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Training for Success Consultation Document - Summary Analysis of Responses

TRAINING FOR SUCCESS CONSULTATION DOCUMENT – SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES

Introduction

The 'Training for Success' consultation document was formally launched on the 5 July 2006. In excess of 1200 copies were issued to a wide range of organisations. Until the consultation closed on 29 September Training for Success was the most popular download on the DEL website.

Some 120 responses were received. Of these 39 provided an overall response to the document and 81 provided selective responses to the 15 questions posed; in total 1,177 responses.

The general view of respondents concurred with that of the Department i.e. an improvement in the quality of provision is essential to address the issues highlighted in the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) November 2005 report. They also agreed that assessment of young people embarking on training provision has not focused on individual needs and ability. However, some respondents considered that the consultation document had focused on administrative and process changes rather than offering a fundamental review of the Vocational Educational and Training (VET) system suggested by PAC. The proposal to drop the Jobskills brand was welcomed. Responses overall were wide ranging and the lack of commonality was notable on many of the issues.

The Key Principles

1. Flexibility and Individuality

Nearly all opinion was in favour of a flexible approach to training that meets both the needs and aspirations of employers and individuals. This will enable a wider range of employers to play a key role in providing the industry experience. Respondents also suggested that a greater emphasis on outcomes such as qualifications and sustained employment would come from more flexible delivery in terms of time spent on programme and less prescription of content. This would recognise the wide range of learner styles and employer requirements.

Additionally it was considered that flexible training will also open up more opportunities for part time learning. It was thought that all elements of the provision could be delivered on a part-time basis, based on pro-rata funding.

Some respondents also stressed that to move away from a 'one size fits all' approach, will require a determination to eradicate gender inequalities in

schools and Further Education (FE) colleges, as well as addressing job desegregation.

2. Emphasis on Employment

A number of responses indicated that employers do not wish to engage with training schemes that are based round the idea of 'employed status' because of the complications associated with employment legislation. Other respondents chose to stress the impacts. For example it is suggested that employers are generally reluctant to take young school leavers directly into employment and usually demand a trial period, even for those on non-waged training. It is also seen that a lack of employment opportunities may limit the choices for young people when choosing a training option. Young people may have to be encouraged to look outside their local areas for employment opportunities.

It was also commented that the proposed training frameworks demand significant time away from the workplace. Consequently, the young person may only be in the workplace for three days per week. It is considered that most employers, particularly in the small business sector, are unlikely to want to pay a five day wage for three days work for an inexperienced and unskilled employee.

3. Progression

Respondents generally agreed with the principle, suggesting that seamless progression is key to driving up the skills of the workforce. They also agree that clear advice and guidance should underpin individuals' best progression route. Progression has been perceived to be upward only. 'Lateral' progression is often what is required to equip the individual to move forward within their occupational area and this should be recognised within this principle. It was suggested that study for progression should start early and be rewarded by wage incentives if milestones are achieved, otherwise delay will risk the loss of an estimated 50% of trainees.

4. Quality

Again there were no dissenting comments about the principle with respondents focusing more on specifics. For example it was strongly suggested that Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) must play a key role in driving up quality through helping to set standards, developing frameworks and accrediting provision. However, there was a major concern that most small

employers, especially those from rural areas, are not directly involved with SSCs and therefore do not have a lot of input into apprenticeship frameworks. It was also suggested that the focus on assessment has resulted in a deterioration of training quality and resultantly in a poor standard of output from apprentices. The quality of training is considered to be of equal if not greater importance than assessment.

Crosscutting Issues

A number of crosscutting issues were identified by respondents such as the complex impacts of migrant workers, incentives to employers, the desire of industry led bodies to provide training in tension to the existing college framework, the role and interaction of SSCs within the NI context, mandatory Essential Skills and the possible exclusion of people with learning disabilities and gender discrimination.

Proposed Menu of Provision

Apprenticeships

Almost all respondents were agreed that the emphasis should be on apprenticeships. It was generally considered that by engaging with employers at all stages of the training provision development and delivery, employers will be committed to the success of the training both for the individuals and their businesses.

It was commented that although the civil and public services are the biggest employers in Northern Ireland, employing 27% of the workforce, apprenticeships are not delivered in any of the departments on a significant scale.

There was significant support for the introduction of Level 2 Apprenticeships. It was generally considered that the Level 2 Apprenticeship should be viewed as a valued qualification in its own right, not a lesser or easier option. It was seen as a good basis for apprentices to build upon their skills and very much as a stepping stone to progress to Level 3 for those occupations that require it.

Some concern was expressed about the commitment from employers in Northern Ireland to equip young people to learn and train while they earn. It was suggested that the labour market may not be able to sustain the new provision's emphasis on employment, particularly in regard to SMEs. In addition, the majority of small employers are unaware of the role of the SSCs in deciding the structure of training for their particular industries.

Difficulties were perceived with the volume of directed training to be delivered, (not less than two days per week) and how this arrangement would sit with employers who at present consider one day per week as a maximum. Overall, employers may look for other cheaper ways to get staff / labour which doesn't involve a commitment to training, e.g. use of migrant workers.

