Engaging FE providers in the National Retraining Scheme

Summary report

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Learning and Work Institute

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Introduction

Introduction

Starting this Parliament, the UK Government is providing £2.5 billion (£3 billion when including Barnett funding for devolved administrations) for a new National Skills Fund (NSF) to help adults learn valuable skills and prepare for the economy of the future.

The NSF builds on extensive user research and engagement with local areas and employers undertaken through the National Retraining Scheme (NRS). In a paper published on gov.uk in October[1], we shared our key findings from the evidence gathered to develop the NRS. This summary report shares further findings from research carried out in 2019 to inform the NRS, and which we have continued to draw on to inform the design of the National Skills Fund.[2]Further education (FE) providers have a key role in delivering learning and training. As such, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to undertake research to explore what needs to be in place to ensure providers can successfully engage with the NRS. Specifically, the research sought to establish a better understanding of:

- FE providers' behaviour and how they make decisions about their learning offer.

- Challenges that may affect providers' engagement in, and delivery of the NRS, and how these can be overcome.

- How the DfE can influence the behaviour of FE providers to ensure the successful delivery of the NRS.

This summary report presents the key findings of the research and highlights considerations for the DfE in relation to the future engagement with FE providers.

Approach

The research took a qualitative approach, involving semi-structured interviews with 11 general FE colleges and 9 independent training providers (ITPs). The use of 'participants' in this report refers to viewpoints shared across all providers interviewed. Where differences exist between colleges and ITPs, the type of provider is stated. The study also included interviews with senior policy staff from the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP).

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[1] National Retraining Scheme: Key findings paper (October 2020), available here.
[2] The publication of this report has been delayed due to disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research was qualitative in nature, with a sample designed to obtain a wide range of perspectives. It is important to note that the findings are not intended to be representative of wider populations of providers. Nevertheless, the findings do provide insight into the breadth of issues and views that exist within the wider population of providers.

During the interview, participants were introduced to the NRS and shown the Get help to retrain user journey (see appendix 1). They were also shown four example personas to illustrate the types of learners who may be engaged through the NRS (see appendix 2).Due to the early stages of the scheme (interviews were conducted during summer 2019), information provided during the interview was not enough to give participants a full picture, limiting the depth of some responses.

Summary findings

Views on Get help to retrain

Interview participants were introduced to the National Retraining Scheme (NRS) and shown the Get help to retrain user journey (appendix 1). For the majority of participants, this was the first time they heard any detail on the potential features of the NRS. This resulted in participants raising queries about the scheme. Feedback related to the following themes:

- **Eligibility and awareness**: Some participants asked whether there will be clear criteria defining "jobs at risk", so that individuals would know whether or not they would be eligible for support through the NRS. Linked to this, some participants queried how adults in "at-risk" positions will find out about the scheme and emphasised the need to successfully reach individuals directly as their current employers may not be supportive of them seeking to retrain.

- **Alternative to an online offer**: While most participants were positive about the user journey, some wanted to know what the alternative route will be for individuals who do not wish to, or cannot, access an online service. The expectation from most was that many of the individuals in the NRS cohort would not have sufficient research, digital and/or study skills to access a wholly online service independently.

- **Line of sight to a job**: There was general consensus across all interviewees that potential learners want a "clear line of sight to work" that will be available in their local area rather than opportunities at a national level. Speaking to a "real-person" was thought to be essential and a person in a national contact centre was thought to be insufficient for what are likely to be detailed and complex conversations. Participants also said that there is a risk that some activity, particularly in relation to information, advice and guidance (IAG) may be duplicated when individuals arrive at the provider.

Meeting the needs of National Retraining Scheme learners

The providers interviewed deliver to a broad range of post-16 learners, including 16-19 and adult learners, but the proportion of provision delivered to adults varied greatly. Most participants commented that declining funds for adults over recent years has made it increasingly difficult to offer a high volume of provision to learners aged 24 and over.

During the interview, participants shown four example personas to illustrate the types of learners who may be engaged through the NRS (see appendix 2). Participants were

generally positive that their organisation's current offer could meet the needs of these adults, particularly functional skills, because this could be funded through the Adult Education Budget (AEB), as well as employability training.

