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Learning Worker Project Evaluation: Final Report

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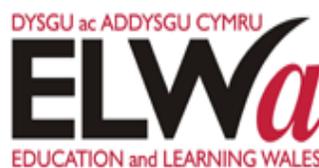
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The Learning Workers Project (LWP) has been a pilot initiative funded by The Welsh Assembly Government and ELWa. The programme was implemented in September 2002 and ran until March 2005. During that time LWP funding provided free learning, up to a level 3 qualification, for almost 1,800 workers employed across 300 organisations in the Llanelli area. The total cost to the public purse has been in the order of £2m.

All workers employed in Llanelli, either on a part-time or full-time basis, were eligible for LWP funded learning during this period, providing they did not already possess a level 3 qualification. LWP also funded a relatively wide range of courses which would not usually be eligible for ELWa funding. The five most popular courses studied were NVQ Construction and Civil Engineering Services; EMTA Performing Manufacturing Operations; LGV driving (various courses, practical and theory); NVQ Care and the Institute of Leadership and Management Team Leading course.

Each learner was offered the opportunity to access LWP funded training twice provided that the initial learning opportunity aimed for a qualification level lower than level 3 and that the second learning opportunity aimed for a higher qualification than the first. This formed part of the programme's "two bites at the cherry" policy.

Of the 1765 learners that registered onto LWP funded training, three quarters were aged over 25 and 42% fell within the 35 – 49 age group. The majority (67%) were male, although a larger proportion of females responded to the survey of learners undertaken as part of this evaluation. Three quarters of these workers were training towards NVQ level 2 and over two thirds (69%) had left school at or before the age of 16. Almost 92% of all the LWP learners surveyed were employed on a permanent basis and over a quarter of those surveyed had been with their current employer for over 10 years. 37% have already completed their course; 23% have dropped out early or quit, while the remaining 40% are either still learning or the data relating to them is not yet available.

Ten training providers in the area supplied the learning opportunities, with Coleg Sir Gâr supplying the largest proportion of the training. These training providers also played a crucial role in LWP's engagement and recruitment process. LWP has also been successful in engaging employers resulting in a rapid take-up of training opportunities funded through the programme. The success of this engagement has been largely dependent on the strength of the existing relationship between the training provider and the employer.

One of the negative outcomes of the engagement process being driven directly by the training providers has been the relatively low level of training needs assessment that took place. The ETPs in England had a much stronger focus on needs assessment. However, even in the English pilot areas, training providers also played an important role in recruiting learners and less than half of the employers and learners involved in the ETPs actually received training needs assessments.

Over a third of the LWP learners had not participated in any learning prior to LWP since leaving full time education mainly due to lack of time. These time constraints created genuine barriers that limited their ability to participate in any learning outside working hours. LWP improved learning access for workers as it, in most cases, brought learning to the workplace. Keeping the learning outside of the classroom played an important role in encouraging many individuals and employers to take up learning opportunities through LWP. Learners were also offered the opportunity to undertake much of the learning within working hours which also helped to overcome a number of the time barriers they had previously encountered.

In the INA Bearings, Calsonic and Krupps Camford sites, Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) money, contributed as part of the overall LWP funding, was used to develop on-site learning suites which further increased opportunities to learn within the workplace.

The direct cost of training played a crucial role for the employers surveyed in relation to the decisions they made regarding whether or not to embrace training opportunities for their workers. Removing cost barriers widened the participation spectrum of workforce development training in Llanelli considerably. Cost removal also significantly increased the number of hard to reach workers that participated in workforce development learning. Similar findings have also been recorded across the ETPs in England.

Cost was reported to be less of a barrier for the learners although many would not have expected to pay for their training. However, the combination of removing costs and modifying delivery approaches, such as learning in the workplace, has had a positive result on the number of learners involved.

Less than a quarter (23%) of learner survey respondents reported that they planned to undertake some form of training prior to the opportunities offered to them by LWP, and only 40% of these respondents (8.5% of all respondents) reported that the planned training was the same as the training that they were currently participating in. These findings suggest that the programme has generated relatively low displacement and deadweight and has encouraged a significant amount of new learning participation.

The additional demand generated for workforce development training in Llanelli has been significant and has contributed to the overall demand increases recorded across the local authority area. Increases in workplace training undertaken in Carmarthenshire between 2002 and 2004 have been well above the Welsh average and the highest amongst all local authority areas in Wales.

Almost all learners on the LWP (97.5%) believed that the training would benefit them, and almost two thirds are now considering further training. Indeed, at the time of reporting almost 10% of LWP learners have already registered onto further learning courses. It remains to be seen the degree to which this enthusiasm for future learning will be sustained once charges are re-introduced.

Just over half (52%) of LWP participants surveyed held a level 2 qualification before taking up LWP funded learning, although 27% held no qualifications at all prior to LWP. The majority (62%) of the learners aimed at qualifications that were at a higher level than those they previously held. Indeed 7% aimed towards upgrading their qualifications by three levels, i.e. upgrading from a position of no qualifications to a level 3 qualification; while a further 25% aimed to increase their skill base by 2 levels.

