

Education Research Programme

Evaluation of Skills for Work Pilot Courses – Interim Report

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The Scottish Executive made a commitment in 2004 to deliver a new programme of qualifications in learning about skills for work by 2007. It announced that Skills for Work (SfW) courses were going to be introduced to help young people to develop skills and knowledge in a broad vocational area, core skills, an understanding of the workplace, positive attitudes to learning, and employability skills. The results reported here are interim findings from research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) examining the piloting of SfW courses over two years, involving approximately 40 delivery centres in the first year and 70 in the second year of the pilot, working in partnership with a total of 255 schools.

Main Findings

- The study revealed four delivery models adopted across the SfW pilot partnerships, of which the in-college delivery model was the most common one.
- Lecturers, teachers and trainers delivering SfW courses emphasised the need to ensure that delivery of the courses is as practical as possible and to treat course participants as adults, including giving them responsibility for their own learning.
- The research suggested that student drop-out is likely to be lower on those courses in which all stakeholders, including school staff, college lecturers, and parents, are involved in pre-course guidance and selection.
- Time-tabling was reported to be a key issue in several schools, but particularly in those involved in transporting students to and from college.
- All 41 candidates interviewed were able to identify positive impacts of participating in SfW courses, including increasing their skills, knowledge, confidence and awareness of the world of work. Almost three-quarters said that they thought that participating in the courses had improved their chances of finding work in the future.
- Almost all candidates interviewed said that they really enjoyed the courses they were doing, and more than half of them were not able to identify any way their courses could have been improved.
- Most interviewees in both schools and colleges reported increasing demand for courses, although evidence from the evaluation to date suggests that increasing capacity was limited by physical space, staffing, as well as, in some cases, some college staff attitudes towards working with younger students.
- Several interviewees wanted more in-school delivery by school or college staff in order to overcome transport and time-tabling issues and to build capacity. However, there was recognition that most schools lacked the facilities and staff with the necessary skills to deliver the different SfW courses, and would therefore need to rely on external partner assistance for an in-school delivery model.

Background

In the ministerial response to *A Curriculum for Excellence*, the Scottish Executive made a commitment to a phased introduction of Skills for Work (SfW) courses in a fully supported pilot. The rationale for the SfW courses is that they would be introduced to help young people to develop skills and knowledge in a broad vocational area, core skills, an understanding of the workplace, positive attitudes to learning, and employability skills. The courses are intended to provide progression pathways to further learning, training or employment for pupils of all abilities. The SfW pilot is being run over two years, involving approximately 40 delivery centres in the first year and 70 in the second year of the pilot, working in partnership with a total of 255 schools.

About the Study

The overarching purpose of the research was to undertake a process evaluation of the SfW pilot courses in order to inform the roll-out of these courses. The evaluation of the SfW pilot is based around a qualitative methodology in order to get to the heart of the implementation process. It consists of five distinct, but interrelated, research methods. These are as follows:

- **Strategic interviews:** face-to-face meetings with key representatives from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Scottish Executive, HMLe, Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) during September and November 2005.
- **Telephone survey:** of a representative sample of 20 partnerships, including interviews with schools and colleges at two time points (around November 2005 and May 2007).
- **Case study visits:** to six partnerships involving interviews with 16 course lecturers, teachers or trainers, 22 school staff (including headteachers, deputies and guidance teachers), six college senior managers and/or programme coordinators, three local authority staff, one employer working with a school and 41 SfW students (between April 2006 and November 2006).
- **Analysis of monitoring data:** from all pilot centres in order to determine pupils characteristics, retention and achievement on SfW courses.
- **Document analysis:** collection and review of relevant documentation, including course materials from all six case study areas, covering the pilot courses.

At this stage, the strategic interviews, first round of telephone interviews with 20 partnerships and six case study visits have been completed. In addition, the NFER has analysed basic data provided by the SQA relating to the characteristics of pupils involved in the pilot.

Key Findings of the Research

Delivery models

The initial telephone survey of Year 1 partnerships and visits to six case study partnerships helped to identify four delivery models, which included:

- College or training provider delivery off-site.
- College or training provider delivery in school.
- Joint delivery by college/provider school staff.
- School-only delivery.

