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Evaluation of the Traineeships Programme: Final Report 2015 - 2019

Executive Summary

1. This final report contains the findings from the research undertaken by Learning and Work Institute (L&W) and Wavehill Research to evaluate the Welsh Government's Traineeships programme between 2015 – 2019 which was part funded by European Social Funds.
2. The evaluation has been delivered between April 2017 and March 2019. During this time, it has included: scoping desk-based review of programme documentation; analysis of the WEFO 'ESF Participant Survey' (911 respondents); interviews with Welsh Government officials (7), providers and subcontractors involved in delivery of the programme (17, 11 follow up interviewed at later date); telephone survey with employers (48), trainees (105) and a counterfactual assessment and cost benefit analysis.

Key Findings

Programme structure

3. Most officials, partners, and providers agree that the overall structure and approach for the Traineeships programme is the correct one. Respondents consider the split into different strands to be a positive feature of the programme, however there is low use of the Bridge-to-Employment strand of the programme.
4. Employers who have participated in the programme generally consider its key strengths to be the opportunity for young people to gain work experience and skills through the programme, and that it provides an alternative option for individuals who have not had their needs fully met by mainstream provision.

Recruitment, referral, engagement and delivery

5. Family and friends, schools and/or careers teachers and Careers Wales Advisors, are the main routes through which young people first find out about Traineeships. Providers report

that they use a range of approaches to engage their target audiences including through schools, social media, and referral partners.

6. Several providers and partners noted the key role that Careers Wales plays in ensuring young people are receiving advice about their options. This includes undertaking an assessment of each individual young person's needs, interests and aspirations, and, if appropriate, making a judgement about their suitability for the Traineeships programme.

Participant backgrounds and support needs

7. Findings suggest that the programme has been successful in engaging young people who face barriers to securing employment, with over half of respondents to the learner survey having no prior work experience. Trainees predominantly participate in the programme in order to increase their employability skills and prospects.
8. Providers reported that young people engaging with Traineeships display an increasingly complex set of needs and barriers, including mental health difficulties and wider social issues such as housing and accommodation.
9. Despite Welsh Government amendments to the process it was noted that take up of ALS funding was still low, with many providers not attempting to access the funding due to the perceived administrative burden of the process and that they often feel able to offer support within their own organisation.

Work placements

10. Providers described increased challenges in engaging employers to offer placements. The lack of awareness of Traineeships as a brand/programme of support and the unfamiliarity of the offer was felt to impact negatively upon levels of employer engagement.
11. Employers typically described their reason for participating in the programme as a desire to help young people in their careers generally; others mentioned a specific role they wished to play in their local community, whilst also recognising the complementary benefit they would gain as an employer.

Cross-cutting themes and Welsh language

12. Providers were confident that their delivery of the Traineeships programme addresses the requirements of ESF equal opportunities. It was felt that the flexibility of the programme allows the theme to be addressed from a learner-led perspective.
13. The majority of providers felt that the training allowance had a negative impact in terms of equal opportunities, describing it as 'unfair' and 'disincentivising' for trainees to be working alongside paid employees, undertaking similar hours, yet earning significantly less.

14. Providers asserted that the sustainable development theme was embedded within their delivery of Traineeships. Examples given included information in inductions and specific projects such as beach cleaning.
15. Respondents consistently suggested that the Traineeships programme has a key role to play in tackling poverty through supporting young people into employment. Although providers generally did not perceive the programme as alleviating poverty directly in itself, many gave examples of actively supporting trainees (e.g. with food or clothing), signposting them to appropriate services they were aware of or have links with and embedding learning around poverty (such as budgeting or healthy eating) as part of the programme.
16. Providers generally felt that the programme supports the Welsh Government's Welsh Language Strategy to at least some extent. Most providers described a range of activities to promote Welsh language and culture and ensure that trainees had exposure to incidental or conversational Welsh during the programme. Take up of provision through the medium of Welsh was generally low, with providers emphasising that this was due to a lack of interest rather than a lack of availability; almost all providers indicated that this was available to all who wanted it. Roughly a third of trainees and employers reported that Welsh language was used to at least some extent at the work placement site.

Outcomes and reported impact of the programme

17. Neither WWV or EW are currently on track to meet their targets for Traineeship completions. By December 2018, WWV had achieved over two fifths (41.8%) of its target, compared with less than a third for EW (28.1%). Extrapolating these figures suggests that, if the programme were to run to 2022 on its current basis, WWV would achieve 75 per cent of its target by December 2022 (19,348 completions) and EW 51 per cent of its target (9,302 completions).
18. EDMS data shows that just under a third of participants (31.1%) entered employment upon leaving the Traineeships programme. Findings from the ESF Participant Survey show that by 12 months after leaving the programme over half of young people (52%) were employed, just under a fifth of young people (17%) were unemployed and looking for work. A small percentage (5%) of respondents were unemployed and not looking for work 12 months after leaving the programme.
19. Trainees report a wide range of benefits arising from participation in the Traineeships programme, in particular social engagement and the development of soft and employment-related skills. Similarly, providers and employers generally cite

improvements in soft skills, particularly in relation to confidence, aspirations, the ability to socially interact and maturity, as a key impact of the programme on trainees.

