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Upskilling@Work Evaluation Report

June 2023



Upskilling@Work
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Executive Summary

Upskilling@Work was a European Social Funding supported skills and training programme operating in South Wales through a consortium of Further Education colleges. The programme ran for seven years up to July 2023 and delivered against Specific Objectives 2.1 and 2.2, aiming to increase skill levels for those with no or low skills and those with intermediate and higher-level skills. Overall, Upskilling@Work supported 6,432 individuals to gain a higher qualification than they already had.

Upskilling@Work utilised an in-work training model to allow businesses to access suitable training for their staff. The courses offered through Upskilling@Work were approved to fill gaps in existing provision and were all accredited, ranging from short courses of several weeks to provision of many months. While there were a number of changes in the context to delivery, with Brexit, Covid-19 and latterly the war in Ukraine and escalating cost of living, the rationale for Upskilling@Work remained appropriate. However, the original programme was designed to offer part funded provision (rather than fully funded provision which had become the norm in Wales) and in response to reduced demand and the challenges facing businesses from the pandemic, the programme moved to a fully funded model after June 2020 and lots of the delivery shifted online.

This evaluation focused on the period of the programme since March 2020 though

provides some summary findings from the whole programme; a separate evaluation was conducted on the first half of the programme and should be reviewed in conjunction with this report. The evaluation drew on a survey of 128 of the businesses who had accessed the support during the latter half of the programme as well as 303 employees. This was supported by a longitudinal study with 40 businesses who had been surveyed as part of the first evaluation and 102 individuals, alongside stakeholder interviews and desk reviews.

While Upskilling@Work had delivered training and qualifications to a large number of beneficiaries, the programme reached 73% of its overall targets for participant engagement (72% for Specific Objective 1 and 73% for Specific Objective 2). This underperformance was due in part to the pandemic, an overcommitment on original targets, challenges with recruitment of staff over this period, competing skills interventions and difficulties of delivering higher level qualifications (which typically take longer). Despite this underperformance stakeholders suggested that Upskilling@Work had been successful and were pleased with the results.

Process Review

Some of the reasons Upskilling@Work was considered successful were the processes that were implemented. A central CRM had been developed early in the programme which allowed centralised collating and monitoring of the programme with support available from the lead colleges to ensure the others were meeting the requirements of the funder. Monitoring processes were

further improved by the move to digital signatures being accepted post pandemic, reducing administrative burdens.

Businesses reported that the communication from the colleges was generally strong (scoring it 4.2 out of 5) and the enrolment process was considered simple and quick by the majority (83%). Employees similarly considered the communication to be effective, though there were some reports that individuals had fallen between gaps when there was a change in staff or following Covid-19 related delays. During delivery, adjustments were made to accommodate the needs of participants and almost all employees felt the provision was flexible and that they could access it easily (98%).

Among the employees 97% felt the training they received somewhat or very closely matched their expectations.

One area that could have been improved on Upskilling@Work was marketing and engagement. Each college had its own engagement team who could promote Upskilling@Work as part of a suite of training offers and there were agreements between the partners as to who operated in each area. This approach ran into the Covid-19 pandemic, which inhibited the direct engagement, and could have potentially looked to reach a wider audience instead often engaging repeat businesses and delivering courses to larger employers who brought greater volumes of support interventions but may have generated more limited outcomes relative to smaller firms.

Cross Cutting Themes

Cross Cutting Themes were addressed by the Upskilling@Work programme through adhering to equal opportunities policies in place at each of the colleges and supporting diverse cohorts of employees to upskill. By delivering greater skills and thereby supporting progression, particularly among those who were earning lower salaries, the programme was helping to tackle poverty. While sustainable development was not a direct outcome from the Upskilling@Work intervention the colleges adhered to sustainability ambitions in minimising resource waste and (enhanced by the pandemic) reducing travel.

The Upskilling@Work programme worked hard to facilitate provision bilingually and all course materials and communication was offered in Welsh. There was, however, very little demand for Welsh provision which along with difficulties of recruiting Welsh language tutors (given the challenges with recruitment of tutors generally) meant in practice there was very little Welsh provision.

Impacts

One of the successes of Upskilling@Work were the impacts generated. Businesses were able to move into new markets as a consequence of the training (reported by 59%) and there was increased capacity as well as leadership and management capability. Some businesses reported increased profitability (32%) while staff retention also improved (37%) and employees were felt to be more productive (56%). The longitudinal survey showed that businesses were more resilient to external shocks and had increased their competitiveness.

For the employees there were promotions (54%) and greater responsibility (59%) which led to increased remuneration. There was greater staff satisfaction and for those employers who accessed training after the Covid-19 pandemic this had a positive impact on their ability to overcome skills shortages.

Staff reported that they had gained new skills that would allow them to offer new services, a mix of practical skills, communication, planning, and leadership; 89% of which had been able to implement these in their job role. The longitudinal study showed that of the 23% who were in a different job to the one they had received training in, over two thirds were being paid more (a median increase of 25%). There was an increased confidence (82%) and in the two years between surveys for the longitudinal sample as well as most reporting the training had improved their performance at work, either in the same or a new role.

Aligned to the ambitions of shifting business culture in Wales towards paying for training, business attitudes towards upskilling staff did reportedly improve. The employees who participated in courses also reported improved attitudes to accessing further training (among those who were had not previously enjoyed training) and 39% were looking to undertake more training in the next 12 months. In the longitudinal survey it was found that 71% of employees had accessed training in the two years between evaluation phases. However, the shift of Upskilling@Work to a fully funded model may have disrupted the progress that had been made in reducing the reliance of Welsh SMEs on free training provision.

Another key success of Upskilling@Work was the strategic benefits it created among the partner colleges. Upskilling@Work brought the six partner colleges together to deliver the programme as a consortium which had not only demonstrated a strong management and governance approach, it also led to closer integration and collaboration in place of competition. This had positive effects beyond the Upskilling@Work programme into other interventions, but also in reshaping how the colleges looked at future opportunities and worked together.

Despite the better working relationships between the colleges, there were perceptions that perhaps more risks could have been taken with Upskilling@Work to test the demand for new courses or exploring new opportunities which the programme had intended to allow. It seemed that attempts at this were blocked in part by internal college barriers and then the pandemic.

Value for Money

While there are no perfect comparison programmes, along with other challenges with assessing value for money, the indication is that Upskilling@Work was more costly to deliver per result achieved. Against its original targets the programme cost 27% more than expected. There were however wider benefits in increased remuneration for employees who received the training as well as the business impacts which will have improved the value for money of the project, though these are difficult to quantify and attribute. That Upskilling@Work filled gaps in the existing Further Education course offer, integrated

with wider provision and offered impacts at an employee, business and strategic level for the colleges, then qualitatively it should be considered as offering good value, especially against the contextual changes outlined.

Conclusions

With the shifts in the funding landscape there is currently no provision available to continue Upskilling@Work or other collaborative interventions between the colleges. This risks losing some of the benefits of the processes, relationships and ways of working that have been developed under Upskilling@Work so effectively. Should skills funding be delivered in smaller interventions within each local authority there is a risk that this undermines the strategic value of working at scale across larger geographies as was effectively demonstrated by Upskilling@Work.

The programme team had been able to adapt to the post Covid-19 landscape effectively and though delivery was disrupted a shift to online provision was broadly successful. There is a clear need for interventions such as Upskilling@Work to deliver accredited short courses and the rationale for shifting Welsh businesses to partly funding training remains.

Recommendations

- Future programmes should look to emulate the management and monitoring processes adopted by Upskilling@Work as they have demonstrated effective approaches to coordinating a large consortium programme.
- Future programmes should operate for a five year period with options to

extend to allow sufficient time for scaling up and delivery but to avoid competing delivery and encourage innovation and development in the offer whilst not detracting from the original ambition.

- Wales still needs to move away from the fully funded training approach that it has become somewhat dependent on and while Upskilling@Work has provided a good start, another part funded intervention may be necessary to encourage businesses to invest in this provision.
- With the closure of Upskilling@Work and the lack of alternatives, a training programme offering short course, accredited qualifications for businesses to access for their staff is needed in Wales.
- Programmes that are trialling and developing new courses should take more risks in introducing provision that explores other gaps in the market or responds to smaller businesses.
- Future programmes should consider how they can integrate training provision in Welsh more fully to accommodate those who may wish to learn through the medium of Welsh. This would need to be balanced against the resource requirements and levels of demand.
- Consideration should be given to future programmes to minimise fully funded provision to larger organisations or those who may have accessed the training anyway. Potentially setting targets for numbers of employers engaged may encourage colleges to reach beyond

their core groups. Alternatively, there could be targets on amount of private sector investment levered in where suitable businesses were accessing the support.

- Flexibility in types of courses delivered is positive if the approved list is constantly refined to ensure it is filling gaps in the market, but more stakeholders should be involved in helping to determine approved courses and what demand should be responded to, including strategic stakeholders or labour market intelligence based judgements. Greater national coordination of workforce development provision is necessary and important to avoid duplication.
- One area of opportunity for the monitoring would be to capture baseline data on the earnings for the participants at the start of the training support to provide a variable that can be reviewed during subsequent rounds of evaluation to understand impacts.

1. Introduction

Upskilling@Work was a £17m skills and training programme in South Wales delivering courses through a consortium of Further Education (FE) colleges between March 2016 and July 2023. The programme provided in work training to the staff of businesses in both West Wales and the Valleys (WWV) and East Wales (EW) Operational Programme areas to overcome any gaps in existing provision covering both short and longer courses. The programme was supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) and originally operated on a part funded model to push funding further and encourage businesses in Wales to recognise the benefits of investing in their staff and to do so without fully subsidised public sector intervention. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, however, the operation became a fully funded model.

The evaluation of Upskilling@Work has been undertaken by Wavehill to assess the extent to which the operation has met its aims and objectives, as well as delivered value for money and provide any insight on lessons learnt to improve future delivery. An interim evaluation was provided in 2021 which focused on the part-funded delivery period from programme implementation up to March 2020. This final evaluation phase will focus on the subsequent period up to the close in June 2023 as well as exploring some of the overall themes and areas of learning.

This report shares the findings of a long-term evaluation which has drawn on a mix of methods to explore the successes and areas for improvement and test the logic of the Upskilling@Work operation. Given the time period covered, this will include consideration of the effects of Covid-19 and the response from the delivery partners, as well as exploring some of the longer-term impacts that the training provision has had, both on the businesses and individuals, but also on the consortium of colleges.

1.1 Background

The concept for the Upskilling@Work programme was developed in 2014 when Welsh Government began having initial conversations with FE colleges on whether an operation could be developed in response to a collection of policy and strategic drivers. One factor was the recognition that SMEs in Wales (and across the UK) had become too reliant on a fully funded training provision.¹ Another was the publication of the Policy Statement on Skills which called for not just skills for jobs and growth, but also training that responded to local needs.² Welsh Government decided not to lead this scheme themselves (though they committed funding) and there was an anticipation that FE colleges would lead and deliver.

¹ See for instance Evans, S. (2022) *Raising the Bar: Increasing Employer Investment in Skills*, Learning and Work Institute.

² Policy Statement on Skills, Welsh Government, 2013.

The Upskilling@Work operation was therefore developed to draw on available Welsh Government funding and secured additional investment through Priority Axis 2 of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund (ESF), Specific Objective 1 (SO1) and Specific Objective 2 (SO2).

- Specific Objective 1 (SO1) aims to increase the skills levels, including work relevant skills, of those in the workforce with no or low skills.
- Specific Objective 2 (SO2) aims to increase the number of people in the workforce with technical and job specific skills at an intermediate and higher level.

To fit with the European funding structures, Upskilling@Work consisted of four operations or strands: one for each of the regions (EW & WWV) and then within these for each of the two Specific Objectives (SO1 & SO2). The two regions were managed by two lead beneficiaries, Coleg Gwent for EW and Coleg y Cymoedd for WWV. Within each region, joint beneficiary (JB) colleges supported the delivery to provide coverage across much of South Wales (from Neath Port Talbot in the East up to the southern part of Powys and across to Torfaen in the West). An agreement was reached between the colleges for loose geographic areas of coverage while looking to maximise the benefits of working in partnership. The consortium of partners comprised the following colleges:

East Wales

- **Coleg Gwent**
- Cardiff and Vale College
- Neath Port Talbot College Group

West Wales and the Valleys

- **Coleg y Cymoedd**
- Bridgend College
- Coleg Gwent
- College Merthyr Tydfil

After a list of courses and training modules was agreed by the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO), delivery commenced in late 2016. Under the co-investment model, businesses who sought to access available training provision (from the list) for their employees and who met the eligibility criteria were able to pay a subsidised rate for the course. The Upskilling@Work training provision was designed to fit around the wider commercial offer from the college (courses that are financially viable without funding intervention) and alongside other funded schemes to provide a broader range of available training.

2. Methodology

The evaluation of Upskilling@Work adopted an enhanced theory of change approach, using a mix of evidence gathering methods to test evaluation questions and determine the impacts and success of the programme.

At an early stage of the evaluation of Upskilling@Work an inception report (in 2020) was prepared and contains full details of the methodology employed including an evaluation framework. A highlighted version of the evaluation approach is provided here for reference.

2.1 Evaluation Aims

The evaluation aims to review the extent to which the four operations constituting the Upskilling@Work programme had met their objectives. The core objectives of the programme were to increase the number of adults with transferable and job specific skills, address skill shortages, and improve employer productivity and business sustainability. Upskilling@Work also sought to help change the mindset of businesses in Wales to funding their own investment in their staff.

In addition to assessing these objectives, the evaluation also aims to explore the wider impacts of the Upskilling@Work programme and the processes that the operations had undertaken from a management and delivery perspective to identify areas of good practice and where lessons can be learnt for similar future interventions.

2.2 Evaluation Approach

An evaluation framework was created during the inception period, which set out the evaluation questions to be tested in order to determine the extent to which the operations had been successful. This evaluation framework was based on a theory of change which outlined the mechanisms by which Upskilling@Work delivery would result in the envisaged changes (see appendix). Several different approaches were then used to generate and consolidate the evidence required to provide the insight needed to answer the questions set by the evaluation framework:

- Literature reviews of related research and evaluations were conducted to provide comparators for the Upskilling@Work programme, particularly to provide benchmarks for the value for money assessment. These comparator programmes are set out in table 2.1 below.

- A review of the wider policy and economic context has been undertaken to situate the Upskilling@Work programme in its wider context and explore the extent to which the operation could contribute to its impact objectives.
- Nineteen interviews with stakeholders identified by Coleg Gwent and their delivery partners were conducted with internal (staff) and external stakeholders offering insight into how effectively the operation has been delivered and where there had been wider impacts.
- A series of interviews (16) were also conducted in 2021 soon after the interim evaluation to capture the impacts and changes that were taking place on the programme in response to Covid-19. This helped to provide insight into this important transition period while it was still current.
- A survey of both businesses and employees who had received the training support under Upskilling@Work during the March 2020 to June 2023 period was undertaken. The surveys explored the delivery itself and then some of the impacts that had been generated.
- A follow up survey of businesses and individuals engaged during the interim evaluation was also conducted to provide longitudinal assessment of impact.
- Programme monitoring information was reviewed to provide additional insight into the performance of the operations and some of the baseline data against which the survey findings could expand.
- Case studies were developed from in depth interviews with nine businesses providing more details on the journey they had been through when accessing skills and training as part of Upskilling@Work. Five of these case studies have been written up below.

Analysis of the data gathered above was then conducted in order to answer the evaluation questions set out in the evaluation framework. This included synthesis of qualitative information and manipulation of quantitative data using MS Excel.

2.2.1 Comparator Projects

Several projects were identified as part of the literature review to provide comparators for the Upskilling@Work programme and against which findings could be considered. Much of the ESF 2014-2020 programme in the UK is yet to be evaluated providing few suitable benchmarks for the performance of Upskilling@Work. Where appropriate, data from the comparator programmes has been used to show the relative success or weakness of Upskilling@Work.

The table below provides a summary of the comparator programmes and the extent to which they share similarities to the Upskilling@Work intervention.

Table 2.1: Comparator programmes to Upskilling@Work

Programme	Region	Description
Skills Support for the Workforce³	South West England	Providing a mix of courses through college and independent training provider delivery partners to meet key areas of demand and skills gaps in the local economies. The programme engaged businesses to train their staff in much the same way as Upskilling@Work and over a similar delivery period making this a strong comparison.
England ESF and Youth Employment Initiative Survey⁴	England	This survey captures insights from people who had recently left work-related courses and training programmes funded by ESF in England and involved 19,769 participants between December 2015 and May 2019. Delivery was a mix of accredited and non-accredited courses from a variety of providers so offering some comparability to Upskilling@Work.
Developing Skills for Business⁵	South West England	Led by Cornwall College group, the ESF project was designed to enhance employer led skills and strengthen the training and education system in Cornwall through employer engagement. While the support included skills training, these were not accredited and there were other interventions which were also included.
ESF In-Work Programme⁶	London	The programme offered tailored skills and support packages aimed at moving lower paid workers into better paid jobs responding to challenges of in work poverty. The target groups and mechanisms of support were therefore different to Upskilling@Work though the intervention similarly focused on those who were in work and typically lower skilled.
Personal Learning Accounts⁷	Wales	PLA was introduced after Upskilling@Work and offered individual led training through Welsh college courses to help develop skills to allow them to progress or access a new job. While the objectives are different to Upskilling@Work and not all courses were accredited, PLA provides a useful comparator given contextual, geographic and timeframe overlap.

³ Skills Support for the Workforce Evaluation, Serco, 2023 (covering three programmes in the West of England and Heart of the South West LEP areas).

⁴ European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative Leavers Survey Report 2016-2019, Department of Work and Pensions, March 2022.

⁵ Developing Skills for Business Summative Assessment, Southern Horizons and Buckman Associates on behalf of Cornwall College Group, April 2020.

⁶ Evaluation of ESF In-Work Progression Programme, Learning & Work Institute, 2019.

⁷ Evaluation of Personal Learning Accounts, Wavehill on behalf of Welsh Government, 2023.

2.2.2 Survey Respondents

Four surveys were conducted by telephone/teams between February and April 2023 as outlined in the table below. Participants were randomly selected for the initial March to June 2023 surveys. Survey respondents who consented to follow up engagement were then engaged as part of the longitudinal surveys

Table 2.2: Evaluation surveys

Survey	Respondents
March 2020 to June 2023 Initial Business Survey	128
March 2020 to June 2023 Initial Employee Survey	303
Longitudinal Business Survey	40
Longitudinal Employee Survey	102

The survey respondents and breakdowns of all the participants or businesses across the colleges are shown in the tables below. These figures show that the samples achieved are broadly representative of the cohort of employee participants. There is however some overrepresentation of Coleg y Cymoedd in the employer survey and subsequent underrepresentation of Coleg Gwent and Cardiff and the Vale College. This should be considered when interpreting the results.

Table 2.3: Business survey respondents and population by college

College	Survey Respondents	Proportion	Eligible Population	Proportion
NPTC Group	21	16%	158	15%
Cardiff and The Vale College	20	16%	289	27%
Coleg Y Cymoedd	71	55%	302	28%
Coleg Gwent	3	2%	214	20%
Merthyr Tydfil College	9	7%	81	8%
Bridgend College	4	3%	35	3%
Total	128		1,079	

Table 2.4: Employee survey respondents and population by college

College	Survey Respondents	Proportion	Eligible Population	Proportion
NPTC Group	10	3%	317	5%
Cardiff and The Vale College	79	26%	1,778	28%
Coleg Y Cymoedd	68	22%	1,395	22%
Coleg Gwent	120	40%	2,297	36%
Merthyr Tydfil College	19	6%	475	7%
Bridgend College	7	2%	80	1%
Total	303		6,342	

2.3 Evaluation Limitations

While a large number of survey respondents has been achieved by the evaluation, the sample size does not constitute a statistically significant proportion of the population. The information still provides valid insight into perceptions and impacts of the Upskilling@Work programme, but this should be treated as inferential rather than actual, with a higher margin for error expected within the evidence provided.

Secondly, the survey is retrospective, asking respondents to review events and activities that may have taken place up to three years ago for some participants. There will be some loss of accuracy over this time and reliability of some of the results may therefore be affected. Further, for those individuals and businesses who completed the follow up survey the focus of the questions was on the longer term impacts from the training undertaken, yet it is likely to be difficult for respondents to have separated any subsequent impacts from other interventions they may have received over this period. Therefore, the results should be considered against this context.

3. Context & Rationale

This chapter sets out the substantial changes in the context to the delivery of Upskilling@Work since its inception including Covid-19, the UK leaving the EU, the war in Ukraine, cost-of-living crisis, and the introduction of new policy agendas.

