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Supporting ‘good work’ in active labour market policies

Rapid review of what has worked in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia

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Executive Summary

This paper sets out evidence on what has worked in supporting 'good work' in employment programmes. Employment support in the UK is often characterised by a focus on encouraging unemployed people to take up 'any job', even where that might be low paid or insecure, but there has been a growing focus in recent years (in the UK and overseas) on how programmes can help people access better paid jobs and progress in work. This paper summarises findings from more successful initiatives in this space, drawing on a rapid review of research reports and evaluations from the United Kingdom, United States and Australia.

This research is part of a wider research project – 'Activating Employers' – which is being led by the University of Brighton and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and is exploring how public policy on the 'demand' side can support improvements in job quality.

Defining good quality work

Within the UK, the 'Measuring Job Quality Working Group' has developed a widely accepted framework for measuring job quality on seven dimensions: employment terms; pay and benefits; health and wellbeing; job design; social support; voice and representation; and work-life balance. Unfortunately relatively few of these measures are captured in evaluations of employment programmes, and where they are captured they tend to be measured relative to outcomes for a comparison group rather than any baseline for 'good' work. Therefore for this paper, good quality work was defined in relative terms and on limited measures, focusing in particular on earnings and working hours, and on job security, retention in work or satisfaction/ wellbeing where this was available.

What works in supporting good work?

This review identifies two broad 'types' of interventions that have been effective in supporting people to move into good or better work: 'career pathways' models that combine industry training with placement support; and specialist adviser-led models with onward referral to wider specialist services.

'Career pathways' combining industry training and placement

Many of the interventions identified in this review focused on providing access to training as a way to enable jobseekers to access better work. Findings from these initiatives was overall mixed, but a number of very successful and well-evaluated

interventions were identified particularly in the United States. These successful models tended to:

- Focus on sectors with strong growth potential and/ or clear routes for internal progression;
- Offer training that is responsive to employer needs; and
- Accompany this with one-to-one support to prepare for, enter and sustain work.

The **WorkAdvance** model in the United States was the most prominent example that successfully combined these elements, comprising intensive screening of participants before enrolment; pre-employment services around career readiness and sector orientation; sector-specific training based on employer need and leading to certification; placement support to enter work with employer partners; and ongoing support and coaching in work. Positive impact findings were driven in particular by very strong outcomes in training people for entry-level jobs in the IT industry with strong prospects for progression.

More recently, **Bridges to Career Opportunities (BCO)** has also achieved positive results. This built on an established network of Financial Opportunity Centres that provided employment advice, financial coaching and income support to people on low incomes, with the BCO programme delvering training support that could ‘bridge’ from basic skills education into occupation-specific training and placement. This was based on strong partnerships with local industries that had good prospects, with curricula tailored to specific vacancies and opportunities. Impact evaluation found significant positive impacts on the likelihood of securing or advancing in work compared with people accessing Centres that did not role out the programme.

Evidence from similar programmes in the UK and Australia has been weaker than in the US, as evaluations have generally either not measured the additional impact of support or have not measured impacts on job quality or earnings. Nonetheless there were potentially promising initiatives identified, in particular:

- **Sector-Based Work Academies** in the UK, which delivered short-term pre-employment training leading to work placements with local employers, with impact evaluation finding that participants spent significantly longer in employment than a matched comparison group (albeit with no measure of differential impacts on future earnings or job quality for those in work; and
- **Work and Learning Centres** in Victoria (Australia) which worked through business networks and community services to provide careers guidance, tailored training and employment services in areas of significant disadvantage, with evaluators suggesting that the outcomes achieved compared favourably with other provision targeting similarly disadvantaged groups.

Adviser-led models with wider support

The second main category of intervention was based on specialist advisory support either on its own or with onward referral to other services. Many of these were from the UK and focused on supporting progression in work. Compared with more traditional support, these services were often characterised by a stronger focus on career profiling, greater flexibility in services, support in dealing with workplace issues, and the ability to link up with wider services where needed.

The single largest example reviewed was the **Universal Credit In-Work Progression** trial, which engaged over 30,000 people in low-income households. This tested different intensities of 'work coach' support alongside requirements to attend jobcentres and undertake activities. The trial found small but significant impacts on earnings for those receiving the most intensive support, with the fiscal and economic benefits outweighing the costs for this group and those receiving more moderate support. Evidence suggested that the personal motivation of participants, their relationship with advisers, and access to wider support (particularly training) were all associated with positive outcomes.

This built on learning from an earlier **Employment Retention and Advancement Demonstration** that ran in the UK and US. In the UK, this supported long-term unemployed people and lone parents (either unemployed or in low-paid work) through specialist adviser support and financial subsidies for retaining employment. Once in work, individuals could also access funding for training and other costs like childcare and transport. Evaluation findings were mixed, with positive impacts in the short term but these dissipating for lone parents in the longer term. Findings suggested that awareness of the subsidy was particularly important in driving outcomes, but also that offices that provided more support to participants in work saw more positive impacts. Accessing training appeared not to make any difference (which may reflect that this was not directly linked to shortage or growth industries).

