

Access to work-related training

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Introduction

The 2006 Leitch Review of Skills recommended the creation of a new integrated employment and skills service. Since then, the welfare system has undergone reform to help meet this objective of which the Integrated Employment and Skills (IES) trials, introduced in 2008 and ending in August 2010, have been a key element. In the later stages of these trials, a new system of Enhanced Joint Working (EJW) was introduced in non-trial areas. Like the IES trials, EJW was intended to identify claimants' skills needs through enhanced screening processes and where appropriate direct them towards support from Next Step.

The Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to evaluate the IES trials. Between September and November 2010, visits were made to three IES trials districts and two EJW districts. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a range of respondents including:

- Jobcentre Plus and Next Step district-level managers responsible for the implementation of the IES trials or EJW;
- Advisory Services Managers;
- Jobcentre Plus and Next Step advisers;
- Jobcentre Plus claimants who had been referred to Next Step; and
- skills providers working with Jobcentre Plus or Next Step.

This report builds on previous qualitative evaluation work and has a particular focus on whether and how claimants get access to appropriate work-related skills training via a Jobcentre Plus or Next Step referral.

Findings

Screening and referrals

Skills screening was reported by Jobcentre Plus advisers to be light touch and primarily conversational, where skills needs are identified through a discussion of the claimant's work history, CV and job goals. In addition, basic skills needs are identified through observation of the claimant's form filling and their GCSEs or equivalent English and Maths qualifications. There was little use reported of assessment tools such as the Customer Assessment Tool or the Fast Track assessment tool (for basic skills) among Jobcentre Plus advisers. They reported a lack of training in how to use the tools and the time available as particular constraints.

Jobcentre Plus advisers reported they made use of a range of referral options to provision to meet potential skills needs identified through their skills screening activity. Advisers at Stage 1 and 2 of the Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal mentioned referrals to externally-funded short certification courses, IT courses, job-search support for jobseekers with professional backgrounds and provision to address basic skills needs. At Stage 3, advisers reported they had a wider range of referral options than in the earlier stages, including provision linked to specific employment opportunities or sectors. Jobcentre Plus advisers reported that they were quite instructive about what a claimant should do and when they identified a skills need they were likely to suggest a particular provision and refer the claimant directly to the provider.

Jobcentre Plus advisers referred claimants to Next Step for a number of reasons including to advise on careers, skills and training options. Referrals to Next Step were also perceived by some Jobcentre Plus staff as a way to take some time-pressure off

Jobcentre Plus advisers as they could undertake more detailed skills diagnostic work. Next Step staff reported some improvement in the appropriateness of referrals as Jobcentre Plus advisers' understanding of what they offered developed, but they also reported some referrals were still inappropriate. Next Step advisers thought the two key influences on the appropriateness of Jobcentre Plus referrals were:

- the experience of Jobcentre Plus advisers; and
- a good understanding at local level of what the Next Step service provided.

Jobcentre Plus staff generally reported making a referral to Next Step was straightforward. However, some Jobcentre Plus advisers had experienced difficulties getting through to the Next Step national booking line. This was thought to have deterred some from referring to the service.

The Skills Health Check

Next Step interviews (the Skills Health Check) were reported to last up to 45 minutes and were focused on:

- exploring skill needs;
- identifying transferable skills; and
- discussing possible options for career change or training, if relevant.

Some screening techniques which Next Step advisers reported using bore similarity to the techniques used by Jobcentre Plus advisers, although Next Step advisers reported they spent more time exploring these issues in depth. Next Step advisers did not report making frequent use of the Skills Health Check Diagnostic Tool; but they did use a range of other tools, for example, Adult Directions, Career Health Check and Adviser Net. Next Step advisers reported they would often take claimants through a range of different options that might be suitable for them, and it was usually the claimants' decision to follow these up.

Jobcentre Plus managers and advisers reported that the quality of Skills Action Plans coming back from Next Step, such as the level of detail and usefulness,

had improved over the period the two organisations had been working together, but some Jobcentre Plus staff still felt they were not sufficiently labour-market focused. As observed in the previous rounds of research, there was a major weakness in the integration of the claimant journey after the referral to Next Step as Skills Action Plans were frequently not used at Jobcentre Plus.

Skills provision

The majority of providers reported undertaking their own assessment of claimants referred to them by Jobcentre Plus or Next Step to fill in information gaps on claimants' aspirations, work history and skills needs and to ensure the claimant was on the appropriate course. Providers reported this could help to reduce subsequent drop-out rates. Most providers reported that the appropriateness of the referrals they received from Next Step and Jobcentre Plus was either good or improving.

Providers interviewed for this study supplied a range of training which fell into three broad groups:

- basic skills training, encompassing literacy, numeracy, basic IT skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages;
- vocational provision including sector-specific training, certification in short-term job-specific skills and longer-term vocational courses such as NVQs; and
- job search and employability support, including CV writing, interview techniques, timekeeping and confidence building.

