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What works in supporting people to retrain at the local level

Rapid Evidence Assessment

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Executive summary

Introduction

This review presents findings from a Rapid Evidence Assessment on what works to retrain people at the local level. It provides insights for local stakeholders, including policy and delivery staff, as well as senior decision makers, on how to design and implement successful retraining programmes. It includes a set of practical recommendations alongside detailed case studies.

Research question

What works to support people to retrain at the local level?

Scope

The review covered programmes focused on local retraining in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. The evaluations:

- considered programmes that supported people to retrain, rather than programmes only for people entering the labour market for the first time
- considered programmes with multiple components rather than standalone training courses
- were impact or process studies, or evidence reviews
- had a target population of people aged 16 to State Pension age
- had a focus on individual outcomes such as employment and increased wages
- were published between January 1997 and August 2026

Key findings

The full report contains case studies illustrating the findings summarised below. Full details of how the evidence standards were applied are set out in the accompanying technical report.

Linked to the labour market

High-quality labour market intelligence (LMI)
Programmes work better when they are tailored to in-demand sectors and the needs of local employers.



Work-based learning
Programmes that include work-based learning are more effective than those which only include classroom learning.
Case study 2 shows how work-based learning leads to positive employment outcomes



Occupational or sector-based training
Occupational or sector-based training programmes are associated with significantly more positive outcomes than programmes that deliver more generic training. This training needs to be delivered by providers with sufficient expertise.
Case study 3 shows how sector-focused training supports workers to retrain for high-demand jobs



Guaranteeing interviews
Guaranteed interviews are an important component of some successful retraining programmes. However, it is not clear whether they are directly connected with improved outcomes.



Features that work well

Wraparound support
Many participants need access to wraparound support to complete training and progress in employment.
Case study 8 shows how wraparound support helps to retrain in-work participants



Selecting participants who will benefit
Programmes that work well screen participants. Effective screening selects participants likely to benefit while avoiding 'creaming'—selecting those likely to succeed without support.
Case study 4 shows how screening can help select participants



Flexible delivery
Flexible delivery helps participants take part and accommodates individual needs.
Case study 8 shows how flexible delivery supports those in work to retrain



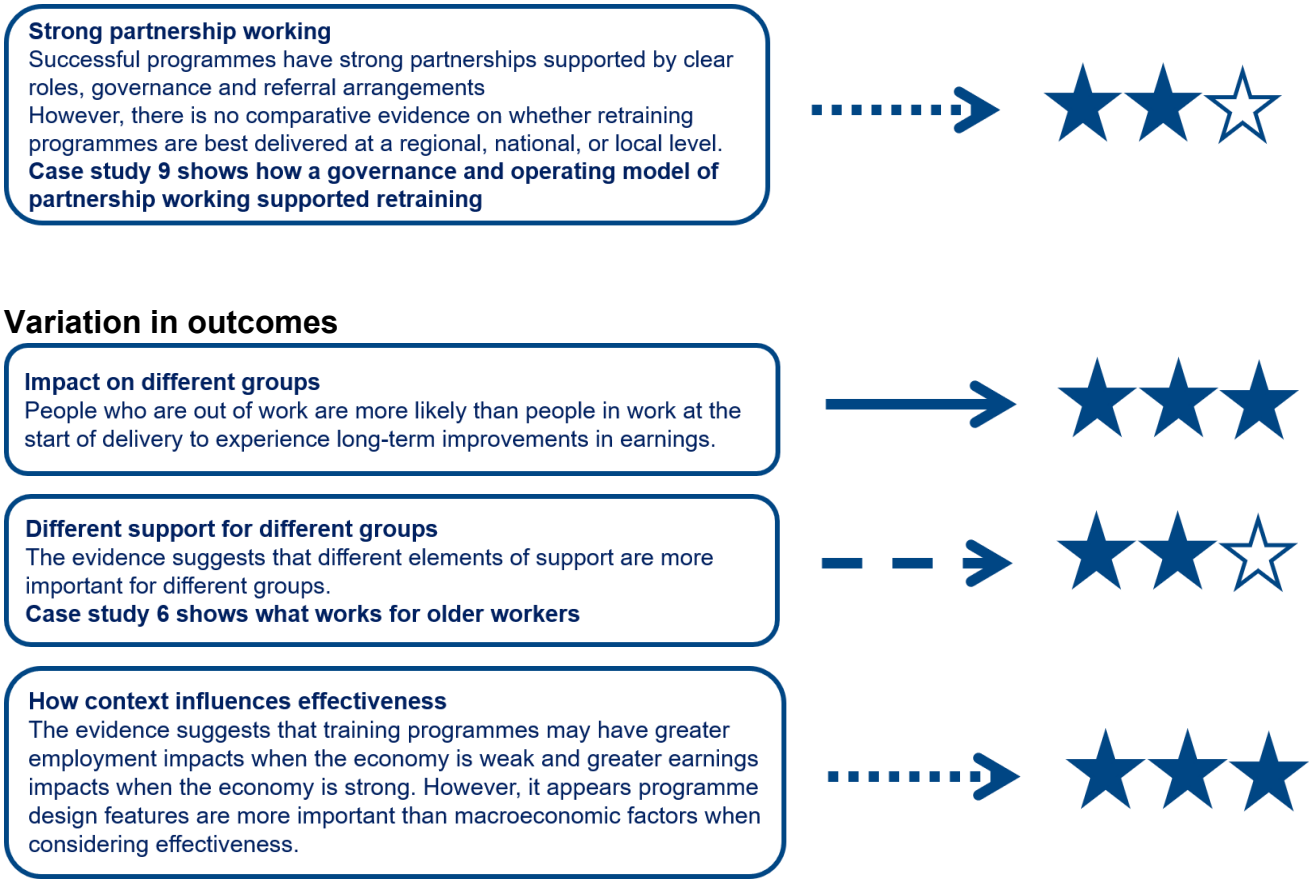
Providing financial support
There are several different forms of financial support. Financial support can reduce barriers and enable participation, but the evidence does not reliably demonstrate an effect on employment or earnings outcomes.



Successful delivery

Delivered by skilled professionals
Skilled and experienced careers advisers, coaches and caseworkers are vital to participants taking part in retraining successfully.
Case study 6 shows how skilled staff can support delivery of retraining and employment support models for older workers





The figure above shows key findings by evidence type and strength of evidence.

Linked to the labour market

High-quality labour market intelligence (LMI)

Programmes work better when they are tailored to in-demand sectors and the needs of local employers.

Evidence type: influence.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Work-based learning

Programmes that include work-based learning are more effective than those which only include classroom learning.

Case study 2 shows how work-based learning leads to positive employment outcomes.

Evidence type: causal.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Occupational or sector-based training

Occupational or sector-based training programmes are associated with significantly more positive outcomes than programmes that deliver more generic training. This training needs to be delivered by providers with sufficient expertise.

Case study 3 shows how sector-focused training supports workers to retrain for high-demand jobs.

Evidence type: influence.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Guaranteeing interviews

Guaranteed interviews are an important component of some successful retraining programmes. However, it is not clear whether they are directly connected with improved outcomes.

Evidence type: indicative.

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

Wraparound support

Many participants need access to wraparound support to complete training and progress in employment.

Case study 8 shows how wraparound support helps to retrain in-work participants.

Evidence type: causal.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Selecting participants who will benefit

Programmes that work well screen participants. Effective screening selects participants likely to benefit while avoiding ‘creaming’, selecting those likely to succeed without support.

Case study 4 shows how screening can help select participants.

Evidence type: influence.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Flexible delivery

Flexible delivery helps participants take part and accommodates individual needs.

Case study 8 shows how flexible delivery supports those in work to retrain.

Evidence type: indicative.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Providing financial support

There are several different forms of financial support. Financial support can reduce barriers and enable participation, but the evidence does not reliably demonstrate an effect on employment or earnings outcomes.

Evidence type: indicative.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Successful delivery

Delivered by skilled professionals

Skilled and experienced careers advisers, coaches and caseworkers are vital to participants taking part in retraining successfully.

Case study 6 shows how skilled staff can support delivery of retraining and employment support models for older workers.

Evidence type: influence.

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

Strong partnership working

Successful programmes have strong partnerships supported by clear roles, governance and referral arrangements. However, there is no comparative evidence on whether retraining programmes are best delivered at a regional, national, or local level.

Case study 9 shows how a governance and operating model of partnership working supported retraining.

Evidence type: indicative.

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

Variation in outcomes

Impact on different groups

People who are out of work are more likely than people in work at the start of delivery to experience long-term improvements in earnings.

Evidence type: causal.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Different support for different groups
The evidence suggests that different elements of support are more important for different groups.

Case study 6 shows what works for older workers.

Evidence type: influence.

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

How context influences effectiveness
The evidence suggests that training programmes may have greater employment impacts when the economy is weak and greater earnings impacts when the economy is strong.

However, it appears programme design features are more important than macroeconomic factors when considering effectiveness.

Evidence type: indicative.

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Recommendations

This report provides practical recommendations for those commissioning, designing, and delivering retraining programmes.

Design and adapt training provision to meet local demand by:

- using labour market intelligence such as employer insights and vacancy data to identify priority sectors before commissioning provision
- building in review points so content can shift when demand changes

Commission high-quality, sector-specific training by:

- prioritising providers with recognised technical expertise, strong employer links and experience delivering qualifications or accreditations in the target sector

Involve employers throughout design and delivery by:

- involving employers in programme design early enough to shape course content so that it meets their needs
- securing workplace exposure through placements, mentoring, work trials and workplace training

Build partnership infrastructure by:

- agreeing partner roles, information-sharing processes and escalation points before delivery starts

- using steering groups to review recruitment, learner progress, employer engagement and barriers to completion

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1. Introduction

This report brings together the evidence on what works to retrain people. It provides insights for local stakeholders on how to design and implement successful retraining programmes in their areas. The review focuses on retraining programmes and interventions, rather than national policy levers such as incentivising employers to invest in training or creating a more responsive skills system.