Three-quarters of the learners were working towards NVQ level 2 and one-fifth towards a level 3 qualification. Very few learners, if any, undertook training aimed at developing basic skills although evidence suggests that there would have been a need for such learning.

When asked to identify the range of benefits that may emerge from the learning almost two thirds (65%) of the learners surveyed were of the impression that the learning would help them do their current job better. Almost 40% reported that they perceived that the training would increase their current job satisfaction and a third (34%) reported that they perceived that the training would increase their confidence.

The benefits perceived by level 1 learners focused largely around the development of confidence and increased job satisfaction. On the other hand learners aiming at level 2 and especially level 3 qualifications perceived that the outcomes of the learning would be of greater benefit to themselves in the form of possible promotion, or to find a new, higher income job. This raises the question as to whether or not the public purse should fully-fund training for level 3 qualifications.

Almost a half of the learners surveyed were of the opinion that the benefits of the learning would be shared equally between themselves and their employer, while almost a third (31.5%) considered that they themselves would be the main beneficiary. Less than 15% of surveyed learners were of the impression that the training would mainly benefit their employer.

Most employers were of the opinion that both employers and learners would benefit from LWP although the general consensus was that the benefits of the learning would be weighted towards the individual worker. Almost all employer respondents (97%) were of the impression that the LWP funded learning would be beneficial to their business or organisation and would lead to the establishment of a more highly skilled workforce.

For a quarter of the employers surveyed, the direct cost of the learning would not be an issue and they would be prepared to support the same level and quantity of learning activities even if the costs had remained. For the remaining 75%, not removing the direct costs would limit the amount of learning that they would support and, in the case of 28% of them, would discourage them from supporting any of the learning. It is clear therefore that workforce development learning remains cost sensitive.

Conclusions

The objective of LWP was to increase the demand for learning amongst the employed workforce. It was designed as a pilot initiative to see what would happen if learning was made available free of charge, with relatively limited marketing and interventions. In tune with this ethos, the management of the programme also took on a relatively hands off approach, relying on a high level of trust between programme management and training providers. Overall the evaluation team conclude that the programme has been managed very effectively.

From the evidence that is available the costs associated with LWP would appear to have generated good value for money. However, a complete answer to this question will depend largely on the sustainability of its influence amongst the local workforce and across the local economy, as well as what use the workers make of their learning. Further tracking studies would be required to fully assess these factors.

Extending the costs placed upon the public purse to include the whole of Wales, for example, may not be feasible and as such future initiatives of this nature may wish to work with Sector Skills Councils to target priority sectors, or target growth businesses across all sectors and industries. However targeting initiatives in this way is likely to be fraught with difficulties and as such targeting priority geographical areas is likely to be the optimum way forward.

LWP has been very successful in increasing training participation rates on a geographical level amongst workers within the Llanelli area. It also appears to have been successful in generating additional training opportunities and attracting segments of the working population previously excluded from training opportunities.

Very little participation in basic skills learning was undertaken within LWP indicating that such learning needs may not have been picked up during recruitment processes. The lack of independent pre-learning needs assessment processes does cause some concern relating to the degree to which some of the learning outcomes pursued were of optimum relevancy to the learner and / or the employer. Guidance is recognised as a key factor in business and workforce development and as such this study suggests that future initiatives of this nature will need to incorporate a higher degree of needs assessment than those adopted within LWP.

Removing financial barriers has encouraged employers and workers in Llanelli to increase their training and education participation rates. Though such results may simply confirm demand theory, they nevertheless indicate that direct costs are a significant contributor to the relatively poor demand for workforce learning.

Almost a half of the surveyed employers claimed that their attitudes towards training had changed as a direct consequence of their involvement in LWP.

However, only one in five of these employers were converted to the attitude that training is a net investment rather than a potential or actual cost. This indicates limitations to the sustainability of the pilot were charges to be re-introduced. Future initiatives should seek to work with employers to incorporate workforce development training within their overall business planning remit and encourage them to consider training as part of their business investment requirements. On the evidence of this project, substantial funding from the public purse is likely to be required.

Evidence collected during this evaluation points to the conclusion that one of the real – but difficult to measure - barriers to training is the relatively low value attributed by many employers to formal qualifications. Until the perceived value of learning to employers increases it may be very difficult to sustain heightened demand for learning beyond cost free incentives, even if it is increasingly sought by the learner.

In order to fully benefit from the lessons generated by LWP further tracking studies will be required to monitor the impact that LWP has had on the local economy. Any future initiatives of this nature will also require monitoring systems that enable data relating to learning take up rates, completion rates and drop out rates to be regularly monitored throughout the lifetime of the programme.

Future policies aimed at stimulating the demand for adult participation in learning must not overlook the influence of the individual worker. However, the sustainability of such policy initiatives are as much about changing cultural and perceptual attitudes and encouraging a realisation of the value of training as they are about creating an immediate catalyst for the current demand for learning.