximum duration from six to twelve months was welcomed during the pandemic but was not considered to be appropriate in the longer term. This flexibility was typically used to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the availability of work experience placements and employment opportunities for trainees. It enabled providers to keep trainees engaged in learning until they could secure a suitable opportunity.

Providers identified challenges maintaining the motivation and engagement of trainees if the duration of the programme was too long, particularly given that trainees were not paid. Some providers considered six months to be too long for a traineeship and would aim to progress trainees through the programme in less than half that time. There was a view that young people should not be recruited to a traineeship if it was unlikely that they would be ready to progress within six months.

The view that traineeships should be short was also reflected in feedback from trainees themselves, who were keen to progress to a paid apprenticeship or job as soon as possible. They saw the traineeship as a stepping stone to doing this and didn't want to remain on the programme any longer than was needed. Those who had completed the programme in less than four months were generally satisfied with the length and felt it was appropriate. A small number had been on the programme for longer than six months and felt it had started to get repetitive (see 'Trainee experiences'). It wasn't always clearly communicated to trainees when the programme would finish, which was also having a negative impact on their motivation and engagement and resulting in some attrition.

'To be honest I think I would have liked it to be shorter... I think it was because I wanted a job, that's the whole reason I joined because I wanted to find a job out of it and it was just taking a lot of searching and it was really hard because of the pandemic... I got my job six months into it, that's why I asked to leave.' Customer Service Trainee, aged 17

Providers typically used the flexibility to extend the duration of the programme in response to challenges sourcing work experience, apprenticeship, and employment opportunities during the pandemic. Some providers extended the duration to enable trainees to try multiple work placements, which was perceived to have helped trainees achieve sustained progression as they had taken the time to find the right fit. One young person who struggled with English and maths was reassured by the possibility of extending the traineeship beyond six months if they needed more time to complete this aspect.

There was limited awareness among employers of the extension to the maximum duration of traineeships. For most, it did not have an impact as they offered fixed length placements typically lasting eight to twelve weeks. There was a view that the extension could keep young people in education for longer than needed and that the best thing would be for them to move into employment as soon as possible. However, there was also a view that this flexibility could be a positive thing for those who needed more time to become work ready.

Broadening eligibility criteria to include prior Level 3 qualified

This flexibility was well received by providers as it enabled them to reach a broader range of young people who they felt could benefit from a traineeship. A prior Level 3 qualification did not always equate to work readiness. Providers working with those at Level 3 found that many lacked work experience and employability skills, which a traineeship could provide. The social restrictions of the pandemic had left many young people feeling isolated and requiring additional support to develop their confidence and communication skills, regardless of level of qualifications.

The expansion of the programme to include those with Level 3 qualifications also provided an opportunity for young people who had started down one career pathway to pivot and try something different. There were examples of young people who had gained a Level 3 qualification in one industry or occupation but had either lost a job or were looking to change direction for another reason and were unsure of what to do next. There were similar examples of trainees who had started university, but this had not worked out for them and as a result they were feeling lost and lacking in direction (see also 'Trainee engagement').

In the provider workshop, specific sectors were mentioned where eligibility for Level 3-qualified young people had been especially useful; for example, Level 3 learners in engineering, rail and electrical. Where young people had studied A-level courses in these subjects, but were then considering a vocational route, they did not always have the employability skills to apply for an apprenticeship. Similarly, Level 3 eligibility was felt to be helpful to meet the needs of learners who wanted to undertake a Business Administration apprenticeship but were not immediately ready to progress straight into this qualification level.

Providers thought broadening the eligibility criteria would be well-received by employers as it could be perceived as offering access to higher calibre candidates. Most employers themselves were unaware of the change, but when it was explained to them, they were positive about it. Reference was made to the value of having more capable candidates on work experience placements during the pandemic when existing staff were having to adapt to new ways of working and were potentially less available to provide support. However, overall, factors such as attitude, work ethic, and interest in the role were much more important to employers than level of qualifications. This was particularly true for employers in sectors involving direct engagement with people, such as healthcare and hospitality.

There was some concern among providers that enabling young people at Level 3 to participate in traineeships could reduce the availability of spaces for those at Level 2, and that more highly qualified young people might be better suited to an apprenticeship. However, providers tended to have some spare capacity on traineeship programmes, suggesting that those at Level 2 were not being crowded out. There was also a view that many of those at Level 3 were not ready for an apprenticeship despite having a higher-level qualification, due to having limited work experience.

For some providers, this flexibility did not affect them as they did not work with any Level 3 trainees. This included providers who were only contracted to deliver traineeships to those up to the age of 18 (as those with Level 3 were often older than this). Those who had not used this flexibility were still positive about it and viewed it as having opened pathways to vocational routes for a broader range of young people who could benefit.

There were no examples of where providers had substantially changed the content or delivery model of their traineeship programme in response to this flexibility. The consensus was that the existing provision they had in place was suitable and appropriate for those with Level 3 qualifications.

Lower minimum hours duration (from 100 to 70) for work placements and option to complete with multiple employers

Providers tended to be very positive about the change to the minimum hours duration, reporting that it helped improve engagement of both employers and young people at a difficult time. Providers observed that employers had struggled to offer placements during the pandemic and that any flexibility was welcomed, as well as the shorter commitment and lower burden on existing staff. They also believed that this shorter commitment was more inviting to young people, especially considering that the placement was unpaid, and that young people may have other paid options to choose from. If placements needed to be delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions, a shorter work placement could help a young person complete a traineeship more quickly.

Some providers had chosen not to make use of this flexibility, explaining that the employers they worked with wanted a longer time commitment so that the young person could make more of a contribution to the business. Alternatively, providers were concerned that some employers would fall short of the minimum hours required and thus wanted to set a higher target. Some providers believed that while this flexibility was appropriate during the pandemic, a longer placement was of more value to a young person and should be seen as the norm once pandemic restrictions eased.

Although providers reported that employers welcomed the shorter placement length, many of the employers interviewed offered placements that were longer than this, commenting that in their view a 70-hour placement was too short for a young person to gain experience that reflected the 'real world', or to obtain new skills. This was particularly the case in office-based roles.

'I wanted them to have a body of work at the end of it that they could be proud of... at the end of 100 hours I felt I had been able to teach them something.' – Employer

Other employers considered that 70 hours was sufficient time for their needs, particularly those that felt they had limited tasks suitable for a trainee to undertake, such as in the hair and beauty sector. One employer in this sector said that because trainees could not work with clients, they tended to spend time shadowing employees and there were limited other tasks they could be involved with. Employers that offered virtual work placements, for example due to social distancing restrictions or lockdowns, also tended to favour shorter placements. While virtual work placements enabled some placements to go ahead in challenging circumstances, they were not part of the official traineeships policy during this time.