An ageing UK workforce, economic and immigration changes, as well as artificial intelligence and climate change, mean that retraining is important for adapting the UK's workforce. The user consultation for the Labour Market Evidence Programme (LMEP) identified that retraining was a priority for Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs). They wanted to boost productivity in their regions by ensuring residents' skills are matched with current and future jobs. Retraining was also a priority for local authority staff in areas with higher levels of employment, who wanted to upskill and reskill their residents to take advantage of available jobs.

In this review, a retraining programme is one focused wholly or in part on supporting adults in or out of work to develop skills to enable them to find a new job or progress in the workplace. This means that programmes focused solely on young people entering work for the first time are out of scope.

Effectiveness of retraining programmes

The effectiveness of a programme has been principally defined by whether it is associated with positive outcomes for individuals. These outcomes include whether employment is entered and sustained, and whether wages are increased. Some features of what works well are only measured by qualitative assessments such as employer or participant satisfaction.

The effectiveness of retraining programmes can often only be fully understood if participants are tracked for several years after completion. This is because participants may initially lose earnings while training or changing careers, and because increases in earnings are sometimes not sustained over time.

About the Labour Market Evidence Programme

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies, in partnership with Learning and Work Institute, to deliver evidence reviews and practical resources on key labour market issues to help inform local stakeholders from Mayoral Strategic Authorities, local authority Connect to Work Clusters and Integrated Care Boards.

The project aims to support local policy makers to better understand what works in improving labour market outcomes for out-of-work and in-work individuals. There are 3 strands within the Labour Market Evidence Programme (LMEP): a user consultation, a series of evidence reviews and a lessons learned phase. The project is informed by a DWP steering group, and expert advisors.

This Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) is one of several reviews that will be published as part of the LMEP. This REA was informed by consultation with a user panel as well as feedback from expert advisors. Each evidence review will be accompanied by a range of dissemination outputs, such as webinars and briefing papers, to support local stakeholders.

Research questions

The evidence review focuses on the following key research question designed in partnership with DWP, the programme's steering group, the user panel and the LMEP's expert advisors:

What works to support people to retrain at the local level?

Sub-questions

- What are the features of effective retraining programmes and how does this vary for people with different characteristics and across different areas?
- What are the features of less effective retraining programmes and how does this vary for people with different characteristics and across different areas?
- How do other programme elements (for example, guaranteed interviews, financial assistance) impact on the success of programmes?
- How does the context (for example, sector and demand) interact with the effectiveness of interventions?
- What features (types of organisations, roles and mechanisms) are enablers of an effective local system to support retraining?
- Who is best placed to deliver retraining programmes?

Scope

The review covered programmes and interventions focused on non-employer funded local retraining in OECD countries including:

- adult skills training pilots
- upskilling and reskilling interventions
- retraining interventions in specific sectors

The studies reviewed included process evaluations, impact evaluations, evidence reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analytic reviews and studies highlighting specific ‘what works’ elements from a programme or intervention. Studies also had to meet the following criteria:

- a target population of people aged 16 to State Pension age (including people who were in and out of work)
- a focus on individual outcomes such as employment and increased wages
- were published between January 1997 and August 2026

These criteria were selected to ensure that findings were directly relevant to the design and delivery of retraining programmes in the current UK context.

Methodological overview

The evidence review was conducted between June and September 2026. Searches were conducted across a range of sources, including sources of ‘grey literature’ (non-academic publications) and academic databases. In addition to these results, studies were identified through a call for evidence. The accompanying technical report contains more detailed information on the methodology, and the scoping report sets out the agreed approach to all the REAs.

The review used a search strategy with several components. First, it involved searching the list of sources using keywords related to retraining and upskilling programmes and then identifying whether evaluations, reviews and other relevant studies were available.

Second, it involved sifting through the evidence found to assess whether the associated programmes met the inclusion criteria. Additional studies were identified through the call for evidence, as well as through backward reference checking and forward citation tracking.

A 4-stage sifting process using the inclusion and exclusion criteria was then applied:

1. Initial searches returned 357 reports or programmes that required further consideration within the criteria for inclusion. A further 2 studies were shared through the call for evidence.
2. At the second stage 53 reports were considered in more detail. This was to identify whether they met more complex inclusion criteria (for example, a clear

focus on individual outcomes of the programme such as employment and increased wages).

3. At the third sift, the methodology section for each report was reviewed. This resulted in 20 reports that were included in the fourth stage.
4. At the fourth stage, evaluation studies were given a quality rating of 'very low' to 'high' using the Youth Endowment Fund Evidence Quality Assessment (YEF-EQA) criteria, as discussed in the following section. Literature reviews, systematic reviews and other review papers were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Systematic Review Checklist. As the CASP checklist does not provide a strict categorisation framework, we developed a qualitative rating approach, using categories that are consistent with the YEF-EQA framework used for primary research. These reports were then taken to the full text review and extraction stage.

Alongside the strength of evidence assessment, the shortlist of 20 reports was reviewed by subject matter experts who suggested that additional studies relating to WorkAdvance and Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) be considered. This led to 9 further reports being assessed for strength of evidence and added to the full text review and extraction stage. To avoid evaluations of WorkAdvance and ERA overweighting the evidence review findings, each suite of reports was considered as a unit (this included 6 studies related to ERA and 3 to WorkAdvance).

About the reports identified and limitations

The review identified a total of 22 reports that met the inclusion criteria. When the strength of evidence was assessed, most reports scored a moderate or high quality rating. In total, 7 reports were rated high, 12 moderate and 3 low.

The technical report provides full details of each included report including its quality rating. Low quality studies were included in this review as they provided information about different groups (such as older workers) that was not available from other studies.

The review and extraction of the evidence from the selected reports highlighted:

- the extent to which the authors considered retraining programmes to work well and why
- the extent to which the reports included information relevant to our research questions, both directly and indirectly.

Limitations

After the first stage of the search it became clear that the volume of studies included and the number of topics covered were too broad for an REA.

User panel feedback indicated they were most interested in findings that would help them design and deliver multi-component retraining programmes. They wanted to understand the different elements and how they interacted rather than focusing on standalone components such as a training course or careers advice. In response to

this user panel feedback, studies with a narrower focus were excluded from the review. This has potential limitations. For example, information about standalone training courses may have been useful in informing MSAs on how to manage their Adult Skills Budget to support retraining.

The original search strategy set out that studies would be considered if they highlighted ‘what works’ elements from a programme or intervention. However, the high volume of material returned meant that the inclusion criteria needed to be narrowed to exclude studies that only highlighted ‘what works’ elements. The final review includes process and impact evaluations, evidence reviews and systematic reviews. These choices may have led to the exclusion of some insight, but this is mitigated by the inclusion of other evidence reviews.

Studies often used the term ‘retraining’ inconsistently. For example, some evaluations use ‘training’ rather than ‘retraining’ even where the participants are those with work history who are moving into new sectors or occupations. A flexible approach was therefore taken when interpreting the evidence. This means this review includes studies where it is not always possible to distinguish between people with work history moving into new sectors, people progressing in their current field, and people training for their first job. However, substantial changes in skill set, sector or occupation, come with greater challenges than training or upskilling within an existing sector. More differentiated evidence on retraining would therefore be valuable within future evaluations.

2. Features of retraining programmes: what works well

This section outlines the key features that influence how well retraining programmes work. The programmes included in this review all had positive effects on employment, progression or wage outcomes of those who took part, but as found in other studies (Black and others, 2023), a combination of factors contributed to achieving these positive outcomes.

Key findings

Key findings included:

- employer engagement is associated with more positive outcomes
- training linked to occupation or sector is associated with more positive outcomes than more generic training
- pre-programme screening and assessment has some association with more positive outcomes
- personalised support is associated with more positive outcomes
- flexible delivery enables participation, but is not directly associated with more positive outcomes
- guaranteed interviews are an indicator of good employer engagement, but are not directly associated with more positive outcomes
- there is limited evidence on how programmes should be structured, and comparison across different design types is difficult
- financial support appears to enable participation, but it is unclear how far it is associated with positive outcomes
- there is limited evidence on how far retraining programmes offer value for money

Employer engagement

The following section explores the importance of employer engagement in the design and delivery of retraining programmes. Employer engagement included shaping content, providing labour market intelligence and insights, and offering workplace and recruitment opportunities.

What works well

Sustained employer engagement and the provision of work-based learning were a consistent feature of more effective retraining programmes.

Several studies emphasised the importance of involving employers, local labour market experts, or both in designing retraining programmes. This ensured that the offer was closely linked to employer needs, local occupational demand and specific job opportunities. However, this was not necessarily directly evidenced through outcomes data. These insights often came through process evaluation findings, and in-depth interviews with stakeholders exploring 'what works' in their experience of the programme delivery.

The impact evaluation Effectiveness of Screened, Demand-Driven Job Training Programmes for Disadvantaged Workers' found that employer input into curriculum design and a focus on local labour market demand were likely critical to programme success, with employers valuing graduates' skills and preparedness.

The Skills Bootcamps Process Evaluation (see case study 1 below) found employer involvement in the design and curriculum development for its Digital and Technical Bootcamp training to be effective. These employers were mostly drawn from the areas where the prior pilot bootcamps had taken place, and employers discussing this in interviews had been invited to meet with the regional lead and providers to explore their skills needs. Regional leads also considered bootcamps were a good fit for local priorities, which were identified in local industrial strategies and local inclusive growth strategies.

