



Evaluation of Unit Delivery Trials

Final Report

September 2011

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1 BACKGROUND

Introduction

1.1. In December 2010, the Skills Funding Agency (the Agency) commissioned ekosgen, in partnership with Education Relations, to conduct a formative evaluation of the Unit Delivery Trials, which took place during the 2010/11 academic year.

1.2. The evaluation began in December 2010 and initially covered 17 providers that participated in the trials from September 2010 onwards. In March 2011, the trials were extended to include an additional 63 providers that participated between March and July 2011. Providers from both waves of the trials were within the scope of the evaluation.

1.3. This is the final report from the evaluation. It concentrates on findings from telephone consultations and case study visits to the second wave of providers, as well as consultations with the Awarding Organisations (AOs) whose units have been delivered through the trials. It builds upon earlier interim reports from both phases of the evaluation that can be accessed online¹.

1.4. A list of the providers that joined the trials in March 2011 is provided at Appendix 1. A list of all organisations (providers and AOs) consulted during the second phase of the evaluation can be found in Appendix 2.

Evaluation Objectives

1.5. The evaluation was commissioned to explore the different approaches to unit delivery being piloted by providers involved in the trials. The specific objectives of the work have included:

- Understanding how providers are using the flexibilities of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) in a live operational environment;
- Assessing the costs and affordability of flexible delivery from a provider and learner perspective, taking account of the impact of AO registration and certification processes and charges;
- Exploring the impacts on learner motivation, credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), and co-financing;
- Examining the benefits and challenges experienced by learners, providers and AOs;
- Highlighting good or innovative practice and identifying considerations and recommendations for the future.

¹ <http://qcf.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/qcf-funding/unitdelivery/>

Background to the Unit Delivery Trials

1.6. The QCF was developed as part of a wider programme of reform with vocational qualifications being redesigned against up to date employment standards (National Occupational Standards) and against the technical specifications of a unit based and credit qualifications framework. Each unit in the QCF has a level and a credit value and can be used as a building block towards a qualification (Award, Certificate or Diploma). The levels indicate the difficulty of the unit (ranging from Entry Level 1 to Level 8), while the credit value specifies the number of credits gained by learners who complete the unit and provides an indication of how much time, on average, it should take (one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning).

1.7. Flexible delivery through units is an important aspect of the benefits realisation of the QCF. Although unit based provision has existed in the post-16 sector for some time, it has typically been on a very small scale and there are many providers that have no prior experience of unit based delivery. The first wave of the Unit Delivery Trials was introduced in 2008. It took place at a relatively early point in the QCF implementation process and focused on issues such as how unit delivery could engage harder to reach learners and barriers or inhibitors of delivery, including funding and performance measures. An evaluation of the first wave of the trials was completed in April 2010².

1.8. The Agency refreshed the Unit Delivery Trials for the 2010/11 academic year, confirming 17 organisations (mainly FE colleges) to take part and making nearly 1,000 units eligible for funding. In March 2011, a further 63 providers were added to the trials and the number of eligible units was increased to nearly 2,000.

1.9. Alongside the trials, although outside the scope of this evaluation, the Agency has also been supporting unit delivery in the Offender Learning and Skills Service and through the [Qualify with Business](#) initiative. Further support for the unemployed has also recently been announced and from August 2011, the Agency's approved providers have been able to deliver eligible units to support individuals who are unemployed and need help to enter work. Approximately 11,000 QCF units have been confirmed for funding for this cohort which significantly broadens the scope of the unit offer.

1.10. Also in August 2011 was the announcement that the trials will continue for a further year in 2011/12 with providers invited to submit Expressions of Interest (EOIs) during September 2011.

Methodology

1.11. This evaluation has taken place through two phases: Phase 1 ran from December 2010 to May 2011, and Phase 2 ran from May 2011 to August 2011. Table 1.1 summarises the main methodological components in each phase.

² A summary of the final report can be found at:
http://readingroom.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/sfa/host_uf_t_evaluation-summary_report-_april2010-final.pdf.

Table 1.1: Methodology Matrix		
Phase 1 - Activity	Dates	Details
Literature Review and Provider Baselineing	December 2010 – January 2011	Short desk review of background materials and baselining consultations with the 17 Phase 1 providers – covering trial aims, objectives, choice of units, anticipated learner numbers, employer involvement and partnership working.
Awarding Organisation Consultations	January 2011 – March 2011	Telephone consultations with 11 AOs that had units eligible for delivery through the trials, covering costing structures, registration and assessment processes, recognition of prior learning and rules of combination.
Case Study Consultations	January 2011 – April 2011	In-depth consultations with 14 providers meeting trial leads, learners, tutors and administration staff, plus employers and other partners where applicable.
Reporting	February 2011 – May 2011	Findings from each of the above strands, plus interim recommendations.
Phase 2 - Activity	Dates	Details
Provider Baselineing	May 2011	Baselining consultations with 51 of the 58 Phase 2 providers who remained as participants in the trials – similar to Phase 1, consultations (where provider contacts were available and willing to participate) covering trial aims, objectives, choice of units, anticipated learner numbers, employer involvement and partnership working.
Provider Mid-point Consultations	June 2011	Mid-point consultations with 44 of the Phase 2 providers – an update on progress and delivery to date (where provider contacts were available and willing to participate) covering number of units delivered, challenges and good practice, and future plans. The consultations also covered the reasons for any delay in starting unit delivery.
Case Study Consultations	June 2011 – August 2011	In-depth consultations with 15 providers meeting trial leads, learners, tutors and administration staff, plus employers and other partners where applicable.
Awarding Organisation Final Consultations	July 2011 – August 2011	Update telephone consultations with the 11 AOs spoken to in Phase 1.
Provider Final Consultations	August 2011	Final consultations with 29 of the Phase 2 providers (additional to the 15 case study providers and where provider contacts were available and willing to participate) – covering trial activity and delivery, number of units delivered, whether the trials met expectations, challenges and good practice, and future plans.
Reporting	June 2011 - August 2011	Interim and final reports concentrating on Phase 2 activity but also drawing upon both phases of the evaluation, plus recommendations.

Acknowledgements

1.12. Thanks are owed to everyone that has participated in the evaluation, and especially to the providers that have contributed through consultations and hosting case study visits. Members of the Agency's College and Learning Provider Services are also thanked for their help and support.

2 DELIVERY MODELS

Introduction

1.1 This chapter provides an overview of the different delivery models that have been employed during the trials. It also summarises the scale of activity that was originally planned by providers at the outset and compares this with what has occurred in practice, based on primary research.

Provider Locations

1.2 Three quarters of the 63 providers that joined the trials in March 2011 are FE colleges, while the remainder are local authority providers. The regional distribution of the providers is shown in Table 2.1.

Table: 2.1: Geographic distribution of providers involved in the trials		
	Number of providers	% of providers
West Midlands	10	16%
London	10	16%
South West	9	14%
North West	8	13%
East Midlands	8	13%
Yorkshire and Humber	7	11%
East of England	5	8%
South East	4	6%
North East	2	3%
Total	63	100%
Source: Skills Funding Agency		

Planned Activity

1.3 Each of the 63 providers submitted an EOI to the Agency outlining their delivery plans and target learner volumes for the trials. Analysis of the EOIs shows that:

- An average of 80 different units per provider were planned, with figures at provider level ranging from fewer than 10 to more than 100 planned units;
- Approximately 30 learners were expected to be enrolled per unit, ranging from fewer than 5 learners on some units to more than 500 learners on others³;
- The most common curriculum/subject areas covered by the trials were expected to be information and communications technology (ICT), employability (developing the skills, attributes and behaviours required by employers) and health and social care. Others cited to a lesser extent included retail, hospitality and childcare;

³ Units with high volumes of anticipated learners include those taken from the NOCN Skills Towards Enabling Progression and City and Guilds Employability qualifications.

