



Supporting Highly Qualified Participants:

Exploring Routes to Success

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The ReAct Partnership

About Us

The ReAct Partnership is a new, industry-led, active collaboration to support a continuous improvement community in the Restart programme through action research, shared and iterative learning, and the development of applied, evidence-based resources.

The Partnership is co-funded by eight of the 'Prime providers' for the Restart programme — FedCap Employment, G4S, Ingeus, Maximus, Reed, Jobs22, Seetec and Serco — and is being managed by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES),



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Executive Summary

The Restart scheme supports a diverse range of individuals, aiming to progress those on its caseload into sustainable employment by providing a baseline service to all participants while tailoring the support package to meet specific needs of particular customers and cohorts. The DWP-commissioned evaluation of Restart¹ identified that individuals with higher qualifications, or who had been working in higher-paid jobs prior to joining the programme, were less likely to be satisfied with their experience, reporting a lack of useful, relevant support tailored to their needs. This research explores in more depth how highly qualified and experienced participants are supported by Restart, what is working across a range of approaches, and identifies recommendations for improving the quality of service to individuals in this cohort.

While this cohort is not clearly defined in the DWP evaluation, we suggest that the term highly qualified can refer to those who have gained higher education qualifications, professional qualifications, as well as those who have moved into a specialised or more senior level position through work-based experience and training. Our research includes interviews with providers and participants across the Prime Providers with Restart contracts, in which both current provision and experience of delivery were explored. In order to contextualise our findings, our research also included an international literature review focusing on barriers and enablers for this cohort and a geographic analysis of job types across the UK. A number of commonalities emerged, both in terms of the key groupings within this cohort and the barriers they face.

Of the eight Primes delivering the 12 Restart contracts across England and Wales, more than half are now exploring a differentiated approach for this cohort. These range from one-to-one coaching to executive job clubs, or a blend of these approaches. In all cases, participants retain access to all other Restart provision, including regular appointments with their employment adviser. Inclusion in differentiated provision is voluntary, but those organisations offering additional support have identified key criteria for identifying suitable participants and this has commonly emerged as important for securing engagement and success within the differentiated programmes.

Commonality of approach was observed within the differential offers, which evidenced the identification of similar gaps in the standard Restart offer. At the heart of many approaches is a focus on greater depth and detail in a range of job search skills, from CV and cover letter

¹ DWP (2024) *The Evaluation of the Restart Scheme*

writing to presentation and interview skills, in recognition of the potentially more complex and often multi staged application processes faced by this cohort. For example, adaptations included upskilling participants in how to utilise LinkedIn and social media in their job search, how to design and give presentations and how to manage panel interviews.

We also found a clear focus on building confidence and working with participants on mindset and motivation as well as creative approaches to employer engagement. Utilising the power of peer support was another element observed as adding value in some programmes.

Despite many of these elements being included in the mainstream Restart offer, our research found that this cohort were better supported by delivering them in more depth to match the requirements of the application processes they may need to engage in.

This research identified a range of recommendations to aid Primes in designing additional support or in wanting to better support this cohort within their mainstream Restart offer. Given that many of the programmes investigated as part of this research were at an early or pilot phase of delivering differentiated support, this research has not attempted to evaluate the impact of the provision but to explore the range of interventions and identify factors that are contributing to success. Significantly, given that a number of changes are in the pipeline for the employment services sector, and that this may affect the profile of participants over the coming years, understanding how to work best with this group is both important and timely.

Recommendations – distilling what works

This research explores the ways in which Primes are utilising a range of approaches to supporting participants who are highly qualified or with extensive experience into sustainable employment. The research team shared the emerging findings in a workshop with representatives of six of the eight Primes, which helped place them in the context of individual organisations as well as the wider Restart contract. The suggestions and questions raised by this group allowed us to fine-tune the final set of recommendations made in this section. These recommendations look to offer a lens through which organisations may examine provision for this cohort and are intended as a guide, in full awareness of the different contexts and geographies in which providers are working.

Some of the recommendations are a way of sharing good practice that is already happening in one or more of the Primes, whilst others arose from provider and participant interviews.

1. **Collect data** where possible, not just the level of education or previous employment but also the intentions, so that those who want to change gear in their working life are supported to do so, but those who want to return to their previous level are also supported to regain either a comparative role or to engage in a role that might lead to that eventual outcome. Data insights looking at speed to outcome could then be examined to fully evaluate the benefits of providing additional support.
2. Irrespective of whether a differentiated approach is introduced, **equip advisers** with the skills to understand the barriers faced by, and experiences of, this cohort and support them to build trust and engagement with participants. This may be done effectively through exploring a coaching approach. Differentiated programmes should be offered hand in hand with the employment advisers, with both provider representatives having agreed goals and communication processes.
3. If differentiating support for this cohort, use **sifting questions** to identify those who might benefit from additional support in order to target this approach. Ongoing reviews of performance data will help hone criteria.
4. Understand and provide opportunities for participants to **address confidence, motivation and mindset**, to address self-belief and preconceptions and open discussions about transferable skills and alternative pathways to work. Explicitly acknowledging that there may be a different skill set and experience for participants belonging to this cohort, can be an effective way of ensuring engagement.
5. Where possible, look to **empower participants** to drive their own job search, focusing on equipping them with the skills they need to be effective.
 - Equip employment advisers or specialists with an understanding of the complexity of applications processes that might be needed for some of the roles being targeted by this cohort (for example, panel interviews, series of interviews, presentations).
 - Support participants to develop CVs that are targeted, focused and effective for applications to more senior roles.
 - Support participants to understand the role of LinkedIn and social media platforms, reverse marketing and building an individual brand as part of the job search.
 - Support participants, where necessary, with presentation design and delivery skills as well as interview skills – including opportunities to practice presentations with feedback.
 - Consider a coaching approach.
 - Guest speakers, including those with lived experience, can deliver sessions to this cohort, which may help them think about different routes to work.

6. Ensure any **specialist provision is managed hand-in-hand with Restart employment advisers**, developing joint working practices, and timely communication.
7. Establishing **peer group opportunities** can be effective for this group. Pulling a group together that can act as a forum to connect, engage with others and allow participants to practice giving presentations and giving/receiving feedback on these as well as potentially providing a network in which they can continue to support each other in building effective job search skills. This peer support may continue beyond the life of the intervention, and providers can support this through the provision of meeting rooms.
8. Whether using a differentiated approach or not, equip advisers with the knowledge and resources to **signpost** participants to external resources and sites that might help them in exploring their sector. Develop effective signposting routes to effective resources across a range of sectors. This can include links and relationships with recruitment agencies.
9. Look to include a **range of images** in Restart marketing that includes this cohort. A participant in a focus group suggested that in order to have confidence that the Restart programme can help, the diversity of provision needs to be demonstrated in the images and marketing materials across the Restart programme. They suggested including images in which higher-skilled and knowledge workers are identifiable to make everyone feel that the provision is for them.
10. Explore **long-term career plans** with participants looking to establish the stepping stones on the way to a final goal in order to broaden their options of returning to work.
11. Look to secure **work experience** for graduates lacking in the experience to match their qualifications and look at graduate placements for new graduates. Work with them to explore all potential roles that might relate to their area of study.
12. **Work with employers** to identify potential additional roles within their organisations than those they normally share that might be suitable for this cohort and to tap into the hidden job market. Keep in contact with past participants of this cohort who have moved into work who may be in a position to identify roles suitable for other participants. Work with employers to help them understand the value of qualifications that may have been achieved abroad.
13. Consider **remote working** roles or **self-employment** options for those with niche sector skills, where the local labour market does not provide opportunities.
14. Ensure participants have **access to the technology** they need to support an effective job search and potentially complex application processes.

15. **Look ahead** at how the participant profile is changing and what other programmes may be coming to an end and consider whether a differentiated pathway is appropriate in the context of your organisation and caseload.

Introduction

Background

A 2022 survey of Restart participants found over a fifth (22%) have degree-level qualifications, and it is likely that others could reasonably be classified as more highly skilled or qualified based on their work history.²

While this cohort is not clearly defined in the 2024 DWP-commissioned evaluation, of which the survey was a part, in this paper we suggest that ‘highly qualified’ can refer to those who have gained higher education qualifications, professional qualifications, as well as those who have moved into a specialised or more senior level position through work-based experience and training.

The DWP evaluation suggested that more highly skilled and highly qualified individuals were less satisfied with their experience of Restart, reporting they were less likely to receive useful, relevant support tailored to their needs. Indeed, the evaluation found that, while almost three in ten participants overall expressed dissatisfaction (28%), participants with qualifications at L3 (30%), L4 (35%), those who had spent most of their time working since leaving school (31%) and participants who were self-employed (34%) were all more likely to be unsatisfied with Restart services.³

In addition, the evaluation found limited evidence of Restart’s ability to support this cohort into sustainable roles which match their levels of qualification and experience. Some participants achieved positive outcomes but attributed this to their own efforts rather than those of their Restart provider.