Case study 1: The impact of employer relationships at the design stage in Skills Bootcamps

The Department for Education's Wave 1 Skills Bootcamps programme was launched in 2020 to test employer-led training models to help adults upskill or reskill for growth sectors, particularly digital industries.

The programme aimed to support participants to move into new opportunities, progress in work, or transition from declining sectors, while ensuring that training was closely aligned to employer skills needs. It comprised intensive, short training programmes of around 2 to 3 months.

Strong employer relationships were important to successful implementation and delivery, and emerging learner outcomes. However, a short lead-in limited the time available to engage employers in co-design.

Employers who participated in course design valued the opportunity to input into training content. They had greater confidence that learners would develop relevant, job-ready skills to be productive staff. Technical skills bootcamps were all located with specific employers, which indicated close involvement at the design stage.

Employers outside existing networks were more challenging to bring on board in the available time, and as a result some felt insufficiently involved in programme design and development. Others reported a lack of alignment in the training and their

employee needs, as they had limited understanding of course content before staff were enrolled.

Overall, employer involvement was identified as a critical success factor. Curriculum co-design increased employers' understanding of the training and strengthened their commitment. It also increased learners' confidence in the relevance of the provision.

Several reports noted that combining training with workplace experience and contact with employers could produce stronger employment outcomes than classroom-only provision.

What Works Growth's Evidence Topic: Employment Training evidence review found that in-firm and on-the-job training generally outperformed classroom-based alternatives. They recommend providing on-the-job training to improve the employment prospects for an individual.

Case study 2 summarises a quasi-experimental impact study of training programmes for unemployed jobseekers in Flanders. This found that programmes offering workplace experience had better employment entry outcomes than classroom or generalised training.

Case study 2: Which training leads to employment?

The quasi-experimental impact study 'Which training leads to employment? The effectiveness of varying types of training programmes for unemployed jobseekers in Flanders' found that programmes with workplace experience substantially outperformed programmes with only classroom training.

Non-contractual workplace training, which combines training with workplace experience, had the strongest results and increased participants' likelihood of moving into stable employment. Participation in these programmes was found to increase employment entry by 12 to 19 percentage points and produced up to 30 percentage points higher cumulative employment incidence than matched non-participants. These effects remained substantial over the longer term, with a cumulative return approximating 20 percentage points.

Matched non-participants were unemployed jobseekers who had not started the type of training being evaluated. They could receive other active labour market programmes or training interventions, because the study did not exclude or censor them for participation in other programmes.

This was seen as particularly notable because participants were often drawn from more disadvantaged groups, such as those with lower educational attainment. The positive impact was attributed to the development of skills and work experience, as well as increased contact with employers. This helped participants build human

capital and access job opportunities. Workplace training also provided employers with better information about candidates' abilities and performance, reducing uncertainty and potential discrimination.

The findings support evidence that employment programmes combining occupational skills development with workplace experience and employer engagement are among the most effective ways to improve employment outcomes.

The RETAIN Impact Evaluation reported limited employer engagement across most programmes, however, findings suggested that workplace accommodations and employer willingness to support workers were important facilitators of job retention.

The Skills Bootcamps Process Evaluation found employer involvement in mentoring, project work, careers support, and recruitment activity to be beneficial to supporting programme delivery (although the ultimate impact of this activity was not assessed by the process evaluation). Employers were also involved through guaranteed interviews, mock interviews, job fairs, and placements. These activities helped to strengthen employability support, provided opportunities to apply learning, and improved learners' applied knowledge of the sector of interest.

What works less well

Retraining programmes appeared to work less well when employer engagement was weak, insufficiently embedded, or disconnected from programme design and delivery.

This often related to initial employer engagement and difficulty in securing buy-in, due to a lack of understanding of the programme purpose, or a lack of alignment with employer needs. For example, the process and outcomes evaluation of the New Futures Pilots found that providers reported difficulty securing buy-in from larger employers who did not always understand the career change objectives of the programme. In the impact evaluation of the Cost and outreach pilots, delivery partners believed restrictions on eligible courses reduced employer support and promotion among their staff because the courses did not meet their needs.

Where participants enrolled in courses that were not aligned to the needs of local labour markets, there was limited impact on career advancement. In an impact evaluation of ERA in the UK, authors indicated that a lack of Jobcentre Plus staff knowledge about sector-specific training pathways may have led to participants not receiving the appropriate advice. This led to some participants taking courses that were not directly relevant to a job, but more closely associated with a personal interest or hobby. ERA impact evaluation found that this focus on the supply side of the labour market that did not engage employers in the choice of training, was a weakness of ERA delivery.

A lack of access to work experience was also a limiting factor for ERA in the UK. The programme achieved good levels of success in engaging those in training who would not typically participate. However, realising the benefits of vocational training was

hampered by limited work experience opportunities. Gaining this experience via a voluntary or unpaid role was not an option for many participants as they could not afford a reduction in household income.

Training linked to occupation and sector

The following section explores the importance of sector-specific and occupation-specific training. This might include aligning programmes with sectors and occupations where there are particular workforce and skills shortages, tailoring training content and work experience opportunities to the needs of particular employers and roles, and embedding industry-recognised qualifications.

What works well

Sector- and occupation-specific retraining was linked to stronger participant and employer engagement when compared with more generalised programmes, and, in some cases, better employment outcomes. Several examples of programmes with a sector or occupation focus and positive employment outcomes were identified.

The impact study Washington State workforce development programmes evaluation considered 12 different workforce development programmes. Apprenticeships, aerospace training, and professional-technical education produced substantial economic returns, employment gains, and earnings improvements when compared with a control group who did not take part in a workforce programme.

The evaluation also found stronger benefits among programmes that were linked to specific occupations or industries compared with general employability or basic skills programmes. However, differences in cohort groups meant that this finding should be treated with more caution.

The systematic review What Works for Adult Learners: Lessons from Career Pathway Evaluations also found that integrated occupational and technical training linked to qualifications or credits and clear labour market opportunities could lead to positive outcomes over time. Several programmes considered as part of the study reported higher levels of employment and earnings, with earnings effects of approximately $4,500 to $5,000 higher than the control group 2 years after enrolment.

The impact evaluation Effectiveness of Screened, Demand-Driven Job Training Programmes for Disadvantaged Workers found that employers valued the programme. They offered anecdotal evidence that trainees had stronger content knowledge compared with other employees in similar jobs. The employers also noted trainees seemed to know what to expect while on the job. In the review, trainees also noted qualitatively that the curriculum provided a ‘good foundation’ of the sector basics and fundamentals.

The process and outcomes pilot evaluation for the Upskill in Cyber Programme found participants rated the training delivered by a reputable provider as one of the most important features of an upskilling programme, alongside the specific technical content, and industry recognised certifications/qualifications.

The study 'Which training leads to employment? The effectiveness of varying types of training programmes for unemployed jobseekers in Flanders' (case study 2) used linked longitudinal administrative data to compare the employment outcomes of unemployed jobseekers who entered different types of training programmes (including sector and occupation-specific and more general employability programmes) with similar jobseekers who did not enter those programmes.

It found that occupation-specific programmes substantially outperformed programmes that focused on more general training. However, the study cannot completely rule out bias from unobserved differences between participants and non-participants due to the way it was designed.

However, the meta-analysis review of 'Workforce Programmes Serving Older Workers and Other Populations with Employment Barriers' (case study 3) found that sector-focused training was only one element of a successful programme. Wraparound support and strong relationships between training providers and employers were also needed for positive impacts to be observed.

Case study 3: What works for older workers?

The meta-analysis Workforce Programmes Serving Older Workers and Other Populations with Employment Barriers, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, aimed to inform improvements to workforce programmes supporting older workers. The review synthesised existing research, evaluations, and evidence on workforce development programs. This included job search assistance, sector-focused training, subsidised employment, and wraparound support.

The study found that sector-focused training models designed to train workers for high-demand jobs were the most effective in achieving long-term positive impacts on employment and earnings, although it notes that findings are mixed.

Using randomised control trials, researchers found that participants in the Sectoral Employment Training Study were more likely to be employed and earned higher wages than the control group 2 years after participation, while WorkAdvance was found to significantly improve employment outcomes across providers and increased earnings for most providers, though impacts varied in size.

Sector-focused programmes typically involved partnerships between employers, community colleges and training providers, and workforce intermediaries. They targeted high-growth industries with competitive wages, and full-time employment and advancement opportunities.

In instances where sector-focused training had more mixed results, this was for a number of factors.

For example, the Accelerating Opportunity and Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Community College and Career Training grants found positive and sustained labour market outcomes were observed only for certain participant groups in 2 of the 4

states it was delivered in. The report suggested that weak relationships between training providers and employers may have limited the possibility of training translating into jobs.

In the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education study, not all the programmes delivered employment or earnings improvements. The research noted that less successful programmes provided less extensive wraparound support than successful programmes.

Pre-programme screening and assessment

The following section examines the use of pre-programme screening and assessment, and their contribution to the effectiveness of retraining programmes. This might involve using specific tools and approaches to identify participants' needs, capabilities, aspirations, and commitment levels before programme entry. This can inform participant targeting, support the tailoring of interventions, and help ensure that programmes are aligned with individual needs.

What works well

Evidence from some impact evaluations suggested that effective screening to target the right participants and identify their support needs was associated with higher completion rates and more positive outcomes.

Where screening was targeted, it was effective, but time consuming. The impact study Evaluation of WorkAdvance outlined that the screening process for the support was rigorous and took at least 2 days. It identified individuals who had the right mix of characteristics to benefit from the programme, succeed in the training and progress into an eventual career in the sector.