- The majority of units were expected to be at level 2 or below.

1.4 More than three quarters of the providers planned to target the trials at unemployed learners. Most of the remainder planned to deliver to both employed and unemployed learners whilst a small number planned delivery for employed learners only.

Delivery in Practice

1.5 Quantitative data on delivery presented in this report has been collected through a consultation programme with providers and learners. Definitive data will not be available through the Individual Learner Record (ILR) until after the conclusion of this evaluation. The numbers contained within this section of the report should therefore be seen as indicative only.

1.6 More than three quarters of providers gave the evaluation team details of their unit delivery, highlighting in particular where delivery in practice had differed from the plans outlined in the EOIs, and why. The key points to note from the information provided are that:

- Four providers withdrew from the trials and two providers merged to form one organisation, leaving 58 who participated until the conclusion of the trials in July 2011. In relation to withdrawals, providers reported that they had insufficient Adult Learner Responsive (ALR) funding remaining⁴ and that only a limited programme of activity had been planned so delays meant it was not worth proceeding;
- Around half of all providers experienced a delay, typically between one and two months, in starting their unit delivery. The most common reasons were an underestimation of the lead-in time required following the approval of the EOIs, lower than expected volumes of referrals from Jobcentre Plus (in one case up to 85% lower than originally anticipated) and issues relating to the provider's internal restructuring or ensuring that the right members of staff could dedicate sufficient time to the trials;
- Consultations undertaken over the summer of 2011 found that four of the remaining 58 providers participating in the trials had not started delivery at that point. The most commonly cited reason was organisational change, including redundancies and internal restructuring, which was said to act as a barrier to effective planning and delivery of the trials;
- There are isolated cases where providers changed the curriculum area(s) they originally planned to focus on through the trials, either by expanding into new areas (typically ICT and health and social care) or concentrating on employability rather than sector specific units;
- The number of units being delivered (typically fewer than 15) is substantially lower than providers originally suggested through the EOIs. Providers chose to focus on a limited number of units due to delays in starting delivery and to test how the unit

⁴ It should be noted that providers had to verify that they had sufficient ALR funding as part of the initial EOIs for the Unit Delivery Trials.

delivery approach works in practice. Providers also said that they listed in their EOIs all (or a high number of) units within a selected qualification(s) although they were not certain that they would deliver them all; and

- As planned, almost all units that were being delivered were at level 2 or below of the QCF.

1.7 Providers chose to begin unit delivery in curriculum areas where they had experience of delivering short courses, where there was evidence of demand and where they were able to start delivery quickly. Departments most commonly involved in the trials are ICT, Skills for Life and Foundation Teams (for pre-employment and employability support units).

1.8 The trials have typically been delivered through a limited number of departments and in some cases a single department has been involved. Providers said that they wanted to start small and plan and implement programmes that were deliverable within the relatively short timescales available. In the main, providers did not take a whole organisation approach when starting the trials.

Learner Registration

1.9 In most cases, learners have been registered with AOs on individual units that they undertake one by one. In a limited number of instances, learners have been registered on full qualifications which are then delivered as a series of individual units. This approach has been adopted for a number of reasons including knowledge of a learner's aspiration to progress to a full qualification, and providers opting to register learners for full qualifications due to lower costs (further details of the costs of unit delivery are provided in Chapter 5).

1.10 One AO consulted during the evaluation remains unable to register learners on units due to the functionality of their IT systems. Learners have therefore been registered on a full qualification against which unit certification is claimed and fees re-credited for the element of the qualification that they have not completed. At the time of writing, a new system was being trialled to allow unit registration.

1.11 Three cases of providers delaying registrations with AOs until learners have completed one unit were identified during the evaluation. This approach allows learners to complete a form of taster session before the provider makes a financial commitment to either a unit or qualification registration.

The Unit Offer for Learners

1.12 The main source of referrals onto units throughout the second wave of the trials has been Jobcentre Plus, reflecting the high proportion of unemployed learners involved. Self-referrals or employer led referrals have understandably remained limited.

1.13 Approaches to engaging learners through the trials have been varied, including single unit enrolments and package enrolments. Although it has not been possible to confirm the numbers of learners enrolled on packages or unit by unit delivery, the proportion of providers

offering packages of units is just over half. These providers typically have higher numbers of learners.

1.14 In some cases where packages of units are offered, these units do not sit within the same rules of combination (and the credit cannot therefore be accumulated to count towards a qualification), but do support learners to progress into employment. This reflects the focus of provision on addressing employer need, including to allow learners to access guaranteed interview schemes and to offer employers the skills that they need.

Example

A large supermarket chain approached a college in the north of England via Jobcentre Plus with a request for a pre-employment training course prior to the opening of a new store. The supermarket had a clear view on the required content of training, its duration and was prepared to offer a guaranteed interview to all learners completing the course.

The course consisted of three units in interview skills, understanding the business of retail and understanding customer service in retail. The units were delivered alongside visits to supermarkets, talks from supermarket staff and practice interviews. All but one of the 24 learners completed the course, achieved the units and were subsequently employed by the supermarket. The new staff will have the opportunity to build upon this by undertaking further QCF units (which may cross a range of different qualifications) whilst employed by the firm.

1.15 The extent of learner choice in unit selection has varied as a result of unit packaging with differences in flexibility found between providers. While some providers have offered learning pathways that bring together units by theme (for example in the care sector or retail focused provision), others have allowed learners to choose units from a predetermined list, compiled by the provider based on their knowledge of local employer demand, learners' needs and, from a practical perspective, those which are feasible to deliver.

1.16 The evaluation found that over three quarters of learners enrolled on a package have limited or no unit choice following selection of their curriculum area whereas almost all learners completing single units (most typically employed learners) have flexibility in their unit choices. It is important to note, however, that this should not be seen as a negative finding, as providers have considerable experience of defining coherent and appropriate programmes of learning and are well placed to identify the most appropriate package to meet their learners' needs.

Example

An FE college has used units to offer programmes for the unemployed. These programmes consist of three units, which result in sufficient credit for the learner to achieve an Award. Each learner starts with the same core unit – focusing on self assessment. As part of the unit the learner is encouraged to select further employability units which meet their identified skills and learning needs they have identified. Currently, 75% of the learners who start with the initial self assessment units progress to an Award. Of these learners, around 50% then go on to identify further learning that they would like to undertake, including both vocational units and other short courses that the college offers.

3 EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT

Introduction

1.17 There are two main ways in which employers have been involved in the unit trials: providing workforce development and pre-recruitment training. There are also instances where employers, not directly involved in the trials, have informed providers' choice of pre-employment units to be delivered to meet local skills needs.

1.18 Around two fifths of the providers consulted have reported some form of employer involvement in the second phase of the trials. This has increased compared with activity in the first phase, despite the focus on provision for unemployed learners. This chapter discusses the ways in which employers have been involved in the trials and providers' views on the potential to increase that involvement.

Workforce Development

1.19 Amongst those providers consulted who joined the trials in March 2011, around a fifth have delivered units to learners in employment. Providers reported that employers' key motivations for undertaking workforce development through units, rather than full qualifications, were the opportunity to choose units that meet specific skills needs and the immediacy with which those units can be undertaken⁵.