Qualitative evidence included in the DWP evaluation suggests that these individuals may be more selective in the types of employment they apply for, seeking jobs that are a good fit for their interests and level of prior experience and qualifications, and perhaps similar to their previous role in terms of sector, level, and salary.

The evaluation concluded that those who are looking for highly skilled jobs would benefit from Employment Advisors who have more specialist knowledge to support them, or who are more experienced in working with these types of claimants.

² N = 5,282. This survey of participants was part of a longitudinal cohort study which was a strand of the evaluation of Restart published in 2024; DWP (2024) *The Evaluation of the Restart Scheme*

³ DWP (2024) *The Evaluation of the Restart Scheme*

Difficulties supporting more highly skilled participants are also likely linked to other factors. For example, the evaluation also noted less evidence of employer engagement with smaller or more specialist employers and that this was a barrier to more highly qualified individuals securing work. It also suggested the types of training courses on offer through Restart were mainly lower-level or shorter training such as those designed to obtain CSCS or SIA badges to access work within construction and security. While the report does not make the connection, it is possible that a wider training offer would increase the ability to support more highly qualified individuals. The case study research as part of that evaluation suggested this was happening in some areas but was not available to all participants who required it.

It is worth noting that higher qualified and higher skilled jobseekers having lower levels of satisfaction with the programmes aimed at supporting them into work is not a newly observed phenomenon. For example, a 2016 evaluation of the DWP's Supervised Jobsearch Pilots noted that *'those looking for higher skilled work were less likely to report they had received appropriate, tailored support'*.⁴

The 2024 DWP report concluded that the needs of these participants should be reviewed more widely. Therefore, in the interests of supporting Primes to understand and share best practice in helping this cohort secure sustainable job outcomes, this group was clearly one that needed to be looked at in more depth.

Since the publication of the 2024 DWP evaluation, more Primes have begun to roll out different kind of specialist provision for this group. These interventions have some broad similarities, evidencing that some of the gaps in more mainstream delivery have been identified. However, this provision is in its early stages and not yet ready for evaluation. As a result, this report seeks to explore provision on offer for higher qualified participants across a range of settings and through a range of different models (including 1-2-1 coaching, executive job clubs and blended approaches) and identify factors that are contributing to success, rather than evaluate the provision itself. We have identified interventions and ways of working across different models in order that they can be understood and applied in different contexts, whether or not there is specialist support in place.

⁴ DWP (2016) *Supervised Jobsearch Pilots trial evaluation*

Research Questions

This research sought to answer the following five research questions:

1. What has worked well in other employability programmes in supporting highly skilled individuals into sustainable employment?
2. What support is currently available to this cohort on Restart, and how effective has this been?
3. What further support is required to help higher skilled participants into sustainable employment that matches their qualifications and work experience?
4. What practical steps could Restart providers take to better support more highly skilled participants into sustainable employment?
5. What other aspects of Restart provision (e.g. its training offer and referral process, employer links) could be adjusted and refined in order to better match the needs of higher skilled participants?

Methodology

This project involved a mixed methods approach.

1. An evidence review exploring what has worked in other programmes, including internationally, in supporting this cohort into work.
2. Study of labour market data using Nomis data and looking at the geographic spread of different types of work, with a focus on understanding the availability and demand for jobs requiring degree-level skills in different geographic areas.
3. Interviews with 15 key stakeholders from each of the Primes, including paired or group interviews in some instances to maximise the range of provision and opinion gathered.
4. Interviews with eight participants from a range of Primes, both from those offering a differentiated approach and those without.
5. Analysis of relevant information provided by Primes including programme content.
6. Focus group and in-person observation of one group session as part of a series of differentiated provision with highly qualified participants.
7. Workshop for co-creating recommendations with senior stakeholders.

The Highly Qualified Cohort

This section will explore what we mean by ‘highly qualified’ individuals in employment support and some of the barriers they face. It draws from the evidence review, geographic NOMIS data and interviews undertaken as part of this research project.

Findings from the evidence review

There is limited evidence on how to best support higher qualified individuals into work in mainstream employment programmes. Where evidence does exist, it tends to review the relationship between jobseekers and recruiters or potential employers, rather than the experiences that this group faces in employment support. Instead of looking at the experiences of one highly qualified group in employment support schemes, evidence tends to focus on specific demographic groups, who may have higher than average qualifications. These groups include:

- Migrant workers and refugees. These individuals may have qualifications/experience in other countries that does not directly transfer over to the UK, and they may be unfamiliar with job search techniques used by employers in Britain.
- Older jobseekers. They may have built up a particular specialism in their career, and struggle trying to transfer this knowledge and experience to other sectors at a similar level. In addition, they may not have any relevant current job search knowledge
- Recent graduates, who are highly qualified, but lacking work experience.
- Women, who may have particular job search approaches and habits that are not reflected in current employment support schemes.

Though no evidence exists looking at these groups together as one ‘highly qualified’ cohort, findings from studies looking at their experiences have been relevant for informing our current research.

Findings from this research

There is inconsistent data collection across Restart Primes on those who might fall into the ‘highly qualified’ category. As discussed above, there is a significant proportion with higher level educational qualifications, and if we include those with extensive skills and experience the group is potentially a significant proportion of Restart participants.

Where data was collected, Primes have different ways in which they identify and monitor this cohort. Some look at qualification, salary, experience and/or previous job title and use these factors to identify and to filter potential jobs and potentially offer additional services alongside the standard Restart offer. The salary level for a Prime including a participant in their highly qualified cohort can vary depending both on the provider and the delivery

location or Contract Package Area (CPA). For example, some include those with previous salaries over £30k whereas others, in areas such as London, require earnings of over £50k.

When asked in interview about the size and proportion of this cohort within the overall caseload, responses ranged from vague to more specific, but inconsistency was evident across the board:

Don't capture this data; not many.

Probably more in some parts of the CPA than in others but don't really know.

Provider interviewees

There is a field for filling in education level, but this is not mandatory and some organisations were not confident that advisers understood what level is equivalent to degree level, particularly when professional or foreign qualifications were involved.

The honest answer is it isn't data we have been gathering regularly, because it doesn't form part of our onboarding questions.

Provider interviewee

When asked about the proportion of the cohort that might fit into this category, the answers ranged from 13% of caseload and 'best guess 5%' to 'roughly 10%'.

The inconsistency of data capture and classification of participants shows that there is no agreed understanding of what a 'highly qualified' job seeker is, as well as no clear understanding of the proportion of the caseload who would fit into this category. This lack of overall data makes it harder to give an insight into outcome data and evaluate the sustainability of employability solutions. As one Prime noted:

We need to do... better at actually capturing the data in the first place because what we don't know is how many people we've got that have got higher level skills.

Provider interviewee

However, the key groups identified through this research largely reflect the findings from our evidence review. That is three broad groups, comprising:

- Recent graduates who have good qualifications but lack appropriate work experience.
- Participants whose qualifications were gained abroad.
- Participants who have faced job losses at a later stage in their career, often after a long period in a role. This group may be particularly unfamiliar with contemporary job search processes and may have experienced loss of confidence.

When it comes to highly qualified participants, we're finding that it's not necessarily to do with the qualifications sitting on paper at that time

Provider interviewee

However, it should be noted that not everyone with the qualification, salary level or extensive work experience to be included in this cohort is suitable for, or wants, differentiated treatment. Intentions around future work, health conditions, home circumstances and language levels should all be considered when determining what support is necessary or relevant for participants.

For example, we were told about a participant who had been very high up in a public sector role and did not want to return to a stressful role. In this case, the employment adviser was able to help them frame this decision for the employer and they found work in customer service. Key criteria for inclusion in differentiated support will be explored in the chapters below.

Geographic variance

This cohort and opportunities for jobs requiring higher level qualifications are not evenly spread. Nomis data using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) and the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RFQ) can be used to show the geographic spread of opportunities associated with a highly qualified and experienced cohort.

Looking at SOC group 1-3 (which consists of 'Managers, Directors and Senior Officials', 'Professional Occupations', and 'Associate Professional Occupations'), which is particularly relevant for a highly qualified and experienced cohort, shows that there is a great deal of variation in the availability of these jobs depending on region.⁵ Table 1 illustrates this, showing that there is a higher proportion of group 1-3 occupations in London and areas in the south and east of the country, with a smaller proportion of these occupations in Northern Ireland, Wales, areas around the north east of England and the East Midlands.

⁵ SOC is a common classification of occupational information for the UK. Most recently reviewed in 2020, it is used to classify occupations based on the skills and qualifications needed for the job. SOC 2020 has nine classifications, which are then split into four major groups. These are:

- Major group 1-3, which consists of 'Managers, Directors and Senior Officials', 'Professional Occupations', and 'Associate Professional Occupations'.
- Major group 4-5, which consists of 'Administrative and Secretarial', and 'Skilled Trades Occupations'.
- Major group 6-7, which consists of 'Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations', and 'Sales and Customer Service Occupations'.
- Major Group 8-9, which consists of 'Process Plant and Machine Operatives', and 'Elementary Occupations'

Whilst these areas do not map directly onto CPA areas used to organise Restart, they can be illustrative for the purposes of understanding the variation that occurs across the country.