Employers also had ethical concerns about using the labour of unpaid young people for long periods of time. Some trainees had struggled to fill the time on their placement with

the tasks they were given by employers (particularly if the employer was hosting multiple placements at a time) or had spent it doing a single task such as washing dishes. These trainees were unsurprisingly of the opinion that a 70-hour unpaid placement was enough. More generally, the length of the placement does not solely determine quality of experience. Seventy hours in a placement of high quality, that offers variety in tasks, supports the development of the young person and shows them a full range of tasks in a sector, is more likely to have positive benefits than a longer placement lacking these elements.

However, the trainees who had completed a placement were generally happy with the length of the placement whatever it had been. Some trainees were not aware of how long their work placement was going to be and, in some cases, this was intentionally varied depending on the employer's view of the trainee's performance and readiness to progress.

The ability to offer multiple placements was seen by providers and employers as very positive for trainees, although very few of the trainees interviewed for the evaluation had experienced or were planning multiple placements. Providers believed that multiple placements would be more appealing to young people, and help trainees compare different employers and learn more about what type of organisation or role best suited them. They would also allow an alternative placement if a young person's first work placement was unsuccessful or had to be cancelled due to restrictions. One young person had undertaken three placements, each of which had been cut short for pandemic-related reasons.

Employers echoed this view, commenting that multiple placements would allow young people to pick up a greater variety of skills and experiences. However, some employers had concerns about young people undertaking placements with other local businesses in the same sector due to concerns around confidentiality or commercial sensitivity, or the potential for young people to develop 'bad habits' from experience with a competitor that had different standards and procedures. This format would also not support the motivations for engagement related to trialling a young person's suitability for an apprenticeship and would also need to be balanced to ensure progression and development opportunities.

Inclusion of digital skills in the curriculum

There was variation among providers, and some confusion, about what was required in the digital skills element of traineeships. Some providers did not offer a specific digital skills element, explaining that digital skills were embedded in the course because it was delivered online or through blended learning. These providers emphasised that learning to work on laptops and use the relevant software would be a valuable skill for young people in the future. Other providers assessed young people's digital skills at the outset

and then offered one of a range of training programmes or personalised support. Curricula were also adapted to include online interview techniques and remote workplace behaviour. However, other providers concluded that the digital skills of their cohort were sufficiently advanced and that they did not need to provide further training. In the provider workshop, the digital divide was discussed, both in relation to trainees' access to computer equipment, as well as a lack of digital connectivity, particularly high-speed broadband connections, in some rural areas. Both issues could affect the ability of a trainee to engage with digital skills components.

Reflecting this variation, some trainees reported that they had not learned any digital skills as part of their traineeship, sometimes because of their initial skills assessment. Others described learning to use the Microsoft Office suite of software. Trainees generally believed that digital skills would be helpful to them, but several commented that this was largely something they already had and that they would have preferred not to take this part of the course. Some young people had also learned other work-related digital skills on their traineeships, such as how to compose an email, designing infographics, and cyber security; and some trainees on IT-focused traineeships had learned a wide range of digital skills.

Some employers, particularly those in 'hands-on' industries such as hair and beauty or agriculture, commented that digital skills were not relevant to their business, and they had little interest in trainees learning these when they could be using the time to learn practical skills. Related to this was a view among employers that young people's digital skills were already good, and likely to already be more than sufficient for the nature of the business. Some employers saw this as a positive and were enthusiastic about the possibility of a trainee being able to upskill other, older workers, or support the business with tasks such as digital marketing. Other employers noted that younger people were at a range of different levels in terms of their digital skills, and that it was important that they develop these skills given their importance for the future.

Increased focus on occupational standards and links to apprenticeships to support progression, and increased capacity

This change appeared to have made less of a difference to providers, since many had set up their traineeships programme to be closely linked to apprenticeships from the start. For example, the qualifications providers offered were designed to give young people a 'head start' by completing some of the units and skills needed for an apprenticeship. Providers also reported engaging with employers from the start of a traineeship to explore the possibility of keeping the young person on for an apprenticeship. Some providers reported frustration at being penalised when young people moved on to an apprenticeship 'too early', such as before completing maths and English.

A small number of providers were not focused on progression to apprenticeships, instead aiming to find permanent employment for a young person, or because they perceived apprenticeships to be inappropriate for the needs of their cohort of learners.

Employers had limited awareness of the increased focus on occupational standards and thought this would be the provider's responsibility rather than something for them to consider. Employers understood the traineeship as an opportunity to get to know the young person and whether they would be motivated and enthusiastic about the work, rather than involving structured qualifications, which were seen as more appropriate for apprenticeships.

The employer incentive

The employer incentive enabled providers to engage and recruit new employers that they had not worked with previously. While some employers in the sample, particularly those that had provided placements in the past, would have engaged with traineeships regardless of the incentive, others put a greater emphasis on the relative influence of the incentive payment in supporting their engagement in traineeships and the nature of the opportunities they were able to offer (see 'Influence of incentive'). Employers were asked for their views on the process for claiming the incentive payment. Overall, interviewees were negative about this experience after encountering administrative issues when trying to claim the incentive as well as long delays in receiving their payments. Only a few employers interviewed did not encounter any issues and found the process relatively simple and straightforward. Some training providers stated that because of these poor experiences, a few employers had been discouraged from offering placements again in future. These were primarily smaller organisations who had been encouraged to deliver traineeships this year because of the incentive.

The administrative challenges employers encountered when claiming the incentive varied. They included problems in accessing the website established to process claims, with some employers reporting that the website address provided to them did not work. Others felt that, after gaining access, the website was complicated, prone to glitches and difficult to use.

A few employers stated that they encountered issues in processing their claim. They had received messages stating that the data they entered did not match pupils' Individualised Learner Record (ILR) entries and that they needed to update this information, an issue which took time for the employer to resolve, and which used terms (eg ILR) that they did not understand.

Employers commented that throughout this process they did attempt to get in touch with the helpdesk to resolve these issues but received limited support and advice. In some cases, employers claimed that they did not receive a reply to their query. Some

employers stated that they requested and received support from their training provider in navigating these difficulties, although this offer of support was not available to all.

