

Summary of ESF Leavers Survey 2002, Objective 3: England

By John Atkinson

This summary presents results of a survey of 3,431 individual beneficiaries who left projects supported under ESF Objective 3 in England during the latter part of 2002. The full results may be found in *ESF Leavers Survey 2002 Objective 3: England*, by John Atkinson, Institute for Employment Studies. The primary research was undertaken by MORI, while IES devised the questionnaire, analysed the results and wrote the report.

Research aims

The main aim of the 2002 Leavers Survey was to evaluate the effectiveness of the training or advice provided through ESF projects to beneficiaries, through:

- obtaining information about the longer-term impact of the programme
- acquiring detailed information on beneficiaries, thus enabling insight into the various and sometimes cumulative disadvantages faced by beneficiaries; and
- obtaining detail about the kinds of support offered, and the views of the beneficiaries on the support they received.

Research methods

A two-stage process was necessary to obtain a sample of beneficiaries to survey as there is no national database of those who have received suitable training or support.

- The first stage involved selecting projects from the 2002 Applications Database held by DWP.
- The second stage involved the compilation of a master list of beneficiaries (forming a 'snapshot' of those who had finished participation between June and November 2002) from the sampled projects.

The fieldwork was undertaken using computer assisted telephone interviews between 14 April and 15 June 2003. Non-respondents were also followed up by letter using a self-completion version of the questionnaire.

A total of 2,200 interviews were conducted by telephone; 1,120 completed questionnaires were returned, and a further 111 questionnaires were completed over the telephone. The overall response rate was high, at 55 per cent, for the telephone survey.

The research findings

The key findings of the survey are summarised below.

Targeting of disadvantaged entrants

There was considerable variety between different kinds and circumstances of beneficiary, but underpinned by fairly widespread experience of disadvantage across much of the cohort. This is captured best by the variable 'low human capital', which included a range of factors (centred on lack of qualifications, lack of skills, and little work

experience) to focus on an underlying lack of competitiveness in the labour market among beneficiaries. Fully two-thirds of the sample were assessed as demonstrating such low human capital, and were consequently likely to be held back, and have their labour market opportunities constrained, by some combination of poor qualification, wrong or out-of-date skills, restricted work experience, *etc.* In addition, a quarter of the sample had continuing caring responsibilities, while close to a fifth were constrained by illness or disability.

Participation was strong among certain key groups, including women (constituting 60 per cent of beneficiaries), people at each end of the age spectrum (27 per cent were under 25 and 21 per cent aged 50 or more), people experiencing long-term unemployment or inactivity (27 per cent) and among people without qualifications (21 per cent).

There was great variation in individuals' entry status, with some 37 per cent already employed at that time, compared with 39 per cent inactive and 21 per cent unemployed. The intake of already-employed entrants varied greatly between different regions within England, broadly reflecting the local buoyancy of the labour market.

Tailored support and provision

Despite the diversity and differing needs of entrants, there was considerable evidence about the tailoring of support to match individual needs and circumstances. Thus, just under half of these respondents remembered agreeing a personalised plan when they joined the project. Consequently, there was a high level of overlap between the various problems which beneficiaries said had held them back and the support they received through their courses.

In addition, although some aspects of provision were very widespread, these too seem to have been quite carefully targeted. For example, in terms of the vocational focus of the training provided, some 61 per cent of beneficiaries said that they had been helped to improve their practical skills *related to a particular job*.

Finally, four out of five respondents thought that the project had been relevant to their needs, and

three-quarters thought that the level of support had been appropriate for their abilities.

Customer satisfaction

Well over four out of every five beneficiaries declared themselves satisfied with the quality of the course overall. While there were some differences between different groups of respondent, they were mostly expressed as shifts between 'very' and 'fairly' satisfied; for no groups did the level of overt dissatisfaction rise above 15 per cent.

In line with this, the volume of early leavers was low, with just 16 per cent of beneficiaries reporting that they had left earlier than expected. Furthermore, much of this was a consequence of finding a job or finishing the course earlier than anticipated. Only about five per cent of beneficiaries left early for negative reasons, such as dissatisfaction, or inability to cope, with the course.