The Upskilling@Work programme was designed in a very different context to the one Wales and the UK currently faces. The extent to which it has delivered successfully has to be considered against this wider context and objectives set at the time of its implementation. Both the policy landscape, along with the skills and training space, and the socio-economic context have changed substantially since 2016 and even March 2020. Below is a summary of the key changes affecting delivery under this evaluation phase which focuses on the period from March 2020 to June 2023.

3.1 Socio-economic Context

A full appraisal of the context at the start of the Upskilling@Work operation is presented in the evaluation inception report. Presented below is a summary of the key changes to have taken place to this baseline during the final delivery period.

3.1.1 Covid-19

The socio-economic context for the second part of the Upskilling@Work operation has been marked predominantly by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic had a substantial impact on the UK during 2020 and 2021 while businesses and the public were in a series of lockdowns and global commerce slumped. These impacted some of the indicators outlined below including output (measured by Gross Value Added) while others were artificially maintained through schemes like furlough, which supported employers to maintain staff rather than creating widespread unemployment.

The pandemic also had implications for business confidence reducing appetite for risk such as to invest or take on more staff. Conversely, some businesses found the pandemic provided an opportunity to redirect resources and provide training as an opportunity created during the down time. For instance, it is likely that furlough was the driver behind an increase in individual led training and upskilling.⁸ As the economy recovered from the Covid-19 pandemic, demand for labour increased creating skill shortages (enhanced by some sections of the labour market taking the opportunity of the pandemic to leave employment). This all served to disrupt the typical demand for skills and training and affected the Upskilling@Work programme in a number of ways which will be explored in the report below.

3.1.2 UK exit from the EU

While the UK's departure from the EU was voted on in 2016, the country did not finally exit until January 2020. Given the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on global trade it has taken until 2022 for many of the implications of leaving the EU to be realised as separate from the impacts of the pandemic. These impacts have been reductions in trade and greater business uncertainty, cost rises and a loss of European labour which have exacerbated skills shortages in Wales and the UK. This has created further complexities for organisations seeking to access training, their propensity to fund it and the demand for skilled labour.

3.1.3 Cost of Living Crisis

The rampant rate of inflation since 2022 has led to significant monetary policy responses from the Central Banks around the world, with the Bank of England raising interest rates from 0.25% in December 2021 to 4.5% in May 2023.⁹ With the price of other goods and services increasing by nearly 10%¹⁰ the ability of both businesses and consumers or families to afford to live and operate has become more challenging creating difficult conditions. By October 2022 consumer confidence had fallen to -49¹¹ (where 0 is average) which was below the level it reached during the pandemic and business confidence had reduced under 50¹² (where 50 is neutral). The propensity of companies to invest in training and skills, as well as capital and infrastructure given these conditions is greatly reduced.

⁸ Evaluation of Personal Learning Accounts, Wavehill on behalf of Welsh Government, 2023.

⁹ Bank of England Base Rate, Bank of England, 2023.

¹⁰ Consumer Price Inflation, ONS, 2023.

¹¹ Consumer Confidence Index, GfK, 2023.

¹² Purchase Managers Index, S&P Global/CIPS, 2023.

3.1.4 War in Ukraine

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has been another factor in a growing number of tensions and issues that affect society in European countries including Wales and the rest of the UK. Not only did the conflict lead to immediate rises in energy prices causing some of the inflation or the cost of living crisis, but it has also caused a recalibration among the business community and governments (following Covid-19) on resilience, supply chains and where to invest. While this may not have directly affected businesses who are engaging with Upskilling@Work, there are implications for the strategic investments being made, which supply chains to utilise and where skilled labour can be best accessed to service markets.

3.1.5 Socio-economic Indicators

Output and Productivity

Output in Wales and the rest of the UK fell substantially in 2020 as the pandemic effectively stopped global trade and reduced workforce capabilities in many industries to practically zero. In 2019 GDP in Wales was £78.3bn, which fell by 22% year on year in Q2 of 2020 before slowly recovering throughout 2021 and 2022.¹³ Growth of the economy has remained sluggish with the latest quarterly data for Wales¹⁴ showing low and negative growth in 2022, while the more up to date figures for the wider UK¹⁵ suggest that the economy has been flat at about its pre-Covid-19 level since 2022.

Productivity in the UK remains weak relative to other countries in the G7 and since the pandemic has not grown as fast as other major developed nations.¹⁶ In Wales productivity is 15.4% below the UK average with GVA per hour £31.80, which despite some fluctuations has remained a fairly consistent gap over the last 15 years. This is despite many policy attempts to reduce the disparity between Wales and the rest of the UK, as well as the UK and other countries.

In the local authority areas covered by the Upskilling@Work operations, there are variations in productivity and both some improvements and some declines relative to the national average over the delivery period. As shown in table 3.1, areas such as Cardiff, Monmouthshire and Neath Port Talbot are more productive than the Wales average, while others in the valleys are less productive.

¹³ Regional Gross Domestic Product, ONS, 2023.

¹⁴ Quarterly GDP for England, Wales and English Regions, ONS, 2023.

¹⁵ GDP Monthly Estimates, ONS, 2023.

¹⁶ Annual output per hour worked, ONS, 2023.

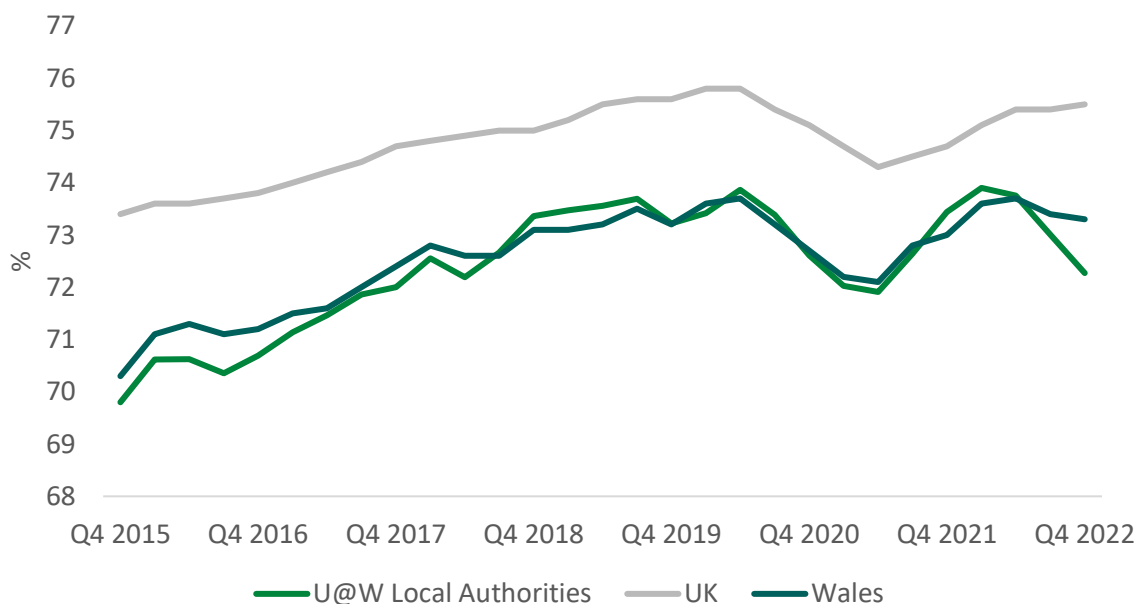
Table 3.1: GVA per hour benchmarked to the UK=100

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Wales	83.0	82.9	83.3	83.6	84.1	84.3
West Wales and The Valleys	79.4	79.6	80.3	80.9	81.4	81.4
Central Valleys	93.7	93.6	92.6	91.7	91.6	91.8
Gwent Valleys	81.6	82.0	83.0	83.4	83.4	82.9
Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot	86.1	85.5	86.4	87.6	88.8	88.9
East Wales	87.9	87.4	87.1	87.2	87.6	88.1
Monmouthshire and Newport	87.3	85.8	85.0	85.0	85.8	86.4
Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan	93.2	92.5	92.0	91.9	92.0	92.2

Labour Market

Like the rest of the UK, the labour market in Wales has been heavily disrupted since 2020 due to the pandemic and other factors highlighted above. Employment rates fell substantially in the Upskilling@Work local authorities (as across Wales and the rest of the UK) from 73.2% at the end of 2019 to 71.9% in Q2 2021 before rising back to 73.9% in Q1 2022 and since falling again. This is different from the UK which has not experienced the same decline in employment rates in later 2022.

Figure 3.1: Employment Rates in Upskilling@Work Local Authorities, Wales and the UK



While unemployment did rise post pandemic some of the fall in employment shifted to greater economic inactivity as people moved out of the labour market entirely (some retiring early or leaving for health reasons). Alongside a reduction in overseas labour due to both the pandemic and the UK's exit from the European Union, substantial labour shortages have materialised in many sectors. This context has generated both positive and negative implications for training programmes such as Upskilling@Work as well as leading to various policy responses from Government.

Qualification rates in Wales have remained below the average for the UK and the gap has widened throughout the Upskilling@Work delivery period. In 2015 the proportion of the working age population with a Level 4 qualification or above in Wales was 33.7% which had increased to 36.3% by 2019, and then to 38.6% by 2021.¹⁷ In the UK the rates had increased from 36.9% in 2015 to 40.2% in 2019 and then to 43.5% in 2021. The gap has similarly widened among the proportion of the population qualified to Level 2 in Wales and the UK from 1.3 percentage points in 2015 to 2.8 percentage points in 2021.

Table 3.2: Qualification levels over time in Wales (percentage of the working age population)

	No Qualifications	Level 1 and above	Level 2 and above	Level 3 and above	Level 4 and above
2015	10.5	83.5	72.1	53.1	33.7
2016	9.6	84.3	73.4	54.3	35.2
2017	8.7	85.3	74.1	54.6	35.2
2018	8.6	84.9	74.0	55.1	35.4
2019	8.5	85.1	74.0	55.3	36.3
2020	7.6	86.8	76.8	58.6	38.6
2021	8.3	85.8	75.3	58.0	38.6

The further contextual challenges for Upskilling@Work are the variations in local authority areas, where in 2021 Blaenau Gwent (64%) and Merthyr Tydfil (57.4%) have smaller proportions of the population qualified to Level 2 and above than areas such as Cardiff (78.6%), Monmouthshire (82.1%) and the Vale of Glamorgan (79.2%).¹⁸ While this may restrict the number of individuals eligible for training through Upskilling@Work the relative size of populations in these areas (particularly Cardiff) means there are still large numbers of suitable employees to provide training to.

¹⁷ Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2022.

¹⁸ Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2022.

Directly related to qualification rates and skill level is earnings where Wales has struggled to close the gap on the UK throughout the Upskilling@Work period, and which have been eroded in real terms by the high levels of inflation covered above. Median annual earnings for full time individuals in Wales in 2022 were £30,596 compared to £33,000 in the UK.¹⁹ This is an increase of 23% in Wales (and 19.5% in the UK) on 2015 but in real terms is a 5.8 percentage points pay decline.²⁰ Given the ambition of Upskilling@Work to generate skill improvements that result in impacts for individual employees, in this socio-economic context it is challenging for any such changes to be observed.

3.2 Policy Context

As established in the evaluation inception report the Upskilling@Work programme was appropriately designed and situated given the policy context. Though there have been numerous shifts in the policy context of adult skills and learning since the implementation of the Upskilling@Work programme these have tended to reinforce the suitability of the operation. This section provides a summary of the key policy changes that have occurred during the 2020-2023 delivery period and how they affect the Upskilling@Work programme.

3.2.1 Local Policies

Several of the local authority within the area of intervention for the Upskilling@Work programme have introduced new or revised economic plans and recovery strategies since 2020. Providing opportunities for residents to reskill and upskill is a feature of many of these plans to facilitate economic prosperity and ensure future resilience is a common feature.²¹ Upskilling@Work not only offers the skills and training that the local economy needs by responding to business demand, it also provides opportunities for in work training to support organisations with skill development as they recover from the effects of the pandemic.

¹⁹ Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, ONS, 2022.

²⁰ Up to March 2023. Inflation rates in 2021 were lower therefore affecting the results that were provided.

²¹ Greener, Fairer, Stronger: City Recovery and Renewal Strategy, Cardiff City Council, 2021 & Neath Port Talbot Economic Recovery Plan, NBTBC, 2022 & Recovery Plan, Torfaen CBC, 2021 & Recovery, Transformation and Improvement Plan, Merthyr Tydfil CBC, 2020.

3.2.2 Regional Policies

Between 2020 and 2023, the Cardiff Capital Region (the area in which most of the Upskilling@Work programme activity is delivered) has introduced an addendum to its core Industrial and Economic Plan in response to Covid-19,²² a new City Deal Business Plan,²³ and a strategic five-year plan covering 2021-2026.²⁴ Aspects of these strategies speak directly to the skills agenda, including supporting future skills hubs to reskill jobs which may become unviable, as well as areas in which skills will play a vital role, such as generating productivity and higher value job roles. To achieve this, alongside investment and business growth, a mix of training provision and levels is needed to facilitate the development of individuals and create the capacity for higher value roles.

3.2.3 Welsh Government

Several new core Government policies have been introduced since 2020 including Future Wales: the national plan 2040, which contains some shifts in ambition for Wales to become a sustainable, prosperous and vibrant place to live, work and do business.²⁵ While Future Wales focus is on capital building and planning, the objectives of supporting good growth in all areas of Wales and enabling people to live prosperously can be linked to the intended outcomes for Upskilling@Work in support both individuals and the business community through training.

In 2020 a new curriculum for Wales was published²⁶ which provides a key contextual change for provision of adult skills with pre-16 education being restructured to focus much more on lifelong learning, acquisition of skills and experiences and to respond to future employment. The new curriculum sets out a clear shift in rhetoric and purpose of education to be more rounded and comprehensive in what it provides pupils. Though no students who have started to undertake the new curriculum will have engaged with Upskilling@Work, the ambition of the programme to support lifelong learning and support a mindset shift among employers in Wales to view training as fundamental to continuing to meet changing needs is closely aligned with the ambitions of the new curriculum.

²² Industrial and Economic Plan Covid-19 Addendum, Cardiff Capital Region, May 2020.

²³ City Deal Business Plan 2020-2021, Cardiff Capital Region, 2021.

²⁴ Strategic Business Plan 2021-2026, Cardiff Capital Region, 2021.

²⁵ Future Wales: the national plan 2040, Welsh Government, 2019.

²⁶ See <https://www.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales> for further information

The Welsh Government has published a new strategy for employability and skills: Stronger, fairer, greener Wales.²⁷ This continues the theme of lifelong learning culture as well as striving for fair work and to tackle economic inequality through provision of skills and employment. This aligns closely with the Upskilling@Work programme and its wraparound training function to fill gaps in other provision while supporting workplace based learning to help develop stronger businesses and places to work that can benefit everyone.

Finally, the Tertiary Education and Research Act in Wales will establish the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) in 2023 and which plans to restructure post-16 education provision in Wales. While the Commission is yet to be fully established, the intentions outlined in the Act are for stronger alignment between education and training with the needs of employers and creating a more holistic process for progression to relevant skills and supporting parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes. Given Upskilling@Work has operated a model that was designed to bring in courses that responded to demand, the learning from the operation may help the partner colleges with this emerging shift.

3.2.4 UK Government

Since 2020 several strategies have been published in the UK replacing the Industrial Strategy of 2017 albeit with similar aims to boost productivity and growth in the UK. In 2021 Build Back Better was published which included a chapter on skills designed to reinforce the need for greater skills and responding to some of the challenges around developing technical skills and meeting shortages in key sectors.²⁸ The Build Back Better strategy pushed the Lifetime Skills Guarantee as part of the same lifelong learning approach being rolled out in Wales and need for the labour market to upskill and reskill in response to changes in the economy.

The Levelling Up agenda has also been a key part of the UK Government policy over the latter part of the Upskilling@Work programme delivery with a whitepaper published in 2022. While primarily focused on capital investment, the Levelling Up agenda also includes human capital and pushes for balancing the geographical disparities across the UK by considering productivity, social mobility, pay, jobs and living standards. Again there is little in the Levelling Up agenda that runs contrary to the aims and ambitions of the Upskilling@Work programme given its focus on upskilling adults from a lower to a higher skills base with subsequent anticipated impacts on economic output and earnings.

²⁷ Stronger, fairer, greener Wales: a plan for employability and skills, Welsh Government, 2022.

²⁸ Build Back Better: our plan for growth, HM Treasury, March 2021.

3.3 Skills & Training Landscape

There have been numerous changes in the skills and training landscape in Wales since the Upskilling@Work programme was developed and these have continued in the later delivery period. This has included the introduction of other programmes as well as changing funding mechanisms and priorities for longstanding training approaches which inadvertently affect the Upskilling@Work delivery.

3.3.1 Personal Learning Accounts

The Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) programme was launched as a pilot in September 2019 and then rolled out to 13 FE colleges in August 2020 where it was repurposed in part to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. The PLA programme supports individuals living in Wales, aged 19 years or over and who earn less than £26,000 per annum with access to free and flexible accredited courses and qualifications. There was also an employment strand to PLA, Employer Learning Accounts (ELA), which closed in 2022 and offered interventions to support skills provision in businesses, such as Upskilling@Work offered. Delivery on PLA was similar to Upskilling@Work through FE colleges though there is less emphasis on in work training. Given that all of the colleges involved in Upskilling@Work were also delivering training through PLA and the latter programme closed earlier, there was a competing pressure to get outputs claimed on PLA before shifting resource back to Upskilling@Work. While the provision did not duplicate (courses were either being run under Upskilling@Work or PLA) there was a clear overlap in the nature of support and many courses could have been funded under either scheme.

3.3.2 Mainstream Support

These skills and training programmes exist alongside or utilise other FE course delivery including A-Levels, Traineeships, BTECs, Foundation Degrees, and NVQs. The number of these courses available grows and changes to reflect the needs of learners and the pressure of sectors to develop and implement training provision in different skill areas.

The key competitor for Upskilling@Work among these non-programme courses has been Apprenticeships. The established workplace training method where participants receive experience and training while learning theoretical and practical at a college or training provider adopt a similar approach to many of the Upskilling@Work courses. Apprenticeships have had a greater impact on the Upskilling@Work programme since 2017 when they became free to access for businesses who were below the Apprenticeship Levy threshold. During the part funded phase of the Upskilling@Work programme, and as found during the interim evaluation, apprenticeships were seen by some businesses as a better alternative to short courses under Upskilling@Work as they were fully funded for most. Since the move to a de minimis model and therefore fully funded provision for most, the competition from apprenticeships has reduced while notably the appeal of short courses while in Covid-19 induced lockdowns has increased.

4. Programme Design

This chapter describes the design of the Upskilling@Work programme and the changes that took place during the delivery since March 2020 to determine the appropriateness of the operation.

A more comprehensive review of the programme design and rationale is provided in the evaluation inception report with a summary given here for reference and to set out the key changes that have taken place.

4.1 Structure of Programme

Upskilling@Work was based on a partnership of colleges working as a consortium to deliver a range of approved training courses through their own faculties. As covered in section 1.1 there were initially six joint beneficiary partners, with a lead beneficiary in WWV, and another in EW. While Bridgend College withdrew from the programme in October 2019 facing capacity challenges at the time (their targets were then shared between other WWV colleges), they were able to return to the programme in 2020 and deliver SO2 elements with a smaller allocation of 50 participants.

The partner colleges established geographic coverage for delivery based on their respective areas and sector specialisms. If any business organisation looking to access support was a previous client of the college, then they would maintain their existing relationships, if not, or if the proximate college could not offer the required course, then the business would be signposted to the most appropriate partner.

With the ESF performance targets split across the two Specific Objectives and two regions, prior to implementation the partners estimated the volume of outputs and outcomes they could deliver in their operation areas based on past experience and anticipated demand. Each partner then delivered courses through their internal training and assessment staff to achieve their part of the target for their respective operation (which are provided in the appendix).

As Upskilling@Work was designed to infill gaps in existing support, a list of training courses was developed for the programme and approved by WEFO to confirm that it was not duplicating current provision and that, if possible, this delivery aligned to the economic prioritisation framework. All courses on Upskilling@Work were accredited qualifications. Delivery was intended to respond to demand from businesses and so where colleges felt there was an opportunity this could de-risk the introduction of new training provision which may become commercially viable in the future. Should a college have wanted to introduce new courses under Upskilling@Work after the initial list was signed off, these had to be sent to WEFO for approval. However, between March 2020 and June 2023 there were few new courses added to the list.