Pre Apprenticeships

The general view was that any Pre-apprenticeship programme would have to provide relevant and realistic work experience for young people to ensure they are fully prepared for the world of work. It was also suggested that general vocational provision, with the skills and knowledge transferable, would allow flexibility should employment trends change.

The quality of careers education, advice and guidance will have significant impact on the uptake of pre-apprenticeships and subsequent progression to apprenticeships.

Essential Skills

It was considered that it would be more beneficial for Essential Skills to be integrated into the training programme rather than being taught separately. This would demonstrate the relevance of these skills to the work role and provide better motivation for candidates.

Barriers to Employment

There was strong support for the proposed range of flexible new provision.

However, there were concerns at the absence of employer involvement in the options presented, in particular the lack of on-the-job training in the non NVQ Based Level 1 and Level 2 Provision. Young people are the very cohort for whom the experience of the world of work and the expectations of employers is crucial if they are to compete for employment.

It was also considered that the non-NVQ based Level 2 would encourage the development of education and personal development rather than training for work. Trainees want and need to be in the workplace to develop the range of skills and experiences. Attending full time classroom based training will be perceived as a continuation of school.

In relation to Barriers to Employment provision respondents expressed the need for the provision of high quality, early careers advice. This would enable

young people to make informed decisions regarding their future career path, and would be dependent upon careers advisers being aware of the benefits of professional and technical training.

Contracting Arrangements

Approximately half of respondents agreed that contracts should be offered to both industry recognised bodies /employers and to training organisations. However, it was also seen as more reasonable and practical that the industry recognised bodies should be contracted to purchase the training to meet their sector's needs. This would help employers and trainees stay on top of industry trends, policy changes and technological developments. High completion rates are common where apprenticeships are offered by industry recognised bodies or employers.

It was considered that contracts should only be awarded to organisations that can provide directed training rather than arrangements through Managing Agents as this would not be an effective use of public funds and would add a 'middle man' rather than adding value.

Other concerns regarding contract arrangements included the ability of SMEs to manage the onerous task of the administration of the contract, Sector Skills Councils being the sole arbitrator in deciding the deliverables and some SSCs not being experienced in contract and performance management.

In England, where employers hold the contracts they are far more committed to the programme and have a greater incentive for apprentices to complete, especially where the contracts stipulate completion targets.

Funding Structure

A majority of respondents were in favour of the proposed funding model but there were a significant number who indicated that they had some difficulty understanding the model. There was support for the extension of the funding bands from two to six and the unitisation of funding. However the proposal that funding be paid on achievement of clusters of units did not match with NVQ structure and Awarding Body requirements. This may disrupt the natural training and development process of the individual towards the M.A. award and cause some providers to push candidates through for cash flow purposes.

A number of concerns were raised in relation to how the proposed funding would encourage employer 'buy in'. In particular the level of funding may not be sufficient to incentivise SMEs to recruit apprentices and they may choose

cheaper alternatives such as the use of migrant workers. It was also suggested that a greater amount of funding be allocated in the earlier stages of apprenticeship, the most costly period to employers.

It was generally considered that the funding model / structure does not have parity with the rest of the UK and is effectively under funded as a result. The rest of the UK get five years to deliver what Northern Ireland providers are expected to deliver in three.

Concern was also expressed that providers may choose to only run apprenticeships that pay the higher funding rates. This could be detrimental to the life span of other apprenticeships that have less funding allocated to them. Similarly the proposed funding structure for Addressing Personal Development, Employability Skills and Non NVQ based training may be more financially lucrative to deliver than the core Level 2/3 apprenticeship.

Other Issues from Consultation

Travel

A considerable number of respondents had concerns regarding the proposed changes for the payment of travel costs to participants. In particular for those in rural areas who depended upon public transport to get them to work.

EMA

The majority of respondents supported extension of EMA to unwaged trainees and considered that it should be available to those in education, employability skills and non-NVQ based training. For unemployed and low wage trainees, it was also suggested that EMAs should not be means tested.

However there were a number of respondents opposed to the introduction of EMA. They were concerned that young people in education currently receiving the allowance are required to complete 12 hours / weekly whilst participants in the proposed provision would be expected to complete 35 hours.

It was also stated that experience of EMA in England has shown a significant drop in numbers due to ineligibility of participants undertaking entry to employment training. Also delays in the payment system have caused hardship to many participants.

Adult Upskilling

Nearly all of the respondents were in support of Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeships for adults. There are many employees over the age of 25 with a minimum schooling who would benefit from an apprenticeship programme. Those who have at least 5 years industry experience are better equipped to achieve a Level 3 qualification. Many early leavers would be attracted back to complete their Level 3 apprenticeship. Many women could be encouraged into non-traditional skills training and employment.

Lower Level Upskilling

There was significant support for the introduction of lower level upskilling. Benefits would include more apprenticeship places available as people progressed up the line, the need to equip people with transferable skills and those facing redundancy transferring to other forms of employment with little training required. Women would benefit from upskilling by moving from low paid part time work to progressing to Level 2 and Level 3.

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