Other recent examples of projects aiming to support progression in work were also reviewed, although none were identified with robust impact findings. However we again found examples of promising interventions with useful learning, in particular:

- The **Skills Escalator** pilot in West London, which supported low paid workers through tailored support from an adviser, onward referral to training and other provision, and direct engagement with local employers. Evaluation suggested that the key factors in achieving successful outcomes were the quality of adviser support (in particular around careers and workplace issues) and the effectiveness of local partnerships in co-ordinating onward referrals.
- The **Routeways project** by the St Giles Trust, which provided career coaching, employment advice and onward access to skills support for disadvantaged people in low-paid work; while also working with employers on jobs brokerage, job design and training. Findings from evaluation of its implementation suggested that the creation of dedicated employer engagement specialists was particularly beneficial, although noted challenges in engaging with employers.

Cross-cutting features of successful provision

Looking across successful programmes, the evaluation evidence points to six common themes that characterised the most effective approaches:

- **Being responsive to local labour market demands**. In particular, projects performed better where they focus on industries with recruitment needs, high projected job growth, relatively higher earnings and low risks from automation.
- **Focusing on those motivated and able to secure decent work**. Many studies highlighted that candidate commitment, motivation and suitability were important determinants of whether support was successful.
- **A ‘dual customer’ focus on employers and individuals**. This model was less prevalent in the UK than US, although a directly employer-facing project with care sector employers in Glasgow was identified and had achieved promising results.
- **Strong partnerships across services and within places**. This appeared to be particularly important where individuals had wider disadvantages in the labour market, to line up support around training, health, care, language and more; while access to wider business services was also identified in employer-facing projects.
- **Adviser skills and capabilities**. Advisers need different skills to support people to access and/ or progress into better quality jobs. These include capabilities around careers advice and guidance, understanding workplaces, identifying and acting on support needs, and working flexibly.
- **Follow-on support as people enter or progress in work**. Post-placement support was cited as a critical feature in a number of projects, to help people to sustain a new job, deal with workplace issues, and continue to progress.

Lessons for UK policy and practice

This rapid review suggests that there is likely to be significant scope for employment services to support ‘good work’, and identifies six key lessons for UK policy and practice:

1. Enable greater alignment between employment services and skills support.
2. Engage more effectively with employers through employment services.
3. Equip advisers to help people secure better work, not just any job.
4. Ensure that there is a tailored offer and access to wider support for those with greater needs or barriers in securing ‘good work’.
5. Consider how to target support – balancing the positive evidence around screening participants with the need to ensure pathways for those who are most disadvantaged.
6. Build the evidence base on what works, by ensuring that interventions are robustly evaluated and thar we collect data on a wider range of measures of good work.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Employment services for people out of work have played an important role in recent decades in supporting low unemployment and high employment in the UK. These services have often been characterised by a focus on support to search for work and rapid job entry, alongside strict rules around jobseeking activity for those on social security benefits. While this has contributed to low unemployment, there is also evidence that it may increase the risks of individuals taking up less secure and lower paid work, being in low income, and/ or having poorer health and wellbeing (Dwyer et al, 2018). Many of these concerns have become more acute in the years following the Covid-19 pandemic, as a combination of labour and skills shortages alongside changing economic demands have led to growing mismatches in the labour market.

At the same time, there are a range of examples of initiatives that have sought to support people to access better 'quality' work – in particular work that may be higher skilled, better paid and more secure. Some of these initiatives have led to significant positive impacts for participants, while others have had mixed, inconclusive or sometimes negative results. There has also been a growing focus among policymakers on exploring how employment policies can help address low paid work and improve progression at work, with for example the recent UK government-sponsored McGregor-Smith Review making 26 recommendations for how public policy and employers could better support low paid workers to progress (McGregor-Smith, 2021).

With the supply and demand for labour going through significant change – driven by demographic, technological, social and environmental factors – it is important that we understand the role that employment services could play in supporting people to access better work. This paper therefore seeks to draw together and summarise the evidence around 'what works' in supporting people to access good quality jobs through employment services and support.

The paper focuses on evidence from programmes and initiatives in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia. These countries were chosen as they all operate systems that tend to focus on rapid job entry and benefit conditionality, but have also tested initiatives that have sought to support entry to better quality jobs – therefore they are more likely to enable us to identify findings that could be applied to future policy and practice in the UK. This research is particularly focused on the role of active labour market policies in supporting good work, but is part of a wider research project – 'Activating Employers' – led by the University of Brighton and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. This research project is

exploring how public policy on the ‘demand’ side in the UK, US and Australia can support improvements in job quality, in particular through improvements in the design and delivery of active labour market programmes and the use of social procurement and community benefit agreements.

1.2 Approach and methodology

1.2.1 Key research questions

This project has sought to answer two research questions, related to the role that active labour market policies can play in supporting good work.

- What are the critical features of active labour market policies that have been successful in supporting people to find better quality work, compared with a counterfactual of ‘business as usual’ support that prioritises rapid entry to work?
- What are the key lessons that could be applied in future policy and practice within the UK?

1.2.2 Approach

In order to address these questions, a rapid review was conducted of online and publicly available repositories of labour market research and evaluation. As noted in section 1.1, this was restricted to sources in the UK, United States and Australia, and included:

- The United States Department of Labor Clearinghouse for Labour Evaluation and Research;
- The US Department of Health and Human Services Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse;
- The UK Department for Work and Pensions research reports collection (including its pre-2013 archived database);
- The Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations employment research collection; and
- Various websites for research foundations, trusts and charities – including the Youth Futures Foundation, Learning and Work Institute, Brotherhood of St Lawrence and MDRC.

