

# Employment, Partnership and Skills

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This evaluation aimed to see how well the new skills, and employment policies and systems, were being implemented by Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and skills providers (colleges and training organisations). In particular it focused on: how aligned the employment and skills systems were; how well local partnerships were working; the claimant experience; and how mandating claimants to skill development was working in practice. The study was based on two waves of interviews and other qualitative research with Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service staff as well as providers, employers and claimants. In all, some 389 interviews were undertaken.

## Partnership working

Some of the areas covered by the study were struggling to adjust both to the introduction of new local stakeholders, such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, and to changes within existing bodies, such as the Skills Funding Agency. In some cases, this had created initial communication difficulties, a lack of understanding of respective roles and confusion over who should take strategic leadership.

Partnership working between Jobcentres and providers increased during the course of the study, as a result of the introduction of the Adult Skills Budget (ASB), providers' new freedoms and flexibilities, and the introduction of the new pre-Work Programme Jobcentre Plus Offer. This resulted in more sharing of local labour market intelligence and more proactive working together. Providers are increasingly networking and collaborating with each other as well, sharing knowledge of new funding opportunities and processes. As a result, some providers were beginning to focus more attention

on delivering employability and other programmes designed to help unemployed people into jobs. Partnership working was improved where relevant organisations employed staff whose role was dedicated to building and maintaining relationships.

Employer-facing Jobcentre staff were proactive in building relationships with employers, but it is an increasingly crowded field with providers and other local agencies looking to build relationships with employers too.

## Local arrangements for employment and skills

The new freedoms and flexibilities for Jobcentres were viewed positively. Although some Jobcentre staff were taking time to adjust to the new arrangements, they were generally thought to give advisers more discretion to provide claimants with the support they required. Providers have also gained new flexibilities, such as greater discretion to use the ASB to offer provision for the unemployed. This was broadly welcomed, although some providers expressed concerns that the move placed increased pressures on their already stretched ASBs.

As intended, local Jobcentres used their new freedoms differently, to adapt to local needs, but this did mean that providers found some difficulties coping with variations in processes and funding rules between offices. Some Jobcentres had introduced dedicated skills advisers or teams, although the effectiveness of this approach was reported to be mixed, particularly where the division of responsibilities between skills advisers and other Jobcentre staff was unclear.

The relationship between Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service staff improved throughout the course of the study, although in some areas there were still difficulties in Jobcentre Advisers' understanding of what the National Careers Service could offer. Co-location had broken down barriers between Jobcentre Plus and National Careers Service staff. Its effectiveness relied on staff from each organisation making an effort to talk to each other, instituting communication processes such as regular meetings and sharing information. Where deepening co-location pilots were operating, co-operation between the two services was further improved.

## Skills screening and referrals

Skills screening in Jobcentres uses a 'light touch' informal process. Some Jobcentre Advisers used the Claimant Assessment Tool to screen for basic needs, but this was not widespread and most relied on what they could pick up through general conversation or observing form filling. This was viewed as a more effective and efficient means of identifying obvious issues. However, there were questions raised about the effectiveness of the screening that advisers are able to carry out, particularly those who are operating under tight time constraints.

The National Careers Service used a range of interview techniques and have the option to use the Skills Health Check, a recently developed assessment tool. This does not screen for basic skills needs, but helps participants to match their interests and experience to careers. Relatively few National Careers Service Advisers used the Skills Health Check tool to identify skills needs, tending to rely on more conversation-based approaches

Colleges and training organisations were more consistent in their use of skills assessments, both in terms of the frequency with which they assessed claimants and the methods used. Almost all claimants referred to them undertook literacy and numeracy assessments.

Jobcentre and National Careers Service Advisers felt constrained in referring claimants to provision because of a lack of knowledge about what was on offer. The District Provision Tools did contain local training supply information, but providers and Jobcentre Advisers often complained it was not always up-to-date.