1.20 Other points to note are that:

- The units most commonly delivered were in the ICT and health and social care curriculum areas;
- Providers have most frequently worked with a single employer. In some cases this is a large public sector employer, including a local authority and the National Health Service; and
- Employers have generally used units to train a relatively small number of staff. However, there are exceptions, including 100 employees being trained from a private sector employer and 50 NHS employees in the East of England. In both cases learners have undertaken units in health and social care.

1.21 Where providers are working directly with employers to provide training to employees there is evidence of co-financing, for example training for the 100 employees mentioned above was part funded, as were units delivered by one provider in health and social care to 12 learners and another in ICT for 2 learners. However, this only applies to a fifth of providers and is on a small scale (in terms of the number of learners and employers involved), in comparison to other forms of activity being undertaken as part of the trials.

⁵ At the time of case study visits, no employers involved with workforce development were available to be consulted as part of the evaluation.

Pre-Employment Activity

1.22 There are a small number of instances (five providers) where training for unemployed learners delivered through the trials has involved an interview or job offer on completion of a unit (or package of units). This approach has allowed providers to equip learners with the appropriate vocational skills that meet employers' immediate needs and helps to address skills gaps in the local labour market. Consultation with providers offering this type of learning through the trials has identified that:

- A number of large employers have been involved in the trials, including four high street retailers and one well known travel agent;
- In most cases the provider is working with one employer, although one provider is working with five, including three large retailers;
- Providers have worked with the employers involved to choose the units that best meet their needs. However, the units do not always fit within the same QCF rules of combination (and therefore the credit cannot be accumulated towards the same qualification); and
- Providers have most commonly delivered (in descending order) units in retail, health and social care, ICT and cleaning services. These have typically been packaged with employability skills such as CV writing or interview skills (this model is discussed in Chapter 2);
- Providers have fostered closer, more formal partnerships with Jobcentre Plus, who have arranged the interviews and/or job offers. Effective communication with Jobcentre Plus has helped to ensure that providers have accurate, up to date information about local vacancies, which enables them to respond to employers' immediate skills needs.

1.23 There is evidence of learners that have completed pre-recruitment training subsequently securing employment. One provider also reported that a greater proportion of learners have progressed into employment through the trials compared with previous employability initiatives.

Example

At two of the trial sites, unit delivery has enabled the providers to respond quickly to employers' needs. Short, pre-recruitment training packages, using QCF units and agreed with the employer, provide potential recruits with the specific, accredited skills that are required to match available vacancies. Employers interview those who successfully complete the units. A second advantage of this approach is that the credit learners have gained allows the providers the opportunity to build on the employer relationship and help learners on a journey towards a full qualification. The employers involved have already expressed interest in building on the activity through the trials and offering additional units to those learners that secure a job to build to a full qualification.

1.24 Although quite rare (reported by five providers) there are examples where employers have informed providers of local skills gaps and, although not directly involved in training or recruiting staff, have influenced providers' decisions over which units to deliver to best meet these needs. For one provider, this has been through an existing health and social care forum involving approximately 30 employers, the local authority, Jobcentre Plus and representatives of the third sector. There are also instances where providers have worked with Jobcentre Plus to establish which units best meet local employer needs.

Increasing Employer Involvement

1.25 Although relatively few employers have been involved in the trials, the majority of providers are enthusiastic about the potential to increase the scale of employer involvement in unit delivery. The motivations noted above by providers that have already delivered units for workforce development (responsiveness and immediacy) are also seen by the vast majority of those involved in the trials as key drivers for increasing employer involvement in the future. Providers also note that the flexibility of unit delivery allows for short blocks of learning which cause less disruption for employers in terms of taking staff out of the workplace (a particular issue for SMEs).

1.26 The evaluation has not found any significant drawbacks for employers of the unit delivery model.

“Employers are really keen on unit delivery. They really like the idea that staff development doesn't cost lots and learners won't have to spend large amounts of time at college.” - Provider

1.27 At the time that the final provider consultations were undertaken for the evaluation, uncertainties over further extension of the trials for employed learners in 2011/12 had prevented some providers from proactively targeting or marketing units to employers. Providers feel that raising employer awareness of their unit offer and the flexibilities of unit funded provision is the key way to stimulate employer demand for accredited skills within their workforce. Subsequent confirmation that the Unit Delivery Trials will continue into 2011/12 will enable providers to progress with such activities.

4 LEARNER VIEWS ON FLEXIBLE DELIVERY

Introduction

1.28 This chapter reports on learners' motivations for participating in unit delivery, their understanding of what it means for their future learning options, and their views on the benefits and drawbacks of this way of learning.

1.29 Findings in this chapter are based on consultations with 46 learners based in 13 different providers. There were two main types of learners within the initial scope of the trials - those who are unemployed and actively seeking work and those who are employed. The former is particularly prevalent in our sample. As this does not cover the full cohort of providers involved in the trials, the findings should be treated as indicative only.

Motivations

1.30 During the trials, learners have primarily been attracted to unit delivery by the outcomes they foresaw, such as employment, new or improved skills or increased responsibility at work. Whilst these motivations are not explicitly linked to the concept of learning through units, learners have evidently been enthused by the opportunity to learn in short blocks, leading many to report that they would not have participated had longer, full qualifications been their only option.

1.31 Analysis of the research findings shows that the reasons why learners have undertaken units vary according to whether or not they are employed:

- **Jobseekers** have primarily wanted to improve their employability skills or relevant vocational skills, and ultimately find work. There is a broad range of learners in the jobseeker category, including those who had recently completed full qualifications, those recently made redundant and the long term unemployed. ;
- **Employed learners** are mainly interested in training to meet mandatory job requirements, or which give them additional skills in the workplace⁶, skills to progress in work or respond to the risk of redundancy. In most cases, employers have taken the lead in putting learners forward. There were also instances of learners interested in skills to support a career change.

"I've not worked for 15 years while I've been bringing up a family and now I want to get some new skills and regain my confidence." - Learner

"I've been made redundant so I'm looking to try a new career." - Learner

Awareness

1.32 The majority of learners consulted for the evaluation have at least some understanding that they are learning through units rather than completing a qualification. The

⁶ e.g. Units in caring for people with dementia for those working in the care sector

evidence suggests increasing knowledge of this amongst learners in later stages of the evaluation, with more providers stating that they explained unit delivery to learners via IAG.

1.33 Awareness levels are fairly similar between the different learner groups although the nature of their understanding varies. Employed learners are more likely to be made aware of the flexibility to select units to match their skills needs. Unemployed learners have more often been made aware of the flexibility to undertake units over a timescale that is convenient for them. An exception to this exists at a number of providers where jobseekers are referred to packages of learning (consisting of units packaged together by the provider and, in some cases, recruiting employers) and tend not to have the same understanding of the flexibilities of unit provision as learners in the other categories.

1.34 Over half of the consulted learners were aware that they can build upon the learning they have completed through the trials and potentially achieve qualifications (where appropriate for them). Where learners were not aware, this was typically due to providers explaining credit accumulation once learners had completed a unit rather than during initial IAG.

1.35 Employed learners are more likely to be aware of and understand credit accumulation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that providers typically view these learners as more likely to take the decision to enrol on further units and are more inclined to offer in-depth IAG explaining credit accumulation at the outset. In contrast, the main IAG focus for jobseekers is on securing employment rather than continued learning, and providers / job advisors have initially been recommending packages of units to learners rather than explaining credit accumulation.