4.1.1 Delivery Profile Changes

During the 2020-2023 delivery phase there were some changes to the targets and the delivery requirements for each college. After an initial request to WEFO in January 2020 to reduce the financial and participant profiles in WWV (following the departure of Bridgend College) was rejected, a further review of the performance was undertaken in 2021. Rather than submitting a formal project change request it was agreed with WEFO that the programme could decommit funding from each operation and declare an underspend at the final claim which would then balance the outputs and outcomes achieved in line with the revised budgets. The budget for SO1 was reduced to £3.734m and for SO2 to £4.915m so participant targets for WWV were effectively reduced from 1,652 to 1,520 for SO1 and 2,128 to 2,020 for SO2. In December 2022, Coleg Gwent decommitted another £171,371 from SO2 lowering the total budget further to £4.744m and decreasing their participant figure from 796 to 507.

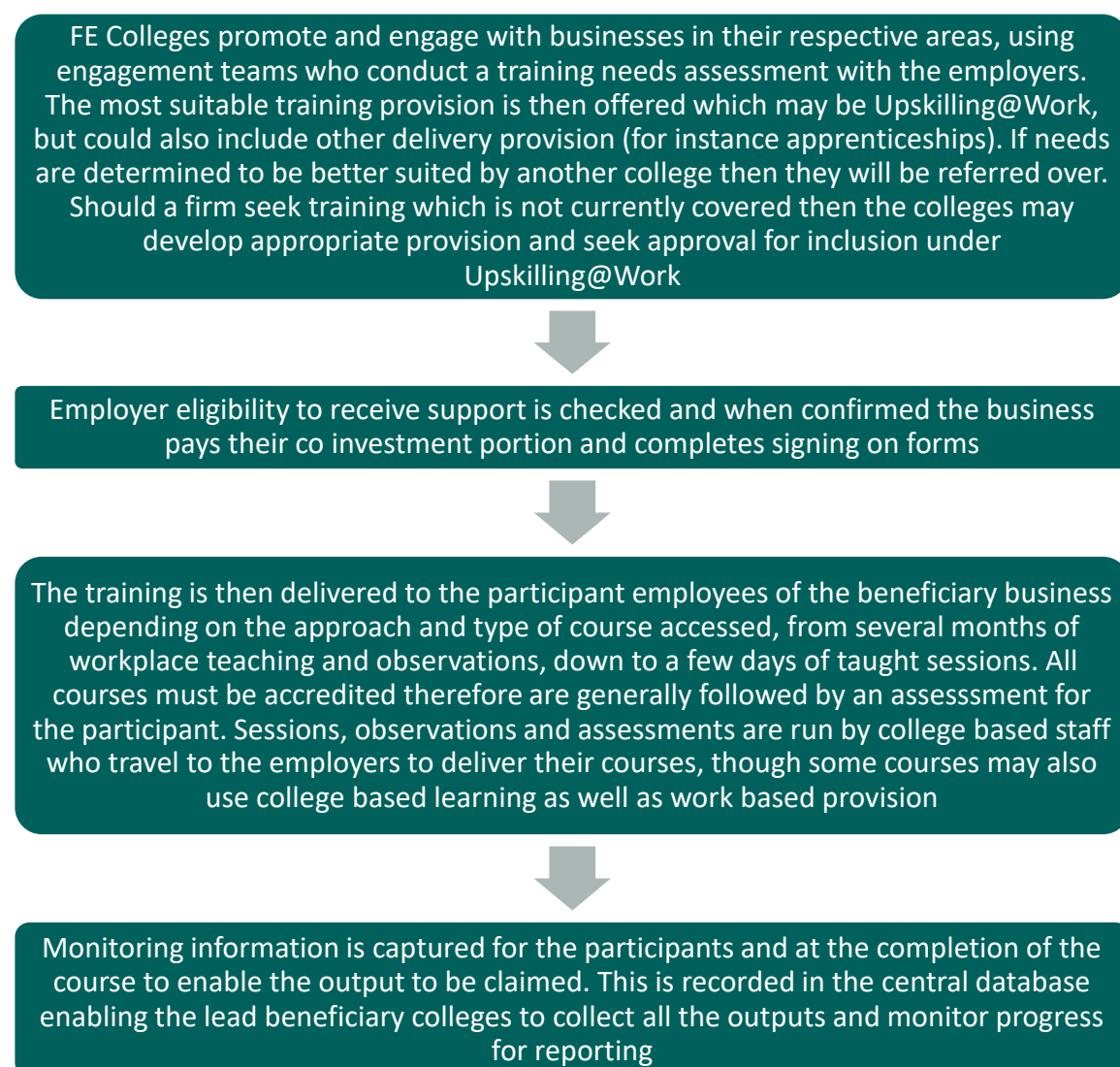
In late 2021 in EW there was a formal reprofile exercise to reflect the demand and redistribute outputs, results and associated costs across the colleges. The reprofile was agreed by WEFO with SO1 targets shifting between colleges. SO2 targets changed between colleges but also gender, with more female outcomes and fewer male, reflecting the experienced demand. Neither of these target changes and adjustments in WWV or EW resulted in any alteration of the actual delivery methods of Upskilling@Work.

4.1.2 Delivery Process

Upskilling@Work was an in-work focused training programme where interventions were delivered to employees at their workplace by course leads and trainers from the colleges. Courses ranged from workshops over a few days through to provision over multiple months including coursework and class-based activities. With courses being accredited, nearly all provision required some form of coursework or assessment to be completed by the participants in order for the certification to be awarded.

The process for delivery is summarised in the flow chart in figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1: Summary of the typical delivery process for Upskilling @Work



4.1.3 Covid-19

Covid-19 created several challenges for the Upskilling@Work delivery approach with lockdown restrictions in Wales and the UK limiting face to face contact. Given the focus of the delivery was workplace-based learning and often included practical modules, shifting courses to online provision was challenging. There were health and safety concerns for both college staff going into workplaces and trainees coming to college while some sectors were completely off limits such as health and social care which substantially affected partners like Cardiff and Vale College who specialised in these sectors. There were also difficulties with accessing IT equipment and getting both trainers and trainees comfortable with its use. With courses typically requiring assessment for the accreditation, discussions also had to take place with the awarding bodies on what would be suitable given the circumstances to ensure validity. Consequently, some courses and delivery were able to transition to online provision quickly while others took months to return creating a hiatus in delivery.

Employer engagement was also impacted during the early stages of the pandemic with the typical approach from college teams face to face interactions that were no longer permitted. Many staff in the target businesses were also placed on furlough leading to fewer contacts for the college engagement teams to approach. College staff were also furloughed restricting capacity. Where businesses were still operating, their initial focus was on surviving the challenges that the pandemic generated, and training opportunities were not a priority. College teams felt that it was inappropriate to contact businesses to promote the training offer given these circumstances.

One key change to the approach of Upskilling@Work was the shift from a part funded to fully funded model, with businesses now bound by de minimis regulations which for many meant being no longer required to contribute part of the costs. This, stakeholders considered, was crucial to the operation of Upskilling@Work at the time (though later reflections from some were that potentially this had been rushed into and could have been more considered in hindsight). The changing funding model did bring greater risks of withdrawals or non-completions as there was no financial cost or repercussions for not attending.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the overall ambition for Upskilling@Work did not change and even if the delivery approach was forced to adjust, the intention to support the upskilling of individuals to engender growth and productivity improvements remained, albeit with some pivot from organisations towards resilience rather than growth. There were also some positive changes that emerged including no longer requiring wet signatures on paperwork from businesses, reductions in travel time for trainers and assessors allowing them to deliver more hours of training provision to larger numbers, and with greater flexibility in delivery.

4.2 Appropriateness of Upskilling@Work Design

Though there were some changes to the delivery approach for Upskilling@Work as the project pivoted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the design remained appropriate given the context and need. The core design of the project did not change, with delivery continuing to provide an approved list of courses through a consortium of colleges as work-based learning to meet the needs of businesses. Any changes effected in 2020 allowed the operation to successfully continue in the new context and, of the surveyed businesses within this evaluation period, 82% reported that the programme met their needs.

The key shift from a part funded to fully funded model was an appropriate change early in the Covid-19 pandemic to avoid putting additional financial constraints on businesses to allow them to undertake training and support organisations. Given some of the challenges that colleges had been facing in engagement around the preparedness for businesses to pay for the support, the offer of fully funded training was helpful to securing participation. Viewed this way, the programme was improved by the change, however, given one of the key ambitions behind the part funding was to shift the culture of businesses to see the value in paying for training (and not just seeking public funded interventions) the change in funding approach could be considered as something of a step backwards.

Currently the fully funded model is great for demand, but there is still a question about whether it has removed the demand for future paid for funding. From our perspective if someone has been accessing a course for free and happy, they might still want to access it because they know it's good, but for many there will be looking for the free stuff.

Another consideration for the appropriateness of the project design was the introduction of new courses to the approved list to respond to changing businesses demand. Though this was fully appropriate given the rationale for the project, it came into conflict with both the practicalities of introducing new courses (including barriers of recruiting trainers and assessors) and the target output nature of European Funding. While some new courses were added during the March 2020 to June 2023 period of the programme, most colleges had settled into patterns of delivery of several core courses to some principal business clients. There was less incentive for colleges to take further risks, especially in the context of the pandemic, to seek out new businesses and introduce new courses to respond to their particular needs.

We can deliver things where we have trainers and have capacity but if someone comes with a niche request, we can't always deliver this. The project should have been doing this to respond to demand, but we can't possibly service them all. Instead, we concentrated on the lecturers who run broader programmes like ILM or food safety where we can take lots of modules and qualifications.

5. Performance

This chapter provides a summary of the performance of Upskilling@Work against its output and outcome targets across the four operations and colleges.

By May 2023, the Upskilling@Work operations had met 73% of their participant target and 70% of their SO1 target. The targets for SO2 have been more challenging, particularly in West Wales and the Valleys where engagement of those with existing level 2 and above skills looking to access courses at level 3 and above has been more challenging.

Table 5.1: Total outputs and results by strategic objectives up to June 2023

	Total Participants/ Outputs	Participants gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving	Participants gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above
EW SO1	1141	886	
EW SO2	2115		1221
WWV SO1	1337	989	
WWV SO2	1749		924
Total	6,342	1,875	2,145
Target	8,740	2,666	3,861
Proportion of Total Target	73%	70%	56%

While there are some indicators for the Upskilling@Work programme which have exceeded their targets, the large proportion have fallen short, as shown in table 5.3 below. There is no clear pattern or distinction between different targets and with both output and result indicators being met in some instances and geographies as well as underperforming in others. Stakeholders reported that the targets were ambitious with colleges having overestimated their capacity to deliver some provision. Despite this, some colleges have met some of their targets while others have found the targets more difficult.

A breakdown of college outputs is shown in the table below. As with the overall performance most college partners are below their targets. Only Coleg y Cymoedd has met both its output and result indicator targets though Coleg Gwent has met or nearly met its output and result targets in both EW and WWV.

Table 5.2: Output performance and targets by college

Output	EW SO1		EW SO2		WWV SO1		WWV SO2	
	Actual	Target	Actual	Target	Actual	Target	Actual	Target
NPTC Group	158	424	159	897				
Cardiff and the Vale	591	1053	1187	1642				
Coleg Gwent	392	322	769	622	495	435	641	796
Coleg y Cymoedd					616	565	779	689
Merthyr					217	420	258	370
Bridgend					9	232	71	273

Table 5.3: Result performance and targets by college

Result	EW SO1		EW SO2		WWV SO1		WWV SO2	
	Actual	Target	Actual	Target	Actual	Target	Actual	Target
NPTC Group	99	351	62	756				
Cardiff and the Vale	455	857	671	1315				
Coleg Gwent	332	263	488	499	419	315	337	491
Coleg y Cymoedd					409	408	430	414
Merthyr					154	303	113	222
Bridgend					7	169	44	164

The overall completion rate, the movement of participants starting courses (outputs) to finishing (results), is 63.4%. Completion rates were much lower on SO2 than SO1 though, with a completion rate of 77.6% on EW SO1 and 73.9% on WWV SO1 compared to 57.7% on EW SO2 and 52.8% on WWV SO2. This reflects the longer length of courses and assessment requirements to complete higher level qualifications under SO2 and therefore the greater propensity to not complete.

As outlined in section 4.1.1 above, there is also going to be a reduction in the target outputs due to some underspend in West Wales and the Valleys as part of the final claim. This is not shown in the figures but would increase the overall performance from 73% to 75% and similarly raise the SO1 and SO2 performance by several percentage points.

Related to the ambition of the targets was the capacity requirement of the colleges. Many reported that during the lifetime of the Upskilling@Work programme it was difficult to recruit delivery staff such as trainers. The tightness of the labour market and competition for jobs in the post Covid-19 landscape was cited as a reason for this, with businesses paying more than colleges could afford for trainers to practice their crafts, rather than teach to others. Shifts in work-life balance were also cited as a barrier to recruitment in colleges where trainers and assessors often work evenings to accommodate business needs and have to travel extensively from site to site while other roles now offered more home working. Beyond the ambitious targets there are a number of other factors that have affected the performance. Most notably has been the implications of Covid-19 and despite the ramping up of delivery in the March 2020 to June 2023 period this has hampered some efforts, particularly where delivery staff and colleges were on furlough. It should be noted though that at the interim report, the project was also behind target profiles overall ahead of the onset of the pandemic, so while this was certainly a factor this is not the only reasons for the underperformance.

Another key challenge has been around policy changes and the introduction of new courses which have served to compete with the Upskilling@Work offer. PLA, and particularly the Employer Learning Accounts strand of delivery focusing on employer skills support, was widely cited by stakeholders as the intervention that most impacted on delivery. PLA commenced after the Upskilling@Work offer had begun and drew on the same resource within the colleges while supporting similar businesses and individuals. In order to meet delivery targets on PLA, given the shorter deadlines, colleges had often put more learners through this programme than PLA before looking to make up the numbers in the remaining period of the Upskilling@Work delivery.

While it is hard to see largescale evidence of this in the numbers of participants compared with results, it was suggested by several stakeholders that one implication of the transition of Upskilling@Work to a de minimis model led to increased rate of drop out of participants. With many businesses having not paid for the support it was hypothesised that they had less incentive to continue and complete engagements where this commitment began to conflict with other priorities.

Against the demographic targets for the project, Upskilling@Work was mixed in its performance, as shown in table 5.2 below. A larger proportion of the participants in the training were female than targeted which was positive, and the targets for Black, Asian or minority ethnic participants were also met. While caring responsibility targets were exceeded, this included childcare which is not clear was in the original target group. Age demographic targets were mixed with fewer young people accessing the training than had been anticipated (though it exceeded two thirds of the target proportions) but more older people. The target proportion for those with a disability or work limiting health condition were not met. While the Upskilling@Work programme was limited by the individuals that the employers put forward for the projects, potentially more could have been done to promote the training available to the targeted groups. Another option would have been to explain to employers that the programme was keen to work with these target groups and ask them to put forward individuals who met these criteria.

A further breakdown of the demographics by Specific Objective is available in section 6.4.2 below.

Table 5.4: Total outputs by demographic groups against targets

Demographic Group	Participants	Proportion of Total	Target
Gender Female	3236	51%	40%
Age Under 25	535	8%	12%
Age Over 54	944	15%	14%
Black, Asian or minority ethnic Participants	199	3%	3%
Disability or Work Limiting Health Condition	188	3%	7%
Caring Responsibility	2112	33%	3%
Total Participants	6342		

Despite these challenges and the underperformance shown in table 2.3, most of the internal stakeholders were pleased with the delivery of Upskilling@Work against the context. There was a feeling among the college leads that they had delivered what they could and had worked hard to best utilise the colleges capacities to facilitate the provision of needed courses to local businesses.

Tables 5.5 and 5.6 below present the performance of the operation in each programme area in relation to achievements of target indicators. The tables show how females were far more likely to enrol in learning generally in EW compared to WWV. Table 3.5 shows a degree of uniformity in terms of rates of achievement by participant. It is evident however that those aged under 25, across both programme areas, were least likely to achieve an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving.

Table 3.6 also shows a degree of uniformity in the proportion of participants gaining qualifications at Level 3 or above, however in EW, the pattern associated with under 25 year olds identified in table 3.5 is repeated. In WWV whilst achievement rates for Black, Asian or minority ethnic participants look considerably lower than for other demographic groups, the low number of participants (36 in total) would suggest some caution should be taken into inferring too much from this performance, particularly as it has not been reflected in the WWV operation

Table 5.5: Participants gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving

Demographic Group	EW SO1				WWV SO1			
	Total	% of participants	Qualification achieved	% of participants securing qualifications	Total	% of participants	Qualification achieved	% of participants securing qualifications
Gender Female p17	733	64%	588	80%	479	35%	415	87%
Age Under 25	197	17%	138	70%	207	15%	130	63%
Age Over 54	158	14%	147	93%	170	13%	141	83%
Black, Asian or minority ethnic Participants	65	6%	49	75%	21	2%	19	90%
Disability or Work Limiting Health Condition	38	3%	29	76%	33	2%	25	76%
Caring Responsibility p31	404	35%	322	80%	444	33%	352	79%
Total Participants	1,142		905	79%	1,357		1025	76%

Table 5.6: Participants gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above

Demographic Group	EW SO2				WWV SO2			
	Total	% of participants	Qualification achieved	% of participants securing qualifications	Total	% of participants	Qualification achieved	% of participants securing qualifications
Gender Female p17	1176	55%	748	64%	898	51%	596	66%
Age Under 25	186	9%	84	45%	141	8%	76	54%
Age Over 54	195	9%	121	62%	210	12%	111	53%
Black, Asian or minority ethnic Participants	84	4%	48	57%	36	2%	12	33%
Disability or Work Limiting Health Condition	67	3%	35	52%	52	3%	29	56%
Caring Responsibility p31	662	31%	399	60%	637	36%	369	58%
Total Participants	2151		1306	61%	1773		987	56%

Table 5.7: Delivery outputs against target profile up to May 2023

Operation	Indicator	Actual	Target	Variance
EW SO1	Output: participants with no formal qualifications - male	217	397	-45.3%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - male	165	327	-49.5%
	Output: participants with no formal qualifications - female	461	597	-22.8%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - female	358	489	-26.8%
	Output: participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - male	193	376	-48.7%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - male	146	308	-52.6%
	Output: participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - female	270	429	-37.1%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - female	217	347	-37.5%
EW SO2	Output: participants with a Level 2 qualification - male	357	512	-30.3%
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male	188	419	-55.1%
	Output: participants with a Level 2 qualification - female	366	645	-43.3%
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female	258	527	-51.0%
	Output: participants with a Level 3 qualification or above - male	593	1031	-42.5%
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male	325	839	-61.3%
	Output: participants with a Level 3 qualification or above - female	799	973	-17.9%

Operation	Indicator	Actual	Target	Variance
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female	450	785	-42.7%
WWV SO1	Output: participants with no formal qualifications - male	512	733	-30.2%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - male	359	525	-31.6%
	Output: participants with no formal qualifications - female	245	305	-19.7%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - female	227	221	2.7%
	Output: participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - male	365	408	-10.5%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - male	236	289	-18.3%
	Output: participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - female	215	206	4.4%
	Result: gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - female	167	148	12.8%
WWV SO2	Output: participants with a Level 2 qualification - male	346	796	-56.5%
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male	143	477	-70.0%
	Output: participants with a Level 2 qualification - female	204	483	-57.8%
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female	152	286	-46.9%
	Output: participants with a Level 3 qualification or above - male	523	485	7.8%
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male	211	289	-27.0%
	Output: participants with a Level 3 qualification or above - female	676	364	85.7%
	Result: gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female	418	216	93.5%

5.1 Budget

The Upskilling@Work programme will underspend on its West Wales and the Valleys budget as part of an agreement with WEFO to effectively decommit funding and reduce the final targets. There will also be an underspend on the EW operations resulting in an overall underspend of 8.1%. This has mainly been due to lower delivery than envisaged and the implications of Covid-19. Given the length of the Upskilling@Work programme, the underspend is marginal, however, against the wider programme underperformance of -27% the programme has been more costly than envisaged.

Table 5.8: Operation expenditure against budget to June 2023

Region	Strategic Objective	Actual to Date	Total Budget	Variance
WWV	SO1	£3,660,672	£4,041,961	-9.43%
WWV	SO2	£4,727,935	£5,127,819	-7.80%
EW	SO1	£3,580,077	£3,845,155	-6.89%
EW	SO2	£5,223,078	£5,695,002	-8.29%
Total		£17,191,762	£18,709,937	-8.11%

6. Delivery & Management

In this chapter the evaluation explores the effectiveness of the Upskilling@Work delivery and management drawing on insight from the survey and stakeholder interviews.