Equal opportunity

There was a significant proportion of beneficiaries who just could not remember whether or not they were both informed that the project had an equal opportunities policy, and explained how this would affect the individual in practice while they are on the course. Despite this, about two in three still clearly recalled that the policy was explained to them. There is little variation between men and women in this respect.

Job outcomes

The survey provides conclusive evidence (see table) that, following their participation in the programme, there has been a substantial and continuing shift of status among respondents towards paid employment. This contrasts sharply with an employment rate which had been declining in the year before participation.

Distribution of activity across four time periods (all respondents)

	12 months before joining project	On joining project	On leaving project	At time of survey
	%	%	%	%
In paid work	41	37	47	53
Unemployed	9	21	11	9
Inactive	49	38	42	38
Base	3,431	3,431	3,431	3,431

Base: All respondents who answered the questions

The table shows that:

- employment increased sharply among these respondents when they left their projects, increasing by a full ten percentage points over the situation when they joined
- gross employment rates went on to increase in the months after leaving the project, albeit not so strongly as they had done, but still by a significant amount (six percentage points overall)
- the rising level of unemployment among these respondents before they joined the project has been reversed; the unemployment rate virtually halved between joining and leaving the projects
- the programme does not seem to have been so successful in reducing inactivity within the sample.

Finally, although it is not shown above, we should note that there were relatively high levels of job retention among the sample. In the (average) six months between leaving and taking part in the survey, eight out of ten of those in work had stayed in it.

Qualification outcomes

Among beneficiaries not working when they joined the projects, having no qualifications or skills, or having the wrong ones, was by far the most widely cited barrier to finding work (at 39 per cent). Two-thirds of all joiners expected to improve their qualifications. Projects and beneficiaries had been very successful in meeting this objective; by the

time they had finished, just over a half (55 per cent) of all entrants had gained a full qualification, and a further nine per cent of those who did not gain a qualification had gained credits or units towards one.

'Soft' outcomes

Beneficial 'soft outcomes' were widely found among the 47 per cent not working at the time of the survey. Nearly three-quarters of them felt they had improved their skills; rather more felt that they were now more confident about their job prospects, and many reported a reduction in the problems they felt had held them back in the labour market.

Disproportionate gains among the disadvantaged

There is evidence of a positive bias towards the most poorly-placed beneficiaries acting across the programme as a whole. Looking at job outcomes, and taking into account the high proportion of entrants who were already working, there is evidence from these results that the programme has been disproportionately helpful and successful in helping the most disadvantaged beneficiaries find work. Similarly with qualification gains, the propensity to gain qualifications was highest among the most disadvantaged groups of beneficiary, declining among the least disadvantaged groups.

The full report 'ESF Leavers Survey 2002 Objective 3: England' is published as part of the Department for Work and Pensions in-house series. Copies are available from the Research Support Team on 020 7962 8566 or from: www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/

Synopsis

This research is based on a survey of 3,431 individual beneficiaries who left projects supported under ESF Objective 3 in England during the latter part of 2002. The primary research was undertaken by MORI, while IES devised the questionnaire, analysed the results and wrote the report.

The full results may be found in *ESF Leavers Survey 2002 Objective 3: England*, by John Atkinson, Institute for Employment Studies, which covers:

- Targeting: is the programme reaching the appropriate beneficiaries?
- Multiple disadvantage among beneficiaries.
- What are the main barriers to entering/progressing within the labour market?
- Different starting points: does it make sense to think of a single client group?
- Tailored support: was support tailored to meet different needs/circumstances?
- Beneficiary perceptions of the programme.
- Early leaving: does it matter?
- Welfare to work: how far have the projects helped to move people into paid employment?
- Qualification gains.
- 'Soft' outcomes among those not working after taking part.
- Disproportionate job gains among the disadvantaged.
- Disproportionate gains in qualifications for the disadvantaged.
- Inactivity: how far is the programme helping inactive groups?
- What has happened to employed entrants?
- How far have projects aligned with, and added value to, national employment policy priorities?
- How far has the programme reflected different local circumstances?