Table 1: the proportion of occupations in SOC 1-3 throughout the UK

Region	SOC group 1-3 (%)
London	63.1
South East	57.6
East	53.9
South West	51.6
North West	50.2
Scotland	50
West Midlands	48.8
Yorkshire and the Humber	48
Wales	47.4
East Midlands	47
North East	46.5
Northern Ireland	42.7

Source: Nomis, from ONS annual population survey [Jul 2023-Jun 2024]

For the purposes of examining the spread of the highly qualified cohort, Table 2 shows the proportion of the population who hold a qualification at RQF Level 4 (RQF level 4 refers to Vocational Qualifications such as a Certificate of Higher Education or a Higher National Certificate) or above by region.⁶ Again, the region with the highest proportion of the population having higher qualifications is London, followed by Scotland and the South East. Areas in the North East, Northern Ireland and the East Midlands once again have the lowest proportion.

⁶ RQF accredits qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are eight levels supported by three 'entry' levels, with Level 8 being the highest level of a qualification. RQF level 4 refers to Vocational Qualifications such as a Certificate of Higher Education or a Higher National Certificate. For context, a Bachelor's degree is RQF6, and a DPhil or PhD is RQF8.

Table 2: The proportion of the population who hold a qualification at RFQ Level 4 or above in the UK

Region	Proportion of the population who hold a qualification at RQF Level 4 or above (%)
London	60.7
Scotland	55.1
South East	49.2
North West	44.4
South West	43.8
Wales	43.2
East	42.8
West Midlands	42.5
Yorkshire and the Humber	41.2
East Midlands	40.2
Northern Ireland	39.7
North East	39.6

Source: Nomis, from ONS annual population survey [Jul 2023-Jun 2024]

Barriers faced by this cohort

Findings from the evidence review

This evidence review has identified some of the key barriers that these different demographic groups face while job seeking. Namely: being unfamiliar with job search approaches and requirements; having qualifications, skills or experience that do not match up to the job that they are seeking; and feeling that employment support schemes are not designed with them in mind, leading to feelings of frustration, isolation, or refusing to engage in the process at all.

Job seekers being unfamiliar with typical job search approaches and requirements

Research pointed at several different groups who may be unfamiliar with typical job search approaches in the UK. This can include people who have not previously looked for work in the UK, as well as people who have not had to search for a job for a long time.

Age UK found that when older jobseekers are looking for their first job in decades, they need more support with returning to job searching. Older workers are proportionately more likely than other jobseekers to have issues with the IT skills required to register on online systems, may also be unaware of the range of online job websites now in existence, or which website is best suited to the jobs they are looking for.⁷

Similarly, research looking at professionally qualified refugees in Leeds found that their job search strategies had significant gaps, and that they may have a lack of knowledge of the culture and norms of the professions they were looking for a job in.⁸ There were similar results from a study in Australia, highlighting that refugees and migrants have different cultural norms around job search, giving an example of individuals feeling it was inappropriate to ask questions of a potential employer, even though it would be beneficial to their job search.⁹

Job seekers' qualification, skills and experience not matching the job that they are seeking

There are many nuances in how a qualification mismatch can impact a jobseeker, and these impacts may be felt more keenly by some groups. Evidence reviewed suggested that a mismatch of qualifications, skills and experience can affect older workers, recent graduates

⁷ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/consultation-responses-and-submissions/active-communities/crs_june14_employment_support_for_unemployed_older_people.pdf

⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/imig.12038>

⁹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1002/ajs4.353>

and refugees and migrants, making jobseekers appear overqualified in some situations and underqualified in others.

Studies in Germany and Australia found that qualified migrants were struggling to utilise their qualifications and felt that qualifications obtained in other countries were not being respected. This led them to take jobs at a lower level than they were initially seeking.¹⁰

Recent graduates have also historically struggled to access jobs that suited their qualifications. A report from the OECD found that 30% of graduates were unable to access a graduate job, a figure that predated the 2008 financial crash, indicating there was a structural flaw in the labour market.¹¹ Indeed, a more recent report by the OECD found that England had the highest rate of over-qualification in the OECD, with 37% of the population being overqualified for their current role. This study also found that England had above average rates of being over-skilled (34%) and for having a field of study mismatch (where a worker is employed in a different field from their highest qualification, 41%).¹²

Older jobseekers may have few formal qualifications despite a great deal of work experience, which could mean that on paper they may be over skilled for a job that, based on qualifications alone they are underqualified for. In these circumstance, Age UK research shows, when an older jobseeker is over-skilled, they tend to be extremely over-skilled.

In addition to this, the older jobseeker may have only had one or two employers in their entire career to date and so have built up a very specialist and particular set of skills that they feel can only apply to one sector, or even a micro-sectoral niche.¹³

Employment support programmes not being in tune with the experiences that different demographic groups may face

Evidence reviewed pointed to multiple groups of people who may feel that their experiences and perspectives are not understood or respected by employment support programmes, which can result in individuals having negative experiences, or not using them at all.

As has previously been discussed, feeling that their qualifications and experience are not being valued can make migrants and refugees feel disrespected by employment services. A

¹⁰ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1002/ajs4.353>,
<https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/48240/1/664196519.pdf>

¹¹ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/right-for-the-job_5kg59fcz3tkd-en.html

¹² https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/do-adults-have-the-skills-they-need-to-thrive-in-a-changing-world_b263dc5d-en/full-report.html

¹³ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/consultation-responses-and-submissions/active-communities/crs_june14_employment_support_for_unemployed_older_people.pdf

study of internationally trained immigrants in Canada found that participants rated the ability of employment service professionals to understand their overall education and work experience background as low, commenting that staff lacked knowledge of other countries' experiences of work and education.¹⁴

Job seekers who have previously had a career may be trickier to place into a new role or job. These issues may be particularly prevalent with older job seekers and migrants and refugees. In addition to this, these job seekers may face additional challenges to do with their mental health and self-worth having to job search after a successful career. For those whose identities were tightly tied to previous professional success, there can be feelings of shame or stigma related to having to go through employment support, and an unwillingness to network with former colleagues as a result. This can all lead to a reluctance to engage constructively in employment support programmes.¹⁵

Finally, there is a risk of certain groups being 'invisible' to employment support programmes if their preferred methods of job searching are not understood. A study of highly skilled female workers in the EU found they rely on social networks, rather than employment support, and as a result do not tend to voluntarily engage in employment support programmes.¹⁶ This leads to a risk of being 'invisible' to the system, or their legitimate job search approaches unrecognised within mandatory programmes. Instead, they may be asked to use other job search approaches which are easier to track but which makes their overall job search less effective.

Findings from this research

Many of the barriers revealed in the evidence review were reflected in the findings from both our research and the DWP evaluation. Some of these barriers are common to all Restart participants, but may be felt more intensely by this cohort, whereas others are specific and different.

Where people have been made redundant after a long period in a role, the local labour market may also have shifted since the last time they were job hunting, exacerbating their situation. In addition, the interviews with both participants and providers showed that a

¹⁴ https://triec.ca/uploads/360/understanding_the_employment_service_needs_of_itis.pdf

¹⁵ https://masshiredowntownboston.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Crisis-of-Long-Term-Unemployment-Is-Looming-in-the-U.S_.pdf

¹⁶ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/imig.12744>

critical factor may be that the types of vacancies being sought by members of this cohort do not match the vacancies usually identified by Restart providers.

In addition, the job search skills needed to secure the types of roles desired by this cohort may be more complex, and the processes more lengthy than for those needed to secure other roles. Those who may have been out of work for a long time may also be out of date with the modern job search. This is explored in depth in the What Works section below.

Barriers related to mindset were also identified. These included unrealistic expectations from participants, and the reduction in confidence and loss of identity that can develop in those who have previously held senior roles, but then are out of work for a significant time period. For new graduates, the barriers included a lack of work experience and a lack of understanding of career pathways and identified skill sets. Participants who have arrived in the UK as adults may also find that their English language skills are sufficient to work in some jobs, but are not at the standard required for graduate level jobs or those they held previously in their country of origin.

For other participants, high levels of financial need to help meet cost commitments, such as a mortgage, were seen as barriers to accepting available jobs, which may also been seen as stepping stones to get back into the job market (and then move on from).

One provider suggested that it would be more efficient if the more highly qualified and/or experienced cohort were on a different pathway earlier to avoid the damage done to confidence and mental health by spending months working through the JCP experience. A participant reported in interview that before being on Restart they felt ‘invisible’.

By the time they are on Restart the system has already failed them - no one has listened to them. The problem is bigger than Restart.

Provider interviewee

The relationship with employment advisers was critical. This had dangers on both sides, where the participant felt that the adviser did not understand their situation and where advisers felt the participant did not respect them, or value their knowledge about the local labour market or job search skills. This mismatch of understanding was raised in a number of participant and provider interviews.

The current range of provision

Business as usual

The tailored approach that sits at the heart of Restart provision is felt by some Primes to be sufficient to support this cohort.

