

City & County of Swansea Employment Training consultation response to the Assembly Government Petitions Committee inquiry: Work based learning for vulnerable young people

City & County of Swansea Employment Training welcomes this opportunity afforded by the Petitions Committee to comment on current training opportunities made available through Work Based Learning (WBL), in particular, that which exists for homeless & vulnerable young people.

Employment Training is one of Wales' (DCELLS) largest single contractors responsible for the delivery of Work Based Learning within South West Wales. We have over 30 years experience of working to improve the employability of young people and unemployed adults. We believe that we are well placed to respond to the committees request for comment. We also believe the WBL is an incredible programme which, with a few tweaks could become even greater.

Current WBL Provision vis-à-vis the Petitions Committee Terms of reference

Qu. The availability and quality of training programmes, and work based placements, particularly suitable placements for vulnerable young people?

1. *The Availability & Quality of Training Programmes*

Access to WBL within Wales is generally well serviced through a comprehensive network of contracted training providers. The quality of training in recent years has seen an upsurge due to the involvement of ESTYN and DCELLS commitment to and investment in sharing best practice among its network of providers.

As with all structured methodologies adopted in tackling issues, (whether this is improving the skills levels of the Welsh workforce or any other goal), flexibility is the key, especially if we are to make WBL available to meet the needs of those most distant and disadvantaged groups.

Within Wales, the 'all-age' approach to WBL is to be applauded, providing opportunities 'potentially' for all who are economically active. The challenge however, is getting those whom are economically inactive engaged, in particular those with acute problems and furthest away from the job-market.

However, the current model of WBL does not work particularly well for participants with multiple barriers to employment such as low basic skills, engagement issues and a history of anti-social behaviour (including drug or alcohol abuse). Employers (whilst there are many that are very supportive), in the main need staff that are steady and reliable. Individuals with multiple barriers are generally the opposite. Consequently, their unreliability results in the loss of their work-placement and a breakdown in their training (and can result in a bad experience all-round, alienating the employer)

The success (or failure) of the WBL model within Wales is highly dependant upon the continued support and engagement of a wide range of supportive employers. To this extent the Assembly Government needs to do much more towards encouraging employers to actively participate. Moreover, the Assembly Government needs to lead by example.

Consideration should be given to extending the statutory requirement to include the provision of Apprenticeship opportunities as a requirement for employers with ten or

more employees (roughly speaking Apprenticeships should account for a minimum of 10% of an employers' workforce).

Crucially, the WBL provider network is periodically thrown into a state of instability, (i) resulting from the compulsory competitive tender (CCT) process, and (ii) from issues caused through the political system, which often result in significant delays occurring at crucial stages, e.g. when awarding provider's annual financial allocations. Both affect accessibility to training opportunities and delivery and 'flies in the face' of all efforts to carry out effective business planning etc. In the past, under the former TEC's and ELWA, the Welsh Office granted powers to 'secure training' negating the need for CCT. Instability within the network could be minimised if not eradicated. By reverting back to this method of allocating resources – Providers could therefore, plan with greater confidence and be more confident in making greater investment in the development of its training provision. Consequently, will be better able to meet the needs of all potential learners and ensure greater continuity of learning for all.

Qu. Progression for the vulnerable young person building on skills and qualifications gained in the previous placement?

2. Progression Opportunities

Securing progression opportunities is often very difficult for all groups. Personable young people with a good attitude towards gaining new skills inevitably do best, others (youth and adults) struggle and those with poor basic skills and/or, multiple barriers suffer the worst, with training coming to a premature end.

Recent changes within WBL requiring 'employed status' for all Apprentices (including those on the Foundation Apprenticeship programme), will result in lost opportunities (worsened by the current economic climate). This together with the National Minimum wage requirements has already had an impact and numerous training providers have seen a downturn in the number of available work-placement opportunities.

Progression, is used as a performance measure by DCELLS and providers are expected to meet a current progression threshold of 50%. Learners, completing the programme continue on in further education, training or employment. This measure is not only unfair on providers; expecting them to meet a target that is predominantly out of their control, but more significantly, it promotes discrimination with regard to learner participants. In that providers are being encouraged to 'cherry-pick' programme starters, taking on only those who might best achieve and be sure to progress. The result; those with significant barriers and it could be argued, those with the greatest need, become even further distanced and disadvantaged.

Wholesale changes to the current Skill Build programme included in the WBL programme specification for the 2011-2014, do raise some concerns. Our greatest concern is in respect of the proposed Traineeships. Whereby, greater restrictions are to be imposed upon providers progressing learners to level-2 NVQ, in the hope that providers will be encouraged and able to secure Foundation Apprenticeships, bearing in mind the limited number of apprenticeship employment opportunities already aired above. We anticipate that the changes to the programme specification will create a 'log-jam'. Hence, many young people's training will stall and come to an abrupt end at NVQ levels-1.

Provider capacity will undoubtedly be stretched, providing the added support required for existing learners to be able to meet the criteria to progress onto the new Level-2 'Bridges-2-Employment' programme. This need to continue support will in turn reduce a provider's capacity to take on new entrants.

Qu. Financial support for independently financed young people including training allowances, Education Maintenance Allowances, benefits, and funding for travel costs?

3. Financial Support & EMA

We at Employment Training are greatly concerned over the introduction of EMA (or TMA as it is now proposed) into the WBL sector.

Firstly, we believe that the introduction of an EMA would have a negative impact upon future learners, many of whom fully appreciate current arrangements, i.e. the payment of a training allowance, which is more often than not, viewed as a wage; an enticement to sign-up and an incentive attend regularly.

