

## ESF support for in-work training

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This report presents the findings of a research study into the nature and delivery of projects to support in-work training under the European Social Fund (ESF) in England.

The main aims of the study were to explore:

- how effectively the ESF has been targeted at priority sectors identified in regional ESF frameworks, used to engage learners facing barriers to access and progress within the labour market; and
- the impact and added value of the programme for employers, employees and other learners.

The research was based on detailed case study fieldwork with 41 projects funded under Priority 2 of the Competitiveness programme and Priority 5 of the Convergence programme, including visits to projects and interviews with project leads, partners and participating employers, and learners. In total some 166 staff were interviewed across the 41 case study projects, and 61 employers and 130 learners. The approach also featured consultations with the national Managing Authority, Government Offices and co-financing organisations (CFOs) across England.

The ESF is a key component of the European Union's (EU's) Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs, and aims to reduce differences in prosperity across the EU. The programme has two broad objectives:

- to increase employment by providing training and support to unemployed and disadvantaged groups, and
- to provide targeted support to build a better and more competitive workforce.

It also features two cross-cutting themes:

- gender equality and equal opportunities; and
- sustainable development.

The current England ESF programme was launched in 2007, and will invest a total of £2.5 billion (€3.1 billion) of funding to 2013:

- £823 million (€992 million) in Competitiveness Priority 2 activities; and
- £98.2 million (€117.9 million) in Convergence Priority 5 activities.

The ESF programme is managed through a number of regional CFOs, including Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and local authorities, but principally the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

### Key findings

The case study projects exemplified the diversity of provision supported by Priorities 2 and 5, and could be grouped into those:

- adding value to mainstream provision (i.e. Train to Gain, Skills for Life, Integrated Employment and Skills and higher-level skills);
- enhancing the supply side, and
- raising and meeting demand for learning.

There was close strategic alignment, which was expected given the development of regional ESF Frameworks and CFO plans, and the involvement of partners such as the LSC, RDAs and Jobcentre Plus. Fewer strategic partnerships were identified at the project level (with the exception of the Convergence projects in Cornwall), although a range of operational partnerships were identified to support project delivery.

The individuals participating in the projects included employees and other learners, including those recently made redundant or at risk of redundancy under the Response to Redundancy theme. The targeting of employers

and learners tended to focus on sectors/occupations, geographical areas, business start-ups, those recently made redundant/at risk of redundancy and those with low/no skills. There was little targeting of specific population groups – and while many projects reported working with ‘hard to help’ employers and learners, few targeted them explicitly. The majority of the case study projects were led by further education colleges (including college consortia) or private providers.

## Summary of research

### *Project delivery models*

A four-step model was used to characterise the ‘participant journey’, and to explore the delivery approach followed by the case study projects.

**Step 1: Engagement** – this step covered the promotion, awareness raising and initial engagement activities followed by the projects. Most of the case study providers followed their existing and well-developed employer engagement processes, with just three describing the introduction of new approaches to employer recruitment. The main engagement activities included recruiting employers with whom they had existing relationships, as well as through links with sector and business organisations, cross referrals between providers, and marketing through various forms of media and word of mouth. These included employers described as ‘hard to reach’, although no universal definition was applied and variables included size, location in rural areas, and previous training history.

As most of the provision explored was in-work training, providers tended to access individual employees via their employer – although other learners were recruited directly under the Response to Redundancy and Skills for Life provision under Priorities 2 and 5, and the Priority 5 higher education (HE) projects in Cornwall. The projects used their existing recruitment processes where individual learners were recruited directly, and followed similar promotional approaches to those with employers.

A series of barriers to employer and learner engagement were identified, including a reluctance to offer time off for training, existing

negative perceptions of training, engaging with employers in rural areas and perceptions of the paperwork involved. Facilitators of engagement included developing personal relationships with employers, offering responsive and relevant provision, preparing to be flexible in delivery and developing links with referral agencies.

**Step 2: Assessment** – this step featured the processes followed to assess the specific skills development needs of employers and individuals, and how the providers can best respond to them. Each provider described having formal training/organisational needs analysis procedures, which were for the most part delivered by the provider (although some were contracted out to third parties – for example independent skills brokers). Assessment processes used with individual learners mirrored those for employers, although the need for sensitivity in their application was noted when dealing with learners not involved in learning since school or where basic skills deficiencies were suspected.

Barriers to employer and employee assessment were rare, as most providers followed tried and tested approaches. Where challenges were described, they referred to assessing individuals and employees, where the paperwork involved was an issue for those with basic skills needs and language barriers.

**Step 3: Delivery and support** – this stage included the delivery of a wide range of project provision, and the support offered to participants during delivery.

Six main types of delivery were identified:

- **NVQs** – including to those not eligible for Train to Gain support (e.g. second Level 2s, or Levels 1, 3 and 4), and in specific sectors or occupations (such as leadership and management, care, customer care, third sector, leisure, marine and aerospace). However, a number were delivering across a broad range of sectors and occupations.
- **Response to Redundancy** – targeting individuals recently made or at risk of being made redundant, including two projects led by trades unions. This provision tended to be delivered at the provider’s learning centre(s) on a group basis, and tended to be structured around the four elements of: induction/initial

assessment; employability skills; Skills for Life, and vocational provision – with the vocational element offering work placements and accredited and non-accredited units to full NVQs.