If someone is highly skilled and highly qualified we will adapt our approach... with someone who's highly skilled and qualified you don't necessarily need to work on their confidence and job readiness. What you do need to do is look at specialist opportunities in the local area where you can say 'who have you not linked in with' and we have our engagement coordinators who reach out to employers, and we can link them up to the employer.

Provider without differentiated approach

Where differentiated approaches were not developed, tailoring support covered a wide range of options, including (but not exclusive to):

- Using external support to counselling in instances where confidence had been severely affected.
- Identifying volunteering or work experience opportunities for graduates without sufficient work experience.
- Identifying more experienced employment advisers to manage them (see section on employment advisers).

Indeed, providers may have other differentiation categories that they use to identify pathways for participants and with which many of this cohort overlap, such as:

- Older individuals.
- Lone parents.
- Neurodiverse participants.
- Participants needing ESOL support.
- Those at risk of burnout for whom a health and wellbeing offer may be appropriate.

In some cases, supporting participants through these alternative lenses may be a better route for the participant. The employment adviser would need to have an understanding of how differing approaches interplay and ensure that those recommended for any differentiated support are receiving the right support to match their needs.

In some instances, providers firmly felt that putting people into specific categories was unhelpful and created additional barriers, or that the primary objective for those receiving financial support should be to move into paid employment as quickly as possible without regard to specifics of sector or preference.

Practical considerations for this cohort may have a bearing on this matter; in one instance, a Prime hired a person at the start of Restart to specifically work with more highly qualified customers. This was when there was an expectation of 12% unemployment. However, this dramatic rise in joblessness did not occur, and the Restart customer profile did not match the early predictions, so after a while they ‘*decided that we could handle this internally*’. Therefore, the geographic area and scale of this cohort are again important factors in decision-making. At the end of this report we question whether the future profile of participants may influence any decision around support design.

Within a business-as-usual model, there is a question as to whether the provision offered is sufficient to meet the needs of these participants. Participants we interviewed expressed concern about the relevance of both vacancies and support within a generalised approach.

I was a bit apprehensive because overall the only jobs [Restart] were offering were cleaners, janitors, jobs that weren't really fitting what I wanted [and] it felt more like I was going there just to talk through things in general. It felt kind of like therapy.

Restart participant

Personally, they don't have what I need.

Restart participant

A differentiated approach

It is significant that although the DWP evaluation featured one case study of a Prime providing something different for this cohort in the shape of a coaching offer, this research reveals that at least half of all Primes are now using a differentiated approach for this cohort, using elements of executive coaching, job clubs, employer engagement and mentoring.

I don't want it to be thought of that this [provision] has been brought about because we weren't supporting this cohort because we absolutely were. We could just do more.

Provider interviewee

Some Primes have explored a differentiated approach after conducting data insight sessions and other exercises to identify the benefits of doing so, or as a response to feedback from employment advisers. Some provision consisted of a set programme whereas others provide a flexible one-to-one approach. Others are developing a blend of these approaches.

The motivations for designing a differentiated support programme were also covered in interviews with providers. In at least one case, the potential financial benefits of a differentiated approach were raised, as this leads to participants moving faster through the system, into work and achieving higher salaries, allowing outcomes to be claimed more quickly. Stakeholders involved in the provider workshop agreed that it would be informative to look at this cohort through the lens of speed to outcome data to understand this perspective more and look to quantify the value add of additional support.

In at least one instance, the provider identified the fundamental importance of ensuring that specific cohorts don't get 'lost' in a mainstream approach. The broad reach of Restart relies on providers to design activities and processes that appropriately support people with a wide range of needs.

It was reported that employment advisers are sometimes '*not seen as credible*' by this cohort, and treated as if they are lacking experience or 'too young' to understand the job role the participant is looking for and what it entails.

People come with the perception of I'm not working for less than 25 grand. I'm not taking that menial job. You're referring me to even this Restart scheme. What do you know?

Prime interviewee

This view was reinforced by a number of providers noting that they sometimes assign an older employment adviser to people in this cohort. At least one provider reported that it was the advisers themselves who had identified the need for a differentiated approach, noting that as well as the importance of a good adviser match, the standard workshops available were at a level that was too basic to be useful to this cohort.

We wanted them to see value in coming and attending their appointments. You know, some people travel to these appointments and if an EC is sat and telling them what they already know and you know doing the basics of the CV and going through interview skills at just a basic level and they already know all of that stuff, then they're not going to find the value and then they will disengage. So we sort of identified that as an issue.

Prime interviewee

Providing differentiated support provided motivation for participants in this cohort to engage more deeply with Restart. Providers generally reported a high degree of engagement with differentiated approaches, and participants interviewed reported gratitude and appreciation for being given the opportunity to work with a programme clearly and explicitly tailored to their needs. One of the differentiated offers reported 95% attendance at the sessions offered. Another reported that their feedback showed 100% of participants are happy or very happy with the service, with 95% very happy, in addition to achieving high outcome rates. As one participant described, having their work coach and exec coach working together so well gave them both the confidence boost and practical skills for pitching for work, calling it a '*powerful combination*'. As a result, they were committed to working with them and completing the actions they were set.

Where there is provision for this cohort being delivered or piloted, there are broad similarities of approach, showing that the gaps in a mainstream approach have been similarly identified and are being addressed through specific interventions. The various approaches to support that have been set up follow a number of different models, including a set programme or a flexible one-to-one approach, as well as a blend of the two. However, all these interventions are voluntary and involved participants retaining access to all other Restart provision, with additional sessions or opportunities added.

As several of these approaches are in early stages or at pilot phase, our approach has been **not to evaluate these different approaches but to look for the common factors that different Primes have identified as making a difference as well as analysing the factors that participants themselves have reported as making a difference to them.** The next chapter will examine some common elements of approach.

Key findings - context and background

- Inconsistency of data capture shows that there is no agreed understanding of who fits into this cohort or an overall understanding of the proportion of the caseload who would fit into this category. Lack of overall data may lead to lack of insight into outcome data and sustainability of employability solutions.
- The broad groupings for this cohort found in this research largely reflect those identified through the evidence review, except in respect to female participants as this was not a group that was the subject of specific research as the sample was qualitative only.
- Where there is provision for this cohort being delivered or being piloted there are broad similarities of approach, showing that the gaps in the overall provision for this cohort have been consistently identified by providers.
- Not everyone with the qualifications or the experience to qualify to be in this cohort should be included as there may be overlapping factors at play that require a different approach to categorisation, such as neurodiversity or age.
- Alternatively, there may be considerable overlap between this cohort and other cohorts, such as those needing mental health or ESOL support. These programmes can be accessed alongside and participants involved in this research described benefiting from a range of provision.
- Geography plays a role in terms of local labour market landscapes. This can have an impact on the type and location of roles for this cohort.
- Employment advisers in some areas have supported differentiation for this cohort as they were aware that normal Restart delivery was not tuned to their needs, including some of the workshops and sessions available.
- Some providers report that there are financial benefits to providing this support, particularly in being able to move people more quickly into work with higher salary levels.
- Where a differentiated approach has been adopted there has been, in general, a high level of engagement.

What works in supporting this cohort?

This section will look at best practice examples across the Restart landscape in supporting participants with higher qualifications and extensive experience into sustainable work in order to bring together practical ideas and actionable recommendations.

Identifying who would benefit from differentiated support

Sifting questions are commonly used to identify suitable candidates for differentiated support. Not everyone with a degree or extensive experience or a previous high salaried job will necessarily want to be included in, or be suitable for, differentiated support. Therefore, where a differentiated provision was offered, organisations exercised a sifting process for candidates with some key criteria to help identify suitable candidates and screen out those for whom the provision is not suitable. Questions included (but not common to all) were:

- What is the standard of spoken and written English? How does that match against employer requirements?
- Has the qualification comparability check been done? (if relevant)
- Have they got access to, and are they able to use, the appropriate technology?
- Are the jobs they are looking for easily available through normal channels in Restart, or is a different approach/network required to source suitable vacancies?
- Are they motivated to look for work requiring higher levels of qualification/experience/skills?
- Are they able and willing to undertake additional support on top of the regular Restart requirements?

Interviews with provider staff described how the candidates for a differentiated approach are referred by employment advisers who feel the candidate would benefit from additional support. This is followed by a clear internal criteria process for referral. The voluntary nature of the programme and the use of sifting criteria ensure a high level of engagement with the programme.

Feeling understood and acknowledged

Feeling understood and acknowledged was a clear driver of satisfaction for this cohort. Several participants involved in the research were very positive that their specialist provider understood them and their situation and expressed how important this was to them. This was evident across the range of differentiated provisions.

[The coach] understood better the sector I wanted to be in and what I was working towards.

Participant interviewee

I believe she has a good understanding of why I am where I am, the things I do well and the things that I can improve on.

Participant interviewee

The delivery staff on one programme were described as ‘*empathetic*’ and were talking to participants with respect and ‘*on a level we understand*’.

They get us. More than we get ourselves. [They] give value to aspiration and experience.