Counterfactual impact assessment and cost benefit analysis

20. Compared to the counterfactual of individuals engaged in Entry Level or Level 1 further education, those participating in Traineeships achieved the following:
 - 16 percentage point higher job entry and three-month job sustainment rates.
 - £642 higher earnings in the financial year following that in which they undertook their Traineeship.
 - £1,811 higher earnings in the financial year two years after that in which they undertook their Traineeship.
 - 33.7 more days in employment in the financial year following that in which they undertook their Traineeship.
 - 61.4 more days in employment in the financial year two years after that in which they undertook their Traineeship.
21. The Cost Benefit Analysis results depend on the length of time over which the potential future benefits of the programme are considered or time horizon we adopt and the assumption we adopt with respect to the cost of the alternative provision undertaken by the counterfactual group.
22. For a two year time horizon the estimates of the net present value of the programme range from £23.9 million to £81.7 million depending on the assumption adopted as to the costs of the learning provision undertaken by the counterfactual group.
23. For a three year time horizon the estimates of the net present value of the programme range from £67.7 million to £125.5 million depending on the assumption adopted as to the costs of the learning provision undertaken by the counterfactual group.
24. For a five year time horizon the estimates of the net present value of the programme range from £148.7 million to £206.5 million depending on the assumption adopted as to the costs of the learning provision undertaken by the counterfactual group.

Recommendations

25. In designing a future employability programme Welsh Government should consider:
- Ensuring that different provision, comprised of distinct strands of activity/support, links to provide a coherent pathway for young people.
 - Exploring ways in which the flexibility and funding associated with, for example, the Engagement strand of Traineeships, is embedded into new provision.
 - Ensuring that provision targeted at young people with complex needs continues to be flexible in terms of duration.
 - Exploring options for greater flexibility in the progression period for individuals after having engaged with employability programme support.
 - Issuing new guidance about how to complete the Traineeship Referral Form (or equivalent document under a future employability programme) and the importance of capturing wider support needs within this, to share with providers, employers and other delivery partners.
 - Issuing guidance about the requirement to directly involve trainees in the development and ongoing review of their Individual Learning Plan.
 - Issuing new communications to providers, highlighting how the ALS application process has been simplified, along with worked examples of how the funding can be used.
 - Consulting about an adequate rate of reimbursement for providers whilst a young person undertakes a work placement, and that such rates are set at an adequate level in a future employability programme, along with guidance about effective work placements.
26. It is recommended that Welsh Government review the range of provision available to young people. Whilst a future employability programme may not be able to cater for the full range of needs that young people present, it is important that:
- All stakeholders, providers and third sector organisations have good awareness of the different support available and adopt a joined-up approach to referring young people to provision that is most appropriate for their individual needs, whether this is within or outside the scope of an employability programme.
 - Providers have good awareness of wider funding that could be utilised to support trainees facing financial hardship.
 - Providers are proactive in engaging employers and enabling them to understand the individual support needs of trainees with a declared disability.

- Welsh Government issues providers with new guidance around effective employer engagement and support. This could include examples of good practice, case studies and resources, such as a checklist.
- Welsh Government explores the wider use of positive messages, case studies and marketing material to promote Traineeships. This could be tailored to the motivations and interests of different stakeholders, such as schools, parents and young people, to promote the programme and reduce any stigma currently associated with it.
- Effective partnership models between Careers Wales and providers are shared widely to ensure these can be incorporated into wider delivery. This includes with employers, to facilitate understanding of long term, strategic benefit of this, or any future employability support programme.
- Welsh Government review the resourcing allocated to referral processes, to secure a more efficient and stream-lined process in the delivery of a future employability programme.

27. To establish a robust evidence base for future evaluations and research it is recommended that Welsh Government:

- Commissions further research to gather data on the conversion of work placements directly into employment or apprenticeship outcomes for young people.
- Continues to develop and enhance the LEO dataset by adding in data from PLASC, DWP data on benefit receipt and exploring the possibility of also including data from Careers Wales. Over time, LEO will allow the analysis of longer run impacts of programmes such as Traineeships than is currently possible.
- Considers more flexible use of data on Traineeships from 2011 onwards which cut across different funding arrangements would allow the estimation of longer run impacts now. We recommend research of this type be undertaken and such longer run impacts have important implications for evidence-based policy making.

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

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