Some screening checks were designed to replicate those that employers would use during the interview process (for example, drug screenings and criminal background checks).

The authors observed that providers would typically need to recruit 5 participants to end up with one enrolled in the programme. They noted that programmes with more intensive screening generally had more positive outcomes. Study authors suggested that this rigour tended to result in recruiting participants who were more motivated to succeed compared to the general population. However, this was also true of the control groups who had been through the same screening process.

What works less well

Conversely, programme engagement and delivery was less effective when the most suitable participants were not targeted. For example, the German impact study Effects of Vocational Retraining on Employment Outcomes Among Persons with Disabilities in Germany found high dropout rates, with nearly half of these dropouts linked to medical reasons. The study suggested better identification of suitable

candidates and stronger accommodation may improve completion rates but did not make recommendations of who and what this would involve.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the New Futures Pilots found technology courses in the Wales pilot were accessed by people with a range of different ability levels, despite the course ideally requiring some prior knowledge. As a result, those with less experience found it challenging to keep up with the course, while more capable trainees were held back as tutors tried to accommodate others.

The process and impact evaluation of the New Orleans Career Pathways programme (case study 4) identified challenges with their initial approach to screening that limited the impact of the programme, including inconsistent implementation among delivery partners.

Case study 4: The New Orleans Career Pathways programme: What works well and less well

The New Orleans Career Pathways programme was designed to help low-skilled unemployed and underemployed workers and people who were disengaged from the labour market move into higher-paying jobs. The programme focused on the advanced manufacturing and energy, health care, and information technology sectors.

The programme combined screening, employer-informed training, and hiring coordination support services. While the process and impact evaluation (which included a randomised control trial) identified many success factors, it also identified several design features that worked less effectively, indicating the importance of design decisions and testing of different approaches. This included:

Mixed approach to applying screening models

Process evaluation findings noted that the programme initially relied on employers and community partners to use their networks to identify suitable participants. This included assessing whether they would likely succeed in training and referring the strongest candidates.

Screening included a 45 minute scored interview which was intended to lead to lower attrition from training and better outcomes. However, this approach encountered challenges as hospitality employers were unwilling to refer their best staff, while community organisations tended to recommend almost all interested applicants without screening. As a result, screening was subsequently brought in house.

Overall, outcomes analysis found that interview-based screening was not strongly associated with better outcomes, but basic literacy and numeracy testing showed greater ability to predict successful completion and earnings gains. It concluded that it is best to select participants who would benefit the most from training (screening) and, where possible, avoid those who would have the best outcomes regardless of whether they were trained (‘anti-creaming’).

Limited workplace experience and employer connections

Participants reported that while the training gave them useful foundational knowledge, the programme lacked opportunities to apply these skills in workplace settings. Many wanted internships, work experience, or more hands-on practical training. Participants also felt that employer engagement after training was weak, with limited support to connect them to vacancies.

Personalised and intensive support

The following section explores the importance of personalised and intensive support as a feature of effective retraining programmes. This can include tailoring to individual needs, providing ongoing one-to-one engagement and offering support throughout participants' employment journeys.

What works well

Multiple evaluations highlighted the importance of personalised and intensive support being embedded into retraining programmes. While the reports typically did not directly show how this supported impact on longer-term employment outcomes, several evaluations found this support led to improved participant engagement and were associated with positive employment outcomes.

Impact evaluations of WorkAdvance found that soft skills training and the provision of wraparound support were contributing factors to persistent earnings gains for participants. The study indicated that this type of support might be particularly important for participants who are exposed to repeated life course shocks (as defined by the evaluation).

Case study 5: Provision of intensive support

The RETAIN Impact Evaluation explored the delivery of 5 state-based programmes that aimed to help workers remain in, or return to, employment following injury or illness.

The programmes had a common framework of return-to-work coordination, healthcare engagement, and employment support. However, states were given considerable flexibility to adapt delivery models, partnerships, target groups, and services offered to meet local circumstances and needs.

The evaluation found that more intensive support contributed directly to stronger labour market impacts. This included regular communication between participants and programme coordinators, and the wider multi-agency system, including healthcare providers, and employers.

In particular, Kansas RETAINWORKS had programme coordinators and workforce development professionals actively involved in service delivery. These services

involved working with the participants to develop individualised return to work and employment plans. They also met participants at least weekly, and communicated with the participants' medical providers, employers and others to coordinate their stay at or return to work.

On average, participants and their coordinators had 19 communications while on programme. Other services offered, included supporting workplace accommodations, referrals to retraining or rehabilitation services, and supportive services such as financial assistance with housing, utilities, and childcare.

The Kansas programme was found to have significantly improved the employment and earnings of participants during the first year and reduced entry into disability programmes. Conversely, the evaluation found that programmes with weaker engagement showed less significant impacts.

Some of the evidence also indicated that intensive support could be particularly beneficial based on key participant characteristics.

Overview of support needs by participant characteristics

Support needs varied by participant characteristics, for example:

- older workers are more likely to require confidence-building and support with identifying transferable skills
- people furthest from the labour market or furthest from learning require intensive pastoral support
- people already in work need flexible delivery and tailored careers guidance and coaching to support transition to a new sector
- parents and carers require flexible delivery and support with caring responsibilities

The Evaluation of the Elevate Pilot found that personalised support helped the confidence and motivation of older workers facing redundancy (see case study 6).

Case study 6: Retraining and employment support models for older workers

The Elevate pilot aimed to support people aged 50 and over in the West Midlands in the manufacturing sector who were at risk of redundancy or had recently been made redundant.

The pilot responded to evidence showing that older workers in the region were less likely to return to work quickly after redundancy and often faced barriers such as limited digital skills, low confidence, and little recent experience of job search. The

pilot process and impact evaluation sought to understand what forms of support helped older workers move closer to employment and to strengthen the evidence base on effective employment support for this group.

Only 16 participants completed the programme, which limits the ability to draw firm conclusions or generalisations. However, the programme showed some success, with half of all completers (8 out of 16) securing employment.

Most (5) of these entered non-manufacturing sectors and full-time roles, while 3 were working as agency workers or contractors. A further 3 participants remained in their existing jobs.

In-depth interviews with 7 programme participants and 5 programme staff found that a blended approach, combining group-based coaching with personalised one-to-one support, was particularly beneficial for participants. Participants valued being able to learn alongside peers of a similar age who had experienced redundancy.

The in-depth interviews also found that skilled job coaches were viewed as critical to success, as they helped participants identify transferable skills and encouraged them to apply for opportunities they might otherwise have felt unsuited for. Job coaches also provided reassurance throughout the job-search process.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the Greater London Authority's (GLA) Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund found that learners furthest from the labour market could particularly benefit from holistic support. This included long-term unemployed people, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners, and people who had not engaged in learning for a long time. The programme offered extensive pastoral support, which project staff believed was essential to build learners' confidence and emotional resilience in order for them to complete the courses.

The process and outcomes pilot evaluation for the Upskill in Cyber Programme identified that differentiated career support models could be beneficial for programmes where people were at different career stages.

For example, soft skills sessions and careers fairs were particularly useful for early career participants who had more limited experience of CV writing and interviews, whereas career changers may need more support specifically navigating their route into cyber security roles and greater awareness of cyber-related roles.

Evidence from impact evaluation of UK ERA indicated that some groups who engaged with the support found it challenging to use skills gained from taking part in training to switch careers. This was especially prevalent among parents with preschool-aged children who sometimes wanted to defer changing careers until their children were older.

Other participants were discouraged from changing sector as the new jobs they desired were associated with poorer terms and conditions of employment. This

underlines the importance of sustained support to help participants explore new job opportunities suitable for their personal and financial circumstances.

What works less well
A common theme in the review was that programmes may be less effective, particularly for clients with more complex needs, without wider wraparound support throughout the programme.

The impact evaluation of the Cost and Outreach Pilots found some learners were unaware of where to find information about career advancement. Many participants were also unaware of available pastoral support. The evaluation recommended stronger communication and ongoing information, and advice and guidance for participants. However, it was still too early following the pilot to assess how this would affect the programme's impact.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the Skills Escalator Pilot found the programme identified some challenges when supporting individuals with complex needs, such as housing instability, financial crises, health issues, ESOL needs, and caring responsibilities. These barriers sometimes resulted in disengagement and the programme sought to identify whether further support needs and solutions could be sequenced into the client support journey.

Flexible delivery and accessibility

The following section explores the importance of flexible delivery and accessibility in retraining programmes.

This includes ensuring that training can be adapted to individual circumstances and delivered in ways that enable participation, engagement, and completion.

What works well
Several of the reports reviewed emphasised the importance of ensuring programmes were flexible and accessible to meet participants' existing responsibilities and circumstances.

Most of the evidence relating to flexibility was process-oriented and focused on participation, completion, and learner satisfaction. It did not typically include direct causal evidence on longer-term impacts such as sustained employment or wages.

Examples of this type of flexibility and accessibility included:

- offering courses and support outside of working hours (where individuals may have work or caring responsibilities)
- offering in-person and online options
- accessible locations (such as libraries)
- loans of equipment such as laptops

This flexibility enabled participation, engagement, and completion of courses and programmes. It also widened access from a range of groups. This included working adults, people with caring responsibilities, parents and guardians, people in rural

areas or with limited transport access. It could also support the accommodation of different learning speeds and styles.

Examples of programmes where flexibility was highlighted as important for participant engagement include:

The Skills Bootcamps Process Evaluation noted that flexibility supported engagement in the programme. The programme included online delivery, recorded sessions, evening and weekend provision, flexible deadlines, and adaptable course intensity and duration.