Participant interviewee

Peer group support

Facilitating peer group support is a valued element of a number of differentiated provisions. Participants responded well to group work with other members of this cohort. One participant described their feelings of being in a cohort similar to them, saying that it was very tailored and helpful;

It was refreshing to see that I was not alone, it was interesting to hear their narratives and their stories and see some of the common themes that were coming out... it felt like a safe place to be your authentic self.

Participant interviewee

Elsewhere, a participant described their group as made up of very different people who all bonded well through shared experience. They described how they were able to ‘*bounce off each other*’ and ‘*air frustrations*’, concluding ‘*you need that at this level.*’ In this instance, the group were intending to stay in touch after the programme and continue to support each other with developing their job search skills, including reviewing each other’s applications and helping with interview practice, thus extending the value of the programme. On the other hand, a participant who was not on a differentiated scheme described feeling isolated and thought that it would be useful to talk to other people in a similar situation to them.

Providers were also aware of the value of bringing groups with similar job histories together.

Meeting with peers can stop the isolation of thinking you're the only person in this situation. Meeting someone in a similar situation and making you realise it's a reflection of circumstance and not individuals can go a long way into helping to support individuals.

Provider interviewee

One participant, who was part of a group programme, talked about the opportunity for peer learning that was available, as the group came from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. They also noted that being part of the group and working together had been a good reminder of what it can be like to work in a team environment. One participant described the feeling of failure they had experienced before the Restart provision and that being part of a group programme had helped them move forward and reframe how they present themselves as a job seeker.

These experiences suggest that creating an opportunity for peer group sharing and learning can support the participant on a number of levels and in some instances extend the value of the support on offer.

Also, on the theme of belonging, a participant in a focus group suggested that in order to have confidence in the Restart programme the diversity of provision needs to be demonstrated in images and marketing materials. They suggested including images in which higher-skilled and knowledge workers are identifiable to make everyone feel that the provision is for them, commenting that they had not seen such visual representation of the programme at their provider centre.

The role of confidence, mindset and motivation

Providers and participants acknowledged the central role of addressing issues of confidence, mindset and motivation in supporting this cohort. Our research revealed a number of references by both providers and participants to the central importance of addressing matters of confidence, mindset and motivation either through a coaching approach or through group work or other provision.

Participants sometimes felt demoralised after months of JCP provision, particularly in instances where a participant may have been unsuccessful in large numbers of job applications. This had impacted their confidence and motivation. One participant on a differentiated programme said that the JCP had had nothing suitable for them, so being on Restart and then referred to the specialist provision had been a huge confidence boost.

Participants on one programme commented that having the opportunity to do this earlier in the job search process would ‘*save a lot of heartache*’.

Loss of confidence may also be experienced after many years in a particular role or sector. In some instances, as one provider noted, a participant may sometimes experience imposter syndrome due to loss of confidence in their abilities. A participant described having been in the same sector for 23 years and how they had not needed even to update their CV in all that time. Initial experience of the job search and many rejections had led to a loss of confidence. The differentiated provision they were offered as part of Restart helped improved their motivation and mindset:

One of the key things that they do is they motivate self-belief to keep going[at a time when it could be easy to lose heart]. It's not just they're trying to help you get a job, it's about changing your mindset to achieve what you want to.

The most beneficial help . . . that I got was about positivity.

Participant interviewees

For some participants, this absence of confidence is coupled with a loss of identity when a job held for many years ends. One provider described this as ‘*If they’ve lost their role, they feel lost.*’

Participant confidence is currently being addressed in a number of different ways in programmes with and without differentiated offers, including group sessions as part of a health and wellbeing offer as well as through individual coaching. This focus on confidence is clearly an effective approach for this cohort:

Being unemployed for quite a while, it's definitely hit my confidence, but slowly in the last few months, the comfortability of having [the advisor]... the skills and the knowledge I've learned, it's definitely improved now. I feel more ready and more motivated than ever to gain employment.

Participant interviewee

Some providers highlighted the importance of participant mindset in opening up attitudes towards transferable skills and career change. A participant talked of the approach taken by their Restart specialist coach as being a mixture of supporting them to apply for jobs that they initially wanted and expanding their mindset to include more jobs that they could also consider. They described this as a collaboration between finding a balance of what they are

qualified for, what they want to do, and what's available – thereby expanding the possibilities for transitioning into sustainable employment.

Participant mindset was cited as both a barrier and the key to unlocking potential. Providers talked of needing to sometimes work with participants to adjust their expectations so that they understand the difficulties in moving into employment, whatever their background. They noted how working with participants to change that preconception can open pathways to potential jobs. One provider reported that some participants come to the programme with a '*chip on their shoulder*' and unrealistic expectations.

It's not to say that they can't go into what they want to go into, but they may need to retrain, which a lot of these cohort are reluctant to do because they've been doing the job with the qualifications and experience they have. But new employers would maybe look for an updated version of the qualification.

Participant interviewee

A number of providers and participant interviews mentioned the role of the differentiated approach in creating a place of trust and safety in which to shift mindset, readjust expectations and set realistic goals.

Employability skills and job search capabilities

Empowering participants own job search

A common thread between differentiated provision was the focus on empowering participants to conduct effective job searches themselves.

Several providers spoke of the value of empowering people to succeed through coaching or through extended training for a more complex set of job search skills rather than looking to secure roles on their behalf. A coach described the approach.

I'm much more about helping people do it for themselves.

Provider interviewee

Much of the specialist support for this cohort acknowledged the diversity and complexity of sectors and roles that might be suitable for this cohort and how it would not be possible for Restart employment advisers to be experts in every area, sector or job type. This support focused on developing employability skills relevant across the board and empowering individual participants to have the confidence and skills to manage the specialist job search and application process themselves.

In one instance, employment advisers within a provider setting had drawn attention to the fact that the standard workshops available to Restart participants were at a level that was too basic to be useful to this cohort, and therefore more was needed to help them develop suitable job search skills.

CVs

CV design may need a different approach for highly qualified or experienced participants. Research with providers and participants suggested that the focus may need to be about the impact someone has had rather than the specific jobs done, focusing on quantifiable achievements rather than work history.

Changing people's opinions and thoughts [on] the way they're applying for roles . . . Quite often people have got to a point when they're machine-gunning applications out, using 'quick apply' functions on job boards for higher end positions. We want them to focus on quality over quantity. We sometimes have people applying for every job in their area or field that isn't tailored, so CV and job application tailoring is the thing we get most common feedback on.

Provider interviewee

A number of findings and approaches emerged that are relevant to this cohort.

- Understanding how to focus a CV on experience rather than time was explained as helping participants, who may have had very extensive and long CVs, condense them to a shorter format, as well as helping to combat any explicit or implicit ageism that may be present in the hiring process. One group was encouraged not to go back further than five to 10 years on their CV.
- In addition, one participant on a differentiated programme described the CV writing help as very useful as they had explained how participants should have more than one CV for different kinds of roles.
- Both providers from organisations offering differentiated approaches and those without referred to supporting participants with access to a CV checking system that gives feedback on CVs and assesses them for suitability for automated processing. Many companies use these and many participants do not realise that it is not a human reviewing their CV at the first stage. This emerged as especially relevant to those experiencing redundancy after long periods in a role. One participant explained how helpful it had been to understand the role of algorithms in CV sifting and noted the help they had received in adjusting and tailoring to that scenario. Learning how to 'work the system' and use the words automated systems are looking for was reported as a helpful.

For instance, a machine might not know that ‘*managing a budget*’ and ‘*financial management*’ are often interchangeable terms.

Because AI scan documents now, you've got to put buzzwords and things like them in... it's a different world now [from when she was originally applying for jobs].

Restart participant on a differentiated programme

Work and CVs have changed since I had to last apply for a job.

Participant who had been with previous employer for 23 years

- Participants may also not realise that automated systems struggle with graphics. One provider noted that automated application systems can be hard for those working in creative industries.

I feel sorry for the creative roles. They're a content designer, a graphic designer, your CV looks fabulous but unfortunately you're going to have to take all of that (images) out.

Provider interviewee

In these cases, providers supported participants with creating a professional portfolio to showcase.

Understanding targeting, and the application process

Application processes for more senior roles can be complex, requiring a targeted approach. Some roles may involve additional steps, including elements such as online assessments. Supporting this cohort requires a knowledge and understanding of the skills necessary to navigate those processes and training for participants that is geared towards supporting them to gain those skills. Providers mentioned preparing candidates for application processes for senior roles that may have six or seven different steps, including online presentations (see below for more details). Another participant spoke of the complexity of the application process for roles in STEM fields.

Some of the differentiated programmes included in the research focusing on equipping participants with the tools needed to apply for jobs in their specific sector. One interviewee described being coached to understand how to develop their ‘USP’ and make meaningful applications to recruitment agencies working in their field. Applying to agencies requires a different, more succinct approach to that of job applications. One participant interviewed

felt that this focus had really helped to maximise their chances of their application being shortlisted.