Almost all employers interviewed encountered what they considered to be delays in receiving incentive payments. Employers were keen to highlight that where they had committed to paying trainees or purchasing equipment for them to use (eg laptops), these delays meant their business had to cover these unplanned costs before they received the payment. This caused financial stress for some smaller employers.

Employers and business owners working in customer-facing roles (eg hairdressing) also noted that they did not have the capacity and working arrangements to pursue their incentive claim when they encountered difficulties. The nature of their business meant that their working day consisted of dealing directly with clients and organising their premises to deliver services: they did not have time to sit in front of a computer or call a helpline. This added to the stress and pressure of trying to resolve payment issues. These employers stated that they would prefer providers to process the claims, and deal with any difficulties in future, on their behalf.

Trainee experiences

Length

Among young people interviewed for the research, the length of traineeships varied from eight weeks to eight months. Young people were generally happy with the length of the traineeship they were on. Some young people saw the traineeship as a 'fast track' option particularly suited to over-18s who were looking to progress quickly, and felt that if they wanted to learn in more depth they could go on to an apprenticeship. Others had been concerned that a nine- or twelve- week course would be too long for them, but subsequently found that the length was appropriate to cover the content. In terms of the work placement, young people generally thought that between four and seven weeks part-time was an appropriate length to get to grips with a role.

Some young people were not concerned about the length of the traineeship if they felt they were doing something productive. At some providers, traineeships were not a fixed length but varied depending on how quickly the young person completed the required training and/or found a job or other progression opportunity. However, one young person was frustrated at being kept on the traineeship until they found a job as they repeated the training content with new cohorts.

Format

Most trainees had done part or all of their learning online. Some trainees welcomed this, because it fitted with their caring or domestic responsibilities, avoided a long commute, or reduced their anxiety about taking part. For these reasons, some young people reported that they would not have been able to take part in the traineeship at all without remote learning. Others simply preferred this format, for example appreciating the ability to easily check progress and catch up with missed work using the educational apps used.

However, other trainees struggled with remote learning and would have preferred to learn face-to-face, especially at the beginning of the traineeship. These trainees reported that they found the software confusing, or that it was more difficult to ask questions because they needed to call or email a tutor rather than putting their hand up, and then needed to wait for a response. This discouraged them from asking questions and slowed their progress. As well as this, trainees explained they had more distractions at home and felt less motivated. Attendance and retention may have been negatively affected, with some trainees feeling isolated or unproductive in their home set-up, lacking access to equipment or a quiet workspace, creating issues for providers. These were common experiences of education and training remotely in the pandemic, and a more detailed example is provided below.

Example of trainee experience of remote learning

One trainee left school at 15 with no qualifications and started a traineeship after completing a life skills course with the Prince's Trust. They were interested in getting the Maths and English qualifications they hadn't achieved at school and the possibility of being offered a job at the end of their work placement.

They chose a retail placement to help them improve their confidence by interacting with others. They were looking forward to this placement. The young person lives a long way from the provider and would not have been able to attend face-to-face classes. However, they found the remote delivery of the maths and English aspect of the traineeship difficult: in particular, they found the homework app difficult to use, found it harder to ask questions, and had some sessions cancelled, so made slower progress than they had hoped.

The provider responded to their concerns by putting them on a waiting list for a device that supports the homework app better and providing extra one-to-one support in the evenings. Overall, the young person feels confident that they will be able to progress to a job or an apprenticeship at the end of the placement with support from the provider.

Young people who had taken part in face-to-face learning reported that successfully going into an unknown environment, meeting new people, and taking part in group activities had given them a confidence boost. Young people appreciated being given time to get to know others on the course and commented that the smaller class sizes (compared to school or college) made it easier to learn. Some young people compared their traineeship favourably to their school or college experience, commenting that it was more engaging and varied and they felt treated like adults. Many providers were keen to maintain a blended learning approach going forward. However, for some trainees, especially those with highest needs, remote delivery did not work well.

Level and content

Young people found the employability-related elements of the traineeship very useful and liked the opportunity to put these into practice straight away during their work placement. Young people also valued the opportunity to take short courses and obtain certificates to build up their CV.

In terms of English, maths and digital skills, young people reported that providers assessed their existing skills at the start of the traineeship, which in many cases had meant that they could skip this element. Where this assessment had not happened or not happened effectively, some trainees who had been required to take these elements reported that they were frustrated at not learning anything new. One trainee expressed disappointment that maths, which they had particularly hoped to work on, was not taught separately but embedded at other points in the course. Trainees who needed to work on their maths and English found tutoring in very small groups or one-to-one particularly helpful and were proud of what this had helped them achieve.

Personalisation

Young people were positive about the individual support offered by providers: for example, providers would attend initial meetings between the young person and employer, help the young person plan their journey on public transport, or text young people with encouragement on the first day of their placement. This helped the placement go more smoothly and made young people feel less anxious about their first experience with an employer.

More generally, young people reported that providers would call them to see how they were feeling and help them with any worries and problems they were facing, such as overcoming a lack of confidence. This was particularly important for a young person with mental health problems. Another young person who had become homeless during their traineeship described how their training provider had helped refer them to a housing

provider and stayed behind after office hours to ensure they had been found a place: this type of support had also been observed by a trainee at another provider. A young person with autism reported that their provider clearly understood the challenges of interviews and CV writing for autistic people and had supported them through this: other trainees had had adjustments made to software or written materials because of their dyslexia. Another example of a personalisation made to accommodate a trainee is given below.

Example of personalisation to accommodate trainee needs

One young person had left school due to being bullied and had low confidence. They heard about the traineeship from their work coach and were interested in it because they didn't know what to do next and were looking for any opportunity to 'get out and do something'. After an initial conversation with the training provider, they felt reassured that the traineeship would be helpful, in particular to allow them to get maths and English qualifications. The provider helped the young person to plan their travel to classes and covered their costs, as the journey took 50 minutes by tram, which the young person had no experience of using.

The young person has social anxiety and noted that the learning provider purposefully used smaller groups to help them feel comfortable. This reduced their feelings of stress, supported the development to their confidence, and at the time of the interview, they felt more able to talk to people without feeling nervous. They had also been surprised by how quickly they were able to gain qualifications in this supportive setting.

Although trainees had not always had a choice of work placement, trainees recognised that providers had generally tried to find them a placement relevant to their interests and strengths, as well as considering practicalities. One young person had identified some shops they were interested in working in and so the provider approached each of these to ask about a placement. However, none of the shops were interested, so the young person undertook a remote work placement in a similar industry.