6.1 Management & Governance

As outlined above, delivery of Upskilling@Work was through a consortium of colleges with a lead beneficiary in each region (EW and WWV). Two principal groups were established during the implementation to manage the operations with representation from each of the colleges, and these continued into the March 2020 to June 2023 period. The Operational Management Board (OMB) provided oversight of the delivery aspects of the programme and resolved day to day issues working to share learning across the colleges. The Strategic Management Board (SMB) oversaw the whole programme and resolved any challenges that went beyond the individual college as well as informing any of the directives needed to respond to wider changes, such as Covid-19 and the reprofiling of the operations. As the programme entered the last six months of operation, the decision was taken to combine the OMB and SMB groups as delivery was winding down and there were fewer separate strands for the two groups to discuss (particularly the OMB). This was felt by stakeholders to be appropriate and responded to some of the indications identified in the interim evaluation that there was little to resolve.

I think that the collaboration between the different colleges has been very positive and the openness about processes and what has been achieved has been really good.

In this last period of delivery there were few changes in the management processes for Upskilling@Work with much of the systems and ways of working having been effectively established. Stakeholders reported strong communication between the colleges through the management groups and the collaboration was still considered to be one of the key strengths of Upskilling@Work. Management activities were shared between the colleges where they had capacity or a strength in that area. There was good issue resolution through discussion and sharing of insight between the partners, as demonstrated by the response to the Covid-19 pandemic which showed resilience on the part of the colleges resolving the issues together and delegating tasks effectively. It was also suggested by stakeholders that the mutual challenges faced by Covid-19 brought the consortium closer together and improved collaboration.

Reflecting on the separation of the programme into the WWV and EW areas and then again into the SO1 and SO2 operations, it was suggested that perhaps having one lead beneficiary rather than two would have helped to bring the two elements closer together. One lead beneficiary may not have maximised the resource strengths of Coleg Gwent and Coleg y Cymoedd, though there could have been greater consistency in how certain aspects were managed. For instance, there were different quarterly reporting methods in EW and WWV and greater oversight and analysis of the data as a whole could have been achieved with one responsible organisation.

In hindsight it would have been better with just one lead beneficiary as having two created some challenges given there were four operations under 2 programmes for one Upskilling@Work project.

The relationship between the Upskilling@Work team and WEFO was regarded by key stakeholders as strong throughout the programme. There was clarity in information shared; the processes developed by Upskilling@Work to monitor performance and submit claims continued to work well. Any issues, such as the views to reprofile, were discussed openly with WEFO and a solution found.

The Upskilling@Work team is very good, really supportive and if there are any issues it's easy to get feedback and work together to make it work. They are very responsive.

Internally, the stakeholders reported that within each college there was good understanding of the Upskilling@Work programme and its function within the wider college offer. Though its clarity of purpose may have been disrupted by the pandemic, senior college staff still recognised the benefits and opportunities that the programme brought, while engagement and delivery staff felt the administrative aspects of the Upskilling@Work teams that they dealt with were effective. Appropriate information was reported to flow down to the delivery staff and that they could concentrate on course provision rather than paperwork was seen as an advantage for the programme.

Having consistent teams within the lead beneficiaries was particularly helpful to the long-term delivery of Upskilling@Work and its situation in the wider landscape. Though there were some changes in staff personnel at some colleges during this delivery period these changes were well managed by the colleges and were regarded as having minimal disruption on the function and operation of the Upskilling@Work programme.

Upskilling@Work benefitted from having a stable management structure with the people in charge. [Key staff] have all been there for the whole show which makes them very reliable.

That the colleges were able to work together collectively, avoiding competition, had benefits not only for the functioning of Upskilling@Work but also supported the wider discussions on skills provision in South Wales. Evaluator observations of the management group meetings showed that they were able to discuss wider considerations such as other funded programmes which had a bearing on Upskilling@Work as well as considerations for future opportunities after the programme had ended. Such closer working relationships and cultural shifts among the colleges are an important wider benefit from Upskilling@Work.

6.1.1 Monitoring

As alluded, the monitoring of Upskilling@Work has been highly effective, drawing on the capability and capacity within the lead beneficiaries and establishment of an effective CRM system for use across the programme early during implementation. Good practice had been established with the lead beneficiaries organising 'health checks' for the joint beneficiary colleges to help them with their paperwork and ensure they were consistent and had the evidence for everything they were submitting. This administrative support was open and positive for all parties, helping to resolve issues early and avoid future challenges. There were also improvements in administrative process during the March 2020 to June 2023 delivery period with the movement to digital signatures during the pandemic.

One area that was reportedly challenging was the operational split in the programme creating an EW and WWV lead and then slightly different reporting approaches for the two. As Coleg Gwent straddled both regions this was felt most keenly by their staff who had to do things slightly differently and information provided back to them was slightly different depending on region. Claim forms for instance, were structured differently in EW than in WWV.

The monitoring of the project has been well enabled by these tools and approaches, though it was suggested that the gathered data could have been used more effectively to help target further interventions or develop other course responses.

6.2 Engagement

During the March 2020 to July 2023 period, engagement followed a similar approach to the first part of the programme; utilising the existing outreach teams within each college to work with businesses and identify suitable provision to meet their needs (of which Upskilling@Work was one of several options). As highlighted above, however, there was some difficulties in deploying this approach due to the Covid-19 pandemic and initially demand decreased substantially. The Upskilling@Work team and the respective colleges decided to suspend active promotion of training opportunities within their networks during the first few months of the pandemic. When engagement recommenced, it was under a de minimis model and therefore courses were fully funded for most small businesses. This had advantages for the engagement onto the programme though ran the risk of late dropouts and incomplete courses as there was no financial commitment from businesses.

Prior to Covid-19 the engagement approach was appropriate, providing all training opportunities to businesses (which met the needs of the colleges as a whole) while ensuring Upskilling@Work could be promoted without additional resource requirements. That engagement was undertaken by the colleges rather than through an Upskilling@Work branded marketing campaign allowing the colleges to operate effectively within their own areas and target new businesses. This permitted relationships to develop that could go beyond the Upskilling@Work programme period, though it was also suggested by stakeholders that the programme did not reach out much beyond its existing contacts and so may have been to some extent detrimental. The impact of Covid-19 also meant that the college engagement teams were less able to approach businesses they had no former contact with.

An area where the data generated from Upskilling@Work could have been better used was potentially in targeted engagement and going back to individuals and employers after they had completed one course and asking if they would want to move onto the next. As touched on, while Upskilling@Work should have potentially looked to establish new business clients this was harder during the pandemic and there was less incentive for engagement with new clients. Also, as engagement was within each college and not under an Upskilling@Work brand this may have made it more difficult for new businesses to come across the support.

I think we could've been better in engaging businesses if we had more resource dedicated to marketing.

Further, stakeholders felt that the number driven targets of Upskilling@Work (as with other ESF programmes) may have also led to businesses who could align to the training receiving it as opposed to others who may have reflected a greater need or for whom such training may have led to greater outcomes. It was questioned whether some of the large employers who put individuals through courses such as the Institute of Leadership and Management were really fitting with the purpose of Upskilling@Work, though acknowledged from an administrative perspective having fewer large companies took less resource. Certain courses were felt to fit well with Upskilling@Work and then some employers fit well with these courses. On average, each business accessed 3.5 different Upskilling@Work courses. Another challenge facing engagement has been the EW and WWV split, with the support from Upskilling@Work having to align with what a college could deliver within their region. There were reported occasions where suitable businesses were seeking support and while best suited to the provision from another college in the consortium were unable to access their training as they were in the wrong region.

Despite these areas of refinement, and over and above the implications of the pandemic, Upskilling@Work was generally successful in the engagement approaches it did employ. The colleges were able to identify and target many suitable businesses through their engagement teams and could successfully 'hide the wiring' of the different funded programmes to ensure the best option for a business was identified.

The most common routes through which employers heard of the Upskilling@Work scheme was direct contact from the college (27%) or through an existing relationship with the relevant college (22%). One fifth of businesses were also recommended to the scheme by another business or contact (20%). Some 14% of respondents came across the programme through an online search, though this did not detail whether it was the dedicated Upskilling@Work website they reached or the college. Given the reduction in open marketing following the pandemic, and the limitations identified in the interim evaluation, advertising or promotional material routes were a less successful means of engagement, with only three per cent of respondents reporting they had come across the programme this way. Only one of the surveyed employers came across the scheme through a recommendation by a local authority.

Reviewing the organisations who responded to the longitudinal study found that 25% had gone on to put additional staff through Upskilling@Work training support in the March 2020 to June 2023 phase of the programme as well as those who had been supported in the first phase. On average, each business had more members of staff (4.5) accessing multiple courses than those who were engaging with training for the first time (3). This suggests both the importance of repeat engagements with Upskilling@Work but also that potentially the model of moving learners up levels of support is working.

I think the businesses have been well aligned and we have looked for more of a partnership engagement, moving from Upskilling@Work training and then on to other stuff like work placements and events evenings.

6.2.1 Diagnosis of training needs

As part of the engagement process, businesses could receive a diagnosis of their training needs to identify which courses would be relevant. However, many (48%) did not require such an activity as they were already aware of what they wanted. Where a business did undergo the training needs diagnosis it was mostly reported positively, with 65% of these employers stating it was very effective and 27% reporting it was quite effective (only 8% reported it was quite or very ineffective).

While it may be effective that many businesses were able to directly access support they were already aware of, by not accessing a training needs diagnostics some organisations may have been restricting the opportunities available from the college. In the longitudinal business survey of participants from the first part of the programme (up to March 2020), over half of the respondent employers (59%) reported that they had further training needs, but the majority of these were unspecified (62%). This suggests that diagnosis remains an important part of colleges' activity when engaging with businesses. Among the delivery staff consulted as part of the evaluation it was suggested that this diagnosis and discussion was very valuable to all parties.

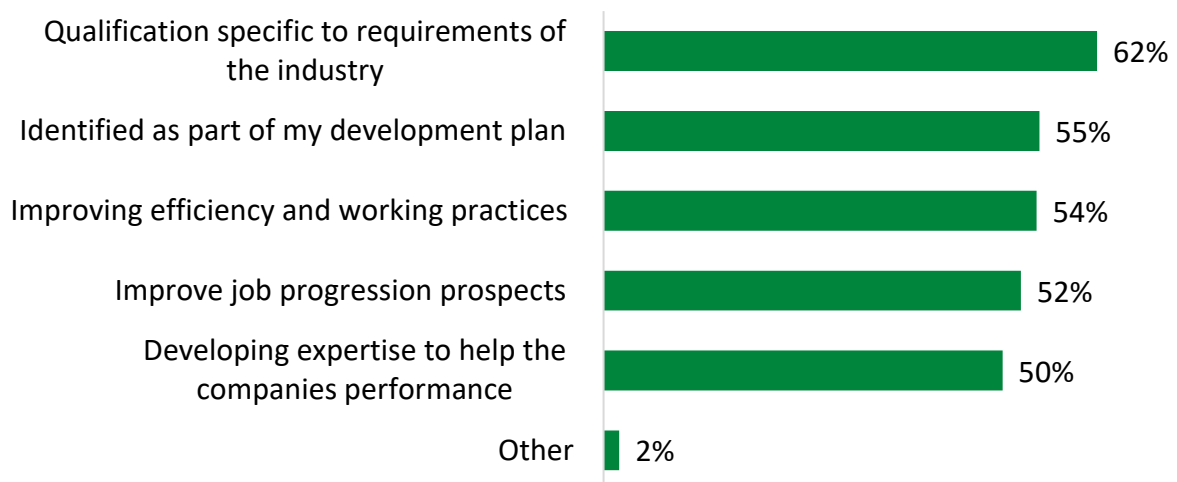
One of the key benefits of undertaking the training diagnosis was that businesses were often reported to not know what training is available, let alone what might be suitable. Stakeholders were able to suggest that by showcasing the range of provision on offer, businesses would become better able to understand where training might be appropriate for their future development.

6.2.2 Training expectations

Training expectations during the March 2020 to June 2023 period of Upskilling@Work closely matched those during the interim evaluation. Employees identified qualifications specific to the requirements of their industry as the principal ambition for accessing the training (62%). As figure 6.1 below shows, other ambitions were also widely cited, both business and individual focused.

Stakeholders reported that for some organisations and individuals there was less demand for the accreditation that came with the courses, and many were just seeking the skills. Where the training was free to the organisation under the revised programme post Covid-19 the businesses were happy to take the accredited element, though in some instances this led to less commitment to complete the assessments. In other cases, such as courses providing site cards, the accreditation was seen as the key priority of accessing the training, and some individuals were reportedly harder to engage in the learning.

Figure 6.1: Skills employees or employers sought to gain from the training



Source: U@W Employee Survey (N=303)

Reviewing the extent to which the subsequent training met the needs of the businesses, 82% reported it met their needs to a great extent and a further 14% to some extent. While companies identifying specific qualifications they required is likely a large driver of these high scores, that there was a needs assessment and Upskilling@Work was able to respond to some of these (or the business was put onto other programmes) is also likely to be part of the explanation.

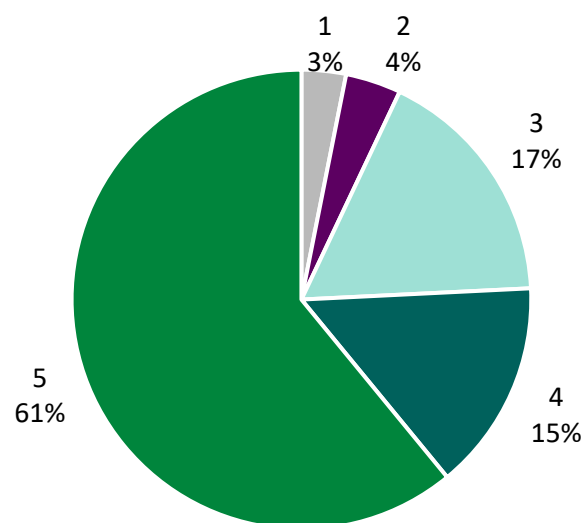
6.2.3 Enrolment and Communication

The businesses reported that enrolling onto the programme and accessing the training for their employees was simple and quick in the majority of cases (83%). A further 9% reported that it was simple but time-consuming given some of the paperwork required and the amount of supporting information. One quarter of employees (26%) reported that they had not been involved in any of the sign-up process with their employer doing it. Of the employees that were involved in the enrolment process, 68% felt that it was straightforward. A small proportion (between 1% and 3%) suggested that there were paperwork issues, it was time consuming or that there were communication challenges.

There were few suggested improvements from the businesses and employees beyond a small proportion recommending simplifying the paperwork and reducing the time taken to get registered.

Where some potential challenges were identified these were in communication. Nearly one in ten businesses (9%) reported they did not get good communication from the college during the registration and onboarding process. Similarly, 10% of employees felt communication could have been improved when they were trying to enrol and start the course. However, overall, the businesses rated communication as 4.2 out of five, while employees gave an average score of 4.4.

Figure 6.2: Employers rating of communication with colleges (5 = high)



Source: U@W Business Survey (N=128)

Given the volumes of survey respondents from different colleges it is hard to make comparisons, but there were higher proportions of lower scores (below three out of five) for business communication at Cardiff and Vale College, Coleg Y Cymoedd, and NPTC Group.

6.3 Course Delivery

As outlined above, the courses delivered through Upskilling@Work are determined firstly by being on an approved list and then by the ability of a college to deliver. The capacity of the college staff, nature of the course and its duration, as well as the number of different businesses seeking to access the course (more businesses may necessitate greater numbers of separate site visits) will then determine the number of places that each course can provide. Courses therefore vary between several participants to ~20 and in duration from less than one month to over a year.

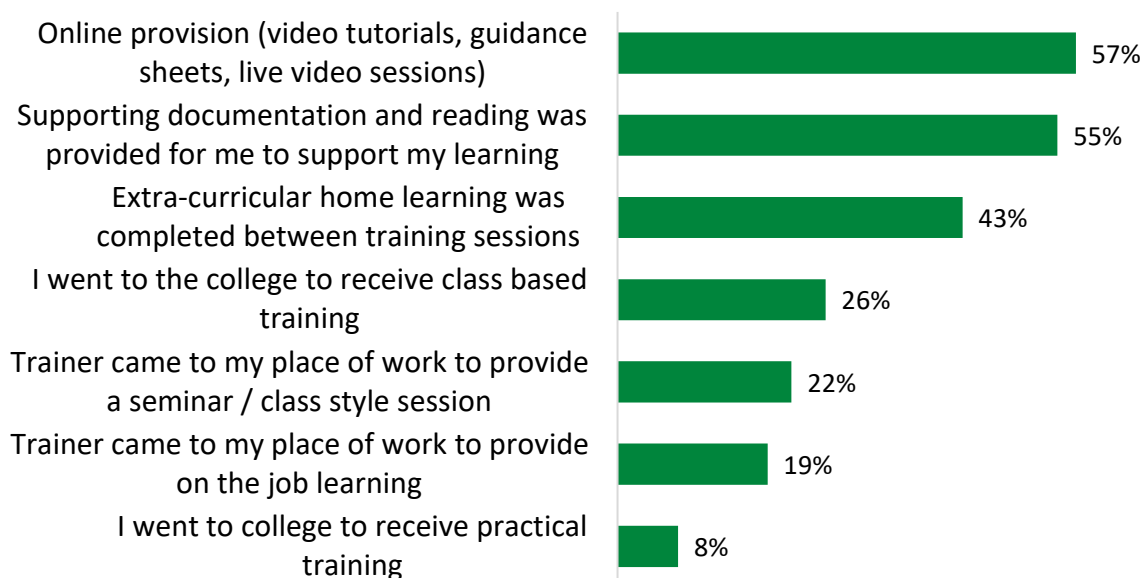
Delivery is then typically a blend of workplace and college-based learning, usually involving both theory and practical learning which covers one to one sessions, class based practice, and document and video material. Some form of assessment is usually required at the end of a course under Upskilling@Work given they are all accredited, though this can take the form of a coursework portfolio as well as observational assessment.

The comments outlined in this section are general observations on the delivery of all courses and modules under Upskilling@Work across the colleges. While the findings should be applicable to the programme, due to the number of courses and colleges conclusions may be applied to all areas that only relate to a specific course or college that have not been possible to separate out. For instance, the insight from delivery staff has informed these findings but many will only have experience of one course and only at one college.

6.3.1 Training Received

As shown in the figure below, the response to Covid-19 led to much of the training being through online provision (57% compared to 22% for the first part of the programme). While this was a departure from the workplace-based learning model of the original Upskilling@Work, online delivery permitted the flexibility that workplace based learning offered to businesses to fit around their schedules and minimise time away from the workplace. During consultations, delivery staff also highlighted the benefits of being able to offer online provision; the flexibility and efficiencies (such as enabling more learners from multiple sites or organisations for fewer trainers) while also suggesting face to face was a stronger approach. Online delivery was also not something that was always appropriate on a course and some businesses preferred face to face, typically for hands-on courses. Generally, an effective blended delivery model was achieved where some face-to-face provision was offered (when Covid-19 lockdowns allowed) but the flexibility of online learning could be maximised with face-to-face provision. This was important learning for the colleges across all parts of their operation for future.

Figure 6.3: Elements of training received by employees



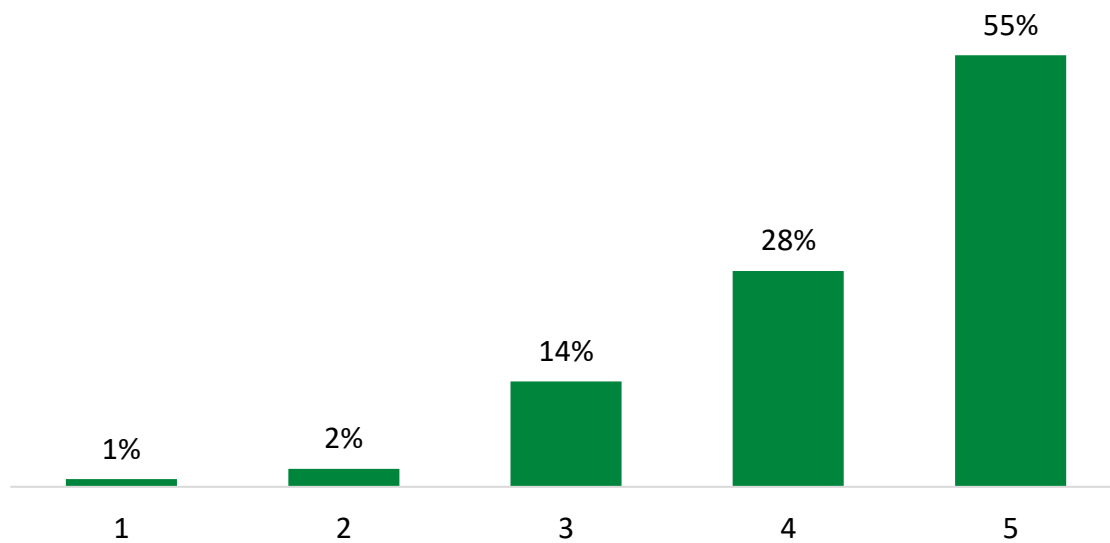
Source: U@W Employee Survey (N=303)

For the most part the training provision was regarded as of a high quality by the stakeholders, with effective trainers and assessors. The course, modules and requirements were clearly set out along with expectations at the start of the delivery and then training progressed on whichever schedule the course demanded. The majority of participant employees (65%) felt that the delivery aligned closely with their expectations. A third (32%) of employees felt that their expectations were somewhat met and fewer than one in 20 (4%) felt as if their expectations were not at all fulfilled. Among the businesses, 82% reported that the training provision met their needs to a great extent. These findings continue to suggest that delivery was appropriate under Upskilling@Work, suggesting that training offered is well aligned to the needs of engaged businesses.

