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Evaluation of Work-Based Learning Programme 2011-14: Apprenticeships

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting, in association with Old Bell 3, the University of Cardiff and IFF Research to carry out an evaluation of the work-based learning (WBL) Programme 2011-14.
- 1.2 The key elements of the methodology included: interviews with Welsh Government officials, external stakeholders and learning providers; a review of apprenticeship management information and programme performance data; a telephone survey of 95 employers involved with apprenticeships delivery; an e-survey of current apprentices; a telephone survey of apprenticeships leavers; case studies of employers involved with apprenticeships and their apprentices (where available); and, counterfactual impact evaluation (CIE) analysis comparing the apprenticeship quantitative survey data to a sub-sample of the Annual Population Survey (APS).

2. Key findings

- 2.1 A review of literature highlighted that similar developments in apprenticeship policy have been taking place across the UK. All UK governments have seen the value of apprenticeships to their economies and in particular are keen to spread the level of investment between government and employers. However, there are some clear differences in terms of timeframes and in policy detail.
- 2.2 Some of these divergences may have longer term implications for the UK and consequently for Wales. For example, as approaches to apprenticeship specification change then larger employers will face a widening gulf between systems operating across areas of the UK. Whilst we cannot quantify the effect of this it is expected that it could result in dilemmas and decisions which may influence the location of apprenticeship training to avoid multiple systems within single employers.
- 2.3 The tendering process known as WBL3 and WBL4 were regarded to have been effective and to have secured a good range of providers. It achieved a blend of

colleges, private WBL providers and third sector WBL providers. The expectations of providers were clearly set out following previous versions of the apprenticeship programme.

Programme performance

- 2.4 The total number of unique learners between August 2011 and December 2014 was 99,773. Annual apprenticeship learner numbers had risen to 54,350 in 2013-14 but fell by 11 per cent in 2014-15 to 48,335. Numbers of learners fell in foundation apprenticeships by 21 per cent and apprenticeships (L3) by 13 per cent; although learners involved in higher apprenticeships rose by 47 per cent.
- 2.5 The biggest sectoral change was the increase in share of apprentices in Health Care and Public Services (increased from 30 per cent in 2011/12 to 35 per cent in 2013/14).
- 2.6 Generally learners had a prior qualification equal to or higher than their level of study when compared with the level of learning that they were working towards.
- 2.7 Data from the Employer Perspectives Survey suggests that there is room for apprenticeships to develop further beyond the current 15 per cent of employers, especially among smaller employers.
- 2.8 Generally, apprenticeship success rates have been rising and are high at 84 per cent. However, success rates among higher apprenticeships (Has) are measurably lower at 67 per cent.
- 2.9 The programme exceeded all ESF targets with the exception of Level 2 qualifications (only narrowly missed) and older people.
- 2.10 Just over half of all participants (51 per cent) achieved a qualification (although this may rise as some apprentices are still in learning).
- 2.11 Just over two-fifths of participants (61 per cent) were from Convergence areas of Wales. The proportion of all participants that achieved qualifications in Convergence areas was even higher (68 per cent). The rate at which Convergence participants gained qualifications was also higher (56 per cent) than those in Competitiveness areas (43 per cent). Over half of all participants were female (57 per cent).

Stakeholder and provider perspectives

- 2.12 Overall, the demand for apprenticeships was regarded by all stakeholders and providers as consistently high and the programme was believed to be gaining credibility.
- 2.13 There was unanimous agreement that the WBL programme generally fitted in well with wider Welsh Government policy objectives and also met local training needs.
- 2.14 In terms of awareness there remained concerns about parents' knowledge of apprenticeships. There were also mixed views about how informed employers were.
- 2.15 There remained concerns that schools were not providing sufficient impartial information to young people to enable them to make informed choices about apprenticeships compared with other options.
- 2.16 The main forms of recruitment to apprenticeships were: from the Apprenticeship

Matching Service (AMS) website; through direct recruitment by employers/providers and through conversion of existing staff to an apprenticeship. Providers' views of the AMS system were generally critical, with a sense of dissatisfaction.