Following initial search, reports were screened to identify those that had relevant findings on either:

- Interventions designed specifically to support individuals to obtain good quality work; or
- Interventions without a specific focus on good quality work, but where evaluation identified particular features of support that may have contributed to this.

Following screening, 33 studies were identified for more detailed review, of which 15 included counterfactual impact evaluation findings using either experimental or quasi-experimental methods; 14 provided descriptive analysis or evaluated the process of implementation but did not have robust findings on additional impact; and 4 were evidence syntheses or reviews. Projects were typically offering access to training; advisory or coaching support to individuals; employer-facing services; wage subsidies; or combinations of these.

Overall, looking across the three countries:

- The United States had the widest range of relevant initiatives, generally with findings from counterfactual impact evaluations;
- The UK had slightly fewer relevant initiatives and fewer of these had robust impact assessment; and
- For Australia there were very few examples of initiatives specifically targeting better work and no relevant impact findings.

This relative paucity of robust evidence in the UK and Australia is itself an important finding that we return to in Chapter 3.

1.2.3 Defining good quality work

There is a wide academic literature on different aspects of the quality of work, and in recent years a growing consensus on how job quality as a concept should be defined and measured. In particular the UK 'Measuring Job Quality Working Group', which was convened by the Carnegie Trust UK and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), brought together representatives from industry, trade unions, academia and public policy and established what is now a widely accepted framework for defining and measuring job quality (Irvine et al, 2018) . This uses seven dimensions, set out in Figure 1.1 overleaf.

The seven dimensions outlined below each come with specific measures, which can be classified into two types: objective measures (like actual hours, pay, and union membership) and subjective measures (such as satisfaction with hours, perceived fairness of pay, and perceived engagement at work). These measures have been adopted by partners, such as the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), and have, to a certain degree, been incorporated into the official Labour Force Survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics. However, of these measures, relatively few are captured in evaluations of active labour market policies – and those that are captured tend to be only objective measures (for example on earnings and working hours) and only measured relative to outcomes for a comparison group rather than any baseline or benchmark of 'good' employment.

Therefore for the purposes of this paper, good quality work was necessarily defined in relative terms and on limited measures, focusing in particular on evidence showing whether earnings, working hours, job security, retention in work or satisfaction/ wellbeing at work were higher than for individuals who received ‘business as usual’ support focused on entry to any job. It is therefore capturing evidence on what may help with finding *better* work on a fairly limited range of measures, rather than *good* work per se.

Figure 1.1: The seven dimensions of job quality

Source: Measuring Job Quality Working Group final report

2 What works in supporting good work?

This chapter sets out core findings on 'what works' in supporting people through employment services to access good work. The first section describes the key features of programmes that appear to have been successful. The subsequent sections then summarise findings on training-led and adviser-led models, with the final section drawing out cross-cutting findings.

2.1 The key features of effective interventions

The evidence base reviewed for this study suggests that there are two broad 'types' of interventions that have been effective in supporting people to move into good or better work:

- **Career pathways models combining industry training with placement support** – often focused on sectors with strong growth potential and/ or clear routes for internal progression; offering training that is responsive to employer needs; and accompanying this with one-to-one support for individuals out of work or in low-paid work; and
- **Specialist adviser-led models with access to wider support** – leading with one-to-one advice and coaching focused around finding decent work or progressing in work, with then onward referral to training and other support where this is needed.

Findings from these two broad types are set out in more detail below. In addition, there were a number of cross-cutting factors that appeared to be particularly associated with more successful outcomes, as follows:

- **Being responsive to local labour market demands**, including industries with recruitment needs and those with the strongest growth potential;
- **Focusing on those motivated and able to secure decent work**, in particular through effective screening of potential participants;
- **A 'dual customer' focus** on both employers and individual jobseekers or employees;
- **Strong partnerships** across services and within places;
- **Adviser skills and capabilities**, particularly related to career planning and sustainment in work; and
- **Follow-on support** as people enter or progress in work.

These are taken in turn in the last section of this chapter.

Finally, it should be noted that for a number of papers reviewed the findings were either very weak (sometimes negative) or did not identify the specific impacts of an intervention on securing better paid or more secure work than for the counterfactual group. This was particularly the case for wage subsidy programmes, where there was no clear evidence of programmes that had had a strong additional impact on the likelihood of participants securing better work (after the end of the subsidy period). Therefore wage subsidy schemes in particular have not been included in this analysis.

2.2 Career pathways models combining industry training with placement support

Many of the interventions identified through this review focused on providing access to training as a way to enable jobseekers to access work that would be likely to better paid, more secure and with better prospects. This evidence was strongest from evaluations of interventions in the United States, where these programmes are often described as ‘career pathways’ models.

Three particularly significant examples where positive impacts were identified are summarised below. However, it should be noted that meta-analyses of career pathways programmes *overall* have found no significant positive impacts on earnings (OPRE, 2023). In other words, the positive impacts from successful programmes like these are outweighed by no or negative impacts from other less successful ones. Therefore the specific design and implementation of programmes matters.

In particular, the three examples below suggest that career pathways models are most effective where the training offer was determined by local sectoral and employer demand, with clear routeways for entry to and progression in work, and where ‘wraparound’ support was available for participants to prepare for work and then take up specific jobs.