Jobcentre Plus and Next Step advisers generally reported there was sufficient provision available, although some gaps were identified including higher-level skills provision for managers and professionals. In addition, some advisers reported occasional gaps in availability, for example, if demand for a course was particularly high, or for very 'niche' courses.

Helping Jobcentre Plus claimants to move closer to finding sustainable work was a key aim of the providers interviewed in this study. To help achieve this, many of those offering vocational skills courses

had links with local employers and there were several examples of providers adapting their courses or putting on new provision, in association with Jobcentre Plus, in response to vacancy information supplied by Jobcentre Plus or their own employer engagement teams. Several providers felt that Jobcentre Plus could do more to co-ordinate their employer engagement activities with their own, though all the providers interviewed reported good relationships with Jobcentre Plus at district level and with advisers. Training providers often visited local Jobcentre Plus offices to promote their services to advisers, which they reported helped to maintain or increase referral numbers.

The claimant experience

Claimants' job histories were diverse but most had a positive attitude towards training. Although claimants recalled a discussion of their work history with Jobcentre Plus, most did not recall explicit skills screening, which may reflect the light-touch approach taken by Jobcentre Plus advisers. Claimants had a clearer recall of the skills assessment by Next Step and most reported this had been done in-depth and identified transferable skills or skills used outside of work which could be incorporated within a CV. Claimants reported Jobcentre Plus advisers were more instructive in making referrals than Next Step advisers, including suggesting particular providers and would often call the provider on the claimants' behalf.

There appeared to be variations in the type of provision to which claimants could be referred, depending on the stage of their claim and local availability. Many claimants wanted to access training earlier in their claim rather than wait to become eligible.

Integrating Employment and Skills

Part of the IES approach was the co-location of Next Step advisers within Jobcentre Plus offices. The most prevalent model was the same Next Step adviser being assigned to the same Jobcentre Plus office, for set days of the week. Less common was a peripatetic

model in which different Next Step advisers would rotate between different Jobcentre Plus offices. Managers and advisers in both Jobcentre Plus and Next Step felt that co-location helped to build mutual understanding and long-term relationships between advisers and improve communication about referrals. It also helped to maintain the profile of the Next Step service within Jobcentre Plus, which advisers and managers from both services felt supported referral rates.

Organisational understanding between Jobcentre Plus and Next Step was reported to have improved over the period the organisations had been working together. However it was also the case that Jobcentre Plus adviser understanding of Next Step continued to vary both across individual advisers and between local offices. In some offices, this lack of understanding, coupled with a lack of quantitative information on the impact of Next Step referrals on claimants, led to some Jobcentre Plus advisers questioning the added value of the service that Next Step offered to claimants.

There was a general feeling among staff of both services that IES had raised the profile of skills among Jobcentre Plus advisers and that their understanding of Next Step had improved over the course of the IES trials or since EJW was introduced.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research concludes that the IES approach is becoming embedded in adviser practice and co-location is central to an integrated service. However, although there has been progress since Jobcentre Plus and Next Step began working together towards shared systems and processes and building organisational understanding, a fully integrated, seamless service is still an unrealised goal:

- The process of skills screening and referral to Next Step appears broadly effective, Jobcentre Plus advisers' understanding of the Next Step service was reported to have improved incrementally over the IES trials although it continues to vary both across individual advisers and between

local offices. Allowing Jobcentre Plus advisers to shadow Next Step interviews (with permission from the claimant) was recognised as being useful to build better understanding about the Skills Health Check process. Advisers should be encouraged to do this and allocate time for it.

- Jobcentre Plus staff consider the quality of Next Step Skills Action Plans to have improved, but the claimant journey still breaks down after Next Step with poor understanding among Jobcentre Plus advisers of what happens to claimants after referral to Next Step. The difficulty in providing co-location and turnover of staff at Next Step and Jobcentre Plus has had a negative impact on understanding the IES approach, although co-location should be considered the ideal setting for the integration of employment and skills services. In addition to ongoing staff development and induction for new staff, Jobcentre Plus advisers would benefit from hearing success stories to encourage referrals to, and promote understanding of, the Next Step service and what claimants can get out of it.
- Administration has improved but still presents a barrier: data sharing and tracking remains problematic as does the lack of shared Management Information. A thorough review of the paperwork and the development of simpler and shared information systems would improve the integration of the employment and skills systems for Jobcentre Plus, Next Step and providers. A comparison of outcome measures from the IES trials districts – including referral rates, attendance rates, referrals to training, claimant satisfaction and claimant outcomes – against those from EJW districts, would help to determine whether the significant investment in time and resources made in IES trials districts paid dividends in terms of claimant outcomes.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 983 3. Research Report 749. June 2011).

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

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