The report found that those given flexibility in when they were able to learn found the courses more manageable in terms of workload, and felt their courses were successfully meeting their needs.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the New Futures Pilots described the use of flexible provision, including evening delivery and blended learning. It found that training should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate work and caring responsibilities, and to respond to differing participant abilities.

The process and outcomes pilot evaluation for the Upskill in Cyber Programme found participants appreciated the flexible delivery model of the programme, as they felt it allowed them to fit their studying around professional and personal commitments. The majority (81%) of participants opted to take part in on-demand provision rather than live online learning because it fitted around these commitments.

Participants also wanted clear information about workload and time commitments because the programme was short and intense.

What works less well
Conversely, programmes were less effective when participants were not provided with flexibility to accommodate existing work commitments and patterns, caring responsibilities, or other personal circumstances.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the Skills Escalator Pilot found rigid course scheduling limited engagement by people with irregular working patterns and/or caring responsibilities.

A minor theme of the process and outcomes pilot evaluation for the Upskill in Cyber Programme was that some participants would have preferred more of the soft skills sessions and events to be held as evening and weekend sessions because they worked full time.

Guaranteed interviews

The following section examines the use of guaranteed interviews in retraining programmes. This could involve a commitment to interviews from an employer (or multiple employers), ensuring participants are considered for suitable vacancies, and have an opportunity to present their skills and experience.

Direct hiring pathways are often an important feature of US sectoral training programmes as noted in the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) evidence review

Sectoral employment programs as a path to quality jobs: lessons from randomised evaluations. However, only a small number of the reports reviewed used guaranteed interviews or job opportunities as a programme feature. This information was mostly from process evaluations, so there is limited evidence on the extent to which this leads to employment outcomes.

A prominent example is the Skills Bootcamps Process Evaluation. Guaranteed interviews were reported as an important motivator for some learners. However, the evaluation also highlighted implementation challenges, with some employers struggling to commit to interview guarantees.

Providers also questioned whether interviews were the most appropriate success measure. This was because digital bootcamp learners had varied career preferences that could not be anticipated fully at the start of training.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the New Futures Pilots reported that its Belfast model used guaranteed job interviews which (alongside course design and guaranteed work experience) supported it having the highest level of employer involvement in programme design and delivery in the pilots.

However, later participants in the programme had reduced opportunities for guaranteed work experience and job interviews, as it became more challenging to find new employers who were willing to engage (the report notes that this was in part due to a slow-down in technology sector recruitment in Northern Ireland).

Length and structure of programmes

There was more limited evidence on the most effective length and structure of retraining programmes. Evidence reviewed by What Works Growth in its Evidence Review 1: Employment Training found that ‘comparing fundamentally different types of training was difficult because finding suitable comparators is challenging’. They conclude that increasing understanding of what works for different groups needs to be a specific focus of policy design and evaluation.

Impact evaluations of WorkAdvance found that a train-then-place model was more effective for participants than immediate entry into work. Some early cohorts were placed into work before accessing occupationally relevant training.

A randomised controlled trial examined the economic impact on participants 7 years after entering the support. It found that participants who had entered a job placement first before accessing occupational training were entering lower wage jobs and were not gaining the skills they needed to advance in work.

Some of the reports identified that programme length can impact employment outcomes, for example, case study 7 found that 2-year programmes typically delivered larger and more sustained employment and wage gains than 1-year programmes.

Case study 7: The impact of programme completion and length on employment outcomes for disabled people

In Germany, vocational retraining programmes were used to support individuals whose impairments and health conditions prevented them from continuing in their previous occupations or job tasks.

Shorter 'partial' programmes lasted around one year and built additional skills, for example, in the fields of business administration or information technology. Longer 2-year 'full' programmes combined classroom learning and on-the-job training, leading to a full qualification in a new occupation.

The quasi-experimental impact study Effects of Vocational Retraining on Employment Outcomes Among Persons with Disabilities in Germany: A Quasi-Experiment estimated programme effects using administrative data for 2,399 participants who started retraining programmes in 2005. This included 278 graduates of 1-year programmes and 1,754 graduates of 2-year programmes. A comparison group was drawn from 367 individuals who entered retraining but did not complete it.

The report had 2 main findings:

1. Retraining programme completion was associated with improved labour market outcomes.
2. Retraining programme length influenced the scale of benefits experienced.

Completion of both programme types generated substantial benefits, and 2-year programmes typically delivered larger and more sustained gains. This included:

More time in employment

Graduates of 1-year retraining were employed for an estimated 405 additional days compared with the scenario where they had not completed retraining. Graduates of 2-year retraining were employed for an estimated 441 additional days.

Higher earnings

One-year retraining graduates earned about €24,260 more over 8 years than those who had not completed the programme. Two-year retraining graduates earned about €35,972 more over 8 years.

Reduced time on benefits

One-year completers had 316 fewer days receiving social-security benefits than those who had not completed the retraining. Two-year completers had 92 fewer days receiving social-security benefits (this may reflect the shorter duration and faster labour-market reintegration associated with the 1-year programmes).

The study did not explore the specific programme components that led to these outcomes, but it noted important differences between the 2 programme types.

Two-year programmes were viewed as comparable to apprenticeships, combining classroom and workplace learning, and leading to a recognised occupational qualification. One-year programmes were viewed as primarily providing additional skills to build on existing competencies and were designed to enable faster re-entry to work (including developing skills to enable changing sectors).

The study did not include a formal cost-benefit analysis. However, it is noted that the additional employment benefit was not ‘twice’ the amount for a 2-year programme, suggesting the possibility of diminishing returns.

Programme design and implementation limitations

Process evaluations often noted challenging programme design contexts and constraints. These were seen to have limited delivery, and therefore potentially the eventual impact of programmes. In particular, this included short contracting and implementation timescales.

Impact evaluations of ERA and WorkAdvance illustrated that it took time to implement all elements of support effectively. Authors indicated that participants who enrolled in the support later probably received stronger services than earlier cohorts. However, there is evidence that any impact of unevenness in support received was smoothed out over time. An impact evaluation of WorkAdvance found that difference in earnings impacts across cohorts was not statistically significant at any of the implementation sites, suggesting that the long-term impact of WorkAdvance did not differ based on when individuals entered the support.

To be fully effective, advisers delivering support need to have the right skill set. Impact evaluations of ERA in the US found that for successful implementation, advisers needed skills in recruitment, career counselling and labour market assessment.

The study authors highlighted that welfare to work staff who delivered the support often lacked these skills and that hiring the staff with the right skills was a challenge. Similarly, for ERA in the UK, qualitative findings from the UK impact evaluation found that Jobcentre Plus staff delivering the support faced a steep learning curve.

The study found that ERA’s focus on sourcing training that was relevant to demands of the local labour market initially proved challenging as staff were used to placing a higher priority on job placement. The study showed that over time, Jobcentre Plus staff became more adept at balancing the 2 demands. They were then better able to support participants to develop and pursue job advancement goals.

Financial support

Financial support can enable participation and retention, but the evidence does not demonstrate a consistent effect on employment or earnings. These findings should

therefore be treated with less confidence. In the reports considered, financial support typically took one of 3 forms:

- fully-funded or subsidised training costs
- income support
- other financial assistance

Fully-funded or subsidised training

Where courses were fully-funded or subsidised, it often removed barriers to taking part or enabled people to start training more quickly.

Impact evaluation of ERA in the UK found that the fact that training fees were covered was a motivating factor to enrolment, as fees were often a barrier to training among participant groups.

There was less consensus among both advisers and participants about the value of the training completion bonus. However, some considered it as an extra source of encouragement or as an 'opportunity cost' to help make up for a loss of family time.

While the financial incentive influenced engagement for some, it was generally just one part of the overall package that led to positive outcomes. Access to information, advice and guidance on training choices, and how to translate new skills and qualifications into career advancement were equally important to participants.

The Skills Bootcamps Process Evaluation found that fully funded provision made training accessible and attractive to participants, with some stating they would not otherwise have undertaken training.

The evaluation also noted that training offered a less expensive and faster alternative to other educational routes. Some learners said they would have paid for alternative training if the bootcamp was not available. However, others reported that they would have relied on other approaches such as self-teaching, job seeking in a different field, or trying to find an apprenticeship.

The GLA's process and outcomes study, Adult Education Budget Evaluation 2023 to 2024 reported that full funding flexibility for learners in receipt of less than the London Living Wage was associated with more positive outcomes than other adult skills enrolments. It was found to have increased opportunities for low-income learners to achieve positive economic or social outcomes by removing financial barriers.

Similarly, the impact evaluation of the Cost and Outreach Pilots found that subsidised learning was a significant motivator for enrolment and enabled learners to begin courses sooner as they no longer had to save to pay the fees.

The subsidies were also observed to widen participation from individuals who worked in sectors and occupations that were less likely to invest in training, and in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) where employees may find it more difficult to access time off to train.

Income support

Evidence on income support (where participants received money to support living costs) was more limited. This was not typically a feature of the retraining programmes

considered in this review. However, some programmes found that it enabled participation. These findings should also be treated with caution because welfare systems vary across different geographies.

In the impact evaluation, Estimating the Effect of a Retraining Programme on the Re-Employment Rate of Displaced Workers, participants received wage-related income support during retraining that exceeded unemployment insurance levels, creating a strong incentive to participate in the programme.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the GLA's Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund found that salary support in the Camden project helped to encourage employer participation in the programme.

Other financial assistance
The RETAIN Impact Evaluation examined several forms of financial assistance used by its composite programmes and their relationship to engagement, participant benefits, and economic well-being.