2.2.1 WorkAdvance

The **WorkAdvance** model in the United States was the most prominent example that successfully combined these elements, and has been identified in a number of wider evidence reviews (see for example Webb et al, 2018). WorkAdvance was targeted at unemployed people as well as those in work but on a low income. It comprised five key components as follows:

- Intensive screening of participants before enrolment, to ensure that those selected would be able to benefit from the training offer and progress to employment;
- Pre-employment services, again sector-specific and including career readiness, coaching and orientation to the sector;

- Sector-specific training for identified occupations based on local employer needs, leading to qualification and certification for those roles;
- Placement services to then facilitate job entry into positions that participants have been trained for, again working closely with local employers and focusing on opportunities with potential for continued development; and
- Ongoing support while in work, including coaching, skills training and rapid re-employment support if this is needed.

The initial rollout of WorkAdvance was delivered by four providers between 2011 and 2013, serving around 2,500 people. It was implemented as a randomised control trial, and its evaluation found significant positive impacts on individuals' earnings compared with the control group (Schaberg and Greenberg, 2020). This was found to be driven by earnings rather than employment – i.e. participation in WorkAdvance led to similar rates of employment but higher rates of pay.

The most significant impacts for WorkAdvance were achieved by Per Scholas, a non-profit organisation who operated in the Bronx, New York, and focused on training people for entry-level jobs in IT (for example help-desk and field technicians). Over a six- to eight-year follow up period, these participants earnt around 20% more than the comparison group. The other three sites and providers achieved positive impacts but which were below the level of statistical significance, although two sites did achieve significant increases in the proportion of people with relatively high earnings. Findings from cost-benefit analysis found positive impacts at all four sites for individuals, government and society.

Therefore while the results for WorkAdvance were positive overall, they also varied significantly between sites, suggesting that some elements and combinations of support were more effective than others. The researchers suggested that the most significant impacts were driven by three factors in combination: targeting sectors with strong local demand, achieving high rates of (credentialed) completion, and then providing targeted placement support into jobs with better prospects (Kazis and Molina, 2016).

2.2.2 Sector-Focused Career Centers

Sector-Focused Career Centers (SFCCs) operated with a similar model to WorkAdvance, providing access to industry-specific job services and training for unemployed people and low-income workers. These were implemented in 2008 in New York, and targeted industries with strong growth potential and that offered competitive wages (at least $10 per hour), at least 30-hour-per-week jobs, and opportunities for progression. The SFCCs engaged employers to assess their needs, then designed services (training and job preparation) to meet these.

In common with the WorkAdance model, the main features of SFCCs were initial screening of participants; one-to-one support with job preparation, careers strategies and jobsearch skills; access to appropriate support services; and then industry-specific training followed by job brokerage. The evaluation of SFCCs

suggested that they achieved significant positive impacts, with participants more likely to be in work and earning $5,333 more than those in a comparison group one year after completing the programme (Gasper et al, 2017).

2.2.3 Bridges to Career Opportunities

More recently, the **Bridges to Career Opportunities (BCO)** programme has also achieved positive results through a combination of demand-responsive training and placement support. The BCO model was rolled out from 2016 in eleven metropolitan areas in the United States, building on an established network of Financial Opportunity Centres (FOC). FOCs were developed to support people with low incomes to stabilise their finances and obtain good work, through a combination of employment advice, financial coaching and access to income support. The BCO model was implemented to then fill a specific gap around pre-employment training.

Through the BCO programme, individuals were able to access training support alongside existing FOC services around employment services, financial education and income support. A core feature of the model (as the name suggests) was that it was designed to ‘bridge’ from basic skills education, into occupation-specific training and then placement (for example by contextualising instruction in basic skills within occupational settings). This was in turn often based on strong partnerships with local employers in industries that had good prospects, with curricula tailored to specific vacancies and opportunities.

Overall, nearly nine out of ten BCO participants completed training, and the impact evaluation of BCOs found very strong positive impacts when compared with similar FOC sites that did not offer these services, with 56% of BCO participants achieving or advancing in work over the 14 months following enrolment, compared with 37% of individuals in comparison sites[1]. This implies that the integration of demand-led training alongside employment services significantly improved employment and earnings outcomes.

2.2.4 UK and Australian evidence

Governments in the UK and Australia have also tested approaches that combine pre-employment training in shortage sectors with employment services, although evaluations have either not sought to measure the additional impact of receiving support or have not measured impact specifically on improving job quality or earnings.

For example, the impact evaluation of **Sector-Based Work Academies** in the UK, a pre-employment programme offering short pre-employment training and work placements alongside mainstream employment services, found that participants

[1] The evaluation used a quasi-experimental method – Coarsened Exact Matching – to control for observable differences between participants in treatment and comparison sites.

spent significantly longer in employment than a matched comparison group not receiving this support. However, the study did not measure whether participation led to better earnings or employment retention (DWP, 2016).

In Victoria (Australia), **Work and Learning Centres (WLCs)** have emphasised career planning, training and work ahead of rapid entry to any job. These had been delivered by non-profit organisations working in areas of significant disadvantage, and with a focus on working through business networks and community services to provide careers guidance, tailored training (non-accredited and links to specific vocational training) and employment services to link up with local employers. Unlike the US examples above, WLC support is particularly focused on those significantly disadvantaged in the labour market and facing particular barriers around workplace skills and experience. Evaluation evidence suggests that around half of participants had achieved employment, with around one third of these in permanent jobs (Bodsworth, 2014). However, there was no evidence of the additional impact of WLCs, although evaluators considered that they compared favourably with other similar provision targeting disadvantaged groups.