Benefits

1.36 Learners are positive about learning through units and have not reported any significant drawbacks. A small number of learners reported that their certificates have taken longer than they expected to arrive, whilst others were concerned that they had not received formal acknowledgement for the qualifications they had achieved through credit accumulation, but in both cases these were seen to be minor problems.

1.37 Far more common, learners identified benefits of unit delivery, the most prevalent of which are summarised below:

- **Flexibility:** learners have been enthused by being able to undertake short units, which can be completed quickly, and which do not have a single start point in the academic year. They have also welcomed the opportunity to take breaks in between learning but not lose the credit they have gained; **Overcoming barriers to participation:** units can be a more suitable option for learners who are unable to commit to or afford longer programmes of learning. This includes those who may have been away from formal learning for some time or who have experienced breaks in their learning. Benefits relating to affordability apply in particular to learners paying for or contributing towards their learning themselves;

- **Interest and motivation:** the ability to undertake learning which meets learners' immediate skills needs has been a key motivating factor for participation. Regular recognition of achievement was also cited by some learners as being encouraging, although this is dependent upon them receiving their certification relatively promptly.
- *“Being able to pick the first few units was really important to me; I could see the learning was relevant. It was what I wanted to do. Now I’m doing the Diploma and I’ve been able to use almost all the units I have gained.” - Learner*

Outcomes

1.38 The vast majority of learners consulted for the evaluation identified positive outcomes from unit delivery, including:

- Improved work-related skills and greater responsibility at work;
- Improved employability skills, job prospects, and in some cases subsequent employment;
- Increased motivation and a sense of personal achievement.

“I was looking for a job for a long time but rarely even got an interview. As a single parent, childcare is obviously an issue but I now work flexible hours to fit in with my family commitments. If I hadn’t done the course before going for an interview I doubt I would have got the job. I was able to build up my skills and confidence which was a big issue before.” – Learner

Future Plans

1.39 At the time of the consultations, progression to full qualifications was limited and relatively few learners had plans in place to enrol on additional units (not unexpected given the timing of the evaluation). However, the research found numerous examples of learners intending to carry on learning at some point in the future, for the following reasons⁷:

- **Widening knowledge:** approximately a third of the learners intended to enrol on further units related to those they have undertaken through the trials, e.g. a unit in word-processing having completed one in spreadsheets;
- **Deepening knowledge:** approximately half of the learners said that they intended to enrol on higher level units in the same area as those completed through the trials;
- **Progressing to full qualifications:** a mix of the two types above. Approximately one in four of the learners intended to enrol on further units at some point in the future, motivated by the prospect of a full qualification.

⁷ These reasons are not mutually exclusive and learners may therefore appear in more than one category.

“I am considering self-employment and would favour, ideally, being able to mix and match blocks to include a graphics package, website construction / maintenance and simple accounting.” – Learner

“You would normally have to go [on training] for a year to get a proper award.” - Learner

1.40 Where progression to further learning is not yet taking place, this is commonly because learners have only completed one or two units and have not yet decided how to take forward their learning.

5 OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

1.41 The findings in this chapter present an overview of the main operational implications of unit delivery, for providers and AOs, as raised through the primary research. The findings presented here generally convey a majority view and it should be noted that the extent to which each provider's operations and systems have been affected varies considerably, with some much more significantly affected than others.

Administration

1.42 The most frequently cited operational implication of unit delivery is increased administration, generated by unit registration and learner tracking. Most providers reported having to commit more time per learner to data entry, resulting in some cases (albeit relatively few) of staff being redeployed from elsewhere in the college and/or administrative staff being given additional training to reduce data input errors in registration.

"Units do take more time to administer. You have to do the same registration and certification etc for a unit as you would for a whole qualification." – Provider

1.43 The majority of providers report that the increase has been as expected and is manageable. The general consensus is that the benefits of unit delivery (including increased enrolments, improved retention and progression and the ability to respond quickly to employer and learner needs) outweigh any issues associated with administration, although it is also noted that the additional workload will grow as unit delivery expands.

1.44 Other administrative implications reported to a lesser extent include complications in timetabling and the need to make modifications (generally quite small) to providers' systems and processes to accommodate unit registration.

Assessment, Verification and Certification

1.45 For the majority of providers, unit delivery has not had significant implications for assessment, verification and certification processes, nor is it expected to in the future. However, a small number (fewer than one in five of those consulted) identified specific issues:

- **Frequency:** For some providers the more frequent assessment, verification and certification associated with unit delivery has caused time and cost issues for exams officers and tutors. The providers expect this issue to become more prominent if unit delivery expands, especially as they foresee assessment becoming a more frequent or ongoing task;
- **Internal verification:** There are examples emerging of providers assigning internal verifiers to work specifically on units as the required evidence can vary across AOs. There is also some concern over the cost implication of having more frequent external verification although this was raised by only a very small number of providers;

- **Prompt certification:** Timely recognition of achievement is important for effective unit delivery. This has not been an issue for the majority of providers, although in a small number of cases, and at a relatively early point in the trials, certification has been delayed. In one case it was linked to the provider putting in claims for certificates in batches to reduce their administrative workload, while in another it was due to delays at the AO which resulted in learners leaving the provider without their certificates. In both cases these issues have since been overcome.

1.46 To date, the assessment and verification of units has not caused any issues for AOs, mainly by virtue of the relatively small scale of delivery compared with that of full qualifications. Looking to the future, an as yet unspecified increase in AOs' workloads is expected which will be driven largely by the demand for units. In one instance, the trials have coincided with the AO introducing e-assessments for certain units and qualifications, which is expected to counteract some of the additional work generated by an increase in unit delivery.

Information, Advice and Guidance

1.47 Providers report that the main components of learner information, advice and guidance (IAG) have not changed following the introduction of unit delivery, although as would be expected, the opportunity to undertake units and how they differ from full qualifications is now explained. Other refinements to IAG processes, each cited by a relatively small number of providers, include:

- Introducing IAG sessions at the end of each unit to discuss further learning and employment opportunities;
- Deciding after the initial IAG session whether it would be more suitable to register the learner on a unit(s) or a full qualification;
- Explaining their unit offer in IAG sessions to learners who have recently completed full qualifications.

1.48 Most providers acknowledge that their IAG will need to change in the future if unit delivery becomes more commonplace. Specifically, the following issues were highlighted, both of which link closely to CAT (see Chapter 6):

- **Complexity:** IAG is expected to become more complex as the number of units undertaken expands and the opportunities and demand for learners to transfer credit between qualifications, AOs and providers increases;
- **Timing:** more providers are planning to deliver IAG upon completion of units to ensure that learners receive timely support regarding their options for accumulating further credit.

1.49 One provider reported having appointed a new IAG coordinator, a significant part of whose role focuses on the unit offer and ensuring that IAG staff are able to provide accurate and timely advice to learners on how credit can be accumulated.

Staff Training

1.50 Around half of the providers consulted for the evaluation have trained staff, including management, administration teams, tutors and IAG staff, as a direct result of the trials. With one exception, where assessment training has been delivered by an AO, all of the training has been delivered in-house and has covered a range of topics including:

- The principles of unit delivery (and the QCF more generally), including CAT;
- Accurately entering details of learners undertaking units onto enrolment and tracking systems;
- Subject specific training for staff not familiar with the content of new units;
- Internal assessment requirements to ensure learner portfolios include all necessary evidence.

1.51 Around a third of providers expect staff training to carry an additional financial cost if unit delivery increases in scale.