For example, in Minnesota treatment participants were estimated to receive $443 per person in stipends. These covered supportive services such as rent, transportation, or utility payments which were one of main contributors to the net benefits experienced by programme participants.

Value for money of programme support

Only a few of the reports considered included formal cost-benefit analyses of the support provided, and where they did, the factors considered varied. The limited number of studies also meant that it is not possible to compare value for money of different design features.

This is consistent with What Works Growth's Evidence Review into Employment Training, which found that there was limited robust and consistent insight into the value for money of different retraining programmes.

The impact study Washington State workforce development programmes evaluation found that collectively, the 12 programmes considered provided an estimated social return of $5.60 for every $1 invested and a total net economic gain of $14.5 billion over 5 years.

The analysis found that longer and more intensive programmes often incurred higher short-term costs through lost earnings during participation, delaying their breakeven point. However, these programmes frequently generated stronger longer-term earnings benefits.

For example, the Community and Technical College 'Worker Retraining' programme had very high lost earnings and a weak 5-year return on investment (a loss of $3.5 million). However, this became positive over a 10-year period as benefits accumulated to an estimated $261 million.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the Skills Escalator Pilot explored the extent to which programme benefits (based on participant outcomes) outweighed

programme costs. It found an additional earnings impact of £147.10 per month compared with a matched comparison group, however, fiscal return alone did not cover programme costs. Once wider economic and wellbeing impacts were taken into account, it was found that for every £1 invested the programme generated £3.41 of public value return.

The impact evaluation of the New Orleans Career Pathways programme found that it generated substantial earnings gains for participants in its later cohorts and produced positive returns to society even after accounting for programme costs. For later cohorts, the estimated average causal impact on earnings was $1,051 per quarter, an increase of almost 30% over the average control group earnings.

The report argued that the difference between cohorts is a result of programme improvements being made over time. The authors also cautioned that labour market conditions, local employer involvement, and New Orleans-specific circumstances may limit wider applicability of these results.

3. How context and different participant groups influence programme effectiveness

This section outlines the evidence on how context and different participant groups can influence the effectiveness of retraining programmes. It includes evidence from impact evaluations where available, supported by qualitative findings.

Key findings

Key findings included:

- programme design features appear to be more important than economic conditions in achieving positive outcomes
- programmes perform best when they are responsive to employer needs and local labour markets
- retraining programmes generally have more long-term positive impact on the unemployed than those in work

Economic context

Several of the studies discussed how wider economic conditions shaped retraining outcomes.

Retraining programmes did not operate independently of economic conditions, with evidence indicating that economic conditions and shocks can influence programme demand and delivery.

In particular, the impact of COVID-19 on programme delivery (including the limitations on what training and workplace experiences could be delivered in-person) was discussed in several reports. It was a key driver for the development of some of the programmes implemented, such as Skills Escalator, the Elevate programme, and Skills Bootcamps.

However, What Works Growth's Evidence Topic: Employment Training evidence review found that programme design features were more important than macroeconomic factors and noted that it was 'hard to reach any strong conclusions on whether the effectiveness of training programmes is affected by the strength or weakness of the labour market.'

In other reports, the observation was that retraining programmes had more significant impacts on job-entry when the economic conditions were less favourable, while

programmes had more impact on wages and job progression when economic conditions were favourable.

The impact study Washington State workforce development programmes evaluation found that programme impact, among the 12 considered, varied according to broader economic conditions.

Specifically, the report found that public workforce training systems appeared to have greater employment impacts when the economy is weak, but greater earnings impacts when the economy is strong.

The report hypothesised that employment impacts tended to be larger during economic downturns because the study's control group would have greater opportunity on average to find a job when the economy is strong. This would diminish the estimated impact experienced by the treatment group.

It also noted that earnings impacts tended to be larger during economic expansions because training and job placement services would result in better employment options, such as higher wages, than during a downturn.

The RETAIN Impact Evaluation found that more positive labour market conditions during the study period likely supported employment retention and earnings growth among both treatment and comparison groups.

The hypothesis was that strong labour market conditions may have reduced the observable difference between programme participants and non-participants. It noted that programme effects might be different during periods of weaker labour demand, when employment support becomes more important.

Local labour market and sector alignment

As discussed previously, strong alignment with local employer needs was a key success factor for successful programme implementation and participation, and for successful outcomes for participants.

Several studies found that programmes performed best when linked to sectors experiencing skills shortages, strong employer demand, and clear progression routes.

Examples of this included:

- the Skills Bootcamps Process Evaluation found that clear employer demand and strong employer links were important for both participant engagement and employer satisfaction
- the process and outcomes pilot evaluation for the Upskill in Cyber Programme found that employers were motivated to engage because the programme provided access to potential recruits and a diverse talent pool
    - at the time of the evaluation, 39 participants (out of 217) had secured jobs in the cyber security sector, and a further 58 had secured interviews for relevant roles

- the GLA's process and outcomes study, Adult Education Budget Evaluation 2023 to 2024 highlights the importance of linking provision to sectors with skills shortages, and notes that the healthcare sector has the highest proportion of programme enrolments

Particular sectors that often featured as a focus of retraining programmes included the digital sector, due to sector growth, and the health and social care sector, where demand and conditions support retraining.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the GLA's Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund found that projects engaging health and social care employers generally performed well. This was because workers were motivated to progress within their roles and employers had demand for skills.

The Redbridge project provided vocational childcare training, ESOL, and employability support for ethnic minority women, with a particular focus on helping learners move towards employment in childcare. Although planned industry placements could not take place because of COVID-19 restrictions, the project achieved relatively strong employment outcomes, with project data indicating that around 40% of learners progressed into the childcare sector after completing the training.

The evidence also suggested it was important for programmes to be flexible and responsive to changing labour market demands and to local needs.

For example, the New Orleans Career Pathways programme was purposefully designed as a demand-driven intervention and adapted its training offer in response to changing labour market conditions. When demand in the energy sector declined because of falling oil prices, the programme changed its focus to the IT and healthcare sectors in addition to advanced manufacturing.

The programme's impact evaluation argued that maintaining alignment with local labour demand was likely critical to programme success. Programme leads were able to make this pivot by remaining abreast of changing needs and conditions through quarterly trade advisory committees. These committees brought together employers to obtain an understanding of workforce requirements and hiring potential. The training providers worked with local firms to develop the curriculum where necessary.

However, some evaluations noted that delivering training and work experience opportunities aligned to more technical sectors could be more challenging. This was due to the need for specialist equipment, as well as instances where in-person engagement was not possible (for example in the Skills Bootcamps which were limited by some COVID-19 restrictions on face-to-face engagement).

The reports explored in this review typically placed more emphasis on local sector and labour market demand than on geographic variation, such as the difference between programmes operating in rural and urban contexts. As such, it is often the case that place-based effects are conflated with local labour market conditions and drivers.

There was also limited generalisable evidence on more ‘hyper-local’ influences, although the What Works Growth evidence review argued that training programmes responding to structural economic shocks are typically highly tailored and designed for specific local contexts, making it difficult to derive generalisable conclusions.

Impact on different groups

Some of the evaluations included in this review compared how effective programmes were for different participant groups and over different time periods. Findings from WorkAdvance and ERA suggested that over time retraining programmes had less impact on people in work, and more impact on the unemployed.

A 10-year impact evaluation of WorkAdvance found sustained earning gains among participants who had been initially unemployed. It is likely that in the absence of taking part in the programme, this group would have experienced worse wage outcomes over time than those who were closer to the labour market when they enrolled in the support.

People who had been unemployed for 1 to 6 months, and people who were long-term unemployed, saw their earnings increase. This was by about $3,600 (USD) in both year 7 and year 8 for the first group and by between $2,795 and $3,063 from years 7 to 9 for the second group). Participants who were fully attached to the labour market when they entered the support saw no impacts on earnings over the same period.

ERA in the UK produced short-term earnings gains for lone parents who were mainly women. The UK impact evaluation showed that the early gains resulted from increases in the proportion of participants who worked full time. These effects generally faded in the later years, after the programme ended.

However, the earnings gain appears to have lasted longer among participants who were better educated, though initially unemployed. Participation had the biggest impact for long-term unemployed participants (mostly men). For them, ERA produced modest but sustained increases in employment and substantial and sustained increases in earnings. These positive effects emerged after the first year and were still evident at the end of a 5-year follow-up period.

Case study 8: What retraining support works for people in work?

Learning and Work developed the New Futures programme, with funding through the COVID-19 Support Fund. It tested effective approaches to helping adults reskill and change career through 4 place-based pilots in Belfast, Edinburgh, Tees Valley, and Wales. The pilots combined careers advice, skills training, employer engagement, and wraparound support, while being tailored to local labour market conditions and participant needs.

The process and outcomes evaluation found that, while employment outcomes were similar regardless of participants’ prior employment status, people’s experience of different delivery models varied based on the individual’s employment status at the time of the intervention.

People who were in work at the time of the intervention found it essential that the programme was accessible and flexible. Many of the employed participants struggled to attend training delivered during normal working hours.

Full-time programmes, particularly the Belfast academy model, were difficult to access because participants often had to leave existing employment, creating financial risks. The evaluation found that evening provision, blended learning, self-directed study options, and less intensive training spread over a longer period were more suitable for employed career changers.

Across both groups, the evaluation found that the most effective models combined personalised careers guidance, tailored training, practical employability support, and ongoing wraparound support.

Overall, 44% (280) of registered participants progressed into new jobs. While the report does not provide outcomes by sector, it notes that among participants who entered work and for whom destination data were available, 72% changed career (defined as moving to a different sector or a substantially different occupation).

