

Research Summary

This qualitative study investigated the operation of Work Based Learning for Adults (WBLA) following the hand over of responsibilities for the programme from the Training and Enterprise Councils to the Employment Service in April 2001. Depth interviews were conducted with staff involved in delivering the programme, training providers and employers who have been involved with WBLA.

The results of the research show:

- On the whole, staff feel that the WBLA programme is able to provide useful skills to clients who are willing to participate, but they feel provision could be made more use of if (at least certain elements) were mandatory.
- Most providers feel it has been a relatively difficult first year under ES, with contracts often set up late, staff lacking understanding of the programme and numbers of referrals have been lower than expected.
- Staff generally feel that they see very few clients for whom the short job-focussed training (SJFT) courses are a useful option. This is because, with high employment rates, a large proportion of their clients have multiple barriers to work. Staff feel that SJFT courses would be of most benefit if they could be made available from Day 1 of unemployment.
- Longer occupational training (LOT) is seen to be of more widespread benefit but staff would again like to reduce the eligibility to 6 months of continuous unemployment (from 12). They feel that they are often able to identify a training need and suitable LOT provision at the 6-month point but have to tell clients that they need to 'wait'.
- Staff feel that changes in the eligibility criteria for Basic Employability Training (BET) have meant that some of their clients who require 'soft skills' training but do not have sufficiently serious basic skills problems to access BET are left without any suitable provision.
- They also find that it is often extremely difficult to persuade clients to take up BET opportunities and they would like to be able to make this provision mandatory. Some staff feel that BET needs re-branding in that clients can feel this provision is not relevant if they have worked extensively previously.
- Providers are often interpreting the job search obligations of their contract to mean they need to organise a half day a week to search for vacancies. Some question the value of this in the early stages of provision. There is a varying degree to which providers are including within job search a broader range of activities related to the skills necessary to look for work effectively. Some areas are restructuring job search time so that it can be back-loaded for some provision.
- Many staff have only a very vague idea about the benefits that their clients have derived from accessing WBLA provision. This is because there is no formal process for obtaining feedback from clients after they have attended WBLA provision. Most Restart advisers only see these clients again through chance meetings in the Jobcentre. Some form of follow-through is widely desired by staff. This would help balance the picture - most staff currently only hear about a client's progress if a problem has arisen.
- Very few staff had (or made) the opportunity to visit providers to see how training is being undertaken. Most staff want to be able to do this, but feel they need support from senior staff to enable this to happen (for example, for this to be built in to their workloads).
- Staff are often not feeding back to senior staff suspicions they have about the quality of provision or gaps that they feel exist have in the range of provision available. In part this is because they since there are no formal procedures for obtaining client feedback, and hence they feel their views are somewhat impressionistic.
- Providers would like more flexibility in the system for amending their profiles so that provision which is above profile can easily be substituted for provision where figures are behind. The system for agreeing such changes was described as being much easier under the TECs.
- Employers would like to see a greater degree of follow-up by ES staff about WBLA clients that they have taken on. More broadly, many employers involved in the programme know very little about WBLA and would like a greater level of communication from ES about WBLA but also about ES services more generally.

Executive Summary

The Work Based Learning for Adults (WBLA) programme is a voluntary full-time training programme, designed to provide unemployed people aged 25 plus with practical help and opportunities to equip them to re-enter and retain employment. Elements of the programme are available to individuals after they have been unemployed for 6 months continuously, with the full range of provision available at the 12-month point. If individuals fulfil any of the 'early entry' criteria then they can access WBLA provision before reaching the 6-month point.

IFF Research was commissioned to undertake a qualitative research study to assess how well the programme has been operating since April 2001 when ES took over responsibility for running the programme. The study employed a qualitative method and involved discussions with ES staff, providers and employers. These interviews took place across three waves of research, the most recent being in March and April 2002, and covered six ES Units of Delivery.

This report draws on the findings of 64 interviews with staff, 89 interviews with providers and 46 interviews with employers. Employers were interviewed by telephone, staff and providers face-to-face. Discussions with staff and providers involved a mix of one-to-one interviews, paired interviews and mini-group discussions.

Overall Views

Both staff and providers feel that the hand-over of responsibility for WBLA from DfEE/TECs to the ES was untidy and led to a very difficult first few months for the programme. In some areas, contracts for training provision were not in place by April,

and training for staff was often seen as insufficient and was often carried out before decisions were finalised about what provision would be offered. However by 2002 the problems arising from the hand-over have largely either been addressed or are being addressed.