The only challenges that emerged with delivery came back to communication, either on the part of the employee not responding and engaging, or the trainer not following up. In many cases the lag effects of Covid-19 were responsible for these issues.

When asked to rate the quality of the training provision they received on a scale of one to five where five was high, the average score from participant employees was 4.3. Over half (55%) gave scores of five out of five. The scores are a strong endorsement of the quality of the provision and the appropriateness of the content for the majority of participant employees.

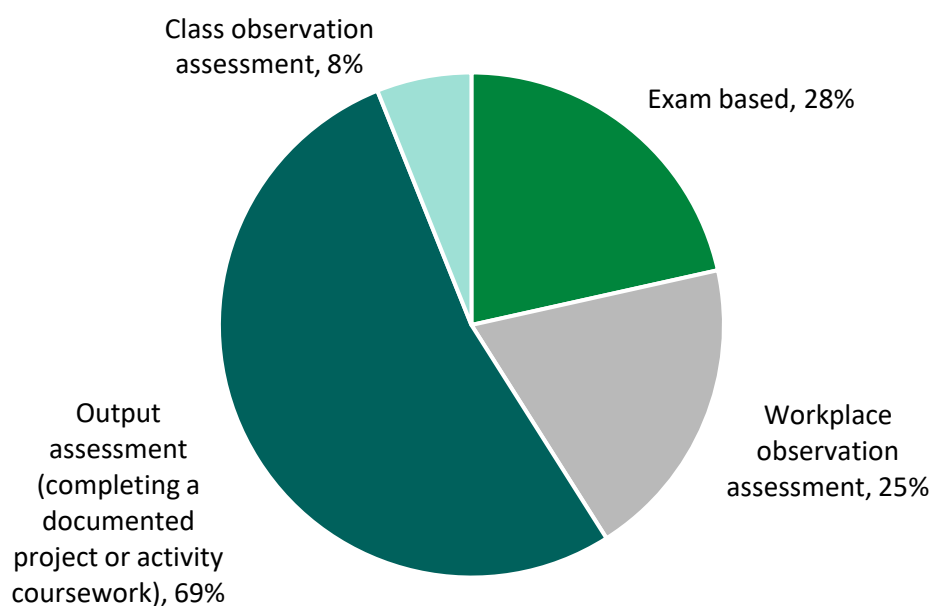
Figure 6.4: Score of the quality of training provision reported by employees



Source: U@W Employee Survey (N=303)

Given the accredited nature of provision under Upskilling@Work, most courses required an assessment. A breakdown of the assessment type is shown in the figure below. While 61% of respondents identified no improvements to the assessments, problems with marking of assessments and communication of assessment requirements were identified as issues by 7% and 6% of respondents respectively.

Figure 6.5: Types of assessment required for qualification



Source: U@W Employee Survey (N=303)

6.3.2 Accessibility

Two per cent of participating employees surveyed (totalling seven respondents) had a work limiting health condition or disability. While six of the seven participants felt that colleges adapted to and made allowances for their personal needs, one respondent with dyslexia cited the academic nature of assessment as detrimental, suggesting discussion-based assessment in place of written and reading-based assessment. Another dyslexic employee shared that the replacement of a written assessment with testing through recordings was helpful to them.

Internal stakeholders suggested that all adjustments were made to the delivery of courses to accommodate the needs of participants. Some of the online provision may have helped with these adjustments but the flexibility of the delivery model in the workplace and at a college, the trainers were able to undertake sessions in the evenings and adjusting any coursework and deadlines to allow completion were all mentioned. Almost all the participant employees surveyed (98%) felt that the timing and location of training rendered it easy to access.

For the 28% of respondents who had childcare responsibilities, almost all (96%) felt that training was flexible and responsive to their caring needs. For those 4% who reported issues, this was often were impacted by Covid-19 related issues; two respondents cited fixed training days as an inconvenience with others having children home from school and unable to rearrange sessions. The strong accessibility of the Upskilling@Work programme is important for the equal opportunities Cross Cutting Theme.

6.4 Cross Cutting Themes

As part of the funding agreement Upskilling@Work committed to three Cross Cutting Theme objectives, Equal Opportunities and Gender Mainstreaming (including promoting Welsh language), Sustainable Development, and Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion. Equal Opportunities and Gender Mainstreaming looks to identify ways in which programmes can reduce inequality and ensure fair access for all (as well as promote and accommodate the use of Welsh). Sustainable Development focuses on what the programme can do to minimise waste in delivery and encourage more sustainable approaches. Tackling poverty and Social Exclusion aims to support those facing various barriers to access support and opportunities to overcome these challenges.

Case level indicators were established for the operations which included activity supporting speakers of the Welsh Language, resource efficiency measures and developing or engaging CCT champions. All of these were met, with a CCT champion being appointed from the Operational Board to help disseminate good practice and ensure that the Cross Cutting Theme agenda was considered during the delivery. This CCT champion collated and provided examples of where the programme had delivered against the CCT objectives which are covered in more detail below.

6.4.1 Welsh Language

The Upskilling@Work operation has made all marketing materials and paperwork available in Welsh. The operation ensured that course materials can also be provided through the medium of Welsh when requested. However, the ability of the colleges to deliver courses through the medium of Welsh has depended on the language ability of tutors and assessors. Although translation services are offered for course delivery, there has been limited demand for this provision from Welsh speakers. As noted in the interim evaluation, where participants have requested Welsh translation, challenges have emerged as these learners are having their English course translated despite understanding the English delivery. This likely creates the perception that pursuing Welsh language delivery only presents an inconvenience for learners, leading them to opt for English-medium provision. This pattern is borne out in the survey data: of the 303 individuals surveyed for this March 2020 to June 2023 phase of the programme, none reported that they wanted their training in Welsh, and none received it in Welsh, despite 6% reporting to be Welsh speakers.

In cases where there has been sufficient demand for courses to be wholly delivered through the medium of Welsh, finding a course leader with the capability to deliver the course in Welsh has become the main challenge. Furthermore, it has been suggested that some Welsh speaking participants would still prefer courses to be delivered in English as they will mostly be communicating the learning and skills from their training in English.

The evaluation finds that the dilemma of Welsh language provision is difficult to solve without significant additional planning and resource dedicated to addressing it. Suggestions that those requesting Welsh delivery are grouped together would create challenges for the timing of delivery and coverage of the various workplaces the trainers needed to visit and would face the same challenges with either translation or finding a trainer who spoke Welsh. When consulted, college leads noted that full Welsh-medium provision was only possible when enough examiners could speak Welsh, which was not deliberately planned. In its current state, through no fault of the programme's delivery, resource and demand constraints often make Welsh-medium delivery an inconvenience for the learner. Therefore, by concentrating on the Welsh Language CCT through bilingual preparation of paperwork, promotional material and through websites is appropriate for the operation to meet this obligation.

These suggest that the Upskilling@Work Joint Beneficiaries could do more to actively demonstrate that Welsh provision is offered. Currently, it is likely learners would feel like they are putting in additional effort to undertake the course through the medium of Welsh compared to English. However, the ability of the operation to respond to any requests for Welsh delivery is a limiting factor. More research beyond the scope of Upskilling@Work needs to be conducted to better understand the barriers to choosing Welsh-medium provision.

6.4.2 Equal Opportunities

The operation has made progress towards equal opportunities CCTs compared to the interim evaluation undertaken in March 2020, though it is implicitly challenged by not being active in the selection of participants. Therefore, target outputs are determined by the demand from companies seeking training and whether or not staff who then access the training provision fall inside one of the target profiles. The participant indicators for equal opportunities are shown in table 6.1 where the variance across regions and strategic objectives is clear across all indicators.

It has proved challenging for both the EW and WWV operations to meet most of the equal opportunities target indicators. This has included supporting Black, Asian and minority ethnic participants, a large number of females and working with those who have work limiting health conditions or care responsibilities. While the WWV operations have been less successful this is due to the underperformance of these operations as a whole in their participant numbers. The data shows there are no areas of the equal opportunities targets that are particularly lagging relative to the overall underperformance of the WWV operations, suggesting that with greater participation in the operation these would likely have been met.

Table 6.1: Upskilling@Work participant characteristics by operation

EW SO1	Actual	Profile	Variance
Gender Male	410	773	-47.0%
Gender Female	731	1026	-28.8%
Age Under 25	197	196	0.5%
Age Over 54	158	254	-37.8%
Black, Asian or minority ethnic Participants	65	134	-51.5%
Disabled Participants	15	31	-51.6%
Work Limiting Health Conditions	23	45	-48.9%
Migrant EU	62	134	-53.7%
Migrant Non-EU	22	49	-55.1%
Care/childcare responsibilities	404	625	-35.4%

EW SO2			
Gender Male	950	1762	-46.1%
Gender Female	1165	1399	-16.7%
Age Under 25	183	302	-39.4%
Age Over 54	192	234	-17.9%
Black, Asian or minority ethnic Participants	79	83	-4.8%
Disabled Participants	40	57	-29.8%
Work Limiting Health Conditions	27	47	-42.6%
Migrant EU	81	124	-34.7%
Migrant Non-EU	20	42	-52.4%
Care/childcare responsibilities	650	962	-32.4%
WWV SO1			
Gender Male	877	1141	-23.1%
Gender Female	460	511	-10.0%
Age Under 25	100	274	-63.5%
Age Over 54	269	240	12.1%
Black, Asian or minority ethnic Participants	21	43	-51.2%
Disabled Participants	19	41	-53.7%
Work Limiting Health Conditions	14	48	-70.8%
Migrant EU	42	33	27.3%
Migrant Non-EU	7	18	-61.1%
Care/childcare responsibilities	431	204	111.3%
WWV SO2			
Gender Male	869	1281	-32.2%
Gender Female	880	847	3.9%
Age Under 25	55	199	-72.4%
Age Over 54	325	282	15.2%
Black, Asian or minority ethnic Participants	34	45	-24.4%
Disabled Participants	36	34	5.9%
Work Limiting Health Conditions	14	33	-57.6%
Migrant EU	36	56	-35.7%
Migrant Non-EU	8	22	-63.6%
Care/childcare responsibilities	627	339	85.0%

The operations had set out in their business plan the intention to provide advice and guidance to employers to help address equality of opportunity. While this was not a structured part of the Upskilling@Work programme and varied between colleges the respective engagement teams who worked closely with businesses did often provide advice and guidance. This included support on workforce development plans and training solutions as well as encouraging diversity among those who accessed training. As covered above however, there are limits due to demographics of the employers and the amount of diversity that exists within some business organisations. Despite this, more could have been done by the Upskilling@Work programme to work with the employers who accessed support to ensure they supported diverse groups accessing training where possible.

While referrals can be made to other proposed ESF operations within the Skills for Growth Priority Axis to help reduce inequality in the labour market among women and disadvantaged groups, there was no suggestion by the stakeholders or the Upskilling@Work team that such referrals had been made to encourage this.

The programme therefore impacted equal opportunities where it was able to and appropriate, though did not fully exploit the opportunity to push this more. All the colleges have their own equal opportunities policies which they adhere to and delivery staff report that where appropriate equal opportunities and sustainable development are included within the courses they run. Examples of this include changing teaching methods to be more practical for learners who may struggle with written material and being considerate during written assessments of learners for whom English as a second language. The survey results from those respondents who had declared a work limiting health condition, disability or childcare responsibilities mostly reported they had been well supported through their course under Upskilling@Work. This included through adjustments made to course timescales and deadlines, timing of learning sessions and hosting in locations that were appropriate to the various needs of those participants with disabilities. Several respondents suggested that their trainers/assessors had gone out of their way to provide support where it was recognised, and they were grateful for this. However, one respondent noted that they would have preferred an assessment method that relied less on writing to account for their dyslexia.

6.4.3 Tackling Poverty

Several of the impacts reported by the employers and employees above show that the Upskilling@Work operation is contributing to tackling poverty in Wales. In the interim survey, impacts of the programme for those on low earnings (<£18k per annum) was explored. Forty per cent of those declared were earning <£18k and such individuals did not only receive the benefits of their accredited course, but were more likely to be retained by employers, increase their responsibilities and were more productive members of staff. Recent cost of living pressures on employees and employers made this kind of analysis a poor comparison for the final evaluation, however Upskilling@Work appears to have continued to have a positive impact on tackling poverty, with 65% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the training had helped increase the salary grade they can earn in the future. Furthermore, 49% of respondents without a permanent contract agreed or strongly agreed that the training would help turn their current job role into a permanent contract. More secure employment is essential to ensuring individuals do not fall into poverty, especially in the face of economic shocks when those with lower skills are more at risk (something to be considered during the final evaluation when the effects of Covid-19 on the operation will be considered).

According to evidence collected in the longitudinal employee survey, over one fifth (21%) of respondents had moved into a new role within 24 months of completing the training through Upskilling@Work, 65% of these respondents noted that they were earning more in their new role. Improving the stability of employment while also supporting people into higher paid job roles will further help to safeguard individuals' employment and help to tackle poverty.

6.4.4 Sustainable Development

Upskilling@Work supports sustainable development through the activities of the Joint Beneficiary colleges and through the training delivered where appropriate and has met this indicator. The ability of the operation to have a direct influence on the sustainable development agenda is, however, beyond the scope of the activity under the operation and any impacts are consequential of delivery.

One of the unintended impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the necessary transition to virtual delivery and paperwork, which has substantially reduced emission generally by travel to and from colleges as well as reduced paper consumption following the wider introduction of DocuSign. Consultations with course delivery staff found that many decided to continue training even when face-to-face could continue due to the time and resource that was saved, as well as the added flexibility for participants.

As a workplace-based learning provision, the Upskilling@Work programme already delivers as sustainably as possible by reducing the journeys learners have to make to come to college to access their courses. Training leads will also encourage sustainability and resource efficiency within their courses if this is appropriate for the course, for instance materials wastage in construction.

Each of the colleges has its own resource efficiency and sustainability policies, such as recycling schemes, minimising journeys and using public transport where appropriate, and reducing waste. For instance, NPTC monitor their sites for water consumption and use rainwater harvesting to reduce their impact on water usage. Other colleges have developed travel plans and encourage staff and learners to adopt sustainable practices as part of their general operation. It has reportedly been a difficult element of the operation demonstrating the sustainable development CCT as it is often just undertaken through the general activity of the colleges which was already in place before Upskilling@Work. Therefore, demonstrating and evidencing the sustainable development indicator has become a secondary task, rather than a natural part of the delivery. Upskilling@Work through the pre-existing activities of the partner colleges has been able to achieve this CCT objective.

6.4.5 Contribution towards the Well-being of Future Generations Act

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 centres on improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The legislation focuses on changes that will lead to long-term improvement in Wales, centred on seven well-being goals. As a project that strengthens Wales’s labour force through offering support based on the demand of Welsh businesses, Upskilling@Work (by design) contributes towards a number of the well-being goals at an operation-level scale. It could however be argued that the design of Upskilling@Work has inhibited the operation’s ability to contribute to other well-being goals.

Additional efforts undertaken by the delivery staff and the colleges (which have been discussed in previous sections) expand the project’s contribution towards the well-being goals at a case level. The educational focus of the Upskilling@Work operation adheres to the long term ethos of the Act, contributing towards more productive and resilient employees for the future. Table 6.2 below outlines some of SWAW’s contributions towards the Well-being of Future Generations.

Table 6.2: Upskilling@Work’s contribution to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act

Well-Being Goal	Summary of Contribution	Scale of Contribution	Relevant Targets, Outcomes and Case Studies
A prosperous Wales	The project has made a strong contribution towards skills development and job stability, improving the wealth generation through decent work.	Operation level - Direct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above. • Career Opportunities • Techsol Group Case Study
A resilient Wales	The project has promoted good practice regarding sustainable use of resources through uniting partners that had already integrated effective practice, such as travel and paper minimisation, and college-specific sustainability plans. Economic resilience has also been strengthened by improving workers attitudes to training.	Operation level - Indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable development CCT • Employee Attitudes to Training
A healthier Wales	Although not a direct focus of the project, there is strong	Case level - Indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace Impacts • City Hospice Case Study

Well-Being Goal	Summary of Contribution	Scale of Contribution	Relevant Targets, Outcomes and Case Studies
	evidence demonstrating the correlation between unemployment and poor mental health, the programme tackles this by improving employability and job stability. Furthermore, several beneficiary businesses were based in the care sector, having a positive case-level knock impact on the people they support.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home Instead Case Study
A more equal Wales	Upskilling@Work has supported many workers to develop job relevant skills as well as strengthen communication, organisation and confidence. While the design of Upskilling@Work meant that it was harder to actively target participants, they could have marketed and emphasised the opportunities to provide training and support to underrepresented groups. The operation did however provide equal access to all those who sought training and support.	Operation level - Indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving • New or enhanced skills • Tackling Poverty CCT • Equal Opportunities CCT
A Wales of cohesive communities	The Upskilling@Work operation will have made indirect contribution to Wales's supply chain, particularly by upskilling workers in the construction industry. An improved supply chain will likely make Welsh communities safer and better-connected.	Case level - Indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Outcomes
A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	Upskilling@Work has consistently offered bilingual paperwork, marketing and classroom materials. However, the design of the operation and demand from businesses has restricted its ability to significantly contribute to this goal	Minor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh Language CCT

Well-Being Goal	Summary of Contribution	Scale of Contribution	Relevant Targets, Outcomes and Case Studies
A globally responsible Wales	Upskilling workers through the operation has contributed towards improving the sustainability of Wales's supply chain. Partner colleges also adhered to their own pre-established sustainability plans.	Case level - Indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above. • Sustainable development CCT

6.4.6 Summary

The Upskilling@Work operation has been able to meet its CCT objectives by project close. Sustainable development and tackling poverty have often come as part of the general activity engaged by the colleges or training delivered by the operation. Welsh Language provision has been made, though the challenges of delivering courses bilingually paired with very low demand has thwarted some of the ability to deliver training in Welsh. Delivery of equal opportunities is being fulfilled, but this is very much related to the outputs reached and there are challenges with meeting targets where participants fall outside of the ability of the programme to control. Due to the inherent design and objectives of Upskilling@Work, the operation has made significant contribution to some of the well-being goals laid out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, namely a prosperous and a resilient Wales. Survey evidence has also highlighted some cases of good practice surrounding inclusion of learners through adjusting assessments and offering classes virtually and flexibly, however these varied between colleges. Examples of this good practice included extended deadlines for coursework to allow for the needs of learners with care responsibilities, relocating delivery, changing times or offering sessions online to accommodate attendance.

7. Outcomes & Impacts

This chapter examines some of the outcomes that Upskilling@Work has achieved and the impacts that the improved skills and training has had on both individuals and businesses.

Upskilling@Work has generated a range of immediate outcomes and benefits, as well as some longer-term impacts for both the businesses who have sponsored participants through training and the individuals themselves. Some of the short-term outcomes for the March 2020 to June 2023 period of the programme have been captured through the surveys conducted with participants. Longer term impacts have also been considered through a repeat survey of some of those organisations engaged during the first evaluation. This provided a second data point against which the impacts could be assessed which are presented below.

7.1 Business Outcomes & Impacts

The most frequent business outcome cited as part of the survey was that the training enabled the business to move into new markets (59%). This was mostly due to accredited courses offering skills and licences that permitted staff to deliver new services. Another key outcome was the improvement in organisational attitudes towards training reported by 59% of surveyed businesses (this is explored in more detail subsection 7.5 below). Over half of respondent employers (52%) reported improvements in leadership and management. Some 45% indicated that training had resulted in an increased capacity to expand into new areas and grow (above comparator programmes at 19%), and over a third (37%) felt the training had increased staff retention (above comparator programmes at 27%).²⁹ There were also some outcomes for increased resilience and an increase in profitability.