- **Holistic support** – offering a range of support depending on identified needs, including working with employers on a geographic or sectoral basis or developing learning advocates in the workplace. The projects with a sector or geographic focus included the development of sector-relevant qualifications and accredited provision from Skills for Life/English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to Level 4, and delivery models included blended learning, one to one, learning centre-based, specific workshops, distance learning and providing specialist equipment.
- **Skills for Life and ESOL provision** – here projects delivered Skills for Life or ESOL provision predominantly to migrant workers, mainly in group sessions at the workplace. Most provision was standalone accredited ESOL and Skills for Life qualifications, but some provision was embedded and non-accredited.
- **HE provision** – four of the case study projects funded under Priority 5 of the Convergence programme in Cornwall supported the implementation of the Cornwall HE and Skills Strategy. The projects took different approaches to enhancing HE capacity, service provision and target groups. All projects aimed to increase the level of higher-level skills within the workforce, and targeted both existing employees and individual graduates/post-graduates.
- **Other provision** – a final group of projects were difficult to classify due to the specificity of their focus, including one project focusing on converting migrant worker qualifications, two on environmental skills, one on enterprise for graduates, one on developing the skills of maths tutors, and one on management and marketing training for micro businesses and third sector organisations. The provision varied in duration from single-day courses to others lasting nine months, and included a range of delivery mechanisms, accredited and non-accredited provision, progression and post-project support. These projects also included an example from the Innovation

and Transnationality strand of Priority 2, and sought to identify transferable lessons from the German Dual Training System.

A number of common barriers to delivery were identified, including the reluctance of employers to release employees to train, delivery in rural areas, and other issues such as covering the range of client languages and the effects of the recession. Areas where delivery was considered to have worked well included the development and delivery of flexible and relevant provision, creating links with other provision to support progression, and the overall quality of provision offered.

**Step 4: Progression and aftercare** – few examples were identified of progression and aftercare support amongst the case study projects, although examples of less formalised routes were found and expected as part of the final advice and guidance session with learners.

## Benefits and impacts

The providers, employers and learners offered examples of the benefits that their participation in ESF-funded training had provided to date. These included:

- **For employers** – improved business performance (both in terms of profit and improved efficiencies), increased workforce and management skills, and the increased propensity to train.
- **For employees** – improved confidence, achieving qualifications, help with career progression, improved skills and improved attitudes to training. The majority of the employees interviewed stated that the training received had helped them to do their existing jobs better.

Other ‘unanticipated’ benefits cited by the case study providers included attracting new business and providing potential progression routes for existing clients. Several examples of new or improved partnership arrangements were also described, as were examples where joint delivery had served to further cement existing relationships.

Providers also identified a number of ways in which ESF added value to their provision. The main contribution ESF made to the projects

was through:

- **Enhancing provision** – with ESF being used to further develop provision to either increase its relevance to their target markets or to enhance other provision, such as Train to Gain.
- **Supporting learners and employers to invest in training** – with many considering that without ESF support many hard to reach employers and learners would not have been able to take up the provision. This included provision to redundant workers, hard to reach learner groups, e.g. migrant workers and hard to reach employer groups, as well as delivery in rural areas.
- **Developing innovative provision** – ESF has allowed a number of projects to try out new models of, and approaches to, delivery, which would otherwise not have been funded. These included: developing sector-wide provision; developing new materials and blended learning approaches for different learning styles; and approaches to addressing hard to reach learners by the use of union and non-union learning advocates.
- **Improving the flexibility of provision** – to address some of the barriers faced by employers and learners, such as time off for learning, and allowing providers to be less prescriptive about the type of learning undertaken.

## Recommendations

The report featured a series of recommendations for consideration as part of the continued implementation of the current ESF programme, which included:

- **Innovation** – the co-financing approach had a positive effect on the strategic alignment of ESF-funded provision, although its effect on innovation should be monitored, and steps taken at the Managing Authority level to ensure this important and valued aspect of ESF programming is maintained.
- **Progression and aftercare** – an increased emphasis should be placed on maximising the benefits of positive employer and learner experiences through more active approaches to progression and aftercare. Such emphasis could be provided through, for example,

requirements to include explicit progression strategies in project applications/delivery plans, and the provision of additional support to enhance mechanisms to aid progression, such as stimulating cross-referrals between projects and provision for mutual gain.

- **Flexibility and responsiveness** – the relevance and responsiveness of provision was praised by many of the participants interviewed, although providers reported sometimes having to work within certain inflexible programme parameters. It is not clear whether this is due to the interpretation of ESF by CFOs, the alignment of ESF with regional and other priorities, or specific contracting decisions. Such processes should be as flexible as possible to support providers in delivering flexible and responsive provision, and the Managing Authority and individual CFOs should ensure that they accurately communicate the parameters of the current programme to potential providers.
- **Issues of delayed starts** – delayed starts resulted in many of the case study projects not engaging with the number of employers and learners expected by the time of study. While delays are to some degree inevitable, we recommend that the importance of prompt starts, and of prompt contract finalisation processes, are emphasised to providers, CFOs and others.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 785 3. Research Report 666. July 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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