Outcomes and plans for the future

This chapter details the outcomes and benefits that resulted from traineeships for trainees, employers, and providers.

Trainees

Traineeships are a pathway supporting well-established outcomes for young people. In the context of the pandemic, they continued to provide soft skills and work readiness, improved job search skills, insight into a work environment, clarity on future options and qualifications. These benefits provided a pathway to apprenticeships and other employment and education outcomes.

In addition to vocational skills, the providers and trainees reported improved soft skills, work readiness and personal development as some of the most significant outcomes of the traineeship. These included improved communication, awareness of responsibility and confidence for taking next steps into the workplace or further education. They suggested this occurred because the traineeship provided a safe space for young people to gain skills through a supportive work setting, in addition to classroom learning focused on work preparation, as well as pushing trainees outside their comfort zone.

Confidence and positive mental health effects also emerged for trainees interacting with other people. This was particularly important in the pandemic context which had negatively affected trainee confidence. For a 20-year-old learner who completed a traineeship in education, although she had prior work experience, the traineeship helped her refamiliarise herself with the work environment and gain confidence after being made redundant. Since most trainees had no prior work experience, the work placement gave them a valuable insight into the world of work and a work schedule.

Traineeships could help young people to make work and learning decisions as they gained clarity on different pathways and developed aspirations. Trainees reported that the traineeship cemented their ambitions and increased their motivation, increasing their confidence and preparedness to progress. The insight gained into an apprenticeship, or a particular industry, could help them decide whether it is right for them before committing. For example, one FE College said traineeships in childcare enabled young people to explore whether the sector is right for them without committing to a two-year BTEC qualification. Realising, during a traineeship, that a sector was not one that they wanted to work in could also be a valuable outcome for a young person (see box below). A private training provider, which specialises in training for the hair and beauty industry, mentioned that traineeships help them see whether a young person will fit within a salon or whether they need to find an alternative workplace for their later apprenticeship.

Example of using a traineeship to test work ideas

One young person started a university course but left before finishing due to personal reasons. They began a business administration and IT focused traineeship because they were interested in this sector but had no relevant work experience. They anticipated that the traineeship might be an entry point to a career that was more meaningful than the part-time job they had.

The young person undertook a five-week work placement with an IT company. They found the team very welcoming but towards the end of the placement they started to become disengaged and did not enjoy the job role tasks. On reflection, they felt that an IT career would not be well aligned to their interests.

Overall, the young person viewed the traineeship as a positive experience because it was valuable to find out that this type of career was not for them without having made a long commitment. They also reflected that they learnt job search skills through mock interviews and CV guidance. They felt that this then helped them to secure a new role with a finance company.

Trainees highlighted the value of the employability sessions and job search skills. Trainees - whether with and without Level 3 qualifications - valued sessions covering interview preparation as well as CV and cover letter guidance, which they had not been supported in during earlier education.

‘Feeling very proud of my improved CV and my ability to actually write one. It's got a whole new key skills range. Two-week placement with a reference. It's also now two pages from four which is more appropriate for applications.’ Trainee

Providers acknowledged that the qualifications gained on the traineeship were important for giving trainees a sense of achievement, but generally gave this aspect less prominence, as did trainees. However, the example below illustrates that the qualifications could add value.

Example of trainee gaining vocational qualifications

A 23-year-old trainee on a railway engineering traineeship had recently been made redundant from a railway job and found out about the traineeship from Jobcentre Plus. They were impressed with the opportunity to complete challenging work on the railway and were pleased with the opportunity to obtain the Personal Track Safety (PTS) qualification. They felt that this qualification would enable them to apply for many varied railway jobs. They felt well-prepared to apply for permanent employment once they completed the traineeship and reflected on the importance of the vocationally relevant nature of the programme: 'It's a great opportunity to be able to actually learn about engineering, do it so quickly and for it to be free as well'.

Overall providers reported that progression pathways are well-established and have not changed since September 2020. Many trainees progress to further education, apprenticeships, and employment. Most recently, while Kickstart was a competitor for potential trainees at enrolment, for some it was a destination following a traineeship.

Providers tried to ensure traineeships led to apprenticeships where appropriate, discussing this pathway with employers and trainees. Providers reported that, especially in the context of the pandemic, employers were hesitant to commit to hiring people full-time, and therefore traineeships provided a valuable means to see whether a learner was right for their organisation before offering a more long-term role. Furthermore, a college reported that the reduction of the minimum hours from 100 to 70 improved progression because it allowed trainees to move on to apprenticeships sooner if they were ready. Some noted the lack of apprenticeship opportunities available for trainees to progress to due to the pandemic and its economic fallout.

Since the work placement also provided an opportunity for trainees to demonstrate their capability to an employer in a work environment regardless of their CV, experience, or qualifications, it opened doors for a lot of learners and increased chances of progression. For example, a participant who did a traineeship in childcare was offered an apprenticeship at Level 3 rather than the originally expected Level 2, partly because the manager at the nursery where she had worked for her placement vouched for her potential. Trainees reported positive progression outcomes directly due to their experiences of traineeships; see the case examples below.

Example of trainee progression to a BTEC

One trainee, diagnosed with a special educational need or disability, lives in supported living. Prior to the traineeship they were unemployed and had no maths or English qualifications. They wanted to work in photography, so were looking to gain work experience and functional skills before applying to college. They said that the traineeship work experience placement improved their confidence, particularly for a work setting. They also gained qualifications in maths, English and customer service which they felt made them more employable. As a result of the traineeship, they gained the confidence to apply to college and have been accepted to study a BTEC in photography. They attributed this success to the traineeship.

Example of trainee progression to an apprenticeship

A trainee who recently completed the traineeship held a Level 3 IT qualification from college. They were looking for an apprenticeship in IT, as they enjoy hands on learning, but were struggling to find one on their own. The IT traineeship was attractive to them as a pathway to an apprenticeship. They undertook the traineeship alongside a part-time job in a restaurant. Through their work placement they gained beneficial hands-on experience of working for an IT support company, vocational skills in computer repair, and became more confident in communication. The training provider also supported them with their employability skills, suggesting improvements to their CV and applications. At the end of the traineeship the training provider helped them apply successfully for an apprenticeship with another IT support company. They are looking at the possibility of completing a Level 4 qualification in cyber security when they complete their apprenticeship.