²⁹ Skills Support for the Workforce Evaluation, Heart of the South West Transition Area, Serco, 2023.

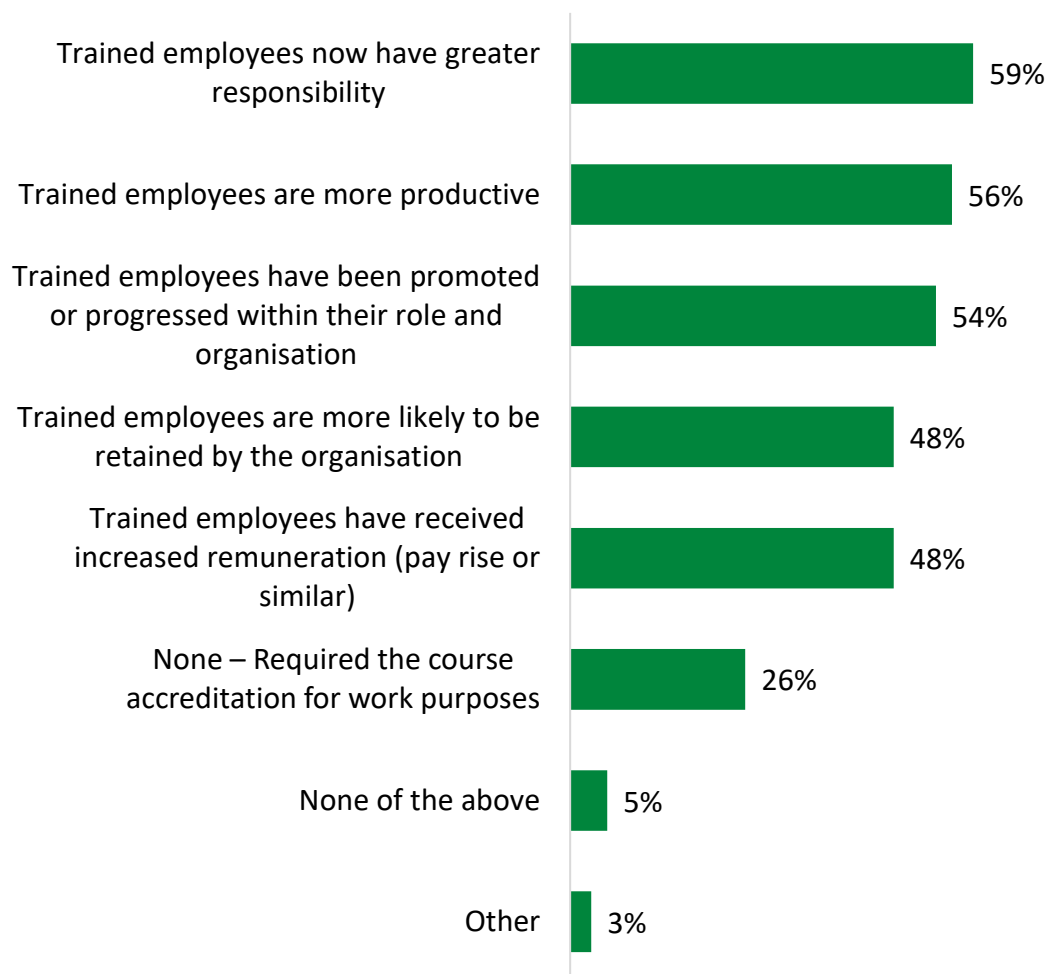
Figure 7.1: Main impacts of Upskilling@Work experienced by employers



Source: U@W Employer Survey (N=128)

The businesses in the March 2020 to June 2023 survey cohort were asked to indicate the impact they felt the training had on their employees. These findings are presented in figure 7.2 and show that over half of the businesses cited employees now taking on greater responsibility (59%), alongside productivity improvements (56%) and promotion or progression (54%) as impacts of the training received. Just under half also identified increased employee retention (48%). However, over a quarter of businesses (26%) reported that there were no impacts of the training on employees, with the course being an operational requirement for the business. Despite this not being reported as having an impact, that Upskilling@Work was able to provide this necessary training (and without a cost for many businesses during this phase of the operation under de minimis) is still a benefit from the programme. Conversely, had the course not been available under Upskilling@Work and if it was necessary for the business function, it may be that they would have sought the course anyway, and therefore in these instances Upskilling@Work has not added value.

Figure 7.2: Impact of training on employees according to employers

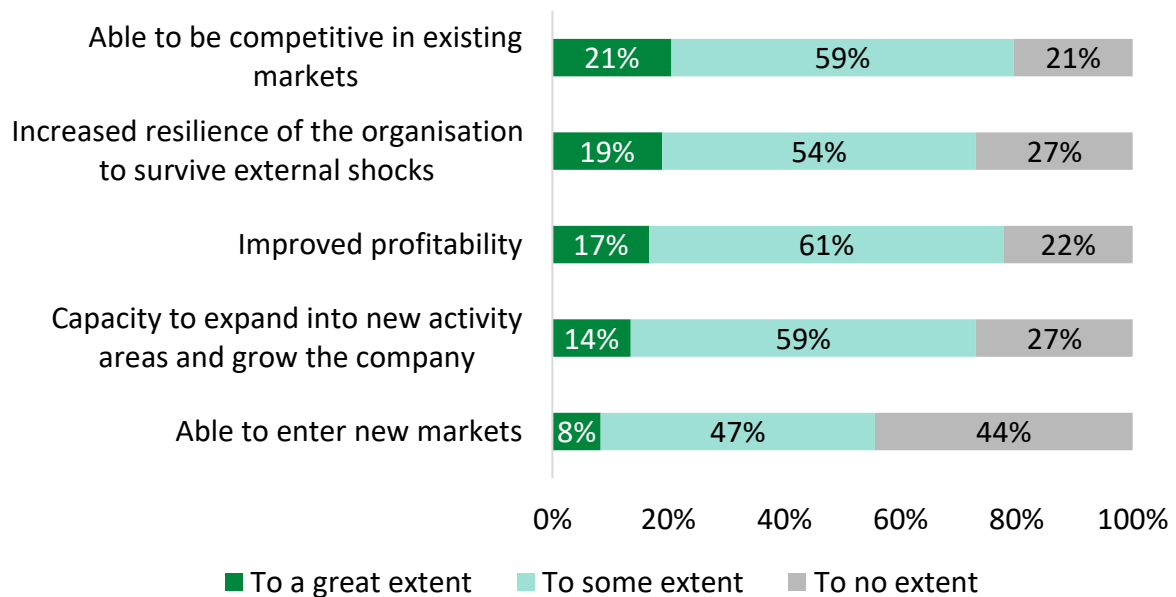


Source: U@W Employer Survey (N=128)

Employment figures during the March 2020 to June 2023 period have been heavily influenced by the pandemic and the effect that this has had on different sectors with labour supply. Therefore, any changes in employment reported by businesses in the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort have not been reported. While a greater proportion of the businesses surveyed longitudinally suggested that they had taken on additional staff than they had at the interim evaluation (suggesting some economic improvements) for 70% of the respondents there had been no change in their employment.

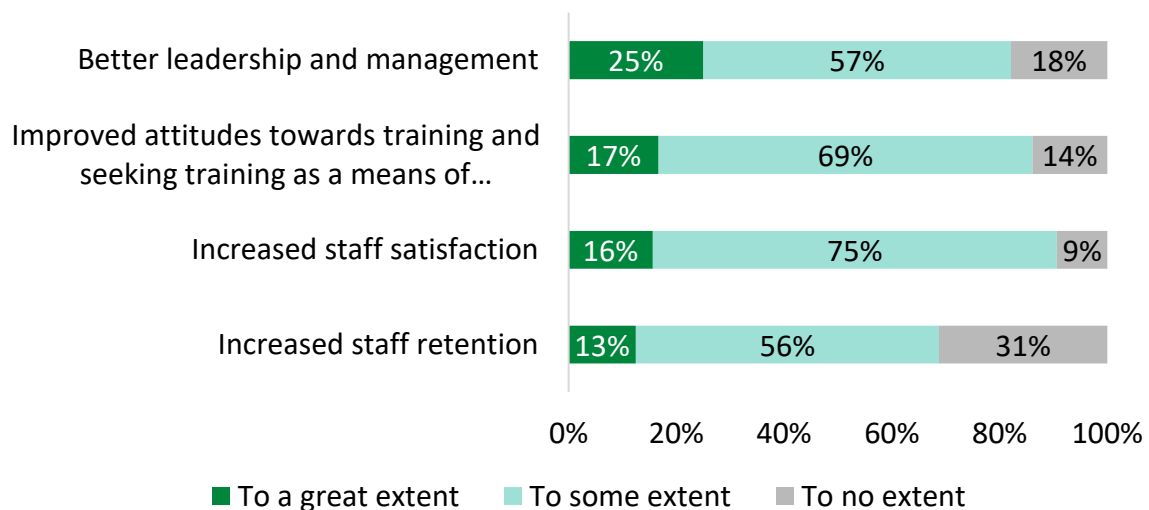
The longitudinal survey found that there were further impacts from the training provided under Upskilling@Work since the initial survey. These included being more competitive in existing markets, resilience and profitability, as shown in figure 7.3, suggesting that the skills improvements continue to deliver benefits. Additionally, 15% of businesses reported new services being offered and improved processes because of the training. Most of these new services were designed to attract new customers.

Figure 7.3: Longitudinal business impacts due to Upskilling@Work



In addition, 25% of the businesses responding to the longitudinal survey reported that they continued to see better leadership and management from their staff to a great extent. There were also some improvements in attitudes towards training as well as increased staff satisfaction levels supporting greater staff retention as shown in figure 7.4.

Figure 7.4: Business reported longitudinal staff improvements



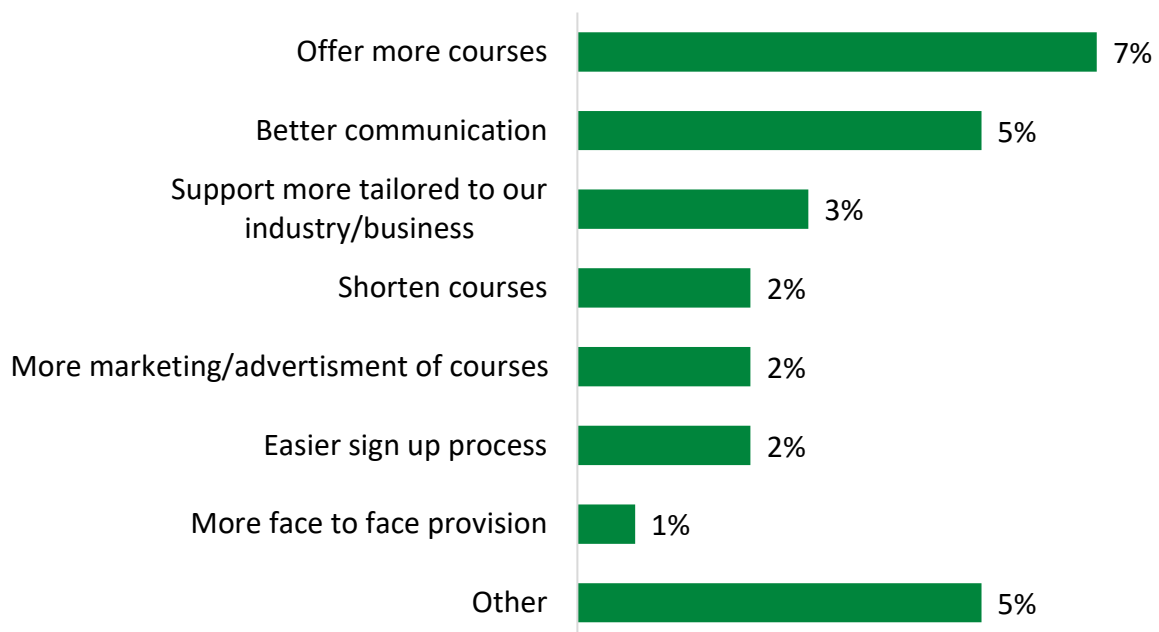
The main long-term impacts reported by businesses were more productive staff (60%), trained staff taking on greater responsibility (58%) and promotion or progression (58%).

In the two years between the survey for the interim report and this evaluation phase, 65% of the businesses surveyed longitudinally reported that they had arranged further training for their staff. While some of this additional training was focused on job specific skills (35%), there was also health and safety (27%) and leadership and management (19%), as well as NVQs, apprenticeships and internal training. Half of the new training provided was from the same college that the business had accessed Upskilling@Work courses from, reinforcing the notion that the Upskilling@Work had helped to facilitate or further relationships.

It is suggested that from the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort survey that the training available through Upskilling@Work had a positive impact on employers' ability to overcome skills shortages which was particularly pertinent given the tightness of the labour market after the pandemic. Nearly one-third (30%) of employers felt it had improved their ability to address skills gaps to a great extent and a further 56% felt it had increased their ability to some extent.

Employers were also asked what their college could do to improve the training provision and meet the needs of their business. Almost three quarters (71%) felt there was nothing that the college could do. Suggestions by those who felt colleges could improve provision are displayed in figure 7.5.

Figure 7.5: How colleges could improve training provision to meet business needs



Source: U@W Employer Survey (N = 128)

7.1.1 Employer attitudes to training

The March 2020 to June 2023 survey explored in greater depth how employers' attitudes towards in-work training had changed as a result of accessing courses through Upskilling@Work.

Some 85% of employers said that the training through Upskilling@Work had led to them feeling more confident in the capability of colleges in delivering training provision. Where this confidence had not changed, the survey asked what could be done to improve the business's perception of colleges as training providers. The frequent suggestion was that communication regarding course requirements should be clearer (11 respondents) and three employers also suggested there should be better provision of online training.

One area tested was around workforce development plans or training plans; the businesses that did not previously have a plan (51%) were asked whether they had subsequently created one. Of these employers, only 8% indicated that they had; a lower proportion than in the interim report (16%). It may also be that with the training shifting back to being fully funded for many businesses, there was less incentive to structure staff training and manage a budget when instead the business could access for free what was available. Further there was little impact over the longer term, with only a further 3% of businesses surveyed at the interim having created a training plan by the follow up survey.

Of those businesses that already had a training plan (48%) some 17% indicated that they had changed it following the Upskilling@Work training. This increased with time, and the longitudinal survey found that 67% of those which already had a training plan in place prior to their engagement with Upskilling@Work had updated it by the time of the follow up survey. This would suggest that while the attitudes to training improved among some of the businesses (and 8% did create training plans where they had none before) the organisations who participated in Upskilling@Work either had these plans in place and continued to update them periodically or did not and would not.

The figures on training budget also attest to a general consistency among the businesses with 13% reporting that they have increased their budget since the initial survey while 70% remained the same. While this represents an improvement in training commitment, these do not reflect the 59% of businesses who reported that the scheme had improved attitudes towards training (as shown above), indicating that any such changes were often qualitative. The pandemic may have contributed to this; over a quarter (28%) of businesses in the longitudinal survey (who originally accessed training prior to the pandemic) reported that the pandemic affected the business's ability to access training for staff because of limited resources or other challenges.

On the whole these findings are positive, and suggest that the programme has, in some cases, contributed towards more positive attitudes amongst employers to in-work training delivered by colleges. However, only 13% of business respondents surveyed suggested that they had accessed further training for their staff since the Upskilling@Work course, though this may be due to the period of time that has elapsed since the training completed. Of these though, 88% reported that the training provided under Upskilling@Work had encouraged this engagement.

7.2 Employee Outcomes & Impacts

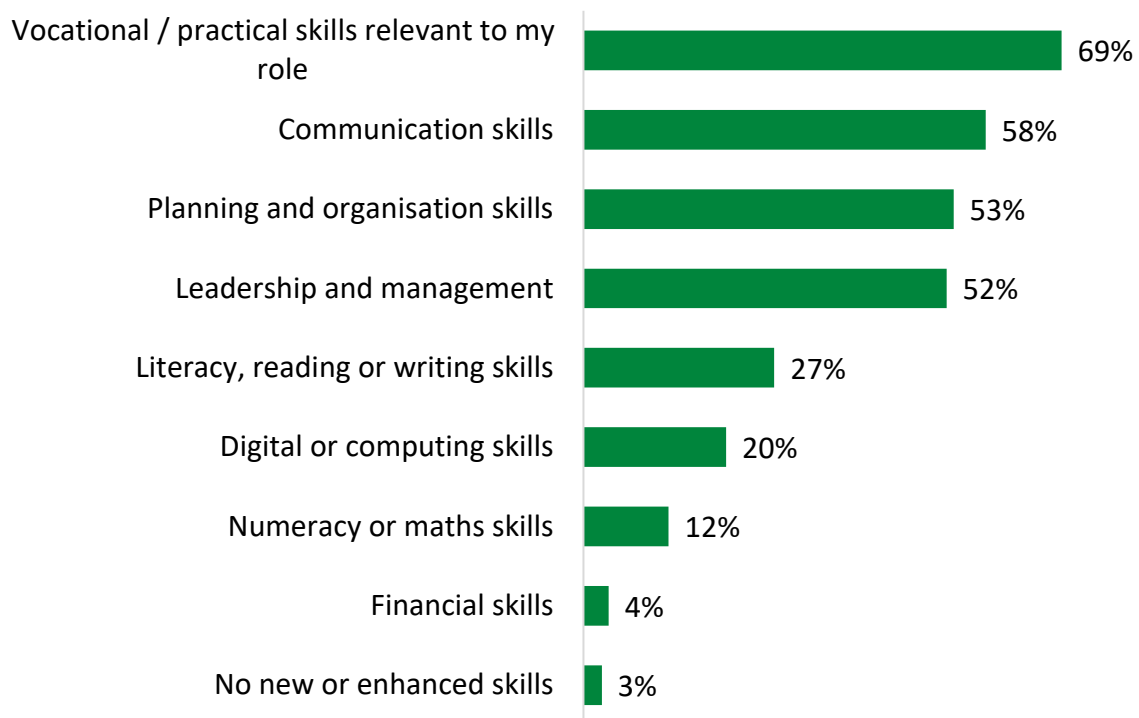
In addition to the outcomes Upskilling@Work has had for businesses, the evaluation also sought to understand the effect the training has had on the employees themselves. This section will explore these impacts based on the survey results addressing the skills they have developed and the effect on productivity or the ability to fulfil their roles and the effects or potential effects on their careers.

7.2.1 New or Enhanced Skills

Almost all employees (97%) reported that the training they received enhanced or developed their skills. This was higher than a comparator ESF programme where skill improvement was 72%.³⁰ When asked which skills they felt they had developed through the Upskilling@Work training most reported practical skills relevant to their role (69%) alongside communication (58%), planning (53%) and leadership (52%) skills as shown in figure 7.6.

³⁰ European Social Fund and Your Employment Initiative Leavers Survey 2016-2019, Department for Work and Pensions, March 2022.

Figure 7.6: Skills developed through Upskilling@Work training



Source: U@W Employee Survey (N=303)

In addition to the specific skills for the job and wider work-related skills, the participants also reported an increase in general skills including literacy, reading or writing skills (27%), digital or computing skills (20%), and numeracy or maths skills (12%). The breadth of these skills is a strong indication of the effects of the Upskilling@Work operation.

Nine out of ten employees (89%) indicated that they had been able to implement the skills they had developed through Upskilling@Work into their current job role. This suggests that the training, and the skills employees develop through this training, are well-aligned to both the needs of the employees and their job roles.

Overall, 65% of the individual survey respondents reported that the training they received very closely matched their expectations at the start with a further 32% stating it somewhat met their expectations. Only the remaining 4% suggested that the support they accessed through Upskilling@Work did not meet their expectations.

7.2.2 Workplace Impacts

Upskilling@Work training led to a range of workplace impacts for employees, as shown in figure 7.7. Roughly a third of employees (35% of males and 33% of females) experienced increased remuneration as a direct result of training. This was above the figures reported at the interim (18%), likely due to the increased labour market pressures following the Covid-19 pandemic, however below the comparator programme (45%).³¹ Nearly half (46%) also had taken on more responsibility since receiving the training, suggesting an enablement effect of the training. This was above the comparator programme at 39%.³²

Nearly two thirds (63%) of participants under the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort also reported clearer career aspirations. This may well lead to career changes or progression. Among the longitudinal employee survey 23% reported they were in a different role and 68% of these were being paid more (a median average increase of 25%).