Providers did raise some issues, however, with their ability to offer flexible provision to meet learners' different circumstances and preferences. For example, some providers interviewed do not currently offer evening provision, and FE colleges in particular were unsure whether they could support learners who cannot commit to a regular time for training.

While participants identified potential opportunities for engaging with employed adults, such as giving them the opportunity to start an apprenticeship, some raised concern about the feasibility of individuals retraining while with their current employer. This related both to learners' time to access provision and the challenges they may face if their employer is not supportive.

Online training for the National Retraining Scheme

The DfE is exploring the potential for supporting the delivery of online training for NRS learners. Providers were asked about their organisation's current online provision. Some of the colleges predominately offer classroom-based delivery with little or no online provision. While others have an online offer, this is limited and only as part of a blended delivery model, involving a combination of face to face and online provision. Some ITPs offer online learning courses with remote tutor support. Other ITPs reported very little online delivery or wholly classroom-based provision.

The following five potential features of online training for the NRS were shared with participants: tutor support; peer-to-peer collaboration; flexibility; initial focus on basic skills (maths, English and digital) and employability skills; and a blended offer (combining classroom and online learning) for learners with very high needs/low levels of digital literacy. Overall, participants responded positively and in general agreement with the potential features as set out. Participants also highlighted considerations for online provision, including:

- Accessibility of online provision, including access to equipment, the internet and study space, as well as access being limited by learners' digital skills

- Learner motivation and needs. Individuals in the NRS target group may not have participated in learning for a considerable time and may need 'in-person' support from tutors and peers to stay engaged

- Funding and capacity. If the NRS offer is predominantly delivered online, providers may need help to invest in infrastructure and they may need to make significant changes to their workforce

- The suitability of online technical training, particularly where tools, equipment and hands-on experience are essential to developing skills.

Participants were presented with the scenario of establishing a national training platform to deliver training in basic skills and employability for NRS learners. Participants' preferred option for delivering this was for government to commission one or a group of providers to deliver the training platform and online training materials, for providers to tailor to their local context. Participants explained that this would be cost effective in terms of infrastructure, it would avoid of duplication of work, whilst being standardised to help ensure high quality training. In particular, participants welcomed the ability to have a locally contextualised and delivered offer.

Interview participants were presented with the scenario of Government incentivising providers to deliver online training that meets the needs of the NRS. On the whole, participants' preferred option for implementing this was for government to issue guidance on what it regards to be effective online training, which providers can respond to. Most participants suggested this approach allowed flexibility and was more akin to the current FE model; government sets the funding/programme rules and FE is trusted to deliver against these but with the knowledge of monitoring, audit and inspection.

Provider decision-making

FE colleges described a structured approach to decision making in relation to their learning offer. Whilst not exclusively, government funding policy and funding allocations set the main backdrop against which decisions are made.

Colleges draw on various sources to gather intelligence on local skills priorities, vacancies, employer demand and learner demand. In addition, internal information on quality, success, capability, capacity and capital infrastructure are also factored into the decision-making process.

A range of staff (such as tutors, curriculum staff and faculty leaders) are required to develop plans backed up by evidence to agree establishing, continuing or removing curriculum areas. Modelling and costing tools are used to estimate the financial impact of offering the provision. The plans and financial modelling are presented normally once per year to a Senior Leadership Team who make the final decisions.

In contrast, most of the ITPs described models that appeared less complex and more agile and responsive to employer needs and demands. None of the ITPs felt financially constrained by an annual cycle of planning. Instead, they described planning and decision making in response to funding priorities and employer demand, backed up with data and intelligence, as well as tendering and bidding for opportunities.

Support for FE providers to engage with the National Retraining Scheme

For FE providers to successfully engage with and deliver for the NRS, participants identified the following:

- Clear policy and funding rules

- Funding, for infrastructure/development, equipment, transitioning to a national platform, study hubs, and a funding methodology that recognises the true costs of online delivery

- Clarity on how the NRS will fit alongside other funding policy/streams

- Clear messaging for potential users of the service

- A national marketing and promotions campaign that reaches both individuals and employers

- Sector workforce development support to support the development of an "online teaching" workforce

- At least one year's lead-in time to allow for planning, development and implementation.