Trainees generally felt optimistic and prepared for their future, and planned to use their new skills, qualifications, and experience to find opportunities for work or further education, including university. Many planned to work in the same field as their traineeship, and some planned to try to secure an apprenticeship with their work placement employer. There were examples of this being achieved among the trainees that had recently completed a traineeship where there had been a good match between trainee and employer for the work placement. Trainees on the programme reported applying for jobs and apprenticeships, and generally felt confident about their chances of securing a positive outcome, given their recent and relevant experience on a traineeship.

Employers

Benefits for employers and local communities

The employers interviewed generally expressed high levels of satisfaction with traineeships and identified several benefits from offering these opportunities. The primary benefit identified for the organisation (and trainee) was providing a possible progression pathway to apprenticeship opportunities. For employers newer to traineeships, other benefits were identified, including trainees playing a positive role in supporting their business operations as well as providing an insight into offering training and work opportunities for young people.

For employers who saw traineeships as a means of identifying suitable apprentices for their business, the programme was often described as an 'extended interview' for an apprenticeship or a chance to 'try before you buy'. Based on their experience of working with trainees, employers reported that the programme provided an opportunity for young people 'to find their feet' in the role and see if they were a good fit for the business and the type of work. Employers noted that sometimes trainees found that they lacked enthusiasm for their work on placement and did not want to progress onto an apprenticeship within the company. However, this was seen as an acceptable alternative for the business over an apprentice disengaging from a one to two-year programme after receiving a significant level of business investment. In this way, traineeships were viewed as a low risk given their short-term nature.

Other employers were positive about the contribution trainees had made to their business during a work placement. Some noted that the training opportunity provided them with additional support to assist customers or build their online marketing presence, for example. In this way, employers also reported that trainees could bring new and fresh perspectives to branding and marketing activities, particularly those that take place on social media, due to their familiarity with these digital platforms.

Another benefit identified among employers newer to offering traineeships was the insight it gave them into providing training opportunities for young people. This group spoke of the greater understanding they had developed of the expectations and skills of young people looking to enter their industry. Some employers noted this had enhanced their knowledge of what level of support trainees require on placement to support their development, which in turn had informed their decision as to whether their business could continue to offer these opportunities in future.

Future involvement with traineeships

Based on the above experiences, several employers stated that they were intending to continue delivering traineeships in future, particularly where they were part of established

entry routes and training pathways within the organisation. Some even noted that they were intending to increase the number of trainees they were offering placements to as part of their next intake, as the economy reopens, and business confidence grows.

A few small employers wanted to continue to offer traineeships based on their positive experiences but noted that this was subject to business growth and what capacity they had to support trainees within the company, which could be highly variable. Others wanted to continue to offer placements but were waiting for an approach from their local training provider to move forward with these plans.

Other employers commented that they were not intending to offer traineeships again in future. These tended to be small employers that were new to the programme this academic year, and that had negative experiences of claiming the incentive payment. The additional burdens placed on the business by the administrative processes and delayed payments were not experiences these employers wanted to repeat in subsequent years, and these informed this view.

Suggested improvements

Taking account of their experiences to date, interviewees were asked whether and how they felt traineeships could be improved in future years. Several employers stated that they were satisfied with their experience overall (sometimes taking account of their experiences of offering traineeships over several years) and could not think of any improvements that could be made. In general, however, employers were not aware of the range of changes that had been made to the programme from September 2020. Some commented that they therefore would have valued more information on these flexibilities and how they differed from previous versions of the programme so they could consider whether they would like to make use of them.

Where employers identified areas for improvements, some noted that they would like to see a simplified and more efficient system for processing incentive payments, if these were to continue and would be the responsibility of the employer to claim. Others stated that they would have liked further information upfront on how the incentive system operates to help them manage risk: one employer for example noted that they were unaware that they would be unable to claim the incentive payment if the trainee did not complete the placement.

Another improvement commonly suggested by employers was greater contact and support from training providers. Some interviewees were surprised that the training provider did not contact them during the placement to learn more about what tasks the trainee was completing. Employers were keen for the placement to provide a meaningful learning experience and were looking for professional guidance on whether they were achieving this and any improvements that could be made.

Providers

The expansion of the eligibility criteria to include those with Level 3 qualifications enabled providers to reach new cohorts of young people who could benefit from a traineeship. For some, this led to the development of new recruitment pathways, such as through colleges where previously they focused on schools. This contributed to raising awareness of the programme among young people and wider stakeholders.

The employer incentive enabled providers to engage and recruit new employers that they hadn't worked with previously. This enabled them to broaden the range and type of work experience placements they could offer trainees. An unexpected benefit of trainees not always being able to secure their first choice of work placement during the pandemic (such as in the hospitality sector due to widespread closures) was that it prompted them to consider alternative options that they may not have thought of previously. Having a larger bank of employers to draw on enabled providers to offer a broader range of options to trainees.

Most providers shifted to a blended learning model during the pandemic, which involved a combination of in-person and online sessions. This was found to have worked well and some providers said they would sustain this in the future. The ability to access learning remotely helped remove barriers to participation, such as travel costs or access to public transport (particularly in remote or rural areas), which have historically negatively affected attendance rates and contributed to attrition from the programme.

Providers were optimistic about the future of traineeships, and the potential of the programme to support the post-pandemic economic recovery by addressing skills shortages in key and growth sectors. Digital skills are in high demand across all industries and so embedding these within the programme will ensure trainees are well placed to take up available opportunities. The impact of leaving the European Union on the supply of labour was perceived as offering opportunities for trainees in sectors such as hospitality and care. Construction, childcare, health and social care, IT, and general business support were also identified by providers as potential growth sectors for trainees.

Providers identified two main challenges to delivering the traineeships programme during the pandemic. The first was that Kickstart launched at the same time that the flexibilities to traineeships were introduced and targeted a similar cohort of young people. Kickstart was perceived as a more attractive option than traineeships for some young people, as it offered paid work placements, which had an impact on recruitment. It was also perceived to have reduced the volume of referrals to traineeships from Jobcentre Plus, as work coaches were referring some young people who were eligible for traineeships to Kickstart. There was a perceived lack of coordination and clarity at the national level on how the two programmes should align. Some providers were using Kickstart as a

destination for young people completing a traineeship, but it was unclear how that aligned with the established vocational pathway from traineeships into apprenticeships. The last start date for Kickstart placements is planned for March 2022.

The second challenge faced by providers was raising awareness of the programme among young people, their parents, the careers sector, and wider stakeholders. This was exacerbated by the pandemic as many of the usual routes to promoting the programme (such as attending careers fairs) were not available. Providers would have welcomed more marketing and promotion at the national level, particularly to raise awareness of the flexibilities. The profile of traineeships contrasted with Kickstart, which had a national marketing campaign and was therefore widely recognised and understood by young people and employers.