4. Delivering retraining at the local level: what works well

This section explores the features of local systems associated with retraining programmes that work well. Most of the evidence relating to partnerships and systems was process-oriented and focused on participation, completion, and satisfaction of different stakeholders. It did not typically include direct causal evidence on longer-term impacts such as sustained employment or wages.

Key findings

Key findings included:

- there was no evidence comparing whether programmes delivered at a national, regional or local level are more effective
- successful programmes have strong partnerships supported by clear infrastructure
- local government often played a coordinating role in retraining systems
- specialist training providers are associated with more positive outcomes
- careers advice and employment support are more effective when delivered by skilled professionals
- community and voluntary organisations play an important role in referrals
- employer involvement is particularly important in ensuring training reflects current needs and providing progression opportunities

Local partnership structures

Strong partnerships were one of the most consistently cited features of effective retraining systems. Across the UK evidence, successful programmes were typically delivered through partnerships involving employers, training providers, local authorities, Jobcentre Plus, careers services, further education (FE) colleges, community organisations and other local stakeholders.

A recurring finding was that partnership quality depended not only on which organisations were involved, but also on the infrastructure supporting collaboration. The evidence came mainly from process evaluations and qualitative findings rather than impact evaluations.

Several evaluations identified strong partnerships underpinned by clear leadership, shared governance arrangements and strong referral mechanisms as important enablers of effective delivery.

The impact evaluation of the Cost and Outreach Pilots found that successful programmes typically had strong strategic leadership, steering groups, clear partner roles and regular communication between partner organisations.

It also found that partnership protocols and data-sharing agreements were important mechanisms for creating seamless learner journeys. Meanwhile weak referral systems, limited communication and unclear responsibilities were identified as barriers to effectiveness.

Case study 9: How a governance and operating model of partnership working supported retraining

The Cost and Outreach Pilots were delivered across 5 Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Strategic Authority areas in England. They aimed to increase participation in subsidised Level 3 plus learning among working adults. The evaluation concluded that areas with stronger partnership infrastructure were better able to recruit learners, engage employers and support progression.

Strategic leadership: LEPs and MSAs acted as local leads, bringing together learning providers, National Careers Service providers, outreach organisations and employer representatives to coordinate delivery.

Employers and Chambers of Commerce contributed labour market intelligence, helping ensure that provision reflected local workforce needs and increasing opportunities for progression. Courses were aligned with local economic priorities and skills shortages, with provision mostly concentrated in sectors such as health and social care, digital and engineering.

Referral pathways: Effective partnership structures helped create a coordinated learner journey from recruitment through to training participation. In several areas, outreach organisations identified potential learners, Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) providers helped individuals understand local training opportunities and career pathways, while colleges or training providers delivered subsidised Level 3 plus courses.

Formal governance arrangements were also particularly important. Steering groups provided oversight of programme delivery and enabled regular communication between partners, while partnership protocols and data-sharing agreements supported coordination across organisations.

In the evaluation, interviewees reported that these arrangements helped reduce fragmentation between outreach, careers guidance and training provision, making it easier for learners to access support and move between different elements of the programme.

International evidence drew similar conclusions. In the United States, the RETAIN Impact Evaluation found that programmes achieved stronger outcomes where

workforce boards (regional employment and skills organisations), workforce agencies, employers and healthcare providers were actively integrated.

In RETAIN, workforce boards and agencies worked directly with healthcare providers and dedicated case managers to integrate health and work support. The evaluation found programmes using this integrated approach achieved stronger service uptake and generally better outcomes than those relying mainly on healthcare services or workforce services alone.

Who should deliver which elements of retraining programmes?

The most successful programmes distributed functions across organisations according to their expertise. Specialist providers and colleges were typically best placed to deliver technical training, careers professionals provided guidance and navigation, employers shaped curriculum and provided workplace opportunities and local authorities or combined authorities often played a coordinating role.

Figure 1: the function of each component – strength of evidence

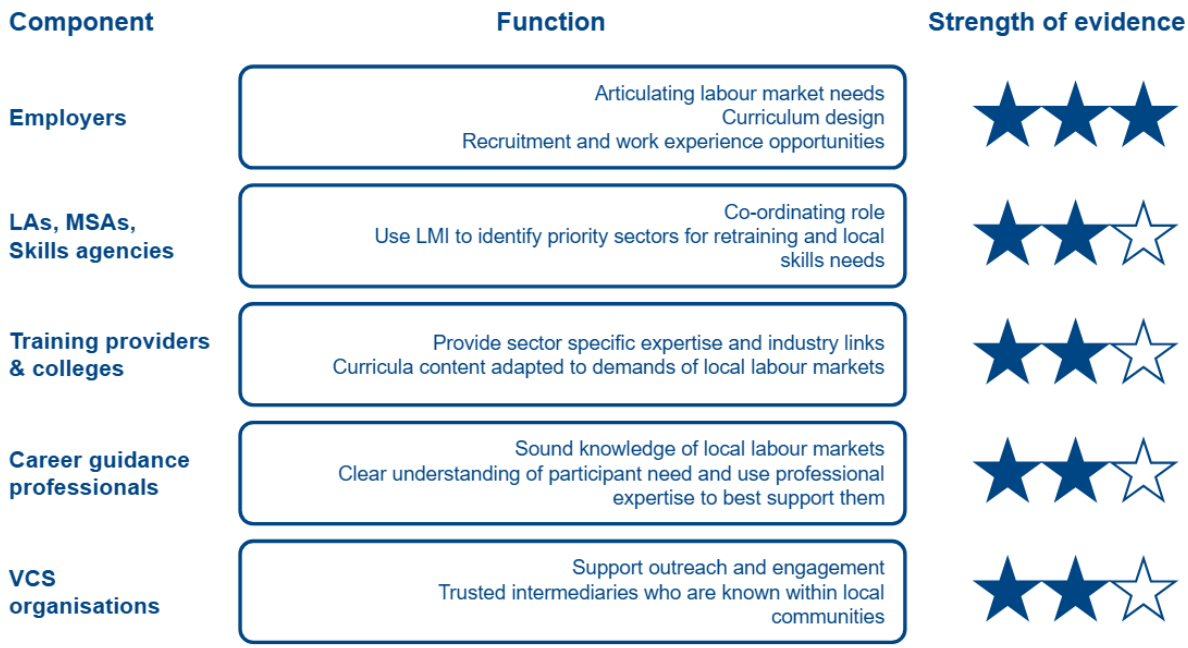


Figure 1 provides an overview of the function of each organisation and the strength of evidence that underpins each component:

Component: employers
Function:

- articulating labour market needs
- curriculum design
- recruitment and work experience opportunities

Strength of evidence: high quality.

Component: local authorities, MSAs, Skills agencies
Function:

- coordinating role
- use LMI to identify priority sectors for retraining and local skills needs

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

Component: training colleges and providers
Function:

- provide sector specific expertise and industry links
- curriculum content adapted to demands of local labour markets

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

Component: career guidance professionals
Function:

- sound knowledge of local labour markets
- clear understanding of participant need
- professional expertise to best support them

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

Component: VCS organisations.
Function:

- support outreach and engagement
- trusted intermediaries who are known within local communities

Strength of evidence: moderate quality.

Level of devolution
There was no evidence comparing whether programmes delivered at a national, regional or local level are more effective. The What Works Growth review of evidence on employment training found no impact evaluations directly comparing local, regional and national delivery systems. The evidence in our review similarly did not

directly compare different governance models, instead, most evidence focused on programme delivery rather than institutional effectiveness.

There is also a gap in the evidence about whether there are any cost savings achieved if programmes are designed and procured at a national level, and whether such savings could offset benefits achieved from local delivery.

However, findings from several studies suggested that local flexibility could support effective retraining. Programmes delivered through local and regional structures, including the GLA's Adult Education Budget, Skills Bootcamps, Skills for Londoners, Skills Escalator and the Cost and Outreach Pilots, demonstrated the value of tailoring provision to local labour market conditions and regional economic priorities.

The key benefit observed in local systems was stronger alignment between training provision, employer demand and learner needs, as devolution allowed programmes to be responsive to the local context.

Local authorities, MSAs and skills agencies

In UK studies, local authorities, MSAs, LEPs and skills agencies often had an important coordinating role within retraining systems. These organisations brought together stakeholders, commissioned provision, supported referrals and used labour market intelligence to identify priority sectors and skills needs. However, the evidence reviewed did not indicate any of these bodies were more or less effective than one another in undertaking these functions.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the Skills Escalator Pilot provided an example of local authorities undertaking a direct delivery role. The evaluation found that Harrow and Hounslow councils coordinated support for low-income workers receiving Housing Benefit through partnerships with housing services, Jobcentre Plus, colleges, training providers and employers. Local authority teams helped develop referral pathways, connect participants to funded training and careers support, and address wider barriers to progression.

The programme found that these partnerships supported earnings progression, with participants who undertook training substantially more likely to increase their earnings than non-participants.

The GLA's process and outcomes study, Adult Education Budget Evaluation 2023 to 2024 provided an example of an MSA using devolved funding powers to influence provision. The evaluation found that GLA used local flexibilities to support provision in priority sectors including health and social care, construction, hospitality and digital while also funding additional employability, pastoral and outreach support for disadvantaged learners. This suggests that MSAs can have an important role in aligning retraining provision with local priorities.

Specialist training providers and colleges

Technical and vocational training was most effectively delivered by specialist providers, colleges or other organisations with recognised expertise and strong industry links.

Studies emphasised the importance of training providers maintaining close links to employers and adapting content to labour market demand. Industry-recognised qualifications also increased learner confidence and employer recognition.