Another specialised intervention, on cover letters as effective selling tools, was given by a provider as an example of further developing the standard offering to Restart participants. Providers noted that employers may have concerns that participants in this cohort are overqualified and therefore either too expensive or carry a risk of attrition. In order to combat these or similar biases, it can be helpful to articulate the participant story about what they want from work and what they would bring to an organisation as well as tailoring the CV to the role. Provider interviews and participant interviews also explored the need to reset a person's position in relation to the job market and how this can help a participant to understand how to pitch at the right level to gain employment.

Providers described instances where participants may be casting a very wide net and applying for anything that might be of interest, and with coaching they were able to work to refine their approach. In interviews, participants reported the value of spending time talking about their career goals and being helped to be more targeted in their job search.

In some instances, coaches on a specialist provision have conducted more detailed research into a particular sector and talked to participants about routes to achieve a role. A number of examples emerged through the interviews conducted; for example, a participant interested in writing was encouraged to think about the different types of writing, the opportunities available and how they would prioritise these.

Participants were often aware of the nature of their specialist areas and suggested approaches that could help. In one case the recommendation was to have a number of specialists, for instance someone who knows about STEM who 'could more accurately judge what you're good at and what you're not good at.' Elsewhere, a participant suggested that, where this is not possible, that the provider could cultivate links with appropriate recruitment agencies that they could use to provide that help.

LinkedIn and social media

LinkedIn and social media play can play a major role in the job search for this cohort and equipping participants to successfully navigate these can be important. This is particularly true when engaging in reverse marketing and researching organisations that might be suitable for proactive applications. Activity on LinkedIn can include encouraging participants to connect with relevant people, following a company and connecting where appropriate, including with how to present and pitch to head-hunters.

Providers also talked about the need for a participants to think about their personal branding and how this can contribute to their success. One participant on a differentiated

pathway described the valuable help they had received on how to present themselves and use LinkedIn to create opportunities. For example, a sales person experiencing a crisis of confidence was encouraged to make a speculative approach online and demonstrate similar skills to those they would use when selling a product in their job.

Multiple participants mentioned that learning to utilise LinkedIn was a key part of learning how to job search effectively. One participant had been very active on LinkedIn within their network, but had not known about all the different tools there are:

It was about tweaking the things that I was doing, to fully maximise their impact.

Participant

One provider runs training for employment advisers about where to look for jobs for this cohort, understanding that these roles tend to be on LinkedIn rather than Total Jobs or CV Library, as well as looking at specialist industry jobs.

A little extra training [for EAs on where to find jobs] wouldn't go amiss.

Provider interviewee

Another provider noted the importance of LinkedIn for sourcing remote working roles for highly qualified participants.

Talking about the job search in the modern world also includes being aware of and thinking about your social media presence and profile in the knowledge that prospective employers may look at this as part of recruitment practices.

The likes of LinkedIn and talking about social media with them and the importance of being appropriate on those platforms because you know, that is probably something, again, if they were in the same company for a long time, they've not encountered when they were last looking for work.

Provider interviewee

The primary position of LinkedIn and the relevance of other social media platforms is an area that is especially relevant to this cohort and may require some additional focus when looking at equipping participants to deal with the modern job search.

Interview skills and practice

Offering interview practice and feedback can boost confidence and increase skills for this cohort. This was particularly seen through some of the differentiated approaches.

- Support provided by offering mock interviews was seen as useful in developing confidence.
- In some cases, these mock interviews were conducted with a colleague the participants had not met before to more closely reflect a real world interview. Feedback is then given to the participant.
- At least one provider offered second stage mock panel interviews to members of this cohort to prepare them for complex interview stages.
- Interviews with participants revealed a high degree of support for providing group sessions which can help people to share tips and discuss challenges around their experience, which includes helping them realise that getting nervous for an interview is not unusual.

One example given by a provider was of a participant who had been in a role for a long time but lost their confidence after losing their job. In a session with a specialist, they were given the time to explore why they were not being successful in their job search. Through that process, they identified that their interview persona was different to their normal persona. As a result of that feedback, they were able to work on their interview technique and secured a role. Again, the focus on interview skills may not in itself be different for this cohort than from other Restart participants, but the level and depth of skill may need to be deeper.

Presentations and public speaking

Supporting participants in this cohort to gain job application skills may extend to developing presentation skills. Many jobs that this cohort will apply for will involve not only interviews but also designing and giving presentations. One provider creates peer groups to act as a forum to allow them to practice giving presentations and giving/receiving feedback on these. Another provider ran a session on presentations and feedback as part of a programme which was described as really helpful by the participants.

One participant reported being helped to prepare slide decks and presentations as well as receiving help in developing presenting skills.

Those practical things - I cannot express to you how vital they were.

Participant

This participant is now self-employed and confident of stepping into the world of work and independence.

Bring in the experts

Whether it's developing elements of the job search or working on confidence or mindset, the main approach taken by providers that offer additional support to this cohort is to bring in the experts. In some instances, this may take the form of a coach; elsewhere providers are using experts to deliver specialist skill sessions, including bringing in those with lived experience. This has commonly been developed as an alternative to upskilling all employment advisers, in recognition that the majority of Restart participants may not share the same experiences or be needing the same range of job search skills. One provider described this approach as showing that you need a different way of thinking.

One provider described the workshops that are offered by Restart (without specialist provision) as not working well for this cohort. The general workshops were talking them through things at a basic level and as a result they were disengaging from the process. This contributed to the design of a programme that saw additional expertise being brought in to support the work of the employment advisers.

Guest speakers included a range of experts in CV skills, presentations and external recruiters. Guest speakers in some instances can include participants from this cohort who have found a job. Bringing in lived experience was described as very powerful. One provider brought in a previous participant from this cohort who had ended up working at the provider itself after being through the process of reviewing their own skill set and identifying transferable skills.

Having them come to talk to participants brought it to life.

Provider interviewee

Working closely with employment advisers

Employment advisers and any specialist provision needs to work towards shared goals. All specialist programmes discussed in this paper are being offered hand in hand with the standard Restart experience. Some providers talked about the need to ensure both employment adviser and any specialist provider worked towards the same goals and were agreed on the approach, stressing the importance of shared priorities for a participant. This might involve, for instance, understanding that timelines for application processes for some roles may be longer and more involved than for other roles.

In one instance, this was achieved by participants completing a feedback form after every session with the specialist, which was then sent to the employment adviser so that actions can be followed by both parties.

It's about sustainability. And doing the right thing for the person – not pushing them into the wrong job.

Provider interviewee

We tell them you may not get a job within the 12 weeks [of the programme], but you will be set up with all the tools and everything you need to get that job.

Provider interviewee

Training for employment advisers

There are a number of areas where organisations may look to upskill employment advisers to understand the perspective and needs of the highly qualified cohort, help them to build a trusting relationship, and feel confident in how they can support these participants to positive outcomes.

The central importance of the role of the employment adviser was explored in the recent ReAct research, *Maximising Workforce Development* (2024)¹⁷, and this programme of work confirmed the centrality of that role for the participant. When asked about whether additional training for employment advisers might be beneficial and where the focus should be, interviews with providers and participants revealed a number of key findings about the types of training that might help advisers working with this cohort:

- Being aware of what being out of work as an experienced and previously senior person might feel like and understanding what the JCP experience might have done to their confidence and their sense of empowerment, can help build connection with participants.
- Building trust is key, so employment advisers need to reassure participants from this cohort that they understand and can support them – that they are not going to be pushed into a job that may be unsuitable for them and that the advisers understand the particularities of searching for, applying for and securing these jobs.
- A blend of skill sets within the adviser team enables members to complement each other with different specialisms and allows a broadening of the overall provision. This depends on the needs in the locality. One provider described it as 'unfair' to expect employment advisers to be jack of all trades and to be able to respond to all circumstances. In this instance there has been a focus on developing their internal training to include acknowledging when it may be time to pass a participant on to a

¹⁷Maximising Workforce Development [AdviserWorkforceDevelopment_0.pdf](#)

specialist. They are also creating champions with specialist experience in particular fields.

- Providers engaged in coaching programmes for this cohort talked about upskilling employment advisers to adopt coaching approaches. (see also *Maximising Workforce Development* report from ReAct 2024). This approach at an employment adviser level allows the participant the time to talk and the adviser needs to develop the active listening skills that help the participant feel heard and visible.

Signposting

Developing signposting resources to include routes to niche sectors and specialist recruitment agencies can be useful when supporting this cohort. Some Restart participants may belong to overlapping cohorts such as the over 50s or those with neurodiversity needs. In these cases, signposting to other resources and support can be helpful. As an example, one participant involved in the research was struggling with mental and physical health and needed to tackle those issues. Their advisor signposted them to MIND, the Samaritans, and access to the New Skills Academy:

It was informative to find about anything and everything that could help me.

Participant

Whilst acknowledging that there cannot be employer engagement teams with knowledge of a wide range of specialist areas, it may be possible build up and improve the banks of signposting information to cover more specialist roles and avenues for relevant people to explore. As an example, one participant acknowledged that it is not reasonable to expect that there would be an adviser that would have knowledge of working in fields such as emerging technologies and AI. However, developing links with external recruitment agencies that could potentially work in tandem with them was suggested as a potential pathway.