Staff feel that the fact that ES is now responsible for WBLA contracts with providers will improve the service that they are able to offer clients. Not only will there be greater direct control over the quality of provision but staff will have increased overall levels of familiarity with what is offered under different elements of the provision. However many also feel that there is some way to go in realising these potential benefits.

Providers are in favour of the fact that they are now dealing directly with ES and not an intermediary (the TECs) and there is general support for the fact they are less tied to NVQs and qualifications with the focus moving to jobs and work outcomes. However, this is tempered by the programme being viewed as more inflexible than pre April 2001, for example the duration of the training available being tied to the length of time a person has been unemployed.

In terms of the overall effectiveness of WBLA, staff feel that the programme can provide useful skills to individuals that are interested/willing to take part, and is helping a reasonable proportion into work. However, the fact that they cannot make participation compulsory does limit its scope to help a large proportion of the clients that they see.

Areas of progress over the year

Staff confidence in the operation of the programme has grown as their familiarity with WBLA provision has developed. This has contributed to an increase in the number of referrals being made. Providers bear witness to this increase, although referrals for some courses, particularly SJFT, remain very low, and generally providers are behind profile for the year.

Providers have also seen a decrease in the proportion of referrals that they would consider to be inappropriate. Problems were encountered in the first half of the year particularly in relation to SJFT clients. Providers felt that there was a significant gulf between their opinions on the level of 'job-readiness' necessary to benefit from an SJFT course and those of ES staff. However, this reduction in 'inappropriate referrals' does seem to mean that in many areas, very little use is being made of SJFT courses.

In the first two waves of the research, staff had suspicions that not all providers were fulfilling their job search obligations and that several did not consider this to be a major part of their remit. Staff are now confident that job search is fully integrated into all WBLA options but staff still have concerns about the quality of job search that is being conducted, and several areas are planning to focus on addressing this in the coming months.

Significant teething problems were encountered in regard to the paperwork involved in administering WBLA, providers complaining of receiving late and/or incorrect forms, and staff often describing providers as being confused about the paperwork required. By wave 3 of the research, this problem had greatly diminished as both parties had developed familiarity with the programme.

Issues that continue to be problematic

As a result of low unemployment, staff find that they are dealing with a hardcore of clients who have deep-rooted or multiple barriers to work. Relatively few are job-ready, hence SJFT provision is rarely being used. Put another way, SJFT would need to be extended beyond six weeks to be of benefit to most clients that they see. They feel that there are many circumstances when they are able to identify a training need at the 6-months stage but cannot act on this because SJFT is unsuitable and the client does not qualify for early entry into LOT. A strong sentiment among staff is that they would like LOT provision to be available at the 6-months point.

Even after one year of operation, staff still often feel they have only sketchy information about the quality and effectiveness of different providers and different provision. Many want more information from providers or senior staff about job outcome levels being achieved, and there is a strong desire for some kind of follow-through to allow staff to get feedback from clients after they have attended provision.

Many staff are able to identify what they see as gaps in provision locally (dedicated soft skills provision for those not qualifying for BET was quite often mentioned) though there is little sign that this information is being passed on to senior staff.

One of the key issues for many providers is the continuing low level of referrals, and some have concerns about the viability of their contract without the underpinning guarantee. There is a degree of frustration that their contract profiles have turned out to be widely different from reality and they are hoping that profiles will be adjusted in such a way that still makes them economically viable.

Employers

There is very little sense among employers of being involved in a programme, indeed a fair number of those interviewed had not heard of WBLA (knowing only of having contact with Jobcentre or a training provider). It was common for employers to desire more information about WBLA and other ES programmes, and also more contact from ES about the clients they had taken on (this generally appeared to be undertaken by providers, not ES, if at all).

Employers views of the programme tended to be shaped very much by the quality of the clients they had employed or provided a work placement for. Most were looking for clients with good motivation and a positive attitude, rather than any occupation-specific skills. Where problems had been encountered these generally related to a lack of motivation and poor attendance (e.g. poor time keeping or their walking out). Even in these cases though, most employers were willing to continue to recruit or take placements via the programme as long as future clients were appropriate for the relevant vacancies.

Looking ahead

After a year focussing on familiarising themselves with the extent of provision and focussing on ensuring that WBLA referrals are being made, staff in several areas are planning to spend the next few months concentrating on evaluating the quality of provision that is being delivered. There are plans to:

- Focus on evaluating the content of courses and to compare the different ways in which providers have elected to deliver the same type of provision
- To increase (or in some areas to start) provider monitoring visits by WBLA staff

- To investigate the variation in employment outcomes by provider