Awareness and Contacts with AOs

1.52 The majority of providers know who to contact within their AOs for information / queries on units and have not encountered any problems in doing so. In most cases the providers reported having good links with the AOs before the trials so discussions on units were seen as an extension of existing relationships rather than something new.

“We are very clear on who to contact within [the AO] and have had lots of communication because we were one of the first centres to get clearance from [the AO] to deliver all ITQ units.” - Provider

1.53 However, a minority of providers either feel uninformed about who to contact within AOs about units, or report a perceived lack of communication and easily identifiable advice on unit delivery and accreditation. This has, however, improved in the later stages of the trial.

1.54 The priority attached to unit delivery has markedly increased amongst some AOs over the second half of the trials, whilst others expect it to increase as the scale of delivery increases next year. This includes some of the largest AOs and those that reported that unit delivery had a low priority within the organisation when first consulted as part of the evaluation in February 2011. Following the publication of the confirmed list of units to be used when delivering to those on active benefits from 2011/12 onwards, and confirmation of the continuation of the trials, AOs reported that they foresee a high demand for units and consequent market shift, which will change internal business priorities.

1.55 The Agency has been encouraging AOs to raise awareness amongst providers in 2011/12 regarding their unit offer. In some cases, AOs have started to take this forward by contacting providers involved in the trials to discuss their units approved for delivery in 2011/12.

AO Charges

1.56 Where learners achieve a full qualification through credit accumulation and unit delivery, paying for units individually has proven less cost effective for the majority of providers compared with paying for a qualification. For example, one AO noted charge £24.50 per Certificate (5/6 units) or £12.50 for one unit. In another case, a provider reported that it costs £26 to register a learner for a single unit, and if the learner went on to complete two or more further units, the cost would exceed that of registering the learner for the full qualification (£60).

1.57 The above had several implications. In extreme cases, it caused providers to delay all of their delivery through the trials, although the following have been more common:

- **Registering on full qualifications:** although not evident on a significant scale, there have been examples of providers assessing, at the initial IAG stage, whether learners have the potential to complete full qualifications and, if they do, registering them with the AO on that qualification rather than on units to save costs⁸;
- **Switching AOs:** there have been occasions where providers' frustrations over AO charges have caused them to change to new AOs during the trials;
- **Cheaper or longer units:** several providers have reported that they are unable to deliver units with low credit values (such as those with ten or fewer guided learning hours assigned) due to cost inefficiencies and/or they have deliberately focused on units with relatively low registration fees. Although not the case amongst the majority of providers, a small number identified that the most cost effective units are those that they can deliver regularly and in relatively high volume, and they will therefore look to prioritise those in the future.

Negotiation

1.58 The experience of negotiating with AOs on unit costs and the success (in the opinion of the provider) of doing so can differ significantly from provider to provider, even with the same AO. A small number of providers have been successful in negotiating lower unit prices based on scale of delivery. For example, one provider had been able to agree a reduced rate per unit with an AO on the proviso that they would spend a certain amount.

1.59 In the later part of the trials, AOs have appeared more willing to negotiate on unit costs with providers (although some have engaged in negotiations since the outset). AOs recognise they will negotiate on cost with those providers delivering units to unemployed learners in 2011/12. Similarly, it is expected that the expansion of unit delivery will stimulate providers to become more active negotiators.

⁸ The providers have taken the view that there are learner benefits because the registration fee (if paid by the learner) is lower for the whole qualification than for multiple registrations for individual units. The funding claim to the Agency is based on QCF units and not the whole qualification. This practice appears to be a method of saving learners a small amount of money in AO registration fees. However, it is important to note that not all providers charge an AO registration fee.

1.60 While providers are able to identify differences in costs between units and full qualifications⁹, there is a sense of frustration amongst some at not having had the rationale for the differences between the costs of registering on units and on full qualifications explained to them by AOs. That is not to suggest that providers expect to be given commercially sensitive information, but there is currently a sense amongst some that the differences appear somewhat arbitrary.

Quantifying Cost Impacts

1.61 The financial implications of unit delivery for providers are still to be fully tested. Providers have yet to quantify the anticipated increased costs (administration, learner tracking, AO fees etc) and the vast majority have absorbed additional expense within existing resources. In many cases the impact on affordability will become more apparent in the future as the scale of delivery increases. However, no provider has stated that the increases caused them to withdraw from delivery or affected their willingness to continue in 2011/12.

1.62 The trials have had a limited cost implication for AOs to date, with the majority of costs are expected to accrue in the future. For example, one AO identified a cost associated with business development to raise awareness of their unit offer, provider support and possible IT system updates.

⁹ The costs for many units and qualifications are now also available through the Regulatory IT System (RITs).

6 CREDIT ACCUMULATION AND TRANSFER

Introduction

1.63 This chapter summarises how credit accumulation and transfer is being explained to learners and is taking place in practice. For the purpose of the evaluation (and using the Ofqual definition as set out in the regulatory arrangements for the QCF), CAT can be described as follows:

“ Credit Accumulation is the process of putting together a combination of credits to meet the achievement requirements of a qualification. Credit Transfer is the process of using a credit or credits awarded in the context of one qualification towards the achievement requirements of another qualification¹⁰. ”

1.64 CAT forms the basis of the unit- and credit-based QCF. For many providers consulted as part of this evaluation, the Unit Delivery Trials have been their first experience of applying the principles of CAT.

Provider Understanding and Support for CAT

1.65 Providers are confident that the majority of staff with direct involvement in the trials have a good appreciation of credit accumulation and can clearly explain what it means and how it can occur. The knowledge of staff not directly involved in the trials is less advanced, as may be expected.

1.66 Understanding of the demand for credit transfer and how it could operate in practice remains limited amongst both those directly involved in the trials and wider staff teams. The majority of providers consulted said they were not aware of the extent to which credit can be transferred between the qualifications of different AOs. They recognise that awareness raising and/or training exercises will be required regarding CAT as a whole and transfer in particular as new curriculum areas begin unit delivery and learners accumulate credit over time. It is important to note that it was always expected that demand for credit transfer would develop slowly and that the scale and pace of activity will be heavily influenced by how AOs choose to operate.

1.67 Provider support for credit accumulation has been strong across each stage of the evaluation while most providers still appear to be reserving judgement on their support for credit transfer. They have welcomed the opportunity for learners to accumulate credit over time and to have the ability to return to learning to build on credits at a time that suits them, whether immediately following completion of a unit or at a later point in time. The one challenge that providers foresee is in effectively tracking learner achievements and participation (see Chapter 7 for further details).

¹⁰ http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/Regulatory_arrangements_QCF_August08.pdf

Demand for Credit

1.68 There is evidence that learners are enthused and motivated by being able to learn through units. There is clear demand for bite sized delivery and learners welcome the accreditation of their learning offered by units and the award of credit. This interest and motivation indicates a demand for learning through units and suggests that learners welcome the credit that is gained as a result.

“Learners want the accreditation quickly rather than doing a full qualification. They know they can come back and complete the qualification later.” – Provider

“Most of our learners are focussed on gaining employment. They can see how the units will help them to do this in the short term and they value the way units can build-up into qualifications.” – Provider

“Being able to do one unit is great. You can pick what you want to specialise in, then decide if you want to do something else later. Being able to take breaks in between learning also takes the pressure off.” – Learner

1.69 Evidence of the extent of learner demand to accumulate credit is however limited. Learners know that they have completed a unit, many realise that credit is attached to it, and over half realise that they can build upon the credit they have been awarded in the future. Demand to accumulate credit links back to learner motivations (considered in Chapter 4). For example, for unemployed learners there is evidence that the primary motivation to complete units is to gain the skills and knowledge they need to find work rather than to progress into further learning, either immediately or in the future.