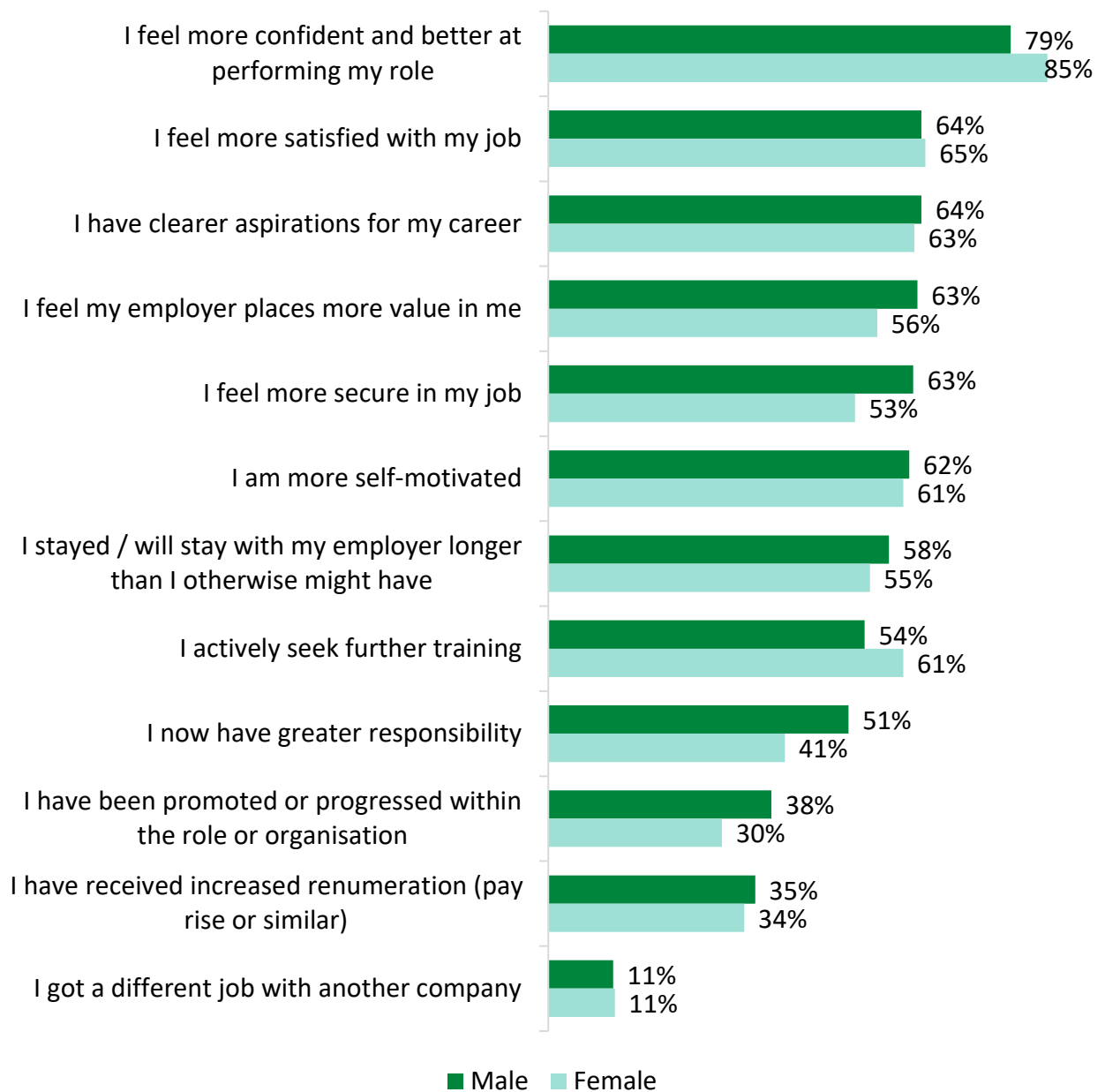
A large proportion of the March 2020 to June 2030 cohort also reported that they were more confident (particularly so amongst females (85%) and better at performing in their role. This was above the proportions reported at the interim (68%) and is greater than comparator ESF programmes.³³ A majority of respondents also felt their employer placed more value in them, were more satisfied with their jobs and would stay with their employer longer, with similar results to comparator programmes.

³¹ European Social Fund and Your Employment Initiative Leavers Survey 2016-2019, Department for Work and Pensions, March 2022.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

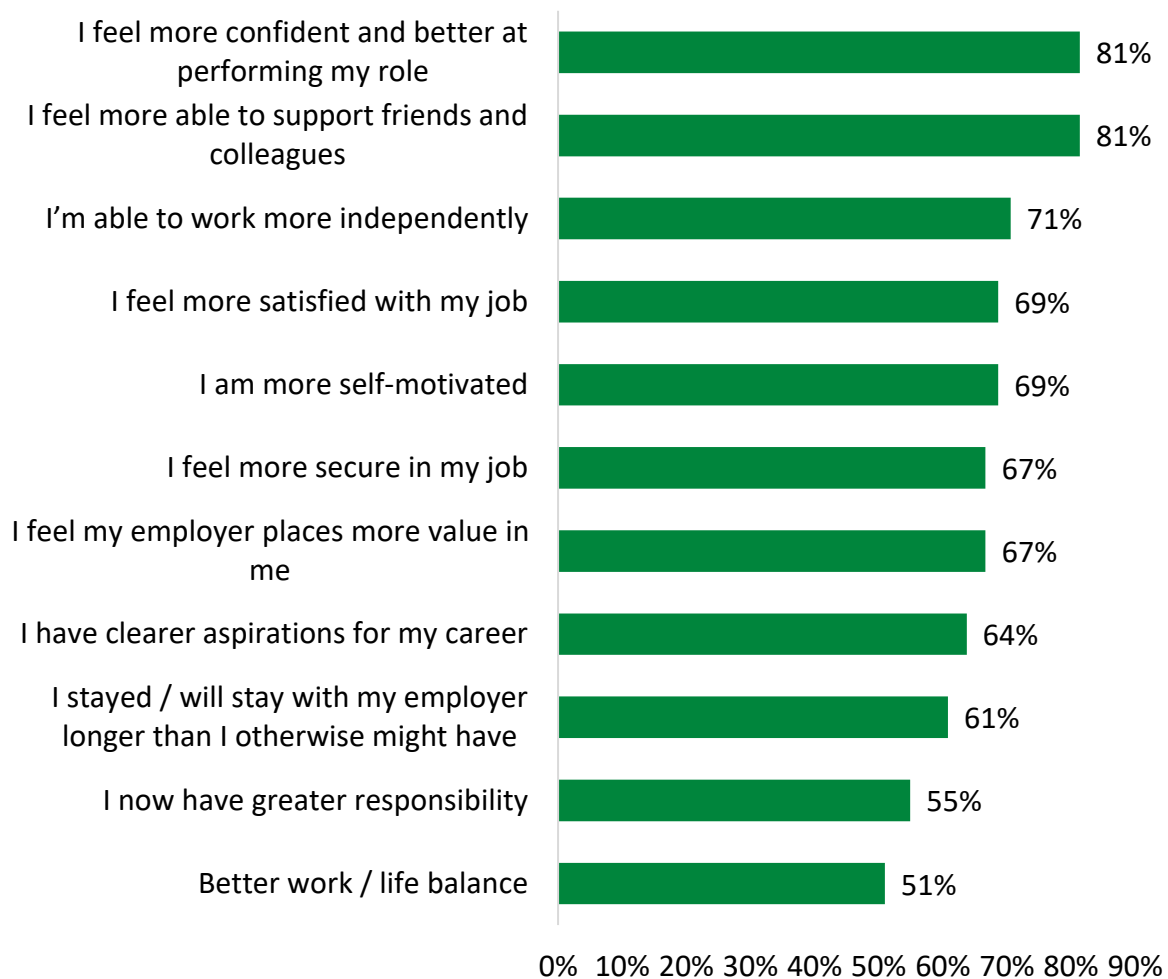
Figure 7.7: Impact of training on employees in the workplace



Source: U@W Employee Survey (N= 144 Males and 159 Females)

There were also improvements in some of the workplace impacts over the longer term, as shown in figure 7.8, with upward shifts in longitudinal responses relative to the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort who had more recently completed their course. This suggests that potentially some of the effects take time to imbed. For instance, more responsibility was reported, as may be expected, after a longer period of time.

Figure 7.8: Longitudinal impacts of the Upskilling@Work training



Source: U@W Longitudinal Employee Survey (N=102)

The majority of respondents felt that Upskilling@Work had been to some (60%) or a great extent (26%) responsible for the changes.

Reviewing earnings, the results shown in table 7.1 below show the change following the training received.

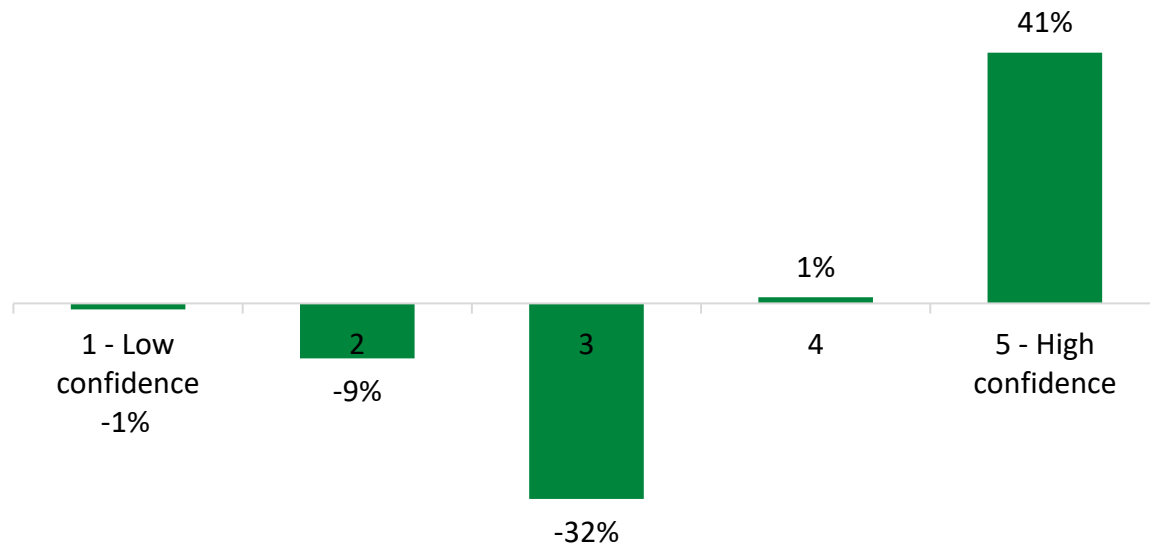
Table 7.1: Salary increases since receiving training

Salary Increase	Proportion of Males	Proportion of Females
1-4%	13%	29%
5-9%	26%	46%
10-19%	10%	14%
20-29%	42%	7%
>30%	10%	4%

Source: U@W Employee Survey (N= 31 Males and 28 Females)

Further details on the increase in confidence to perform their role in the workplace was explored by asking employees to rate their confidence before and after receiving training. Overall, 41% more employees rated their confidence to perform their role as five out of five compared to before they undertook training, as shown in figure 7.9.

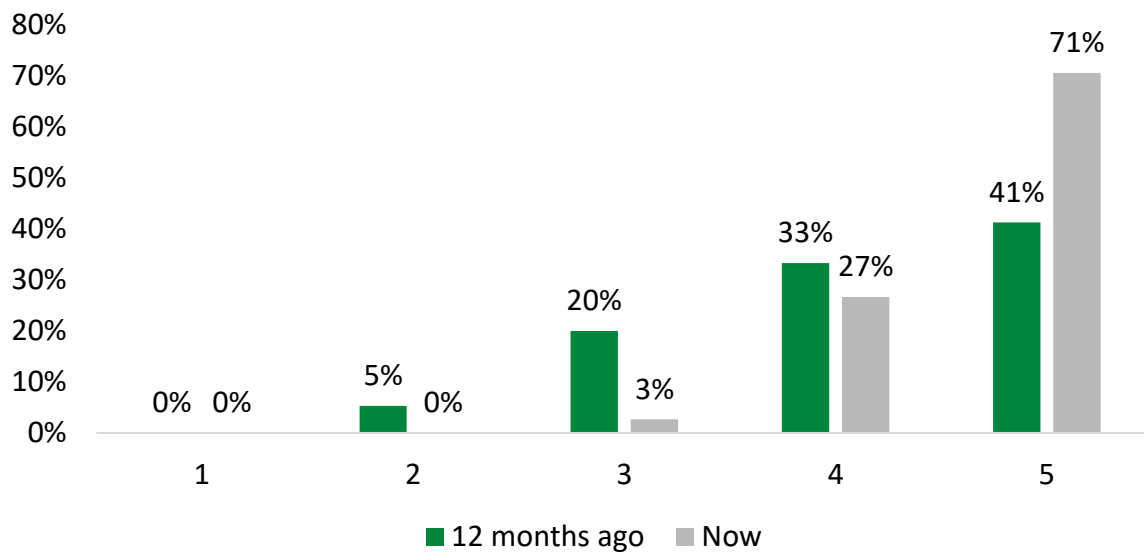
Figure 7.9: Percentage change in employees' confidence to perform their role before and after training



Source: U@W Employee Survey (N = 269)

Figure 7.10 below shows that for those surveyed two years on, workplace confidence increased as time progressed. This manifested as 30% more employees rating their confidence level as five out of five than when they first completed the survey. However, it is difficult to disaggregate this from a natural increase in confidence to perform their role that comes anyway with time.

Figure 7.10: Longitudinal percentage change in employees' confidence to perform their role



Source: U@W Longitudinal Employee Survey (N=75)

Despite this rise in confidence, 43% of employees still felt as if they could benefit from further training for their own development, with the majority of these individuals (52%) desiring further training that is job specific. Twenty-six per cent of respondents desired further managerial or supervisory training, and others cited a need for general further training (11%), health and social care training (6%), and higher education training (2%).

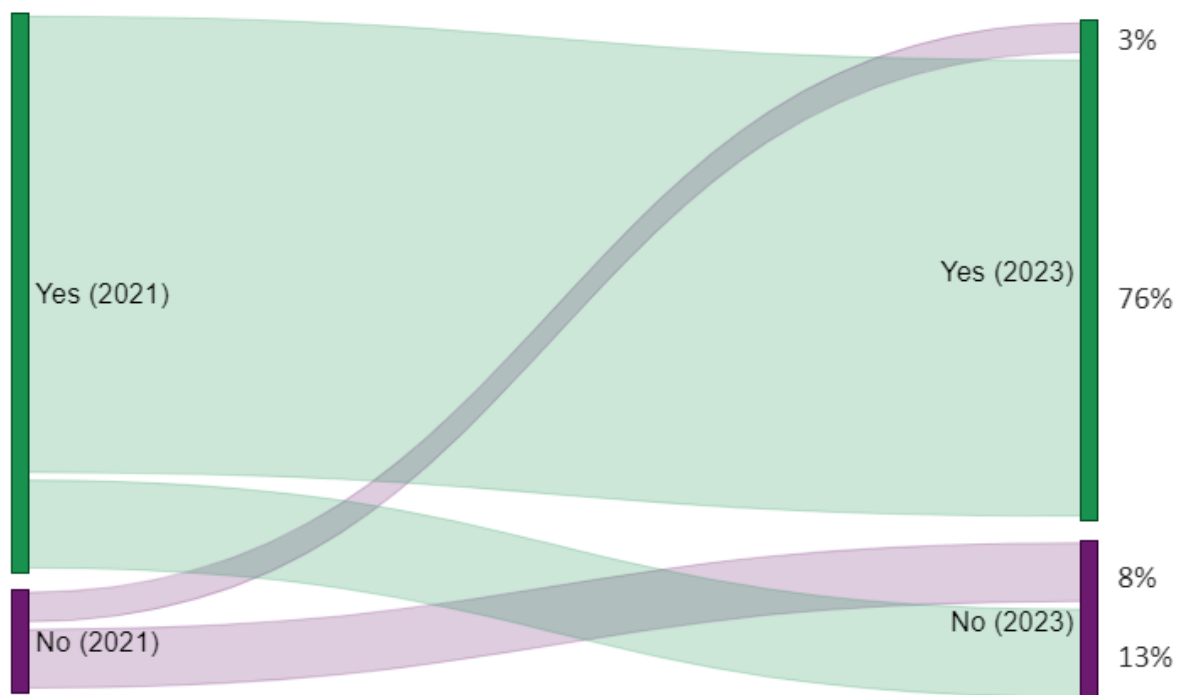
7.2.3 Career Opportunities

As outlined in figure 7.8 above, there were a number of impacts from Upskilling@Work that demonstrate career development for individuals who accessed training, including seeking alternative employment opportunities. Where individuals did not report that the training would increase the likelihood of remaining with their current employer 29% suggested this is because they would have stayed anyway and 21% felt that the training had no impact. Thirteen per cent were looking for alternative employment where 5% reported the training was helping with accessing new job opportunities and 8% that it had no effect.

One in ten (11%) of the respondents noted that they no longer worked for the employer who sponsored their training under Upskilling@Work and a large proportion of individuals reported that they had worked for their employer for less than 5 years (43%). While 89% of the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort reported that they had used the skills developed through Upskilling@Work training in their current job role, this reduced to 62% among those who had moved jobs.

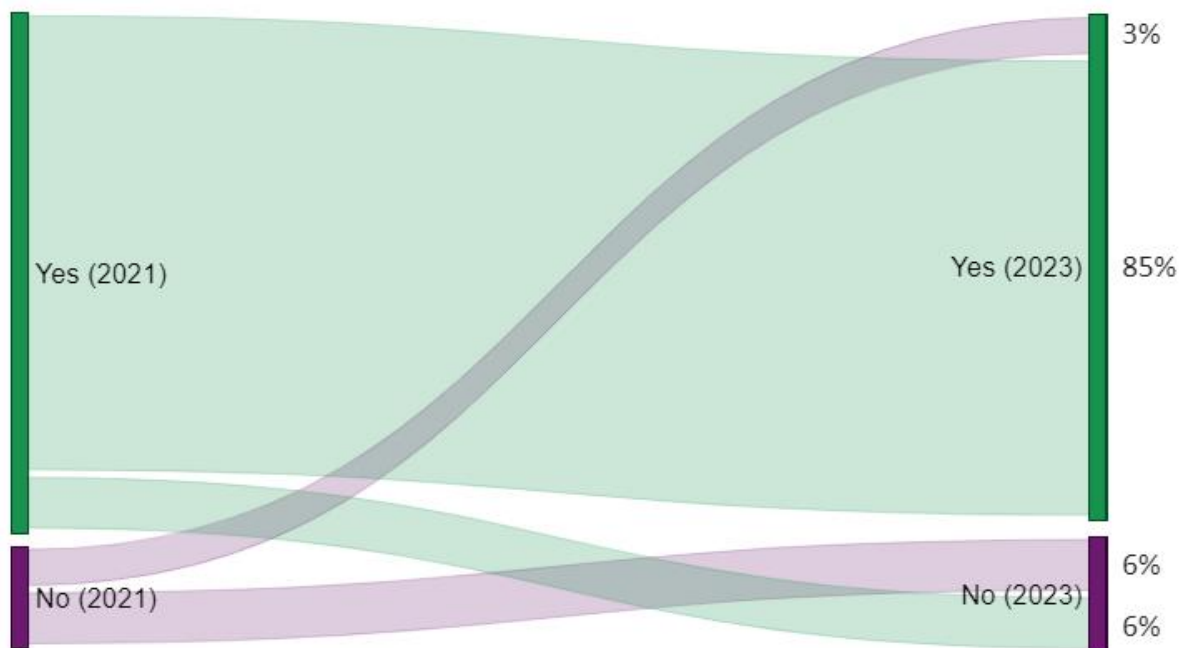
Similarly, among the longitudinal employee cohort, the ability to use the skills in their current job role seemingly decreased with time, from 87% in 2021 down to 79% by 2023. These changes in skill use over time are shown in the figures below. This is likely due to many of the courses being job specific as outlined in section 6.3.1 above and therefore as people move they may become less applicable. However, while there is a reduction in skill use over time and in new jobs, the majority of respondents were able to continue to use the skills and learning they had developed from their Upskilling@Work intervention.