- 2.17 A number of benefits were identified that were associated with the emerging higher apprenticeships. However, a few stakeholders and providers expressed concern that HAs might be having the effect of trying to force some employees into more senior roles than they really want to undertake. Providers felt that HAs had probably engaged some employers that would not have traditionally taken apprentices on. This suggests that progress has been made to encourage more employers to invest in training in the future.
- 2.18 Providers generally agreed that there was minimal demand for apprenticeships in the Welsh language. All providers said they promoted learning through the medium of Welsh. Many said their documentation was bilingual. Taking a 'blended' approach to the Welsh language - promoting bi-lingualism - was enabling apprentices to talk in Welsh with their assessors if they so wished but to undertake their assessment/course work in English if this was their preferred option. A number of providers used this 'blended approach'.
- 2.19 All providers were aware of the importance of addressing gender stereotyping, however, there was not a great deal of evidence of proactive responses or challenging employers.
- 2.20 On the subject of competition between providers for learners there were mixed views. Some providers felt there was no internal competition within their group of sub-contractors, while others recognised there was.
- 2.21 Probably the biggest issue for providers was underspend. Some providers were not highlighting under-spend or under-utilisation at an early enough stage for the places to be re-allocated.

Employer experiences

- 2.22 The majority (56) of employers were very satisfied with their apprenticeship participants since 2011, and nearly all (72) apprenticeship employers said that the overall efficiency of the workforce had been positively impacted because of the organisation's involvement with the apprenticeship programme.
- 2.23 The majority of employers were satisfied with most aspects of their relationship with their provider. Employers were clear about what was expected of their organisation's involvement with apprenticeships.

The majority of employers were very satisfied with their recent experience of the WBL programme (51) and said that it was very likely that they would offer placements in the future, given their recent experience (58), while 18 said that it was likely.

Experiences of apprentices

- 2.24 The experience of current and past apprentices is very similar.
- 2.25 The top three reasons for doing their apprenticeship were 'to develop a broader range of skills and/or knowledge', 'to improve or widen their career prospects' and 'to

develop more specialist skills and/or knowledge’.

- 2.26 Nearly three-quarters of past participants were not aware of the AMS. Of those that were aware, 43 of them (30 per cent) used the AMS when thinking about doing an apprenticeship. Of these 43 respondents, nearly all of them (98 per cent) found the service a useful tool.
- 2.27 Nearly three-quarters of past participants were working for the same employer before starting their apprenticeship that they were working for during their apprenticeship. Approximately one-quarter of respondents were recruited specifically as an apprentice or to undertake an apprenticeship.
- 2.28 The majority of respondents agreed that apprenticeships were ‘good for getting experience and skills’, ‘a good stepping stone towards getting employment’, and ‘help you progress in employment’.
- 2.29 Of the 144 respondents that said that they could speak Welsh: over four-fifths were given the opportunity to complete some or all of their learning and assessment in Welsh (85 per cent) and to use Welsh during their course (86 per cent); nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) were given the opportunity to use Welsh in the workplace; and almost three-fifths (58 per cent) were given the opportunity to work towards a Welsh medium qualification.
- 2.30 The majority of respondents were satisfied with their provider overall (88 per cent) and with their employer overall (85 per cent).
- 2.31 Of those that were working as an employee for the same employer as before the apprenticeship (267 respondents), just under a third (31 per cent) had had a promotion since doing their apprenticeship. The majority of respondents (86 per cent) felt that they had been able to apply what they learnt on their apprenticeship. Just under half of the apprentices surveyed felt that their apprenticeship had exceeded the expectations they had before starting (46 per cent). Overall, just over four-fifths (83 per cent) were satisfied with the apprenticeship. Three-fifths (60 per cent) would do the same apprenticeship at the same place.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 The following recommendations were identified as a result of this evaluation:
- 3.2 Given the high level of demand for apprenticeships there would be merit in considering more careful targeting of the funded support in the future. Key target areas might include: smaller employers, learners with lower prior qualifications and priority sectors.
- 3.3 A review of the AMS should be undertaken to assess its value for money, given the relatively low proportion of apprentices using it. We understand it was designed in a way that it should be relatively low cost to administer but providers indicate that the cost of maintaining the data outweighs the benefits. This needs to be balanced against the marketing effect, as it may also be a ‘lightening rod’ to support awareness of apprenticeships, especially among young people and their parents.
- 3.4 Developing more effective forms of communication about apprenticeships in general and specific opportunities in particular should be explored. These should consider youth-friendly forms of communication such as Facebook and similar social

networking mechanisms.

- 3.5 More detailed research and understanding is required specifically about higher apprenticeships. The HA share of all apprenticeships is rising but concerns about widely varying success rates and some differences in expectations among employers, providers and participants indicate that more attention is required to ensure effective development.
- 3.6 Identify improved management of provider learner numbers to avoid the compound risks associated with providers hanging on to apprenticeship places and then releasing them at too late a stage to enable other providers to react.
- 3.7 From a research point of view improving the levels of consent to participate in research would enable more robust evaluation analysis to be undertaken.

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Full Research Report: Evaluation of Work-Based Learning Programme 2011-2014:
Apprenticeships

Available at: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-work-based-learning/?lang=en>

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

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