Considerations for National Retraining Scheme policy development

Sector engagement

While the research findings of this study are based on a small number of comprehensive and detailed interviews, and therefore cannot be generalised to the wider population of providers, this was the first time that the majority of participants had heard any detail on the National Retraining Scheme (NRS). Due to the early stages of the scheme, information provided during the interview was not sufficient to give participants a full picture, limiting the depth of some responses. Some participants held back on the basis that they did not understand the full intention of the NRS and how the policy will be implemented. For example, participants frequently asked questions such as:

- Is it just a brokerage or referral service into the existing skills system?

- Will the pre-recruitment phase be funded using existing AEB funding policy or is there any participation funding?

- What are the outcomes this policy is trying to achieve?

- Is this a cost saving exercise?

- Is this an entirely learner-facing policy or will employers have a role?

- What are the timescales?

It is therefore recommended that the DfE continues to build on their engagement with the FE sector and where appropriate provides the sector with a more comprehensive understanding of the NRS and how it fits with wider skills agendas. This engagement should include further research as the Department's understanding and plans become more developed. This model of sector engagement and research can be seen in relation to other learning and skills policy, for example the development of T Levels.

User journey

Policy makers should be mindful of the existing IAG and (to a lesser extent) job brokerage services that the FE sector already delivers on a day to day basis. The strength of this delivery is their understanding of, and relationships within, the local context. From the information provided it was unclear to participants whether the user journey presented would be a single national service or would make use of local expertise.

It is suggested that during the initial implementation phases of Get help to retrain there is a review of IAG received by adults up to and including enrolment to identify points of duplication and opportunities for data and intelligence sharing which may overcome some issues.

Courses and participation funding

For FE providers, the factor of most significance is the courses or curriculum that will be included within the NRS and where, how and for whom this will be funded – and how this fits alongside providers' wider offers. Once this information is available, providers believe they will be in a better position to make informed judgements as to the impact this and the options presented would have on their organisations. Several participants offered their time to engage with DfE and colleagues further to advise on policy development in this area.
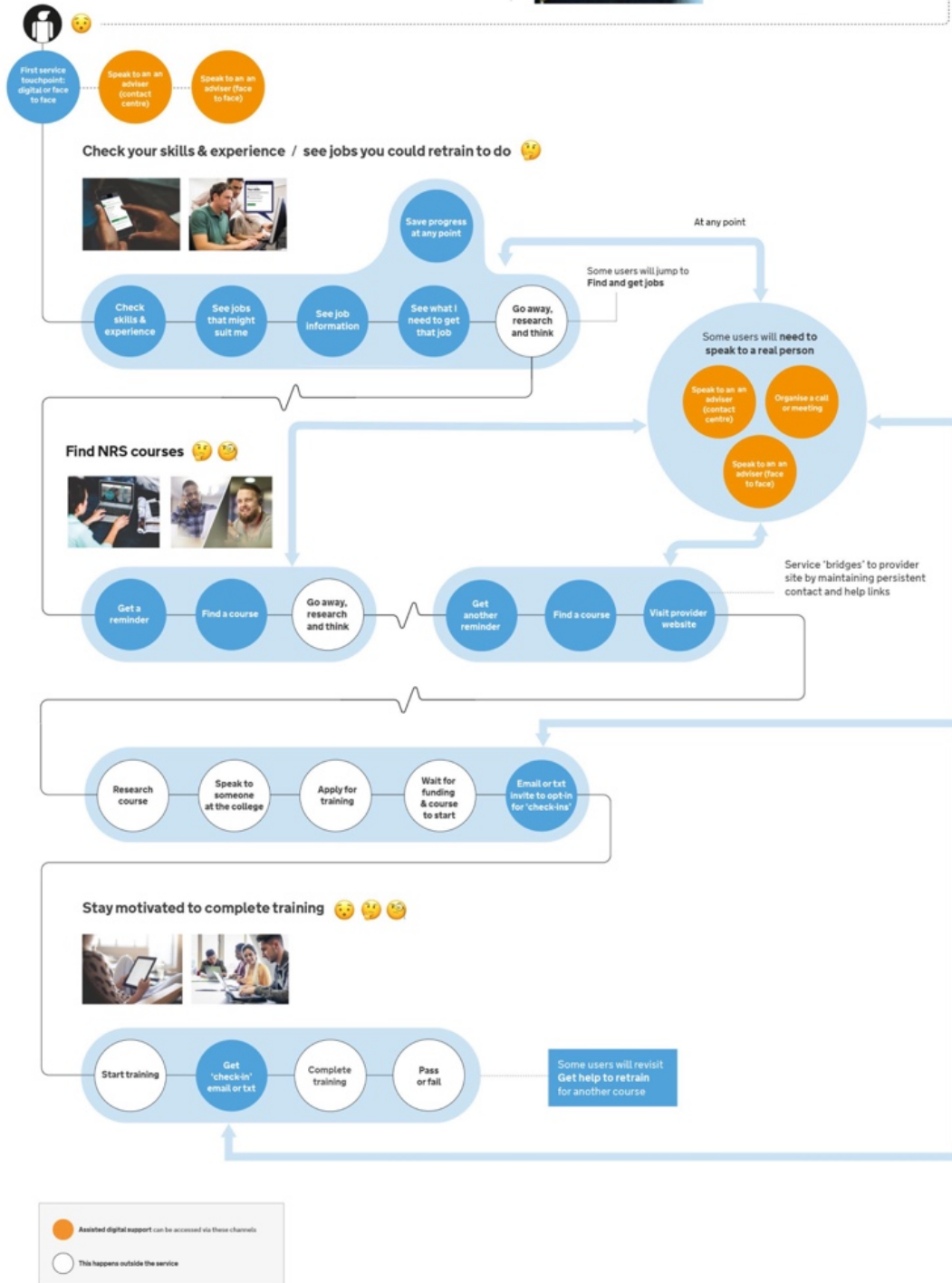
Online learning delivery platforms