Claimants who went on training courses tended to fall into three groups: those who went largely at the suggestion of, or having been mandated by, Jobcentre staff; those who initiated a discussion about skills training with their Jobcentre Adviser and attended training on their own initiative; and those who had found a training place themselves, without the help of Jobcentre Plus.

## Skills conditionality

Skills conditionality, whereby individuals claiming active benefits can be required to attend training, was introduced in August 2011. Many interviewees found the initial introduction problematic because the implementation was rushed; guidance was lacking; responsibilities between Jobcentres and providers were unclear; and the timing, during the summer months, was difficult. During the course of the study, progress had been made on these initial issues as advisers became more familiar with the process, more advice was provided, more appropriate provision was made available and relationships between Jobcentre Advisers and providers improved. However, even at the end of the study, there was a general consensus amongst interviewees that the policy was not always being applied correctly or consistently.

Skills conditionality was applied more frequently to claimants with basic skills gaps and, in some districts, linked to general 'skills conditionality' courses. It was less often applied to those with vocational skills needs. There was no clear evidence that sanctions were effective in reducing the number of claimants failing to attend training.

National Careers Service staff thought that skills conditionality had increased the number of referrals, but were concerned about the impact on their relationship with clients. Providers were also concerned that it generated unwilling learners, but thought it had brought about a closer working relationship with Jobcentres. Jobcentre Advisers have found skills conditionality challenging, both in terms of the criteria for deciding on mandation and staying up-to-date with the training available in their area.

Overall, Jobcentre, National Career Service and provider staff thought the premise behind skills conditionality was positive and necessary, and had brought about closer working relationships. However, it had resulted in greater administrative costs all round and different interpretations of the policy, in different areas, had led providers to question the appropriateness of referrals.

## Provision

Most of the training to which Jobcentre Plus claimants were referred was fairly generic, rather than particularly vocational. Longer term and full qualification-based vocational training was a rarer option, and claimants who took this option often self-referred and even paid for themselves. In addition, Jobcentre Advisers organised work experience placements, particularly for claimants with a limited work history.

Sector-based work academies (sbwas) took two main forms: employer-based models, where an employer was setting up a new operation and worked with a Jobcentre and a training provider to prepare a stream of job applicants; and provider-based models, where providers sought to prepare candidates for a range of vacancies across a sector. Sbwases varied with the number and form of the vacancies available, but generally lasted for about six weeks and involved varying proportions of work experience, training and, in all cases, a job interview. They were largely

viewed positively as a means of directly or indirectly offering claimants a real chance of work, but could prove resource intensive for Jobcentres. Some of the areas had encountered difficulties setting effective sbwas due to problems identifying employers with a sufficient number of vacancies; generating enough good quality candidates; the capacity of providers to support the candidates; clarifying roles and responsibilities, and ensuring there was sufficient time to set everything up.

The most commonly identified gaps in provision included pre-entry English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and basic skills (literacy and numeracy) courses, Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards, and high-level skills courses. The Flexible Support Fund had been used to fill some of these gaps and meet claimants' specific needs. There was also felt to be a shortage of work experience in manufacturing and smaller workplaces.

## Approach to supporting young people

In most areas, partnerships had been established with local authorities and others to tackle youth unemployment, for example, through establishing learning agreements and pre-apprenticeship learning opportunities. The most commonly identified needs among young people were for employability skills; establishing realistic career expectations; maintaining their confidence and motivation; understanding the world at work; and improving basic maths and English.

The most common measure that was organised for young people was work experience (including mandatory four-week placements brought in under the Get Britain Working measures) as they were felt to be very receptive to it and it helped them develop their CV. Work experience took place before, or sometimes alongside, basic skills training.

## Conclusion

Overall, there were a number of signs of progress towards a greater integration between skills provision and employment services. Where it works well, claimants and employers report considerable benefits. Job seekers liked the opportunity to add qualifications to their CV and gain the confidence and skills they need to find work. Employers fill vacancies with motivated and skilled employees. However, there is still scope for further progress across both systems.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978-1-909532-25-0. Research Report 830. March 2013).

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

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