



ITEC Training Solutions Ltd response to the Assembly Government Petitions Committee inquiry: Work based learning for vulnerable young people

ITEC recognises the matters arising from the Petitions Committee result of a petition submitted by Action for Children to comment on current training opportunities made available through Work Based Learning (WBL) with specific reference to the homeless and vulnerable young people.

ITEC is the largest independent training provider in Wales with current contracts with DCELLS and with DWP that enable a service addressing the needs of some 6,000 learners in 2009/10. We provide opportunities for nearly 900 youths and 400 Adults on Skillbuild Programmes. We provide an “open-door” enrolment process that ensures all can enter training, within the contract conditions and funding limitations. We are therefore well placed to respond to the committees request for comment. Our aim is to encourage reconsiderations of WBL that improve services to the communities of Wales.

Call for written evidence

Terms of Reference 1: The availability and quality of training programmes, and work based placements, particularly suitable placements for vulnerable young people?

Over the past few years there has been significant improvements in the quality of delivery, including the outcomes achieved. There remain some further needs and the forthcoming PS3 tender may attend to some or all of the remaining issues.

The work of Estyn and WAG has targeted the Provider Network with the result that there are fewer providers, but their standards of performance are significant (recent reports showing Wales is performing above UK wide standards in many areas).

Success has been achieved by WBL Providers because they offer flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the learners they engage with. Professionalism of organisations has embraced increased expectations alongside reduced funding per learner. What is apparent is that where a provider manages their clients requirements, within the All-Age Skillbuild programmes (youths and adults), there are a range of opportunities made available to the most needy and least able of learners.

It is important that WBL is seen as the recipient of the least able of school leavers that have, for many reasons, left 13 years of mandatory education with little, or none, achievements and WBL providers are tasked with gaining positive outcomes (qualifications, jobs, progression to further education).

There are limited funds available for WBL (Skillbuild and Apprenticeships) but DCELLS are insistent that priority is given to the “guarantee group” and this is the vulnerable youths and adults that are referred by Careers Wales and/or Job Centre Plus. Training Providers that are contracted to deliver the Skillbuild programmes are required to make places available as they arise and are monitored closely to ensure they meet the obligations.

The best of providers have regularly recorded delivering to learners whilst the funding has run out. That is the extent of the commitment and dedication of the Providers that deliver quality of provision and enable access when it is needed.

Placements and Work experience

The remit for WBL providers does necessitate learners entering a placement or work-experience setting that provides the practical experience necessary in their chosen vocational route. Often this is the starting point of a relationship that results in an employment offer.

Recessionary influences will create barriers for some employers and, dependent on the length of time and the depth of the recession, this may cause operational difficulties for a process that often works well.

There are existing barriers to engagement of placements/work experience based upon the history of learners. There are challenges when relating to learners with multiple barriers to employment such as low basic skills, engagement issues and a history of behaviours, including drug or alcohol abuse. Employers are operating a business and whilst there are many that will offer hard to reach learners some work, they require staff who are ready, able and willing to work.

The Skillbuild programmes are used to support the most difficult to reach, and WAG/DCELLS provide additional funding where necessary to address exceptional support issues.

The role of all stakeholders is to ensure that failure of work placements is reduced through targeted, specific and appropriate support is given. No professional wants to offer a route to failure. In these recessionary times innovative and radical solutions are required and perhaps here WAG/DCELLS and other agencies can lead the way, and can encourage more employers into taking learners (albeit specific incentives may be required)

The political position regarding incentives such as requiring quotas of Apprentices/trainees in every employer is an area for consideration, but not one for the WBL provider to enter. Our relationship with employers has to remain outside of the political agendas.

Terms of Reference 1: Concluding comments

- WBL has improved and continues to lead the way in the education sector of Wales, in regard to quality of service and the achievement of positive progressions
- Many thousands of employers engage with the WBL Providers and placements/work experience opportunities still exist, but the recession may provide future difficulties.
- Annual contracts, and three or four year re-tendering, do little to enable Providers to stabilise their provision and cost diverted away from the learner are ill-afforded
- All Government departments are an imperative partner to national actions that better serves all potential learners and it is the Government, and other agencies, that have to steer the content and values of WBL contracts to better serve those currently not being served.