The first of these was the most common delivery model for the pilot, used by ten of the 20 partnerships contacted as part of the phase 1 telephone survey. Each of the four delivery models were found to have their own strengths and challenges associated with them. Several interviewees saw more in-school delivery by school or college staff as the way forward, in order to overcome transport and time-tabling issues associated with the in-college delivery model experienced in some schools, and to increase the number of students being able to participate in SfW courses. However, there was recognition that most schools lacked the facilities and staff with the necessary skills to deliver the different SfW courses.

Partnership working

Interviews with teachers, college staff and students revealed that partnership links between schools and colleges were sometimes very effective, but not always as effective as they could be. Some partnerships were taking steps, such as two-way visits and more systematic reporting procedures, to overcome this issue. Furthermore, there was evidence from the case studies that where partnership links between schools and colleges were weaker, teachers were less likely to be aware of courses and more likely to see them as an option just for badly behaved, low ability or disengaged students. Another concern was that not all partnerships had managed to set up effective links with employers due to health and safety or child protection concerns, or lack of time or contacts.

Delivering the SfW courses

Interviews with those delivering SfW courses identified the need to ensure that delivery of the courses is as practical as possible and to treat students as adults, including giving them responsibility for their own learning. The employability skills component was found to be most successfully integrated into Construction Crafts courses, in which lecturers used workshops as simulated working environments. Other courses had used employer links to strengthen the employability focus of the course.

Views on course materials

The majority of respondents interviewed as part of the telephone survey and the case studies were extremely positive about the support materials provided by the SFEU for use and adaptation by colleges and schools. Several interviewees reported that they had adapted the provided materials or developed additional ones to better suit their students' needs and requirements. Interviewees were also generally satisfied with the National Assessment Bank materials, although some complained about the time-intensive nature of completing them.

Staff development

Most of those interviewed in year two of the pilot reported that they had accessed some external training either from the SFEU, the SQA or their Local Authority and most said it had been useful. Training needs were most likely to be reported in relation to the delivery of employability skills, managing difficult behaviour and child protection issues. Staff development issues were more likely to be reported in case studies visited at the end of the first year of the pilot than those visited later on, which suggests that training needs were increasingly being met.

Getting involved in the courses

All 41 students interviewed said that they had freely chosen to participate in their courses. The most common reason for wanting to take part in a course was an interest in the area of study and/or that it supported their chosen career. Students' course choices largely conformed to traditional gender stereotypes, with only, for example, three per cent of participants on construction-related courses being female. It is worth noting that levels of pre-course information and guidance received by students differed across interviewees and schools, with not all students reporting that they had discussed their choice with a guidance teacher.

Views of the courses

Almost all candidates interviewed said that they really enjoyed the courses they were doing, and more than half of them were not able to identify any way in which their courses

could have been improved. All students interviewed were able to identify positive impacts of participating in SfW courses, including increasing their skills, knowledge, confidence and awareness of the world of work. Almost three-quarters said that they thought that participating in the courses had improved their chances of finding work in the future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

To date, the evaluation has shown that schools and colleges continue to be committed to the value of SfW courses and that they have increasingly found ways to improve the delivery of SfW courses over the two years of the pilot. In particular, schools and colleges are increasingly recognising the need to work more closely together and have started to implement strategies to strengthen their partnerships; teachers, lecturers and trainers are improving their delivery approaches and developing or adapting materials to ensure that students are fully engaged in the learning process; colleges and schools are looking at ways of setting up more links with employers and involving them in the delivery of courses in order to increase students' awareness of the world of work and making clearer links with future employment.

Recommendations

The study suggests that involving college staff in selection is good practice – it helps to ensure that well-motivated students are selected who will not disrupt lessons for others, it can reduce student drop-out and can also be used for pre-course guidance so that pupils know what they are signing up for.

The case studies revealed various concerns about the funding of alternative models of delivery, and the long-term funding of transport costs. The Scottish Executive should consider whether schools using non-standard delivery models will be able to access some additional funding as part of the national roll-out of SfW or whether the current funding model could be made more flexible to allow for different delivery models. It may also need to examine what support local authorities currently provide to schools and what their long-term plans are for continuing this support.

Time-tabling continues to be an issue in several partnerships – approaches adopted vary considerably across schools, with some schools choosing to substitute one or more Standard Grades, and others time-tabling it in such a way that students missed lessons. The Scottish Executive should

consider providing guidance to schools on the need to offer SfW courses as an alternative option to completing a Standard Grade. It may also need to think of ways of raising awareness of the courses among parents, employers and universities.

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