2.3 Adviser-led models with wider support

The second main category of intervention shared some similarities with those programmes described in section 2.2, but were characterised by being based on providing specialist advisory support either on its own or with more limited onward referral to other services. Many of these examples were from the UK – perhaps in part because work-related training is far less well aligned with employment support in the UK than it is in the US – and focused on supporting people who are already in work to progress (reflecting current UK political and policy interest in this agenda, see for example Jones and Carson (2024)).

Compared with more traditional support for jobseekers, these services were often characterised by a stronger focus on career profiling, greater flexibility in how services are designed and delivered (for example around working hours or caring needs), advice and support in dealing with workplace or employer issues, and the ability to link up with wider services to meet specific needs for example around training, care or transport.

2.3.1 Universal Credit In-Work Progression pilot

The single largest trial of additional support to increase earnings was the Universal Credit In-Work Progression (IWP) randomised control trial. This ran between 2015 and 2017 and engaged over 30,000 claimants of Universal Credit who were in low-paid work or in low-income households. The trial was focused specifically on testing the effectiveness of differing intensities of adviser-led (or 'work coach') support alongside requirements to attend jobcentres and undertake activities. The trial tested three intensities of support for participants:

- Frequent – participants were required to meet their work coach fortnightly;

- Moderate – participants were required to meet their work coach every eight weeks; and
- Minimal – participants had an initial telephone appointment and then a follow-up call eight weeks later, but had no other requirements (with this acting in effect as the control group).

Overall impact evaluation of the trial found small but statistically significant and sustained positive impacts on earnings progression for individuals in the Frequent group compared with the other two groups – with weekly earnings on average £4.16 higher than those of the Minimal group eighteen months after enrolment (Valerio and Martyn, 2019). Those in the Moderate group also saw small but significant impacts on weekly earnings a year after enrolment, but these had largely dissipated by the eighteen month follow-up. For both groups however, evaluation implied that the fiscal and economic benefits of the intervention more than outweighed the costs.

Evaluation of the implementation of the trial indicated that stronger performance was often associated with the personal motivation of participants and their relationship with their adviser. It suggested that those with high motivation and relatively few barriers to progression were most likely to do so, while those motivated but with significant barriers were often able to overcome these where they had a supportive adviser and could get support tailored to their needs. Those with lower motivation to progress, on the other hand, often made little progress (Langdon et al, 2018).

The evaluation also found that onward referral to wider support was also often associated with better progression outcomes. In particular, individuals who undertook job-related training saw larger increases in their earnings than those who did not, echoing the findings in section 2.2 that combinations of training and specialist adviser support can lead to improvements in employment outcomes.

Finally, there were further signs that the intensity of adviser support made a difference, with those in the Frequent group more likely than those in either of the other two groups to have had access to training (with one third doing so compared with around a quarter in the other groups), to have had positive outcomes from actions they had undertaken, and to report having fewer barriers to progression after support had finished.

2.3.2 Employment Retention and Advancement Demonstration project

The IWP pilot built on learning from an earlier project that ran in the United Kingdom and the United States called the Employment Retention and Advancement Demonstration (ERAD) project. This demonstration ran between 2003 and 2007, and in the UK was focused on providing targeted support to enter and progress in work to long-term unemployed people aged 25 and over, and to lone parents who were either unemployed or in low-paid work. The two key elements of support were tailored support from a specialist adviser and financial subsidies for retaining

employment. In addition, once in work, individuals could access funding for assistance with training and other costs like childcare and transport.

ERAD was therefore a multi-component intervention rather than one solely offering advisory support, and the use of financial subsidies to individuals set it apart from other interventions examined in this review. However, it is included in this section because the core common thread for all participants was the delivery of specialist support from a personal adviser.

The evaluation found mixed results overall, with positive impacts on earnings for all three groups in the short term compared with a control group[2], but sustained impacts only for the long-term unemployed group. For the two lone parent groups, impacts dissipated after the end of the subsidy period (Hendra et al, 2011).

The evaluation also explored the relative effectiveness of adviser support, incentives and training, by comparing different offices that delivered ERAD based on the intensity with which they delivered different aspects of support and the take-up of these elements. Consistent with the impact findings, this analysis suggested that awareness of the subsidy was particularly important in driving outcomes, but also that those offices that provided more support to participants while in work (either to stay or progress in work) also saw more positive impacts – consistent with the later findings of the IWP pilot. Accessing training appeared not to make any difference to outcomes (which may reflect that training was not specifically linked to shortage or growth industries, which would echo findings from wider programmes which have been less effective (see for example OPRE, 2023)).

2.3.3 The Skills Escalator pilot and the Routeways project

There have been a number of recent UK examples of projects that have sought to provide more specialised in-work support to try to improve progression for workers in low paid or insecure work, although this review did not identify any with robust counterfactual impact evaluations. Nonetheless two promising interventions with findings from evaluation of their implementation have been the Skills escalator pilot and the Routeways project.

The **Skills Escalator** pilot ran in the London Boroughs of Hounslow and Harrow from 2014 and supported residents in low paid work, living in private rented accommodation and entitled to Housing Benefit. The project sought to help individuals to increase their earnings and so move off benefits, through a combination of tailored support from an adviser, onward referral to training and other provision, and direct engagement with employers to support them with recruitment, job brokerage and access to training and apprenticeships.