Conclusions

In response to the measures set out in *Plan for Jobs*, providers increased capacity, and adapted traineeships for the academic year 2020/21, implementing six flexibilities which will remain in place until at least July 2022. Each flexibility aimed to broaden the reach of the programme to more young people and employers, and to enable providers to adapt to labour market challenges caused by the pandemic.

How changes to traineeships were received and implemented

The flexibilities were well-received by providers. Each flexibility was helpful in specific trainee or employer circumstances and provided a means for providers to adapt to meet individual needs. Together the flexibilities helped to maintain and broaden the training and recruitment opportunities available to young people and employers.

An extended maximum duration (up to 12 months) was introduced. This flexibility was welcomed during the pandemic, and there were instances where it had enabled young people to continue on the programme in the face of disruption and challenges sourcing work placements or an apprenticeship. However, it was not considered to be appropriate in the longer term. Providers, employers, and trainees felt traineeships should be short, and focused on progressing young people into a paid apprenticeship or job as soon as possible. Trainees saw a traineeship as a stepping stone and did not want to remain on the programme any longer than needed.

Extending the eligibility to young people with a Level 3 qualification was well received by providers as it enabled them to engage a broader range of young people who they felt could benefit from a traineeship with the changed labour market context, and because a prior qualification level did not always equate to work-readiness. The labour market effects of the pandemic affected the availability of apprenticeships and work opportunities, including leading to some young people being made redundant. It was important that traineeships could expand to support young people who might have applied for an apprenticeship or found work in ordinary times. The expansion of the eligibility criteria led to the development of new recruitment pathways, such as through colleges, where previously providers focused on schools.

An employer incentive of £1,000 per trainee (capped at ten per employer in each English region) enabled providers to engage and recruit some new employers, especially SMEs, that they hadn't worked with previously. This facilitated providers to broaden the range and type of work experience placements they could offer. The incentive supported some employers new to traineeships that wanted to deliver a good quality experience (for instance, by paying trainees, reimbursing their expenses, or purchasing equipment to support the placement). Where employers had offered traineeship placements in the

past, the incentive was seen as a bonus, but it was something they were likely to have done anyway.

A lower minimum hours duration for work placements and option to complete with multiple employers tended to be well-received by providers where it had been used; they reported that it helped improve engagement of both employers and young people at a difficult time. However, it was only used where appropriate, and for example where providers observed that employers had struggled to offer placements during the pandemic or were concerned about burden on staff. Some providers had chosen not to make use of this flexibility, explaining that employers they worked with wanted a longer time commitment. One group of employers considered 70 hours was sufficient for their needs, particularly those that had limited tasks suitable for a trainee to undertake. The ability to offer multiple placements was generally viewed by providers and employers as positive because it would help trainees compare different employers and learn more about what type of organisation or role best suited them. This flexibility was particularly helpful in the context of the pandemic, as it made it possible to find an alternative placement if a young person's first work placement was difficult to secure due to a lockdown.

Digital skills were included in the curriculum. There was variation in practice among providers, and some confusion about what was required. Some providers did not offer a specific digital skills element, explaining that they were embedded in the course because it was delivered online or via blended learning, whereas others had additional content in the curriculum. Some employers, particularly those in industries such as hair and beauty or agriculture, commented that digital skills were not relevant to their business, and they had little interest in trainees learning these when they could be using the time to learn practical skills.

An increased focus on occupational standards and links to apprenticeships to support progression, and increased capacity. This change appeared to have made less of a difference to providers, since they reported they had set up traineeships to be closely linked to apprenticeships. Employers understood the traineeship as an opportunity to get to know the young person and whether they would be motivated and enthusiastic about the work, rather than involving structured qualifications, which were seen as more appropriate for apprenticeships.

The short- and medium-term outcomes for trainees

Young people's work and learning options were affected by the pandemic; fewer employers were hiring or offering apprenticeships, and redundancies rose. Traineeships offered a way for young people to explore and understand new pathways, and for employers to test whether a young person was suitable for an apprenticeship.

The personalisation and variation possible in a traineeship helped to support outcomes for young people, who tended to be positive about the individual support they had been offered by providers. Trainees found the employability-related elements of a traineeship very useful and liked the opportunity to put these into practice straight away during their work placement. Young people also valued the opportunity to take short courses and obtain certificates to build up their CV. Trainees who needed to work on their maths and English found tutoring in very small groups or one-to-one particularly helpful and were proud of what this had helped them achieve.

The work placement was reported by providers and trainees to be a particularly important way to develop skills and to realise the potential positive benefits of the traineeship. In the longer term, if the flexibility regarding placement lengths continues then it will be important to monitor the use of this flexibility, and any differential impact it might have on trainee outcomes (eg progression to apprenticeships or employment). However, the length of the work placement is not the sole determinant of positive outcomes for the trainee; rather, it is the quality of the experience: seventy hours of a high-quality placement, supporting the development of the young person and offering variety, is more likely to have positive benefits than a longer placement lacking these elements.

Successes, challenges, and lessons learnt

The academic year 2020/21 presented a demanding context, not least for recruitment of trainees and employers. There were several successes and lessons learnt. Providers and employers were optimistic about the future of traineeships and the potential of the programme to support the post-pandemic economic recovery by addressing skills shortages.

Providers have needed to be agile and adapt their working practices with regard to recruitment. For example, providers needed to modify how they promoted traineeships and engaged with learners, with face-to-face work in schools not possible. When engaging employers, staff in some employer sectors worked from home, or faced periods of business closure and workplace absence. Additionally, when recruiting employers to provide work placements, there was competition between providers for placements. This stemmed from other providers in the same location, where sectors were closed for parts of the year due to government restrictions, as well as new competition from the Kickstart programme, which stakeholders reflected had a larger national profile. Recruitment for Kickstart is planned to end in March 2022. This presents traineeships with a strategic opportunity to build on the national profile and employer interest in Kickstart and nurture more support for traineeships. There is scope to co-ordinate with the Department for Work and Pensions on this aim and explore how referral routes to traineeships might establish and integrate systematically with the Youth Hubs being created. More

generally, traineeships promotion could be linked to apprenticeship marketing nationally, stressing the links and pathway between the two.