Evidence on the role of specialist training providers included:

- the process and outcomes pilot evaluation for the Upskill in Cyber Programme found that participants highly valued the delivery of cyber security training by a recognised cyber security training provider, and viewed provider reputation and industry-recognised certifications as important factors in programme credibility
- the Skills Bootcamps Process Evaluation found that specialist digital and technical training providers used existing employer networks to shape curricula around local skills shortages in areas
- some evidence from the meta-analysis The Effectiveness of Adult Retraining: Evidence from a Meta-Analytic Review indicated that private sector and specialist providers could achieve stronger employment outcomes than public providers, although wider review evidence suggests that most successful programmes use mixed public and private delivery arrangements and there is not enough evidence to indicate one provider type is better

Career guidance professionals

Careers advice and employability support were most effective when delivered by experienced careers advisers, coaches, navigators or caseworkers. These staff provide effective support due to strong knowledge of local labour markets as well as understanding of participants' needs.

Evaluations of programmes including New Futures, Skills Escalator and Elevate highlighted the importance of personalised careers guidance that included action planning and ongoing coaching. Participants valued advisers' ability to identify their transferable skills and tailor advice to their individual circumstances.

Trusted relationships between participants and advisers were frequently associated with higher levels of engagement and confidence, as well as progression into employment or higher paid work.

These career professionals also play an important role in initial assessment to make sure that the people who would benefit most are enrolled into the support. For example, impact evaluations of WorkAdvance highlighted the extensive screening process ensured that the programme was accessed by appropriate cohorts.

Voluntary and community sector organisations (VCS)

Some evidence showed that community and voluntary organisations can act as trusted intermediaries in supporting outreach and participant engagement, although it was primarily based on qualitative evidence relating to recruitment, engagement and referral outcomes rather than measured employment impacts.

The process and outcomes evaluation of the New Futures Pilots discussed the pilot's use of VCS networks to identify and engage potential participants, while the process and outcomes evaluation of the GLA's Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund found

that charities, community groups, children's centres and local organisations were particularly effective in engaging disadvantaged learners and supporting referrals.

Similarly, the process evaluation of the Sector Hub Action Research Project (SHARP) and the GLA's process and outcomes study, Adult Education Budget Evaluation 2023 to 2024 found that community organisations and Jobcentre Plus referral networks helped programmes reach groups that are less likely to participate in mainstream training provision.

Employers

Across the evidence, employers contributed labour market intelligence, curriculum design, mentoring, workplace experience, interviews and recruitment opportunities. Employer involvement was particularly important in ensuring training reflected current labour market demand and provided clear progression routes.

The strongest evidence of effective employer involvement was in sectors experiencing skills shortages or active recruitment demand, including digital, cyber security, health and social care, construction and technical occupations. Several studies found that employer engagement was most effective where employers had genuine vacancies or workforce needs.

For example, the process and outcomes evaluation of the New Futures Pilots found stronger employer engagement where training was linked to growth sectors and live vacancies, such as technology-focused provision in Belfast and Wales.

5. Conclusions

There is evidence that retraining programmes can provide positive long-term outcomes for participants. But they do not always work. Whether they do depends on many aspects of their contexts and implementation including the target population, the organisations involved in delivery, and the elements of programme design.

The strongest retraining programmes include elements such as sector or occupation-specific training with clear labour market demand, active employer engagement, effective participant screening to ensure suitability, flexible delivery and personalised wraparound support.

Programmes tend to work better for some participant groups, with unemployed people generally experiencing more positive outcomes. There is more limited evidence on how economic, geographic and labour market context influences the effectiveness of programmes. Comparative evidence of who is best placed to deliver training programmes is also lacking, as noted in previous reviews.

These findings are in line with previous evidence reviews. However, this review adds to the knowledge base by providing a strength of evidence rating for the different practical elements of what constitutes an effective programme. Information about how evidence ratings were applied is set out in the accompanying technical annex.

The key findings for each programme feature are set out below, along with the evidence type and standard.

Impact on different groups

People who are out of work are more likely to experience long-term improvements in earnings, than people who are in work at the start of delivery.

Evidence type and standard: High – causal

Wraparound support

Many participants need access to wraparound support to complete training and progress in employment.

Evidence type and standard: High – causal

Provision of work-based learning

Programmes that include work-based learning are more effective than those which only include classroom learning.

Evidence type and standard: High – causal

High-quality labour market intelligence

Programmes are more effective when they are tailored to in-demand sectors and the needs of local employers.

Evidence type and standard: High – influence

Occupational or sector-based training

Occupational or sector-based training programmes are associated with more positive outcomes than programmes that deliver more generic training. This training needs to be delivered by providers with sufficient expertise.

While there is clear evidence on the need for sector-specific and work-based training, the evidence is more limited on the length, structure and level of training. The variation between retraining programmes and the experiences of different groups mean it is likely to be difficult to provide generalised evidence of what works.

Evidence type and standard: High – influence

Selecting participants who will benefit from programmes

Programmes that work well screen participants. They choose people who are suitable and most likely to benefit in the long-term (for example, people with larger treatment effects). They avoid ‘creaming’, which means picking people who would do well anyway.

Evidence type and standard: High – influence

Providing financial support

Financial support can include fully funded or subsidised training, and income support. This support can reduce barriers and enable participation, but the evidence does not reliably demonstrate an effect on employment or earnings outcomes.

Evidence type and standard: High – indicative

How context influences effectiveness

The evidence suggests that training programmes may have greater employment impacts when the economy is weak and greater earnings impacts when the economy is strong. However, it appears programme design features are more important than macroeconomic factors when considering effectiveness.

Evidence type and standard: High – indicative

Flexible delivery

To help participants take part in retraining, courses also need to be flexible and fit individual needs. For example, courses need to be accessible outside of standard working hours, with a mix of face-to-face and online options available.

Evidence type and standard: High – indicative

Delivered by skilled professionals

Experienced careers advisers, coaches and caseworkers are vital to participants taking part in retraining successfully. They need a strong knowledge of local labour markets and be skilled in helping participants identify their skills development needs, Delivery staff's knowledge about skills needs in local areas improves as programmes mature.

Evidence type and standard: Moderate – influence

Support tailored to different groups

The evidence suggests that different elements of support are more important for different groups. Older workers are more likely to require confidence-building and support with identifying transferable skills.

People furthest from the labour market or furthest from learning require intensive pastoral support. People already in work need flexible delivery and tailored careers guidance and coaching to support transition to a new sector. Parents and carers require flexible delivery and support with caring responsibilities.

Evidence type and standard: Moderate – influence

Strong partnership working

There is no comparative evidence on whether retraining programmes are best delivered at a regional, national, local level. However, effective partnership working is a key feature of successful retraining programmes. These networks are wide and vary depending on the context of the support. Successful programmes have sound infrastructures that support collaboration.

Evidence type and standard: Moderate – indicative

Guaranteed interviews

Guaranteed interviews are an important component of some successful retraining programmes. However, it is not clear from this research whether they are directly connected with improved outcomes or whether they are a broader indicator of successful employer engagement.

Evidence type and standard: Moderate – indicative

6. Recommendations

This chapter presents tailored recommendations for local stakeholders on the design and delivery of retraining programmes. It is relevant to senior decision makers, policy and delivery staff. The recommendations are organised by mechanism and identify the main audience, with examples from practice.

Design and adapt training provision to meet local demand

Main audience
Senior decision makers

Recommendation
Use labour market intelligence such as employer insights and vacancy data to identify priority sectors before commissioning provision.

Build in review points so programmes can change course content, or numbers enrolled where demand changes.

Example from practice
The New Orleans Career Pathways programme shifted provision to new sectors (including Information Technology and Healthcare) when demand for jobs in the oil industry fell.

Commission high-quality, sector-specific training

Main audience
Policy staff

Recommendation
Prioritise providers with recognised technical expertise, strong employer links and experience delivering qualifications or accreditations in the target sector.

Tailored rather than generic training is more likely to support people to achieve employment outcomes.

Example from practice
The WorkAdvance site run by Per Scholas was the most successful in delivering sustained positive outcomes and this can be, in part, attributed to its existing strong relationships with local employers and understanding of the local labour market.

Involve employers throughout design and delivery

Main audience
Policy and delivery staff

Recommendation
Involve employers in programme design early enough to shape course content so that it meets their needs.

Secure workplace exposure through placements, mentoring, work trials and workplace training.

Example from practice
The design phase of Skills Bootcamps demonstrates how employers can be effectively involved in the development of training.

Build partnership infrastructure

Main audience
Senior decision makers and policy staff

Recommendation
Agree partner roles, referral routes, information-sharing processes and escalation points before delivery starts.

Use steering groups to review recruitment, learner progress, employer engagement and barriers to completion.

Example from practice
Cost and Outreach Pilots used local leadership, referral pathways and data-sharing arrangements to ensure effective delivery in complex systems.

Screen and target participants effectively

Main audience
Policy and delivery staff

Recommendation
Use screening to identify whether applicants are likely to benefit from training, meet course requirements and need support to progress.

Combine checks, such as literacy, numeracy or technical readiness, with careers guidance to avoid weak targeting and make sure the programme reaches those who need it most.

Ensure that screening is delivered by appropriately qualified staff who can apply the criteria consistently without bias.

Example from practice
The evaluation of the New Orleans Career Pathways programme found that screening was best delivered in-house rather than by employers or community organisations to make sure that the programme targeted people who would experience the greatest benefits.

Provide flexible and wraparound support

Main audience
Delivery staff

Recommendation
Assess barriers at enrolment and offer practical support such as flexible learning options, childcare or travel support, digital access, pastoral support and ongoing careers guidance.

Example from practice
The GLA Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund provided extensive pastoral support to groups such as long-term unemployed people, ESOL learners, and people who had not engaged in learning for a long time.

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