[2] The evaluation captured both earnings and employment impacts, and the percentage increase in earnings was consistently higher than the percentage increases in employment – suggesting that higher earnings were in part driven by higher pay than the control group.

The evaluation of the pilot showed d that participants achieved earnings around £150 a month higher than a matched comparison group of non-participants, although the evaluation was only able to match on a limited number of variables (Colechin et al, 2017). Nonetheless the results were promising, and the evaluation findings suggested that the key factors in achieving successful outcomes were the quality of adviser support (including the extent to which such support was trusted and tailored, for instance providing relevant advice on careers, jobseeking, as well as addressing barriers for accessing better quality work). Additionally, the effectiveness of local partnerships played a crucial role, especially in coordinating flexible training and addressing broader needs and barriers.

The **Routeways project** was operated by the St Giles Trust between 2018 and 2019. It offered tailored support to both low paid workers and their employers (i.e. following the ‘dual customer’ model). Employee-facing services were targeted at disadvantaged people in low-paid and poor quality work and included one-to-one career coaching, employment advice and onward access to training support. Employer-facing services then mainly focused on offering support with job brokerage, design and training in order to improve firms’ recruitment, retention and business prospects; while also facilitating progression pathways for individual employees on the Routeways caseload.

The evaluation of Routeways did not include any counterfactual impact assessment, but the evaluation of its implementation found that just over half of participants reported improvements in their work situation and half improved their incomes and financial stability (JH Consulting, 2020). It suggested that the creation of dedicated employer engagement specialists had been particularly beneficial, as it enabled the project to meet a particular need among firms for support with job brokerage and recruitment, but also identified particular challenges in engaging employers given the short-term nature of the project.

2.4 Cross-cutting features of successful provision

Almost all of the programmes reviewed were ‘multi-component’ interventions, combining different elements of support including accredited training, help with basic skills, advisory or coaching support, and access to wider services to assist job entry, retention and progression. However across the programmes, the evaluation evidence points to six common themes that characterised the most effective approaches.

2.4.1 Responsiveness to local labour market needs

First, many evaluations set out that programmes appeared to perform better, and were better able to support people into higher paid jobs, where they were well attuned and responsive to local labour market needs. The active targeting of sectors with shortages or strong growth potential was common across all of the training-led models from the US, and identified as one of the three critical success factors in the

WorkAdvance evaluation in particular. Recent research published by the US Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) makes very similar findings, suggesting that focusing on occupations with high projected job growth, relatively higher earnings and low risks from automation may be more likely to lead to higher incomes and longer-term progression opportunities (OPRE, 2023).

In one further model – delivered by the **Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership** as part of a Sector Employment Impact Study in the early 2000s – very short-term (two to eight weeks), industry-responsive training for the healthcare and construction sectors, in combination with case management support, led to increases in earnings of around $270 a month for participants compared with a control group, with participants also much more likely to be earning above $13 an hour and more likely to be in a job with benefits and union recognition (Maguire et al, 2010). The evaluation noted that the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership achieved positive impacts sooner than other projects in the same study and that these impacts were sustained for at least two years. The evaluation attributed these encouraging results to the strong local connections to employers as well as the relevance and flexibility of its offer to local businesses.

2.4.2 Focusing on those motivated and able to secure better work

Secondly, a number of studies highlighted that candidate commitment, motivation and suitability were important determinants of whether support was successful. One important difference between US and UK projects was that those in the US tended to actively screen participants on whether they were suitable for support, while in the UK this was not a pre-requisite for being enrolled. Nonetheless in the UK, the evaluation of the Universal Credit In Work Progression pilot suggested that participant motivation was a more important determinant of success than other barriers or needs that individuals might have faced.

In the US, candidate screening was used in WorkAdvance, Sector-Focused Career Centers and in the WRTP project described above. The engagement and screening process was seen as a particularly important feature of programmes, beginning with outreach and engagement efforts (often through partners) and then screening candidates to identify those who were motivated to take part, had the ability to benefit and had the potential to be successful in the sectors being targeted.

2.4.3 A ‘dual customer’ focus

Thirdly, many of the interventions (but by no means all) operated a ‘dual customer’ approach where staff delivering the employment service were focused on both on helping jobseekers (or employees) to secure decent work and offering employer-facing services around recruitment, job brokerage, access to skills and training, and sometimes support on wider workplace practices.

This ‘dual customer’ model was notable in US training-led programmes in particular, where training was generally identified through partnerships with employers and this

was accompanied by services to broker candidates into those roles and to support people once in work. For example in the BCO programme, staff reported that employer partnerships both facilitated job entry for candidates and supported ongoing retention and progression in work.

In the UK, the ‘dual customer’ approach was less evident in the ERA and IWP projects, although the ERA evaluation noted that this was a point of difference with the equivalent demonstration project that ran alongside this in the US where there was a stronger focus on employer engagement and services. In the Skills Escalator and Routeways projects, there was a more explicit focus on the ‘dual customer’ model, although interestingly in the Skills Escalator pilot the two boroughs (Harrow and Hounslow) took distinctly different approaches: with one integrating their progression offer within wider borough services for employers around skills, recruitment and job brokerage in order to deliver a range of services to firms; and the other focusing just on sourcing better paid vacancies and then supporting participants in low paid jobs to then take those opportunities elsewhere. (The evaluation found that outcomes were ultimately very similar between the two boroughs.)