The extent of referrals from Jobcentre Plus reported by providers varied between areas, with some reporting lots of relevant referrals, and other concerned that work coaches were referring to Kickstart ahead of traineeships. While the Kickstart placement was paid, which might attract and motivate some young people to take that path, the route from Kickstart placements into qualifications and apprenticeships was less clear. Stakeholders felt that at a national level the skills and employment response articulated in *Plan for Jobs* could have been more clearly communicated across departments, and better co-ordinated, with greater clarity from a national level about how the programmes might align (eg how they differed as progression routes). Going forward, increasing awareness of traineeships across all Jobcentre Plus offices may help to make referral routes more uniform, and a nominated ‘traineeships champion’, providing a point of communication and partnership between local Jobcentre Plus offices and traineeship providers, would be one mechanism for this

The employer incentive seems to have been effective in bringing new employers (SMEs) forward to offer placements, and to have enhanced the quality of placements provided. However, after the experience of claiming and delays to receiving the incentive, some employers were reluctant to offer placements in future. The processes and information required for employers to receive payment should be reviewed to ensure it is as smooth and seamless as possible from the perspective of employers.

Consideration could be given to how to encourage more large employers to engage and offer work placements. Some providers felt that large organisations do not necessarily see the benefit of the programme: for example, as an ‘extended interview’ for an apprenticeship placement, given that it is less of a commercial risk for these companies if apprentices disengage from their programme. Similarly, providers highlighted that the financial incentive to take on trainees is not large enough to encourage bigger companies to provide placements and compensate them for costs incurred. Indeed, the financial incentive appears to have been most motivating for smaller employers to engage. Other employer motivations were to support corporate social responsibility agendas, or to support the diversification of the workforce. Additionally, leading to a better apprenticeship experience for a young person sure of a ‘good match’ following their traineeship could be a benefit to explore in the marketing of the programme to (large) employers.

Employers did not tend to be aware of the range of flexibilities that were incorporated into the programme (eg beyond the employer incentive). Some employers commented that they therefore would have valued more information on these flexibilities so they could consider whether they would like to make use of them. In future, there could be more communication about the flexibilities to all employers. Inviting

employers to determine the length and content of their work placement within the parameters of the programme more explicitly may help to bring forward work placements, particularly in specific sectors where shorter placements were deemed to be sufficient.

Extending eligibility to young people with a **prior Level 3** qualification enabled providers to engage a young people who they felt could benefit from a traineeship but who were not work-ready. If there is sufficient capacity, there could be a case for continuing eligibility to include some young people qualified at Level 3 but not ready for an apprenticeship, supporting them to make the transition via a traineeship as labour market changes are likely to continue. It would be good to understand the level of engagement from trainees previously qualified at Level 3 during the 2020/21 academic year, and the proportion of all trainees they represent, to ensure that this group are not crowding out less qualified young people.

Providing clarification about what digital skills mean in the context of traineeships might help to unify the different perspectives found among providers, trainees, and employers who each had different expectations about the relevance of digital skills.

Distinguishing between essential digital skills (eg applying online for job vacancies; and handling data securely, including personal and financial information), and occupationally specific digital skills (eg cyber security, coding) could be considered. Given that some employers did not see digital skills as relevant to their sector, illustrative examples about how essential digital skills affect all businesses might be useful.

Remote and online learning were an enlarged part of programmes and could offer ways to increase participation in future. The ability to access learning remotely helped remove barriers to participation for some young people, such as travel costs or access to public transport, which have, historically, negatively affected attendance rates and contributed to attrition. For these reasons, some trainees reported that they would not have been able to take part without remote learning. However, other trainees struggled with motivation through remote learning and would have preferred to learn face-to-face. In the medium term, there may be more variation in delivery models to accommodate both learner and employer preferences. However, some of the benefits reported by trainees, such as increased confidence, stemmed from face-to-face interactions. For example, young people who had taken part in face-to-face learning reported that successfully going into an unknown environment, meeting new people, and taking part in group activities had increased their confidence. Careful consideration should be given to how trainee outcomes will be maintained where delivery models change.

The flexibilities enabled providers to tailor programmes to the needs of young people and employers. This ethos supported young people from a diverse range of backgrounds to engage and to have a tailored programme of learning and workplace support. For example, in 2019 to 2020, 23 per cent of people starting a traineeship declared a learning difficulty or disability. The [National Disability Strategy](#) contained a

commitment to evaluate the impact of recent investment in traineeships on young people with a special educational need or disability. Early evidence from this evaluation suggests that the personalised programme of support, including the length of work placement, programme length, and qualification components, helps to meet the learning and support needs of a range of learners, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. Furthermore, in future, if remote work placements continue, then this could offer the opportunity for trainees in areas of the country where placement opportunities are fewer in specific sectors to undertake work placements with employers from other geographies, potentially supporting the government priority of 'levelling up'.

There were several findings that could inform the traineeships quality strategy currently under development. For example, a number of these findings could inform the quality of work placements. At the outset, supporting the young person to plan travel and understand workplace expectations would help to maintain engagement. Throughout the placement, employers wanted and expected more communication and support from training providers during the work placement, as they thought that this would help providers learn more about the tasks being undertaken and provide support as needed. The variety and developmental nature of the tasks during a work placement is crucial to supporting outcomes. A slightly shorter placement that offers variety in tasks, supports the development of the skills of a young person, and shows them a full range of tasks in a sector, can be more beneficial than a longer placement without these elements. At the end of the placement, in cases where the planned progression route into a job or apprenticeship with the work placement employer does not materialise, there could be greater consideration of when and how best to start supporting the trainee to consider other options or begin job searching. This could include how the employer might support the young person to make a successful transition beyond their organisation, such as via an exit interview at the end of the programme.

Annex

This Annex contains the full methodological details for the evaluation.

Detailed methodology

A qualitative method was undertaken to deliver detailed insights into the views and experiences of key programme stakeholders. In-depth interviews allow exploration of what is working well, challenges, and contextual issues affecting delivery, in order to assess what is working for whom, in what context and why.

Providers: sampling and achieved interviews

The evaluation took a purposive approach to sampling. A sample of traineeships providers receiving funding for the academic year 2020/21 was provided by the Department for Education. This contained 203 providers with contact details. To ensure representation in the sample from providers with varying characteristics and from across England various quotas were set. These were:

- **Provider type:** a minimum of ten FE colleges and 10 private providers.
- **Region:** a least one provider, and a maximum of five, in each of the following regions: London, North East, North West, Yorkshire, East Midlands, West Midlands, South East, East of England, South West.
- **Funding line:** at least five providers receiving funding from each of the following funding lines: 16-18, 16-19 and 19-24.
- **Delivery area:** a maximum of ten providers working nationally.
- **Sector specific providers:** a maximum of ten providers delivering a very limited number of sector specific traineeships.