Similarly, a provider without a differentiated model suggested that they could provide more signposting to organisations that are able to provide support alongside them, if a participant is interested in a certain or niche sector, allowing the provider to build up a bank of relevant partners.

In STEM sectors, participants also spoke of a quick loss of skills and knowledge and therefore signposting to skills refresher courses would be helpful to keep up to date.

A focus on transferable skills

Taking the time to understand a participant's transferable skills in detail can help broaden the range of potential employment opportunities, and can be particularly useful with this cohort. Whilst many employment advisers deliver training sessions on identifying and marketing transferable skills, participants on differentiated provision reported that the intervention had '100%' opened their eyes to different areas of work.

Participants described the value of examining in detail their strengths and weaknesses with their provider as a way to focus their job search and that this took time, which they received as part of a differentiated approach.

In at least one instance, providers were also engaged in activity to use detailed labour market insights to identify the skills needed to meet local need. This insight underpinned discussion on transferable skills to match people with jobs available.

In the examples described to us, transferable skills were drawn from hobbies and modules in degree courses as well as previous work experience. A provider described using this approach to help a participant secure a role in a particularly niche field.

Taking the long view – career planning for sustainable outcomes

Taking the time to develop a longer-term career plan can also be an effective way of identifying stepping stone jobs to help participants get into work more quickly. This was particularly seen in those offering a differentiated approach. For example, one participant was supported into a public sector role. While the salary for this position was approximately half previous earnings, they had also developed a plan to use this opportunity to update their skills and then to potentially move from that job to one closer to their career goals.

One participant described the specialist provision they had been offered as allowing them to take a long-term view. The value placed on staying within their industry and boosting their skills made them confident of securing a sustainable job.

Provider interviews referenced the need to establish a long-term pathway with the participant and work backwards from that. This sometimes revealed secondary job goals, opening up additional opportunities, and helping to build towards their primary job goal.

If we're talking about this cohort, we do have to spend more time. There are no quick wins here, we have to ensure that we have full understanding of what it is they are looking for, in the short term, to get to where their long-term goals are.

Provider interviewee

Supporting highly qualified and skilled participants to take a long-term view to career planning can lead to sustainable outcomes. It was suggested during a provider interview that it would be interesting to track people beyond the six months outcome mark to understand the impact of this approach on longer term sustainability and progression.

However, provider interviews revealed the conflicts that can arise between this approach and the internal pressures to achieve job outcomes as quickly as possible. Complex job application processes can take several months this can be at odds with internal needs to secure job outcomes, and with the pressures participants feel to move into work as quickly as possible to ease their financial situation. An agreed approach between employment advisers and any specialist provision is important.

New graduate expectations and work experience

Working with new graduates can involve exploring key skills gained during their degrees, managing expectations, exploring graduate opportunities and securing work experience opportunities. This cohort may include graduates from all stages of their working lives. However, it was noted that those who are more mature usually have work experience and a career history to help them secure future roles, which is something that many new graduates do not have. New graduates may be graduating into a highly competitive field or a scenario in which their chosen field of study may not align with the local labour market needs, or they may be struggling with the gap that comes between the theory of education and the practical application of going into work. In some instances, there is no clear idea of career pathways.

Quite often we'll get graduates that may have studied computer science or software development that'll come out and just say they work in IT. Great! But that's a vast field that grows every year. Do you want to physically fix computers, do some coding, be in technical support? Identifying a job is something they don't know how to do.

Provider interviewee

When new graduates have a degree but not work experience, they need support to translate that degree into a field of work. In some instances, providers may be well placed to identify graduate schemes to suit the degree subject. Alternatively, this may involve the provider having some challenging conversations with those participants about expectations of going into a particular type of role when *'that isn't necessarily how it works in the real world.'* These challenging conversations may also need to include managing expectations around initial salary levels.

There is some sort of work to be done as far as experience and building up to that and particularly around transferable skills from those degrees.

Provider interviewee

One provider recommended using contacts with employers to explore work experience options for graduates with degrees but little relevant work experience.

Qualifications gained abroad

Understanding the value of qualifications gained abroad, helping to translate them into a UK setting and working with employers to understand their value can be significant for some members of this cohort. Where participants hold qualifications that have been gained abroad, there are a number of approaches that providers reported that have been taken to help them move into appropriate roles.

- Participants whose qualifications and experience was gained abroad will often need support to check how their qualifications translate to a UK jobs market and get the certificates necessary to evidence that. Many providers use an online system for this.
- In some instances, providers are helping participants to identify opportunities to retake exams in order to gain the equivalent UK qualifications.

However, one participant reported that they felt that there was employer discrimination at play with regards to qualifications gained abroad which leads to them not being able to use their qualifications and experience here to the same level. This resonated with provider experience – in interview they explained they sometimes have to work with employers to translate foreign qualifications to UK equivalents. Ensuring that employer engagement teams are equipped to have those conversations with employers was suggested as a way to manage these situations.

Other support needs

In terms of the practicalities of applying for more complex roles, the application processes that some candidates have to manage often require access to technology. Ensuring that participants have access to adequate technology to support the application process can be a route to success. The research revealed a number of other ways in which providers were looking to support members of this cohort. These ranged from conversations with employers to providing additional technology. Differing experiences were reported across providers on the availability of good tech to help with job searching and applications processes. In at least one provider, a participant described being given a laptop pre-loaded with programmes such as Teams in order to help them manage interviews and applications.

Employer engagement

Employer engagement teams can support this cohort by working creatively with established employer relationships as well as building relationships with recruitment agencies and exploring more developed resources and signposting. Whilst some providers focus efforts on upskilling participants to engage with the job search themselves within their sector, others were also using their employer engagement teams and links in creative ways to source suitable positions for highly qualified participants.

In at least one provider, employer engagement teams have tried to clarify their offer for this cohort by experimenting with creating a portal for executive jobs. However, they did not feel that it was successful and so shifted focus to empowering participants to source their own job roles to apply to.

One way in which providers managed employer engagement was to use current managed accounts with employers to identify different levels of jobs within those companies. This was described as ‘*working to the edges of current employer engagement*’. This might include gaining an understanding of remote jobs where available, as well as highlighting to the employer that providers may also be able to help with head office jobs.

So there are ways we could tap into our own managed accounts in a slightly different way.

Provider interviewee

Maintaining personal relationships with successful placements can also be effective, as described by one provider;

Because we work hard to build relationships with participants when they're in the scheme, and because we put people into higher positions on a regular basis we like to keep those relationships going once they move into work. We put someone in as an operations manager [...] and he came to us when he needed staff.

Provider interviewee

Another participant described how their specialist adviser had conducted research into their sector and looked for jobs on their behalf and had uncovered roles which they had not been able to find. This points to the role of the hidden job market and how Restart is in a strong position to tap into a market to uncover suitable vacancies.

Provider and participant interviews also referenced that many roles in certain sectors, such as the arts sector, may be found in smaller companies and may be more niche. A participant suggested that the key may be for employer engagement teams to have links

with recruitment agencies and websites that handle less common sectors, therefore enabling them to guide people towards more specialist avenues for roles.

Bringing businesses and participants together is also an approach that has been trialled. In one instance that was discussed there were issues with the size of the cohort as it was not enough to support face-to-face sessions and so the provider was exploring the potential of online provision. Participants on a separate differentiated programme remarked in interview that whilst they had found their programme offered on Restart extremely useful, they would have liked the opportunity to meet potential employers, particularly a senior staff member who might be involved in recruitment. This is something that they fed back to the provider.

Variance in types of employment

Looking at varying type and location of working opportunities can broaden the potential for accessing work, such as exploring remote opportunities and considering the potential of self-employment.

Remote working due to a lack of local opportunities

Geographic factors can be important (see section on Nomis data above pg 15). A factor resulting from being in an area with low numbers of this cohort and few opportunities can mean that sometimes participants feel isolated. One participant who had undertaken a degree as a mature student expressed this as *'I think my situation for them here in [...] is probably unusual'* and because of that she felt her Restart adviser did not understand her.

As a result, some providers are focusing on encouraging participants to look at remote working options, as this can help explore a wider field of opportunities for some of job roles suitable to this cohort. This can depend on the industry; for example, some areas of the country have few software engineering roles available locally but many of these can be accessed via remote working, which can work well for many including new graduates as well as those with caring needs.

Self-employment

Those either already self-employed or those looking to be self-employed may also form part of this cohort. In most cases, the support described above is applicable to their needs in much the same way, particularly when it comes to learning how to pitch for work.

Research also found instances where the mismatch between local labour market and a particular skill set, combined with an examination of career goals and circumstances, has led some of this cohort to be directed towards self-employment through their specialist programmes. One participant described how the programme had helped them get new motivation to reframe their situation and put a *'different spin on the freelance role'*. Another

participant described how the programme has helped them revise their approach and package their skills into a self-employed offer, after previously only looking for full time roles. More information on what works in delivering self-employment through Restart can be found in the ReAct report *Supporting Restart Participants into Self-Employment* (2024)¹⁸.

Looking ahead

Given the change in profile of participants over the course of Restart and considering the extension period and the overall changes in other employment programmes, it may be timely to consider provision for this cohort.