Explaining CAT to Learners

1.70 Learners are most commonly introduced to the principles of CAT at the initial assessment and IAG stage. The extent to which CAT is explained to learners varies between providers. A small number of providers choose not to explain CAT at the point of registration because it may *“put learners off”*, particularly when learners go to a provider intending to complete only a single unit. This group typically includes learners that have not participated in formal learning for a long time and may be disengaged by a focus on formalities at the start of their course. When CAT is explained at the registration stage, emphasis is placed on credit accumulation. While many learners are advised how they can build up credit to achieve full qualifications, very few are made aware of the opportunities available to transfer credit to other providers or AOs.

1.71 CAT has been limited to date but as unit delivery grows the importance of learner and provider staff understanding will increase. In the future it will be important that providers can give learners a thorough yet simple explanation of future learning routes setting out options which meet the rules of combination, as well as an understanding of transfer, for example in cases where learners move between providers (or AOs).

Emerging Evidence of CAT

1.72 There is evidence of learners completing more than one unit and therefore beginning to accumulate credit across the majority of providers consulted for the evaluation (where delivery has started). The packaging of units (explained earlier in this report) has supported learners to progress towards a qualification (usually an Award) where these fall within the same rules of combination. Where learners have enrolled on individual units, there is little evidence of progression to full qualifications so far given the short time that has passed. Evidence of CAT is expected to build gradually over time as learners on the current phase of the trials complete units and accumulate credit enabling them to secure full qualifications.

Example

Many learners originally went to a college in the north of England to develop their internet or email skills. Once enrolled, they found out about wider learning opportunities and over 100 learners have now progressed from completing one initial unit to completing the full level 2 ITQ, building on the credit secured through their first unit.

1.73 A small number of cases have been found where learners do not intend to continue learning in the short term but have plans to return and work towards full qualifications at a later date. Pre-recruitment learners, for example, have secured employment with a major retailer as a result of completing a package of units and are expected to return to learning to build more credit through vocational units once in the workplace.

1.74 Provider and learner consultations found no evidence of credit transfer taking place through the trials. Credit transfer is expected to be a longer term outcome and will become more common as the unit offer is rolled out across providers, AOs and curriculum areas. One AO did however note that credit transfer requests have started to be processed in small numbers (and outside of the PLR).

7 BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Introduction

1.75 This chapter of the report reflects on the benefits and challenges reported by learners, employers, providers, AOs and partners (including Jobcentre Plus) who have been involved in the current phase of the Unit Delivery Trials.

Benefits

1.76 A broad range of benefits of unit delivery have been identified. These can be grouped into three categories, each of which is described in more detail below:

- Responsive and relevant provision;
- Supporting recruitment, retention and progression;
- Learner confidence and motivation.

Responsive and Relevant Provision

1.77 Evidence from the trials suggests that the flexibilities provided through unit delivery have helped to increase the responsiveness and relevance of the learning that providers have been able to offer, within the curriculum areas covered. Allowing learners to undertake individual units, rather than requiring them to register for a qualification, means learners (or their employers) are able to identify the units which meet their specific skills needs, with learning provision tailored to the individual. To date, employer involvement has been reasonably limited, although those employers that have been involved in the identification of units are said by the providers involved to be very pleased with the results.

1.78 Flexible delivery enables providers to respond promptly to identified learning needs by delivering relevant units, rather than learners having to wait for a course with a fixed start date to commence. More regular start points throughout the year and a rolling approach to registration means there is less of a time lag between learners declaring an interest and starting to learn. This helps to reduce incidences of learners losing interest.

1.79 Whilst meeting learners' and/or employers' immediate needs is an important benefit of unit delivery, and has been the main focus of trial activity from March 2011 onwards, the approach can also contribute to learners' longer-term development. By providing credit which can be built on at a later date, it provides the foundations for learners to achieve a qualification in the future, whether or not that is their intention at the time the individual units are completed.

1.80 Unit delivery potentially allows for better alignment of learning provision with labour market needs. Providers can work with employers and partners such as Jobcentre Plus to develop tailored short courses based on local skills needs (something which feedback obtained through the evaluation suggests is more difficult to achieve by delivering qualifications). Through unit delivery, the skills, knowledge and understanding gained in a

pre-employment context can be recognised and credit awarded as part of a nationally regulated system, providing a foundation for further learning once the individual has entered employment.

Supporting Recruitment, Retention and Progression

1.81 There is evidence from the trials that unit delivery has encouraged learner recruitment, retention and progression, and many providers anticipate that this will be one of the most important benefits of the unit approach in the future.

1.82 In terms of recruitment, smaller blocks of learning allow learners to try out learning without long-term commitment. Whilst taster courses have been available for many years, through the Unit Delivery Trials these small blocks of learning are accredited, and the credit gained can be built on if they decide to continue in learning.

“Learners come in and want to learn about email. Once they get started they talk to other learners who are doing the full ITQ qualification and they usually want to do the same. Our tutors also promote the benefits of the full qualification for getting a job.” - Provider

1.83 Delivering through units also enables learners to try provision at a higher level without having to sign up for a qualification. This flexibility has helped to support faster learner progression through the levels, rather than them having to complete a qualification at one level before progressing to learning at a higher level.

1.84 Unit delivery helps to encourage recruitment by making learning more affordable for those who are self-financing, with learners only paying for the units they specifically want to study, and paying unit by unit rather than up-front as a lump sum. For the same reasons, unit delivery also has the potential to be more affordable for employers, with no requirement for them to pay to enrol staff on a qualification including learning which is not relevant to their needs.

1.85 Learners consulted for the evaluation welcomed the flexibility of completing learning in “*small chunks*”. For many, learning through units is more easily combined with work and family life than committing to a qualification, and therefore learners reported that they were more likely to sign up for units, and more likely to complete those they had started, than would be the case for a full qualification.

“Our employed learners appreciate the fact that they can complete one unit at a time - it works for them.” - Provider

Learner Confidence and Motivation

1.86 A commonly cited benefit of unit delivery, identified by learners, providers and AOs, is the contribution the approach can make to building learner confidence and motivation. Many learners obtain a sense of achievement from the regular assessment and verification associated with the completion of relatively small units of learning, which provides them with evidence of the progress they are making.

“Learners undertaking full Level 2 courses, usually over a 12 month period, where their learning isn’t accredited until the end of the course, don’t tend to get these same ongoing boosts in motivation and confidence which may have negative impacts. As a consequence we now feel that it would be beneficial to deliver all our QCF qualifications in a unitised way.” – Provider

1.87 A small number of providers highlighted the danger of this advantage being undermined if assessment and verification does not happen in a timely manner – with a risk of some learners no longer being in contact with their learning provider by the time their work is assessed and therefore not experiencing the motivation that comes from having their achievement formally recognised. This issue is alleviated when providers have been approved by AOs to verify the work of their own learners.

1.88 Building confidence and motivation is particularly important for learners with low prior attainment or who have not participated in learning for some time. Prompt assessment and verification of unit achievement can play an important role in encouraging these learners to continue in learning.

Challenges

1.89 Alongside the benefits outlined above, a number of challenges have also been identified by those participating in the trials. The most significant are summarised below.