Terms of Reference 2. Progression for the vulnerable young person building on skills and qualifications gained in the previous placement?

We must all accept that not everyone is able or willing to progress at a similar rate. The task of Training Providers has to be to offer opportunities, probably never made available before, and to encourage every learner to achieve the maximum possible for them.

Formal training programmes that are associated to work placements provide the greatest opportunity for success because the two integrate, become relevant and enable learning through examples. If managed properly, with all parties involved (learner, employer and trainer) the success rate of 60% learners with positive progressions is frequently achieved. WBL can provide significant opportunities for learners particularly as evidence gathering of previous experience by the learner reduces the extent of repeat work the learner has to undergo.

Whilst it is desirable that a learner stays with the employer who has offered work experience in the placement situation, it is inevitable that learners have to leave and then find employment. But managed fully and correctly there are many who find employment because of the work placement experience carried out elsewhere – job ready and job enabled learners are an asset to employers.

WBL Providers have to meet exacting “positive progression” targets as part of their contract. This indicates the WAG commitment toward providing real opportunities for the young people, and Training Providers systematically have year-on-year improvements to their annual outcomes.

Exacting targets are considered by some to be unreasonable. However even as an “open-door” provider who do not “cherry pick” the most able learners we frequently deliver above National Comparator Standards. Providing WAG/DCELLS and Etsyn offer opportunities for mitigation, whilst still expecting the best that can be achieved there should be a fair balance achieved between what can, and what cannot, be reasonably attainable. Removal of targets will enable the least diligent of providers to deliver to minimum requirements that will never benefit the learner

Terms of Reference 2: Concluding comments

- WAG must continue to find rules of contract delivery that enable the most vulnerable to access training and development.
- DCELLS must be clear and precise as to what are current and expected targets in relation to those most in need of support
- Finite funding will inevitably mean that not everyone can access training programmes
- Providers are responsible morally as well as financially to maximise their contracts and to address needs of those most vulnerable if we are sincere about supporting Wales growth
- WAG should continue to be robust in its appraisal of current arrangements that continue to result in about 10% of the population not being qualified and remaining as NEETs

Terms of reference 3: Financial support for independently financed young people including training allowances, Education Maintenance Allowances, benefits, and funding for travel costs?

ITEC have previously responded to the consultation regarding changes to Training Allowances into EMA into the WBL sector. The outcome of that consultation and inclusion into WBL contracts has not yet occurred so we are not aware of what will apply from 2011.

However we will continue suggest that the EMA system was and should remain applicable for FE but not for WBL. Our reasoning is based upon years of experience. Learners in Skillbuild are frequently from deprived areas and from families that could have limited incomes. The Training Allowance is often shared income within the family. We have experience of parents waiting outside the training centre to collect part or all of the weekly allowance. Some of these learners are renting (some were previously homeless) and the weekly allowance pays their way for the next week.

We also have a significant number of learners that are from low income families and that any delays to payments would disproportionately affect the ability of these learners to continue attending WBL, and it is improbable that these learners will attend FE so WBL must be an easy option for entry.

The amount available per week does act to encourage continued commitment to complete a qualification driven outcome, plus work experience through placements, that many would never have regarded possible when they left school with nothing other than the experience

Terms of Reference 3: Concluding comments

- The current arrangements are appropriate for the cohort group
- The value has remained the same since 2006 which indicates that learners “cost of living” have remained static
- Eligibility for allowances requires a learner to attend full time programmes for minimal enticement to attend
- The Trainee Allowance is not the only form of support funding so in exceptional cases providers should apply for the Support Funding available (though the process can be lengthy).

Terms of reference 4: Personal support for vulnerable young people including differences in levels of support for care-leavers?