One provider commented that they saw the value in this research now, but given that the provisions being examined are at an early stage, it would be good to return to this subject in a year and look again at how these differentiated support programmes have developed.

In addition, providers noted that changes to the overall Restart participant cohort since the programme was designed has meant that the profile of the Restart participants has been shifting and this may require a further look at differentiation. It was also suggested that the discontinuation of other employment programmes means that there may soon be more referrals coming through that fit this cohort, which, including the Work and Health programme makes this area even more relevant now and one that all Primes need to be aware of. Indeed, in one instance, a provider reported already seeing an increase in demand for their differentiated approach over recent months and especially a keener emphasis on higher salary levels. As providers noted:

While the participants are not one size fits all, the contract is one size fits all and the parameters around that don't necessarily account for the differentiation.

We've seen a difference in the people that we're getting, and we're having to adapt to all of those circumstances. How we differentiate between different cohorts of people to support them is something we're looking at more as we've got into the extension.

Provider interviewees

Therefore, it would be good to come back to this topic to see how these provisions have developed, evolved and to understand any mechanisms of success.

¹⁸ [REPORT Supporting participants with self-employment.pdf](#)

Key findings – what works

General points

- Including sifting questions can help identify suitable candidates and ensure high levels of engagement in specialist provision.
- In all programmes that offered specialist provision to this group, issues of managing mindset, motivation and confidence were a central part. Acknowledging their situation and making people feel understood were also key elements that encourage trust and can lead to motivation to engage.
- Peer group activity and support is highly valued and can bring additional practical benefits for participants.
- Signposting and the development of links to external resources and expertise can help providers to overcome the issue of managing participants from niche sectors.
- Providers often work with participants from this cohort to identify long term job goals and establish career plans, sometimes establishing roles that can be stepping stones on the pathway to those roles. When supporting highly qualified participants, looking at the longer-term view and managing career planning can lead to sustainable outcomes. However, this can take time to establish.
- Graduates can benefit from understanding the range of specific roles that may be relevant to their area of study or providers can seek out work experience opportunities using their employer contacts to help them gain the experience they need to match their qualifications.
- Where qualifications have been gained abroad, providers are helping people translate those to a UK setting and helping participants potentially take any exams they need to gain a UK-equivalent qualification.
- Providers sometimes encourage participants to look for remote working options to broaden their pool of potential jobs if the local labour market does not have many of the roles in their area.
- Providers can support participants to shift to self-employment if their skills and areas of strength support such a move.
- Providers are offering additional support for participants from this group with access to technology to support a complex application process.

Empowering an effective job search

Several of the interventions that have been developed focus on empowering an effective job search and developing skills, and less on employer engagement or engaging in job searching with the participant.

- CVs for this cohort may need to be developed to a different degree than for other Restart participants.
- For many of this cohort, the mechanisms of the job search and particularly how CVs are reviewed by automated systems has changed since they were last looking for work.
- Application processes for jobs may have many different elements for roles at this level and require a deeper degree of support than with other Restart participants, including online assessments, targeted cover letters and designing and giving presentations.
- Participants coming from niche sectors or highly specialised jobs may benefit from additional support to identify appropriate job areas that they can meaningfully target and understand their transferable skills.
- Social media and LinkedIn are often used to recruit for job roles appropriate to this cohort and participants benefitted from being supported to understand how to maximise the impact of their online communications in targeting employers and jobs.
- Supporting participants with mock interviews was valued by this cohort, either with members of the employment support team or with peer group members.
- Recruitment practices for job roles appropriate to this cohort may also involve designing and delivering presentations. Support in developing this skill set was also seen as adding value by participants.
- Where guest speakers have been part of differentiated programmes, this has included development of practical job search skills that can support and build on the work of the employment advisers. This has sometimes included previous participants with lived experience.

Working with employment advisers

- Differentiated programmes work well when they are offered hand in hand with the standard Restart experience, with both provider representatives having agreed goals.
- Employment advisers may need training and awareness so that they are able to understand what being out of work as an experienced and previously senior person might feel like, and to understand what the JCP experience might have done to their confidence and their sense of empowerment. This can help them connect with and build trust with participants.
- Employment adviser teams may be able to develop internal specialisms to allow them to offer members of this cohort an appropriate experience.
- A coaching approach can be helpful for employment advisers when dealing with the characteristics of this cohort.

Working with employers

- Employer engagement can play a significant role in supporting this cohort by connecting with their managed accounts in a different way, developing conversations with employers about other jobs within those organisations that might be suitable for this cohort. They may also maintain contacts with any placed participants to encourage closer working on future roles and to tap into the hidden job market.
- Whilst bringing employers and participants together has been challenging for some providers, it may be something of value to participants.

Recommendations – distilling what works

This research explores the ways in which Primes are utilising a range of approaches to support participants who are highly qualified, or have extensive experience, into sustainable employment. The research team discussed the emerging findings in a workshop with representatives of six of the eight Primes, which helped place them in the context of individual organisations as well as the wider Restart contract. The suggestions and questions raised by this group allowed us to fine-tune the final set of recommendations made in this section. These recommendations look to offer a lens through which organisations may examine its provision for this cohort and are intended as a guide in full awareness that different organisations are operating within different geographies and delivery models.

Some of the recommendations are a way of sharing good practice that is already happening in one or more of the Primes, whilst others come from suggestions uncovered through provider and participant interviews.

1. **Collect data** where possible, not just the level of education or previous employment but also participant intention, so that those who want to change gear in their working life are supported to do so, but those who want to return to their previous level are also supported to regain either a comparative role or to engage in a role that might lead to that eventual outcome. Data insights looking at speed to outcome could then be examined to fully evaluate the benefits of providing additional support.
2. Whether using a differentiated approach or not, **equip advisers** with the skills to understand the barriers faced by, and experiences of, this cohort and support them to build trust and engagement with participants. Explore a coaching approach and ensure any differentiated programmes are offered hand in hand with the employment advisers, with both provider representatives having agreed goals.
3. If differentiating support for this cohort, use **sifting questions** to identify those who might benefit from additional support in order to target this approach.
4. Understand and provide opportunities for participants to **address confidence, motivation and mindset**, to address self-belief and preconceptions and open pathways to work. Acknowledge that there may be a different skill set and experience for participants belonging to this cohort.
5. Where possible, look to **empower participants** to drive their own job search, focusing on equipping them with the skills they need to be effective.

- Equip employment advisers or specialists with an understanding of the complexity of applications processes that might be needed for some of the roles being targeted by this cohort.
 - Support participants to develop CVs that are targeted, focused and effective for applications to more senior roles.
 - Support participants to understand the role of LinkedIn and social media platforms, reverse marketing and building an individual brand as part of the job search.
 - Support participants, where necessary, with presentation design and delivery skills, as well as interview skills.
 - Consider a coaching approach.
 - Guest speakers, including those with lived experience, can deliver sessions to this cohort, which may help them think about different routes to work.
6. Ensure any **specialist provision is managed hand-in-hand with Restart employment advisers**, developing joint working practices.
 7. Establishing **peer group opportunities** can be effective for this group. Pulling a group together that can act as a forum to connect, engage with others and allow participants to practice giving presentations and giving/receiving feedback on these as well as potentially providing a network in which they can continue to support each other in building effective job search skills.
 8. Whether using a differentiated approach or not, equip advisers with the knowledge and resources to **signpost** participants to external resources and sites that might help them in exploring their sector. Develop effective signposting routes to effective resources across a range of sectors. This can include links and relationships with recruitment agencies.
 9. Look to include a **range of images** in Restart marketing that includes this cohort. A participant in a focus group suggested that in order to have confidence in Restart, the diversity of provision needs to be demonstrated in the images and marketing materials across the programme. They suggested including images in which higher-skilled and knowledge workers are identifiable to make everyone feel that the provision is for them.
 10. Explore **long-term career plans** with participants and looking to establish the stepping stones on the way to a final goal in order to broaden their options of returning to work.

11. Look to secure **work experience** for graduates lacking in the experience to match their qualifications and look at graduate placements for new graduates. Work with them to explore all potential roles that might relate to their area of study.
12. **Work with employers** to identify potential additional roles within their organisations than those they normally share that might be suitable for this cohort and to tap into the hidden job market. Keep in contact with past participants of this cohort who have moved into work who may be in a position to identify roles suitable for other participants. Work with employers to help them understand the value of qualifications that may have been achieved abroad.
13. Consider **remote working** roles or **self-employment** options for those with niche sector skills.
14. Ensure participants have **access to the technology** they need to support an effective job search and potentially complex application processes.
15. **Look ahead** at how the participant profile, and programme portfolio, is changing and consider whether a differentiated pathway is appropriate in the context of your organisation and caseload.

Just keep doing what you're doing. It's a tough thing to do, but the support that they give, the package it's in and the way it's tailored to the needs of their client is very good and I'm very thankful.

Thank you. I feel like I almost lost myself, and I'm just so grateful

A big thank you – can't thank them enough.

Participants on specialist programmes as part of Restart

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