Feedback from participants on the options for delivering and procuring online training strongly suggests government should commission a provider, or group of providers, to deliver the training platform and the online training materials. Local providers can then use this to deliver online provision with their own tutor support, and blended provision to those who need more support. It is believed that this option provides consistency and avoids duplication and unnecessary additional investment. Similarly, participants also tended to favour an approach whereby government issues guidance for providers to respond to. This most closely reflects current funding arrangements and enables quality to continue to be monitored in established ways, for example through Ofsted. Once

again, some participants said they would be happy to get involved in supporting policy makers to work up the model for the delivery of online provision.

Appendix 1: Get help to retrain user journey

Appendix 2: Example personas

Amit Bright

Professional Profile
- 28 years' experience as a machine assembler for various manufacturers

Background
- 55 years old.
- Two grown-up children, spouse also employed.
- Currently works full-time in a local industrial estate.

Education and training needs
- Is not sure which jobs would be suitable for him and the skills he needs to develop.
- Is prepared to study three evenings a week.
- Unwilling to study online and has limited experience of using a computer.
- Would consider studying in a classroom if it's with other adults.

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Tevin Frye

Professional Profile
- A few years in retail for a large supermarket chain

Background
- Aged 25.
- No childcare responsibilities, but help looks after a sick parent and has irregular caring responsibilities.
- Currently works part time.

Education and training needs
- Lacks basic skills, and would like to study maths and English.
- Would prefer to study completely online.

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Esme-Rose Avalos

Professional Profile

- Many years' experience for a large supermarket chain, including assistant manager of a small store

Background

- Aged 43.
- Married with one child, for whom she shares caring responsibilities.
- Currently unemployed.

Education and training needs

- Would like to switch careers, and build on her existing skills on her customer service.
- Is open minded as to how she studies, but it has to fit round existing childcare commitments.

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Tamsin Paterson

Professional Profile

- 10 years' experience as a van driver

Background

- Aged 35.
- Married but no children.
- Been with current employer three years, but has limited career development opportunities.

Education and training needs

- Is open minded as to what the next career could be.
- Her shift work means that she can't commit to regular time for training.

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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