A more developed example of the ‘dual customer’ model could be found in the **Glasgow In Work Progression pilot**, which focused on providing support to employers in the social care sector through business advisers. These advisers identified and engaged with sector employers, conducted diagnostic assessments of their needs, and then helped them both to access business improvement support (for example around people management, finances and digital provision) and tailored training pathways for their staff. Individuals were then supported through their workplaces to access training. The pilot also addressed other barriers to employment, such as managing personal finances, accessing health care provision, and helping individuals to meet their care responsibilities. Programme evaluation found that participating employers saw a range of benefits from the support provided and that employees saw improvements in their financial circumstances and progression prospects, although it was not possible to robustly evaluate its additional impact (Murphy et al, 2019).

2.4.4 Strong partnerships

A further common feature across many interventions was the importance of having effective wider partnerships in place that could enable both individuals and employers to access wider support where this was needed.

This appeared to be particularly important where individuals may have had wider disadvantages in the labour market that would make it harder to take up secure and better paid work – for example to help participants with improving their English language skills, arranging appropriate childcare or transport, managing health conditions or seeking adjustments at work, and so on. The Australian Work and Learning Centres, for example, were based on partnership between employment services, business support and wider community services in order to offer joined-up

support for jobseekers who were particularly disadvantaged. In the Skills Escalator pilot, the evaluation suggested that the effectiveness of local partnerships was particularly important in achieving outcomes.

In addition, in many cases, the training and employer-facing support delivered through projects was sourced through separate contracted training providers or support services. Again the importance of effective partnerships was emphasised in programmes including BCO and the WRTP, while the Glasgow In-Work Progression pilot referenced above sourced its business support through specialist providers who were usually contracted to deliver these services for firms in the wider city region.

2.4.5 Adviser skills and capabilities

Many of the evaluations also emphasised that advisers working to support individuals to access better quality work needed different skills and to work in different ways from those delivering more traditional employment services. These skills included a need to better understand career paths and journeys, to be able to provide careers advice and guidance, to understand workplace challenges and opportunities, to be able to help identify support needs and line up appropriate provision, and to be able to work flexibly where people are already in work (for example to fit appointments around shifts and family commitments).

The ERAD evaluation in particular emphasised the steep learning curve for advisers, with many of them coming from 'generalist' backgrounds within jobcentres and with little or no experience in providing advice and support to people in work. Over time, advisers developed greater expertise in advising on things like workplace issues, seeking promotion, looking for better work and balancing family life; but the evaluation noted that there remained very little focus on sector- or industry-specific careers advice and guidance even at the end of the programme, which was in contrast to similar models in the US.

2.4.6 Follow-on support

Finally, findings from a number of projects suggested that the provision of follow-on support as people entered work, to help people to stay in work and/ or to support progression at work also played an important role in achieving successful outcomes. In the BCO for example, locating support within FOCs meant that training could be delivered alongside direct employment services and sustained after people entered work. The ERAD model, for the two 'out of work' target groups, was based around providing extensive support once in work in order to help people retain employment and then access support to progress. Post-placement support was also an important feature in the WorkAdvance and WRTP models.

A further programme that indirectly illustrates the importance of ongoing support was the **Accelerating Connections to Employment (ACE)** programme, which was organised as a partnership programme between community colleges and local

Workforce Investment Boards in four US states between 2012 and 2015. ACE was based on a similar model to WorkAdvance and BCOs, combining vocational training with employment services, and achieved strong positive impacts on employment overall. However, among those in work there was no statistically significant difference in hourly earnings between ACE participants and the control group, nor any difference in the likelihood of earning a promotion or pay rise. It is not entirely clear why ACE programme did not lead to higher hourly earnings for participants, but the evaluation noted that sites that did not devote as much resource to support with transitions into work and development at work tended to achieve poorer outcomes than those that did.

3 Lessons for UK policy and practice

Overall, this rapid review has identified a number of key features of interventions that have been more effective in helping individuals to access good work (or specifically, better work than they would otherwise have secured), but has also highlighted that the evidence base on what works is fairly limited and in some cases inconclusive. Nonetheless, it does suggest that there is likely to be significant scope for employment services to be able to support improvements in the quality of work, in particular through the delivery of adviser-led employment support and by helping people to access career pathways into better work. Based on these findings, we draw out six key lessons for UK policy and practice.

3.1 Enable greater alignment between employment services and skills support

This review has emphasised the important role that demand-led training can play in supporting employment entry and progression, particularly where these 'career pathways' are targeting jobs with strong growth potential, engage local employers, and are integrated with pre- and post-placement support.

There would be significant value in adopting and replicating these approaches within the UK, which could also build on the Sector-Based Work Academies model which ticks many of these boxes but with a very specific focus on rapid, entry-level placement rather than longer-term pathways (typically a few weeks of training, a few weeks of work experience and a guaranteed job interview).

Within the UK, responsibilities for publicly-funded skills training is devolved to the UK nations and increasingly to Combined Authorities, so developing effective career pathways models would likely require a combination both of clear national frameworks and guidance, and then local partnerships and commissioning (working across local and national governments, Jobcentre Plus/ employment services, and employer networks).These are also themes being explored within the current Commission on the Future of Employment Support, which is being run by the Institute for Employment Studies and Financial Fairness Trust (Campbell et al, 2023).