Secondly, its introduction will in our opinion, result in an increase in numbers of NEET young people, fuelling, what is already an unacceptably high percentage of early leavers within the FE sector.

If the aim of introducing EMA is to foster 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational learning – Then we question whether a single approach to funding is necessary. If this were true, then delivery methods and techniques would need to be re-aligned also.

College (academic) delivery differs widely from that undertaken in the WBL sector. Consequently, different funding mechanisms are essential ensuring that attendance and achievement is rewarded appropriately - The demands of attending the workplace and 'off the job' training adding up to 30/35 or even 40 hour/week in some instances, which compared to classroom (college) based delivery, is far more physically demanding. Therefore, the learner must be seen to be rewarded for his/her effort. In our opinion, this is best achieved for an individual attending WBL, through payment of a training allowance akin to a wage, 'a fair days pay for a fair days work'.

A small but significant number of learners complain that their training allowance is insufficient. Training allowances have not changed since around 2006. A review of trainee allowances is well overdue and a small increase might make the programme more attractive.

Qu. Personal support for vulnerable young people including differences in levels of support for care-leavers?

4. Personal Support for Vulnerable YP

Whilst WBL has a degree of flexibility which meet the need of most young people and adults, those with multiple and acute issues are still not fully catered for. For example, those whose attendance is affected by issues such as homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse etc require high levels of support away from the learning environment, resulting in attendance that is often below the required 16-hour threshold.

In light of the above, funding linked to a training allowance should be made available for a pre-engagement programme. Whereby barriers to employment can be addressed and the individuals themselves can be engaged, supported pastorally and encouraged to move closer to the employment market without penalty, i.e. an employment-based opportunity which can be tapered to suit the personal circumstances of the individual, without the restrictions of an NVQ and consequently, lifestyle and behavioural issues can be tackled.

Note. Employment Training, with the benefit of European (ESF) Funding developed a highly successful 'First Steps' programme. A programme based upon a progressive model as opposed to the current task/qualification based form of learning. Due to its success, this First Steps programme received ESF support over a period of ten years between 1996 and 2006.

Qu. The effectiveness of agency collaboration/partnership working in issues in Wales?

5. Collaboration/Partnership Working

Employment Training fully supports and believes in collaborative/partnership working and certainly sees this as the way forward – Resulting in financial savings (economies of scale), greater efficiencies in delivery and a reduction in nugatory duplication within the provider network.

Some danger exists whereby the provider network could become too small with the delivery vested in a few large single consortia/partnerships. This could easily become a cartel, monopolising and controlling learning opportunities. There is also a danger in ensuring continuity of learning should any large independent consortia /partnership cease trading.

Brief Summary of Recommended Measures

Within WBL – *'making a great programme even greater'*:

- Flexibility of programme is essential – Greater flexibility desirable and would be welcomed, especially in the form of pre-engagement support for learners with acute and multiple barriers
- All age approach should continue to be supported
- New approach required to engage those with multiple barriers to employment
- Greater employer involvement is essential and the Assembly Government must take the initiative and lead the way by example
- Instability in network – review of current tendering arrangements required to eradicate/reduce the effects of de-stabilising the provider network
- Using progressions outside of the programme as a performance indicator should be abandoned due to (i) its potential impact upon the most vulnerable & disadvantaged and (ii) it is beyond the control of the provider
- Progression - Employed status apprenticeships requirement is likely to cause reduction in progression opportunities – additional funding should be allocated for employer subsidies, to foster employer take-up of employed status level-2 apprentices (funding could be tapered to reflect the balance of the apprentice contribution to the business)

- Financial support/EMA – The level and means of remuneration must be seen to be equal to the effort made earning it – A small increase in Learners' training allowances may be well overdue.
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The Learner View

i. **Mel Burton** (actual learner but not true name)

Mel is one of 11 children (the second oldest) within a traveller family and is their first child to enter formal education or training, beginning her journey with Swansea Council's Travellers Education unit aged 17 years, early 2009. Her skills were understandably quite low and were assessed at Basic Skills Entry Level-2.

As part of her early experience of learning with the traveller unit, staff found a work-placement for Mel within a city centre office environment, to help her towards achieving her career goal of gaining experience and a qualification in business administration. Whilst with the placement provider, Mel was given some support by the employer in developing her basic skills. However, this was highly inappropriate. After just a few weeks in her placement, her attendance became erratic.

Mel began her formal WBL journey later in August 2009, after being introduced by the traveller unit to Employment Training, with whom she agreed to sign on to the Skill Build programme. Whilst with Employment Training, she made it known to her personal case officer, that her placement was unsuitable. Alternative arrangements were made and Mel was found a new work-placement with the City & County of Swansea. Additionally, Mel's attendance for regular basic skills training was timetabled and she was re-assessed at Entry Level-3.

During her early days on the programme, Mel's parents left the Swansea area and Mel went missing for up to 11-days. Upon tracing the family whereabouts, Mel was given authorised absence, allowing her to continue her training upon returning with her parents to the Swansea area.

In spite of issues relating to aforementioned attendance, the new arrangements made it possible for Mel to gain her Level-1 Literacy and Business Administration awards, which she achieved on 17th & 20th August 2010, respectively.

Mel is now hoping to progress and undertake her NVQ Level-2 award. Her case officer however, is finding it difficult to secure a Foundation Apprenticeship opportunity, i.e. one where the employer is willing to take on Mel as an employed status learner. Made more difficult as she has now turned 18-years and employers are concerned about regulations related to making payment in line with the national minimum wage.

In her own words: The WBL experience has been **'a good thing'** anyone looking to improve their skills **'should go for it, it's a great opportunity - Because it's practical and because there's great support, it's not really hard.'**

'I'm really proud of myself'