Consideration in the sampling approach was also given to including some providers that were new to delivering traineeships in the academic year (although there were very few providers in this category in the sample, so no minimum number was set). There was no detail about the size of contract, number of traineeships, or sectors delivered, available in the sample.

The characteristics of the achieved provider sample are detailed in Table 1. Interviews took place in June and July 2021 using video software and lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

Table 1: Characteristics of the achieved provider sample

Provider characteristic	Achieved interviews
Provider type	
Further Education Colleges	9
Other public-funded (eg Local Authorities)	3
Private providers	18
Region	
London	4
North East	1
North West	5
Yorkshire	4
East Midlands	3
West Midlands	5
South East	2
East of England	1
South West	5
New/existing provider	
Existing traineeships provider	27
New to traineeships this academic year	3
Total	30

Employers: sampling and achieved interviews

The employer sample came from two sources, one from providers interviewed for the project, with the remainder from data held by the Department for Education of employers that were hosting a work placement in the academic year 2020/21 and had applied for the employer incentive payment. This contained 435 employers with contact details; however, details such as size and sector were missing for much of the sample file.

To ensure representation in the sample from employers with varying characteristics quotas were set. These were:

- **Organisation size:** at least five organisations with < 249 employees.
- **Region:** a least one employer in each of the following English regions (London, North East, North West, Yorkshire, East Midlands, West Midlands, South East, East of England, South West).

- **Incentive receipt:** at least 15 employers that had applied for the incentive payment.
- **Sector:** a mixture of employment sectors, and no more than seven in any one sector.
- **Placement delivery mode:** a mixture of remote and onsite placement delivery.
- **Prior experience of traineeships:** a minimum of seven employers hosting trainees for the first time, and a minimum of seven with prior experience.

The characteristics of the achieved employer sample are detailed in Table 2. All the employer sampling criteria were met.

Table 2 Characteristics of the achieved employer sample

Employer characteristic	Achieved interviews
Organisation size	
Small/medium	24
Large	6
Region	
London	5
North East	1
North West	6
Yorkshire	1
East Midlands	3
West Midlands	1
South East	4
East of England	5
South West	1
Sector	
Agriculture, Manufacturing, Construction	3
Accommodation & Food Services	2
Transport, Storage, Information & Communication	8
Financial & Insurance Activities	1
Education	1
Human Health & Social Work	3

Other community, social and personal service activities	12
Delivery mode	
Remote	4
Onsite	24
Hybrid	2
Prior experience	
Previously hosted trainees	16
First time hosting trainees	14
Incentive received	
Did receive incentive	28
Did not receive incentive	2

The size of employers in the achieved sample reflects the population of employers who offer traineeships which has far more small and medium-sized employers.

Interviews with employers took place between June and August 2021 and were conducted by telephone or video call. Interviews lasted for 30 minutes.

Trainees: sampling and achieved interviews

Trainees were sampled via training providers using consent processes. Six training providers that had taken part in the interviews were able to share trainee contact details, leading to 16 trainee interviews. Several providers were unable to support the request due to no trainees being on programme during the approach until the end of the summer term, or due to a lack of staff time and capacity. Therefore, in addition, training providers that had not taken part in the evaluation were approached to support this request. A further eight training providers whose data had been shared for the purposes of the evaluation agreed to provide trainee contact details, which resulted in a further 14 trainee interviews. This included three providers that responded to a request for support shared within two provider network meetings attended by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

To ensure diversity of experience and background in the trainee sample, while specific quotas were not set, it was intended that the sample would include:

- **Gender:** a minimum of ten female and ten male trainees.
- **Age:** a minimum of five trainees in each of the following age brackets: 16-17, 18-21, 22-24.

- **Special educational needs or disabilities:** a minimum of five trainees disclosing a special educational need or disability.
- **Ethnicity:** at least five trainees from a minority ethnic background.
- **Prior qualification level:** at least five trainees with an existing Level 3 qualification.

The characteristics of the achieved trainee sample are detailed in Table 3. All the trainee sampling criteria were met. However, when compared to the overall trainee population for the August 2020 to April 2021 period, the evaluation sample underrepresents females and trainees aged 16 and 17.

Table 3 Characteristics of the achieved trainee sample

Trainee characteristic	Achieved interviews	Trainee population (Aug/April 2020/21)	%
Gender			
Female	10	5600	41
Male	19	8000	59
Prefer not to say	1		
Age			
16-17	6	6800	50
18-21	15	5200	39
22-24*	9	1500	11
SEND			
Yes	7	2900	21
No	22	10500	78
Prefer not to say/unknown	1	200	1
Ethnicity			
Minority ethnic background	11	4300	32
White British	17	8900	66
Prefer not to say/unknown	2	300	2
Prior qualification level			
Already qualified at Level 3	12	-	
Qualified below Level 3	16	-	
Unknown	2	-	

* 25 with an EHCP (one in the sample)

Trainees were incentivised to take part in the research. There were two ways they could be involved:

- For trainees on programme at the time of the research: a 30-minute interview, engaging in the App about their traineeship experience over the course of a week, and a final 30-minute interview. For their involvement trainees received a £50 voucher in recognition of their time.
- For recent completers: a one-off telephone interview about their experience lasting approximately 45 minutes, for which there was a £25 voucher as a thank you for their time.

In total, 16 trainees engaged with the three-stage process, and 14 took part in a one-off interview.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded with the permission of respondents, and detailed notes were also taken. Key points from the interviews were summarised, with key quotations noted, and data extracted into excel-based frameworks. The data for trainees collected via the App was summarised into the trainee analysis framework for review alongside interview data. The three frameworks (one for providers, one for employers and one for trainees), were structured based on the research aims, and discussion guides, and were therefore pre-defined to enable analysis by researchers across the team. Full analysis was undertaken once all interviews were completed, with emerging themes summarised, and exploration of differences in views and experiences between respondents with varying characteristics. For example, trainees previously qualified to Level 3 and those qualified to a lower level, and employers that had provided placements before, and those that had not.

This qualitative analysis tool helped to ensure that the analytical process and interpretations are grounded in the data and tailored to the study objectives. The frameworks were designed to ensure systematic and consistent treatment of all units of data. Following researcher analysis sessions, authors undertook within-case analysis (looking in detail at each individual case), and between-case analysis (comparing individual cases and groups of cases such as any differences in trainee experience by prior qualification level).

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