Developing effective career pathways models in the UK would also require a far better understanding of labour market data, both in terms of those potential occupational and industrial pathways that are likely to have the strongest prospects – with US research suggesting that there are a range of 'launchpad' occupations that offer strong prospects and could be within reach of those in low income or out of work (OPRE, 2023) – and the local labour market information on which industries and employers to target and engage. These data and insights are increasingly

available in the UK too, but there is scope for national governments in particular to make better use of this and make it more available for those commissioning services.

3.2 Engage effectively with employers

Alongside this greater focus on skills and training support, the evidence also emphasises the importance of effective employer engagement to access better quality jobs (as opposed to the ‘any job’ model that has often characterised employment services in the UK).

Within the UK, approaches to employer engagement are often fragmented both within services (for example with different employment programmes offering slightly different services to the same employers) and between them (in particular with very little joining up between employer engagement with the skills system and their engagement with employment support).

Despite these reservations, there are noteworthy practices that could serve as foundations for improvement across the UK. For instance, the Labour Market Partnerships model in Northern Ireland, Local Employability Partnerships in Scotland, and city-level initiatives in England such as the Good Employment Charter in Manchester and the Good Work Standard in London offer valuable examples.

There would be value in building on these models, to create a clear framework for working with employers within areas, a strong local offer, and the local partnerships to then engage them. In particular, this should include a focus on ensuring that employers are willing and able to take on candidates who are out of work and may need more support in the workplace, alongside a clear offer around pre- and post-placement training and support.

3.3 Equip advisers to help people secure better work, not just any job

Findings from this review suggest that effective employment advisers need a range of skills and capabilities in order to support people to access good quality work (compared with the skills needed to help people prepare and apply for any jobs that might be available). These include being able to:

- Understand and use labour market information, including information that might signal whether jobs are likely to be better quality or offer better prospects;
- Provide advice and guidance on careers and career pathways;
- Support people with navigating workplace challenges and opportunities;
- Help identify where people may need additional support and line this up (for example around health, care or living costs); and
- Work flexibly where people are already in work.

Many advisers in more specialist roles or programmes already have many of these skills, as would many people working in careers services. However, they are less common within the day-to-day delivery of employment support for claimants accessing Jobcentre Plus or other mainstream employment programmes. Furthermore, changes in the application of benefits rules over recent years have tended to shift the emphasis further towards taking any job and away from trying to find the right job (most notably with the permitted period during which jobseekers can restrict their jobsearch to a chosen occupation being reduced from three months to four weeks in 2022).

The evidence in this report suggests that more emphasis is needed on building the skills and capabilities set out above, both in Jobcentre Plus and in the commissioning of wider employment support. This will likely require more investment in the employment services workforce, but if this investment can lead to improved outcomes and access to better jobs, then it would likely more than pay for itself.

3.4 Ensure that there is a tailored offer for those with greater needs

A further key finding from this work has been that more effective interventions are able to provide support that is tailored to individuals' needs and that does not assume that 'one size fits all'. Specific examples from research reviewed for this project included being able to provide access to support with learning English language, managing health, arranging childcare and meeting the transitional costs of taking up work. Again, support of this sort can be built into more specialist programmes for those out of work, but is not always readily available for jobseekers who are not referred to specialist programmes, even where there may be provision available locally or funding that could be drawn down.

Therefore building in access to this additional support reiterates the importance both of improving adviser capability and of ensuring that there are effective partnerships in place within areas and between services to enable appropriate referral to wider support.

3.5 Consider how to target support (and create pathways to be able to take it up)

A related issue identified within the research was that projects appeared to be most effective when they were well targeted at people who were most able and motivated to secure better quality work (and/ or achieve progression in work). On the one hand this reflects the importance of ensuring that support is personalised to people's circumstances and needs, but on the other could risk running counter to developing an offer that can help those who are more disadvantaged in the labour market and increase the risks that they are 'parked' without access to appropriate support

(especially if it led to a hard and fast distinction and eligibility criteria between support for ‘better work’ and for ‘any jobs’).

One way to square this tension would be to try to ensure that all jobseekers are able to access the support that they would need in order to get to the point where they are best able to take up support to access better work, and to then focus on building the evidence base, adviser capabilities and wider support needed to do this (so building on other areas identified in sections 3.1 to 3.4 above). This could include for example supporting people to access short-term employment where that might build work experience and employability skills, or access skills training to achieve foundational skills. Alongside this though, it is important to recognise that some degree of screening for ‘career pathways’ is likely to be necessary, to ensure that those who apply for those jobs have the best chance of getting and sustaining them.

3.6 Build the evidence base on what works

Finally, a key finding from this work has been that the evidence base on ‘what works’ is more limited in the UK and Australia than it is in the United States, and more can be done to build that evidence base. The UK has made significant strides in doing this in the last decade or so, but this has nonetheless been relatively patchy – with many but not all UK government programmes and pilots being evaluated robustly, but very few programmes commissioned by devolved or local government having impact evaluations to the same standard. In part this has been because impact evaluation has not been ‘designed in’ from the start, but in part too it is due to barriers around having access to the necessary data and expertise that would enable this to be done. This therefore reiterates the need for a more coherent approach to generating evidence across programmes and pilots, has happens in many other areas of social policy (particularly through ‘What Works’ centres and networks).

Furthermore, there is also a need to collect data more consistently across programmes and pilots, to enable more effective comparative analysis. In particular with the development of new and accepted job quality measures, there would be significant value in future initiatives collecting data across these seven dimensions – so that we can more reliably understand what works in supporting people to access good work, not just ‘better’ work.

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