Keeping track of learner achievement

1.90 Feedback from providers obtained during the evaluation suggests that keeping track of learner progress is more difficult when learning is being delivered through units than through qualifications. There are two different, but closely related, challenges:

- Understanding learners’ previous learning;
- Recording and tracking their achievements and the associated credit they are accumulating.

1.91 It is important that providers have an accurate understanding of learners’ prior achievements. It can be difficult for some learners to keep track of this (especially if it has involved several different providers), but in the absence of this information, it is difficult for providers to offer appropriate IAG and be confident that learners are selecting, or being directed towards, appropriate units. This issue would be addressed by more comprehensive use of the Personal Learning Record (PLR), including its regular updating by all AOs, (alongside the existing policy on Recognition of Prior Learning).

1.92 In addition, delivering through units requires a greater emphasis by providers on maintaining an up to date record of what units learners are completing and the credit this will secure. An awareness of what units a learner is undertaking and how these can support progression – for example, what gaps can be filled, what additional units are required to achieve target qualifications, how credit from existing and current units can be accumulated to achieve a qualification – will become more important and more challenging as the number of

learners using this method of delivery and the number of units offered by each provider increases.

1.93 To address the second issue, a small number of providers participating in the trials have developed in-house tracking systems. However, they were often described as resource intensive and unsuitable for tracking large numbers of learners. Providers will need to invest in their internal systems to ensure they are able to track the progress of a larger number of learners following the unit delivery route in future. However, the providers consulted for the evaluation were in the main unwilling to make any such commitments until they had a greater degree of certainty about the future scale and timing for the roll-out of unit delivery.

Uncertainty and the implications of the short-term nature of the Unit Delivery Trials

1.94 The fixed-term nature of the Unit Delivery Trials has had a number of implications for the way in which they have been implemented and the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

1.95 Around two fifths of the providers consulted had built in some form of employer engagement. In many cases, providers have focussed trial activity on provision for the unemployed, reflecting an ongoing need for support for the unemployed following the end of Programmes for the Unemployed funding. However in other cases, providers reported that the timescales over which the trials have run have constrained their ability to work directly with employers.

1.96 The ability to offer employers learning through individual, accredited units is distinctly different from doing so through full qualifications or non-accredited provision. Providers highlighted the time which is required to build employer understanding of the new approach and how it could benefit them. Some providers were wary of publicising a unit based offer and raising employer expectations without some certainty over the future of unit delivery beyond July 2011.

1.97 Similarly, although the Agency has not been in a position to clarify the future of the Unit Delivery Trials until relatively recently, it has nonetheless been difficult for some providers to offer clarity to learners on the potential for and benefits of CAT. There has been no guarantee that learners will still be able to access units at their current provider post July 2011 (although many of the providers consulted during the evaluation had assumed that they would be able to continue to offer units), and no knowledge of the potential scale of unit delivery from 2011/12 onwards until very recently.

1.98 Although a number of providers involved in the trials stated that they plan to roll out the approach to other departments during the next academic year, uncertainty (until recently) over the future of the trials and unit delivery in general has meant providers have not felt able to plan their unit offer for 2011/12. Providers have been unwilling to commit time to developing plans, selecting units to offer and marketing unit delivery to employers in advance of their continued participation in the trials being confirmed.

Ensuring cost effective delivery

1.99 One of the key learning points identified by providers is a greater awareness of how unit delivery can be made cost effective. The cost to the provider per credit gained tends to be higher through units than full qualifications, as a result of AO registration costs and internal administrative obligations. Depending on the delivery model adopted, the number of learners per unit may be small and the margin between costs and income very tight. There is evidence of providers planning to undertake more detailed work on the financial aspects of unit delivery as they look to expand their offer in 2011/12.

1.100 Although cost has not been the key factor determining how providers have chosen to deliver through the trials, it is apparent that certain delivery models are more cost effective than others. One provider highlighted the use of short courses delivering concentrated blocks of learning, rather than ones which deliver a small number of hours per week for several weeks. Other approaches to delivery include learners 'dropping in' at centres rather than attending fixed classes, and learners on different units working alongside each other rather than dedicated sessions. Finally, some have delivered pre-determined packages of units rather than providing learners with the option to select the units of their choice.

Balancing employer / labour market needs with long-term benefits for learners

1.101 As noted previously, a number of providers have adopted a model of delivery in which they have constructed 'short courses', bundling together a set of units in response to employer needs or recognised skills shortages in the local labour market. These courses have been targeted at the unemployed and a number have been constructed in partnership with Jobcentre Plus. However, in a small number of cases, the short courses bundle together units which have been requested by employers but do not necessarily sit within the same rules of combination. The credit gained therefore cannot be accumulated towards a qualification – although it could be transferred or built on at a later date.

Moving from a self-contained trial to a cross-college offer

1.102 As noted above, providers have chosen to target specific curriculum areas for the trials, focusing on those where they were confident of seeing demand for units or where the approach mirrored existing ways of working. Providers noted that the unit delivery model is untested across their whole organisation and some felt that there may be increased delivery challenges if unit delivery is rolled out to a larger number of curriculum areas.

1.103 In addition, extending unit delivery to a cross-college offer will require providers to engage and inform a wider group of staff and disseminate knowledge of CAT and the increased need for IAG to a larger group of people, with potential resource implications. Some providers participating in the trials have identified increased demands on IAG staff, which are likely to increase further as the number of units available through unit delivery increases. As noted above, this will also have implications for providers in terms of tracking learner progress and achievements.

Summary

1.104 Delivering through the trials has provided a number of lessons for all involved, including learners, providers and the Agency. Whilst there have been challenges (as would be expected through a trial), providers remain keen on the unit delivery model and almost all feel that the benefits of this approach outweigh the challenges encountered.

8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

1.105 The opportunity to deliver accredited learning through units has been very well received by the providers involved in the trials and there is a strong appetite to continue delivering in this way. The trials have been an extremely useful introduction to the benefits and challenges of delivering through units and have identified a series of potentially important issues to be considered as the model is rolled out.

1.106 After a relatively slow start, the volume of delivery taking place through the trials increased considerably towards the end of the 2010/11 academic year. The units delivered, particularly by the providers who joined the trials in March 2011, have in the main been selected to align with local economic or employer need, with the majority of learners participating to get a job or to improve their skills within their current role.

1.107 Almost all providers agree that the benefits of unit delivery have (and will continue to) outweigh the challenges, which provides an excellent foundation for expanding the approach which has been piloted through the trials. .

The Operation of the Trials

1.108 Unit delivery through the trials ran for only a short period of time – five months for the providers who joined the trials in March 2011. This has implications for the level of CAT reported. Many learners may take significantly longer than the trial period to accumulate sufficient credit to gain a qualification, with the flexibility over timescales one of the key benefits identified by learners of learning through units.

1.109 Understandably, providers have chosen to deliver within a limited number of curriculum areas through the trials, selecting those areas where they expected that they would be able to begin delivering units relatively quickly – typically ICT, health and social care and employability. The vast majority of what has been delivered is at Level 2 and below. Whilst the evaluation provides evidence of the benefits and challenges of unit delivery in these areas, it should be noted that the approach remains largely untested in other curriculum areas and at higher levels.

1.110 In order to keep unit delivery manageable within the timescales available for the trials, most providers have delivered fewer units than originally intended. A more extensive roll-out of unit delivery may mean that the some of the operational issues identified through the evaluation will apply on a larger scale and will require more internal change within providers. They remain in the early stages of thinking in detail about the specific scale of changes that a roll-out would require.