Skillbuild is a flagship programme set out by WAG that refers to “Guarantee” learners, who are those between the ages of 16 – 19 that are guaranteed a place on the programme. The WBL programme provides a degree of flexibility that enables providers to meet the needs of most young people and adults. Additional funding is available to provide specialist support that is required to address barrier to entry issues such as those whose attendance is affected by issues such as homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse etc which require high levels of support away from, and within, the learning environment.

Often the early difficulty is attracting individuals into learning and having to place them on a specific programme, which can be daunting and discouraging. However the Skillbuild programme does enable enrolment onto "Core Skillbuild" which is not specific but is an opportunity to explore the needs of the learner and to design a suitable programme of support, guidance and personal development.

Other changes have been approved and introduced that makes access easier by those that are traditionally "harder to reach". For instance Skillbuild used to be time limited to 13 weeks, which for some was inappropriate. Providers, with Careers Wales, can engage a learner for any period needed to attain the personal goals set with the learner at the entry stage into Skillbuild.

There are entry criteria that may currently not enable everyone to engage in Skillbuild, and there are other programmes being run that sometimes confuse learners because of the choices available, the entry criteria and the lack of suitable sign posting.

For those on Skillbuild and with Providers who are committed to addressing all barriers, there is adequate funding available per learner (WBL core funding and Support Funding) but with finite funding allocations there are limits to the numbers of learners that a provider can enrol. Providing all Skillbuild Providers offer an open door policy, and do not cherry-pick their learners, there is a possibility that more learners will be engaged within the same level of funding. But the Skillbuild budget is distributed widely and does include to the FE sector, which by tradition is not a facility that those with poor schooling experience would want to access. This may be barrier in itself.

There should be some consideration given to the merits of using Skillbuild funding to support NVQ delivery, because these learners are seeking pastoral support, personal development and motivation skills. In addition an NVQ by design should be delivered in the work place and these learners have not yet reached a level of employability because of their personal issues.

Terms of Reference 4: Concluding comments

- Improved definition of what Skillbuild is designed to achieve may result in fewer providers but delivering at a standard that best addresses needs of the learners.
- Integrated funding (Core plus support) will reduce bureaucracy and be readily available to meet needs as they arise
- Reduce the number of providers to ensure that resources and support are at the best level and to avoid duplication of costs of delivery
- Review the entry criteria to ensure all people can enter Skillbuild within the funding limits that exist
- Increase the funding to enable more to enrol because currently Providers have to expend all their budget then hope to receive additional funding for Guarantee learners.

Terms of reference 5: The effectiveness of agency collaboration/partnership working in issues in Wales?

ITEC has been a long standing advocate of collaborative and partnership working having released a paper on 2003 that set out the risks and benefits of such arrangements. The WAG has reinforced the commitments but actions are still influenced by traditional self-interest working in many quarters of the Education Industry.

Success of partnerships can only be tested once they exist and such tests must be frequent and regular to ensure that collaboration is more than words in documents.

Much has been expended at local level in the debates and shaping of collaborative partnerships, with CCETs being an example of significant cost for little outcomes.

The model for the effectiveness of partnership working can be seen in many industries and the education sector is no different, but those who are in places of influence are not embracing the practice.

The WBL sector has seen progressive reduction in numbers of contract holders and at the same time quality of service and delivery has improved year-on-year. This is proof positive that collaboration works because those who lost contracts are now working within those who have gained the contract values from those who lost contracts.

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. Whilst big is not always beautiful, or right, there remain sufficiently robust performance measures that will continue to drive continuous improvement of the value for money exercise managed by WAG and Estyn

Terms of Reference 5: Concluding comments

- WAG must ensure that true collaboration is adopted by making 14-19 Network support funding conditional on full participation of all sectors of education (Schools, FE, WBL and Community)
- Review partnership arrangements to uncover the benefits that would arise if the best providers deliver to the learners (for instance WBL delivering vocational in schools)
- Ensure that collaboration remove duplication of costs (for instance remove the ability for individual institutions building new centres, or buying resources, that already exist in the area)
- Avoid the temptation of having collaborative arrangements just to prove it exists, partnerships must serve a purpose and be measured for positive outcomes.