1.111 The evaluation clearly shows that unit delivery can broaden learner choice and the flexibility or variety of learning programmes – and this is an important feature of its appeal to learners. However, it has also been used by providers, working in partnership with Jobcentre

Plus and local employers, to create packages of units in response to labour market needs, and in some cases these do not fit within the same rules of combination.

Meeting Skills Needs

1.112 Unit delivery provides a new and potentially better way of meeting the diverse needs of different types of learners. The ability to access accredited learning in small blocks which can be built on either in the short term or over a longer period, has been widely reported throughout the evaluation as being a very positive development.

1.113 Delivering learning through units can be an efficient way of improving the job readiness of those who are not in work, without requiring a commitment which removes them from the labour market for a long period of time, as well as providing a foundation for future progression towards a qualification. Unit delivery also enables providers to deliver accredited training to meet the specific skills needs of those in work, without employers needing to release their staff for a full qualification, reducing the cost and disruption of training. This is expected by providers to increase the willingness of employers to invest in training in the future.

1.114 Unit delivery can remove barriers to learning for individuals, including cost, learners being daunted by the prospect of committing to long term programmes of learning, and other commitments such as childcare. The evaluation has shown that it has provided access to learning for learners who would otherwise not have participated.

1.115 There is emerging evidence that the experience of learning through units can encourage learners to continue in learning, widening their knowledge by enrolling on other units in related areas, deepening their knowledge by enrolling on higher-level units on the same subject, and in some cases progressing on to a full qualification (although this has been relatively rare during the trials).

1.116 There is evidence of credit accumulation taking place through the trials although no evidence of credit transfer. Understanding of how credit transfer will operate in practice remains limited amongst the provider staff consulted for the evaluation.

1.117 The low level of employer co-financing observed through the trials is not due to a lack of confidence in this model of delivery. Instead, it reflects the focus on delivering units to the unemployed and the relatively short timescales over which the trials have operated. A number of providers have been in discussion with employers about becoming more actively involved in unit delivery but have been unable to make firm plans until recently due to uncertainties about the future.

Issues for the Future

1.118 Many providers have reported that keeping track of the units that learners are undertaking will become more difficult as unit delivery expands. Numerous in-house systems are already in place and more are planned for the coming academic year.

1.119 In order for CAT to work effectively, there is a need for a system such as the PLR which provides a national record of learner achievement. Providers do not foresee the benefits of CAT being maximised without the PLR.

1.120 Delivering through units has different financial implications for providers than delivering through qualifications. Understanding how unit delivery can be cost effective whilst still meeting the needs of learners and employers is crucial if the model is to be taken forward successfully. Evidence is emerging of providers planning to negotiate further with AOs, and of them working in consortia to secure discounts for bulk purchases of unit registrations.

1.121 AOs are attaching a higher priority to unit delivery than earlier in the trials, especially since the announcement of plans for 2011/12 and the circa 11,000 units that will be eligible for funding to people on active benefits. This bodes well for the future of the model.

1.122 The roll-out of the trials in 2011/12 provides an excellent opportunity to further test delivery models, explore learner and employer impacts, and in particular look in more detail at how CAT can operate.

Recommendations

1.123 The Agency is advised to consider the following recommendations as it takes forward the Unit Delivery Trials in 2011/12:

Recommendation 1: To date, the trials have provided insightful information on the early delivery of unit based learning, which has predominantly concentrated on the Agency's college sector. In 2011/12, it might be appropriate to broaden the range of provider types engaged in the trials by involving a higher proportion of private training organisations.

Recommendation 2: There is likely to be demand for knowledge sharing amongst providers involved in the trials (including those who have been involved to date and those joining the trials in 2011/12). It may therefore be appropriate for the Agency to facilitate information sharing between providers. The case studies from this evaluation may be a useful knowledge sharing tool, and where funding permits, networking events can provide a very useful means of sharing information and developing links between providers.

Recommendation 3: As the trials continue into 2011/12, further examples of credit accumulation (and transfer) should begin to emerge. Where this is occurring, the trials are likely to benefit from the Agency sharing examples with all providers involved in the trials to illustrate how CAT can be facilitated.

Recommendation 4: For credit transfer to operate effectively in the future, the Agency is advised to acknowledge the demand that exists in the sector for a shared, nationally operated and regularly updated record of learner achievement, and the importance that providers are attaching to this as a means of enabling CAT to operate effectively.

Appendix 1 – Providers that joined the Trials in March 2011

Table A1.1: Providers involved in the second wave of the trials
Accrington and Rosendale College
Barton Peveril College
Bedford College
Birmingham City Council
Boston College
Bournemouth and Poole College
Bradford College
Burton College
Bury Council
Buxton College of Further Education, part of the University of Derby
Calderdale College
Carlisle College
Castle College Nottingham
<i>City College Brighton and Hove</i>
City College Norwich
City of Westminster College
Cornwall Adult Education Service
Croydon Adult learning and Training
Croydon College
Derby College
Devon County Council
Dorset Adult Learning
Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College
East Berkshire College
Harlow College
Highbury College
Kensington and Chelsea College
<i>Knowsley Community College</i>
Lambeth College
Lancaster and Morecambe College
Leek College of Further Education and School of Arts
Lincoln College
London Borough of Waltham Forest Community Learning and Skills Service
Manchester College
Medway Council
New College Nottingham
New College Swindon
<i>Newcastle College Lifestyle Academy</i>
Newcastle Sixth Form College
North Hertfordshire College
North Yorkshire County Council
<i>Oaklands College</i>
Petroc College
Richmond Adult Community College
Rotherham College of Arts and Technology
Sandwell Adult and Family Learning Services
Sheffield City Council
Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology
Somerset County Council
South Birmingham College
South Leicestershire College
South Nottingham College
Southend Adult Community College
Southwark College

St Helens College
Stoke on Trent College
Telford College of Arts and Technology
Tresham College of Further Education and Higher Education
Truro and Penwith College
Wolverhampton Adult Education Service
Wakefield Metro District Council
Warwickshire College
Wigan and Leigh College
Source: Skills Funding Agency.
Note: Providers in italics and shading have withdrawn from the trials.

Appendix 2 – Consultees

Table A2.1: Providers consulted during the second phase of the evaluation
Barton Peveril College
Bedford College
Birmingham City Council
Boston College
Bournemouth and Poole College
Bradford College
Bury Council
Calderdale College
Carlisle College
City College Norwich
City of Westminster College
Cornwall Adult Education Service
Croydon Adult Learning and Training
Croydon College
Derby College
Devon County Council
Dorset Adult Learning
Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College
East Berkshire College
Highbury College
Lambeth College
Lancaster and Morecambe College
Leek College of Further Education and School of Arts
Lincoln College
Manchester College
New College Nottingham
Newcastle Sixth Form College
North Hertfordshire College
North Yorkshire County Council
Petroc College
Richmond Adult Community College
Rotherham College of Arts and Technology
Sheffield City Council
Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology
Somerset County Council
South Leicestershire College
South Nottingham College
Southwark College
St Helens College
Telford College of Arts and Technology
Tresham College of Further Education and Higher Education
Wolverhampton Adult Education Service
Wakefield Metro District Council
Warwickshire College
Source: Skills Funding Agency.

Table A2.2: Awarding Organisations consulted during the evaluation

AAT
Ascentis
ASDAN
CACHE
City and Guilds
CYQ
Edexcel
ILM
National Open College Network
NCFE
OCR
Source: ekosgen

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