Figure 7.11: Longitudinal change in use of Upskilling@Work skills in current job role



Source: U@W Longitudinal Employee Survey (N=76)

Figure 7.12: Longitudinal change in use of Upskilling@Work skills among those who were promoted



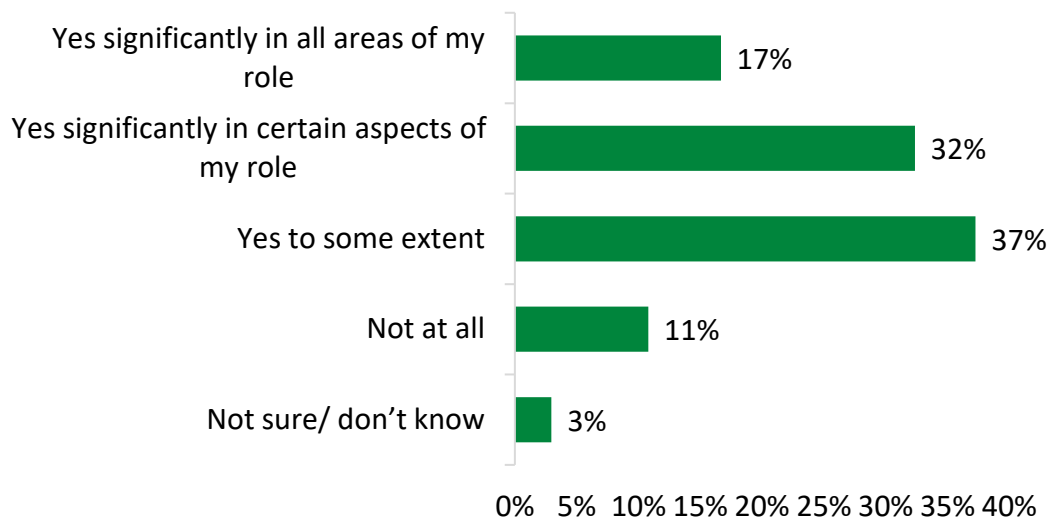
Source: U@W Longitudinal Employee Survey (N=29)

Among those who had moved jobs, 76% remained in Wales, whilst the remaining 24% had relocated to other areas (or could be working remotely) and therefore potentially that skill investment had gone ('leaked') elsewhere.

The longitudinal survey also explored whether individuals had been promoted in the two years between evaluations. While 34% had been promoted during this period, this is similar to the national average rate of progression so there appears to be no added effect of accessing training under Upskilling@Work in driving promotion.³⁴ Despite this, the longitudinal respondents did report that the training had improved their work performance in some or all areas of their role over this two-year period, as shown in figure 7.13.

³⁴ Proportion of employees who received a promotion, Longitudinal Labour Force Survey 2011:2020, ONS, 2021.

Figure 7.13: Longitudinal review of extent training improved individuals work performance



Source: U@W Longitudinal Employee Survey (N=102)

7.2.4 Employee Attitudes to Training

The attitudes to training among the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort were generally improved by their experience on Upskilling@Work (48%) or the training had no impact as they always enjoyed training (41%). Only 9% of respondents suggested that Upskilling@Work had no impact on their attitudes to training, while 2% suggested that the impact was negative. These figures are broadly similar to the interim phase evaluation and the same conclusions with regarding frequency of training were evident for the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort; where individuals seemingly accessed training more frequently there was neutral impact while those who accessed training less frequently had a positive impact. Ambitions to undertake further training in the next 12 months were positive for 39% of respondents while 23% were unsure and 12% were unlikely to do so. One quarter (26%) had already accessed training since completing their Upskilling@Work course. These figures were an improvement on the interim cohort where 20% had progressed onto training since completing their course. Again, those who accessed more training more recently prior to Upskilling@Work, and therefore potentially more frequently or were more disposed to accessing training, were more likely to have gone on to more training since.

Reviewing the longitudinal results finds that 71% of employees had accessed training in the two years since the interim evaluation. This is far higher than those who had expected to participate in more training (even if it was just in the next 12 months) and perhaps suggests that businesses are more open to putting staff through training than previously given staff perceptions.

7.3 Strategic Impacts

Building on the conclusions of the interim report, this phase of the evaluation found that Upskilling@Work had continued to have a positive effect on the collaboration between the partner colleges and the way they could operate together strategically beyond the programme itself. Strong relationships had been developed between the college leads which has resulted in something of a culture change at the colleges, moving from a position of competition to one of collaboration. The openness about client groups, who could deliver what against their expertise and capacity and how each college could work together to maximise benefits and improve delivery is already resulting in different discussions about ongoing partnerships than would have taken place prior to Upskilling@Work. This has included discussions around working together to access potential funding under the Shared Prosperity Fund and becoming more regionally joined up.

While potentially challenging for the breadth of offer, the focus that some colleges have had with specific companies has helped them to better understand the needs of these sectors and deliver other skills and training solutions in response. The testing of some courses under Upskilling@Work has led to colleges expanding their offer in these areas, including supporting industrial placements. This increased demand for, or as a consequence of, Upskilling@Work has then led to some of the colleges taking on more staff and building out delivery teams which will continue beyond the length of the programme.

Several stakeholders did note however, that the colleges were never quite able to take the amount of risks that they had originally expected where Upskilling@Work was supposed to provide the cover for committing to new opportunities to see how they panned out. The internal barriers at the colleges to taking such risks were identified as a key challenge in this regard and perhaps any opportunities to get out in front of this were stymied by the pandemic response. However, the colleges and future programmes should consider how best to utilise such opportunities to de-risk market testing and potentially break more ground in areas which are likely to be important in the future. This was also remarked by the external stakeholders who would have like to see Upskilling@Work be used to respond to some of the more strategic opportunities and challenges facing the region.

Upskilling@Work provided a strong model from which other skills interventions could follow and which other college staff were already looking at for processes and systems which could be incorporated into wider delivery. This demonstrates the strategic value that delivering the programme has had for the partners, alongside their confidence in being able to operate a multi-faceted, cross college intervention.

7.4 Value for Money

Assessing the value for money of Upskilling@Work has utilised a cost efficiency approach given the programme has no impact objectives which were monitored (such as improvement in earnings). There are also difficulties in determining and extrapolating any quantifiable outcomes and impacts from the survey results provided above.

By reviewing the overall spend on Upskilling@Work for each operation and Specific Objective against the output and result indicators, comparisons can be made to other benchmarked programmes. The table below shows these costs per output and result indicators against the final spend for the programme.

Table 7.2: Cost per output and result

	Cost per Output/Participant	Cost per Result
EW SO1	£1,962	£2,526
EW SO2	£1,711	£2,964
WWV SO1	£2,248	£3,039
WWV SO2	£2,045	£3,871
Total	£1,961	£3,094

Reviewing the results from other comparator programmes suggests that Upskilling@Work was more costly per result achieved. Skills Support for the Workforce (which can compare to SO1 totals), provided a cost per result of £1,145. Under PLA the cost per result achieved was £2,109 when accounting for those who were yet to complete their course. The Development Skills for Business Programme delivered at a cost per participant of £1,873. Should Upskilling@Work have met its original targets, the overall cost per participant would have been £2,165. The programme has therefore cost 27% more than expected.

While the focus of Upskilling@Work is on providing training that relates to business needs and therefore generating business outcomes, any impacts on businesses have been heavily influenced by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, some estimates of the change in salary can be conducted. Where individuals identified that the programme had led to a promotion, information was captured on what the salary increase was. Unfortunately, there is no baseline data available for earnings of the participants and the timeframes for these changes will differ between respondents, but an estimate can be calculated from averages. Applying the average earnings in Wales in 2019 to the increases reported suggests that on average participants increased earnings by £3,451 for all those who were promoted due to training provided by Upskilling@Work. Extrapolating this to the entire participant population would suggest nearly £4m in additional earnings has been generated.

As well as the cost effectiveness and quantified value for money metrics of Upskilling@Work, the stakeholders also reported on the qualitative value of the programme. The ambition of the programme was to introduce courses that filled gaps in the existing offer and responded to demand. By their nature these courses were likely to be less commercially viable and therefore a higher cost per result may be expected. That the project had been able to successfully introduce these courses and deliver needed provision in South Wales was therefore regarded as valuable.

Against the backdrop of the context changes and the wider strategic impacts above, stakeholders suggested that Upskilling@Work had added value to the existing offer. Though the programme could have potentially done more in supporting a wider breadth of learners and businesses, it had engaged with a number of new businesses and helped encourage them to participate in training in future as outlined above, creating indirect future value. The collaboration between the Joint Beneficiaries marked a positive change in how skills provision was considered locally and the ability to run programmes jointly. This brought real value for both the project and will likely continue to create strategic added value in the future.

While there were only a few organisations surveyed under the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort who made a contribution to the cost of the training (nine businesses), of these 89% felt that they had received value for money. At the interim stage where businesses were contributing to the training cost, 95% of the surveyed businesses reported that the training they had received provided value for money and six out of ten stated that they would consider paying a greater proportion of the cost of the training.

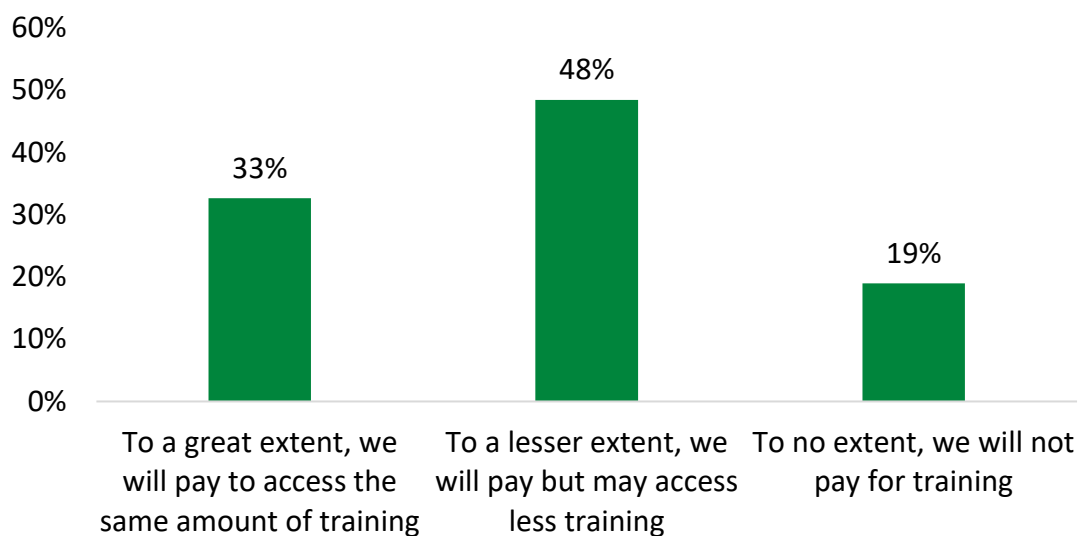
7.5 Legacy

Among the March 2020 to June 2023 cohort of businesses, 55% suggested that they currently had training needs. Of these, there was a mix of responses given the range of organisations and sectors, but some notable coded answers suggested that leadership and management (17%), health and safety (11%), and trades and construction (10%) were all in demand.

Some 61% of all supported businesses in this cohort also said that they would consider paying a greater proportion of the cost for the training provision in the future. Despite the movement to a fully funded model in this part of the Upskilling@Work delivery these were similar findings to the interim report. This suggests that while most organisations have benefitted from the shift back to a fully funded model, there could still be the potential to get businesses to contribute to training, as demonstrated by the operation up to March 2020.

However, when made aware of the potential decrease in future funding in the skills and training space, 48% suggested they would reduce the amount of training they accessed if they had to pay and 19% suggested they would not access any training if it was not free, as shown in figure 7.14. These results do not include 26% of respondents who were unsure of the implications. Over time though, more businesses seemingly moved to being willing to pay for training, perhaps as they see more of the benefits materialise. This was shown in the longitudinal survey where the question on preparedness to pay for training was asked and found that 42% would fully fund future training.

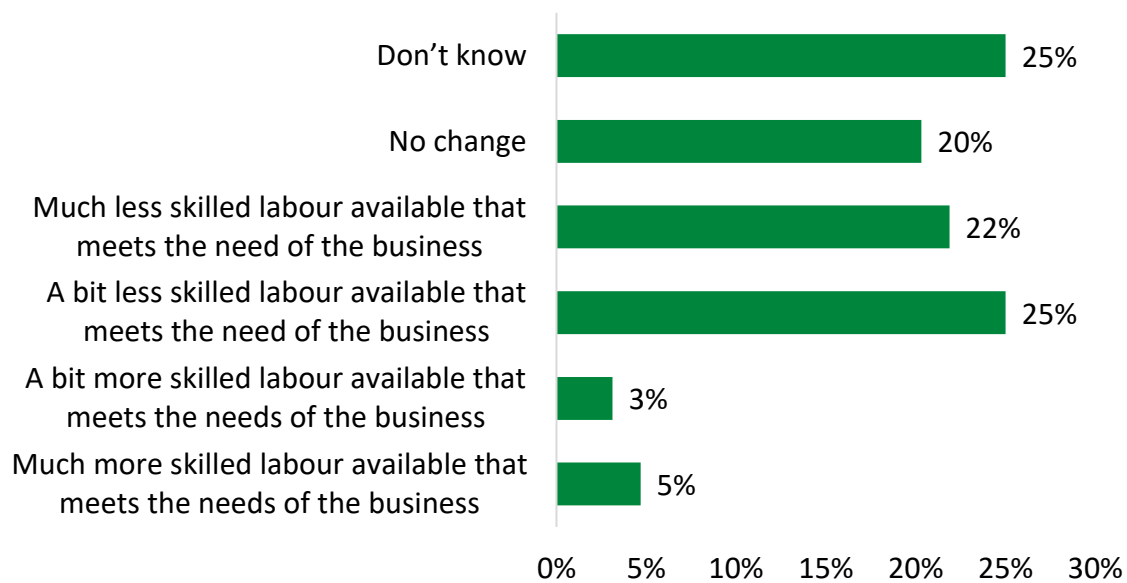
Figure 7.14: Extent to which businesses were prepared to pay to access training



Source: U@W Business Survey (N=95) Don't know results excluded

To support better understanding of future training provision requirements, the survey asked about current labour market conditions facing businesses. The results suggest that though many businesses (47%) felt that to some extent they could access the right skilled labour in the market, there were fewer skills available since the pandemic. Some 18% reported that they were facing extensive difficulties in accessing the right skills.

Figure 7.15: Reported change in labour market skills provision since the pandemic by businesses



Source: U@W Business Survey (N=128)

The longitudinal business survey found that only 10% of organisations who received Upskilling@Work support felt they were able to overcome skills shortages in the market given access to the training provision available. Sixty-seven percent of businesses felt that they could access training to overcome shortages to some extent, while 23% reported that they were not at all confident they could use training to meet skills shortages. Among these respondents 44% were facing recruitment challenges and 33% had hard to fill vacancies. Key drivers of these shortages were low numbers of applicants (35%), lack of the required skills among applicants (30%) and fewer people interested in doing the job (28%).

Despite the strong links between the colleges formed under Upskilling@Work and discussions around securing future collaborative funding, one of the key risks to the legacy of the programme is the shift in the funding landscape at the end of European funding. The transition to the Shared Prosperity Fund in the UK has involved a restructuring of the level at which investment is made and funding managed, removing much of the autonomy from the Welsh devolved administration to local government. With programmes like Upskilling@Work operating across many local authorities unless there is a collective agreement to combine some funding for certain activities, future skills and training delivery will be through smaller contracts in each council area. There is a risk that this leads to the breakdown of the established networks that have been developed, with all the opportunities and advantages this has created, as well as smaller scale interventions that are unable to respond to effectively to skills wider issues.

8. Case Studies

To complement the broader findings collected for the evaluation the following case studies have been created to explore the journey of businesses who accessed training through Upskilling@Work

Virtual consultations were held with beneficiary organisations to gain a more detailed insight into their business, the challenges they face prior to accessing the training, their experience of Upskilling@Work and any impacts that the training has had.

8.1 Target Group Ltd

Target Group are a leading provider of business process servicing based in Wales. They offer mortgage, loan and asset management services and support their clients in automating financial processing and administration. Target Group currently collects £3 billion in direct debit payments each year on behalf of private and public sector clients.

The company was looking to develop their leaders, strengthening them as line managers and making them more self-reliant. After training a number of staff through the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) scheme, Target Group were signposted to the Upskilling@Work offer by Cardiff and the Vale College. As a funded training offer, Upskilling@Work provided an appealing opportunity for the business to expand the training and accreditation available to their staff at a significantly smaller cost.

Support offered by Upskilling@Work allowed employees at Target Group to attain an ILM accreditation. This employee's self-confidence has increased significantly and they're now looking for opportunities to apply the theory they learned on their course into practice at the business. They praised the expertise of the course tutors, who went the extra mile to provide extra support at times when academic and work pressures were high. Beyond individual impacts, company-wide engagement in training is increasing as staff begin to see the impact that training has had on those that have attended.

Target Group are enthusiastic about taking advantage of any future opportunities to upskill their staff, especially in response to an increased internal demand for training courses. Although the funded opportunity was appreciated, it was noted that they would be willing to consider partial or non-funded opportunities in the future too. As a company that operates under strict financial compliance rules, they said that any future training offers which allowed them stay up to date with financial regulations would be ideal if included in future training offers.

8.2 City Hospice

Established in 1984, City Hospice provides palliative care to the people of Cardiff in their own homes. They are a standalone charity funded by the Cardiff and Vale University Health Board and donations from the community. The organisation is made up of clinical and business support workers combining to a total of around 50 staff.

HR staff at the Hospice noted that their clinical workers have a clear personal development route for those clinical skills through the NHS. However, the managerial development path is far less clear for both their clinical and business support staff. City Hospice found out about Upskilling@Work's offer as a result of their close relationship with Cardiff and the Vale College through previous training courses. As a charity consistently looking to manage costs without an internal training facility, the funded offer by Upskilling@Work was ideal to support their business support staff.

“Our clinical staff are experts in their field, however they were less equipped in team management. The training has given them a breadth of knowledge on how to better manage their teams in new situations.” **(City Hospice Interviewee)**

City Hospice has primarily used the support from Upskilling@Work in order to train new line managers. Managers that have received training through Upskilling@Work have provided exclusively positive feedback about their experiences and what they have learnt, praising Cardiff and the Vale College especially for being very accommodating of staff needs during the training. By undertaking the ILM courses, managers have become more self-reliant, reducing management challenges across the organisation. Undertaking the ILM courses has changed how learning is valued in the organisation, leading to an increase in demand for training.

City Hospice is enthusiastic to take advantage of any future training offer which would strengthen the development of their business support staff especially. They noted that they would ideally be seeking funded opportunities in order to save costs for the charity and that they would welcome a more unified training platform that would allow them to find training opportunities more easily.

8.3 People First Bridgend

People First Bridgend is a small charity that advocates for the human rights of those with learning disabilities and autism. Their work involves awareness training of those interacting with individuals with these disabilities, teaching people how to help themselves using self-advocacy, providing independent advocacy and making written material inclusive for those with learning disabilities.

While People First Bridgend is a relatively specialist charity and so experiences little competition, the commissioning environment in which they operate has become increasingly competitive. Staff were therefore keen to obtain professional qualifications - particularly in leadership, management and strategy - that would contribute to the credibility of the charity in both the tender process and in conversation with trustees. Bridgend College is local to the charity, and they had worked with the college in the past. This contributed to their decision to enrol staff in training programmes here, a decision further helped by the fully funded nature of Upskilling@Work. Staff praised the tutoring and support they received, saying that the college could not have improved the delivery of training in any way. They reported that the training encouraged them to think at a higher-level regarding business planning, organisational strategy and bigger-picture thinking. It has also enabled them to strengthen skills necessary for the creation of business cases, which they hope will enable the charity to remain competitive in funding bids.

Perceptions of training have been highly impacted by Upskilling@Work among staff at People First Bridgend. Management are now keen to enrol in further training following their positive experience of the programme and have identified the increased awareness of upskilling schemes as an essential aspect of charities' future success across the sector as the funding environment becomes increasingly competitive.

8.4 Techsol Group

Techsol Group provides a wide range of managed IT services for their clients, specialising in IT helpdesk services and digital solutions for customer and inventory management. Although the Techsol are a relatively small firm within a competitive industry, they have recently experienced significant growth. Having now over doubled their annual turnover in the past two years, Techsol acquired additional HR capacity to ensure that the firm's internal structures were sufficient to sustain its growth.

Despite strong technical knowledge within the company, the company faced a number of medium term risks due to a lack of career development structures and contingency planning. To strengthen the company's internal structures, Techsol sought out ILM training for a number of their senior staff. Although they had never worked with Cardiff and Vale College before, the fully funded nature of the Upskilling@Work presented the most attractive opportunity. Techsol have used the funded opportunity from Upskilling@Work to send 20 of their staff on ILM courses ranging from level 3 to 7. They praised the knowledge of the tutors and their ability to apply the teaching to the specific needs of the company. The increased management capacity within Techsol has allowed the firm to double their staff numbers within a year. The training has also facilitated the creation of clearer development paths within the company. Alongside their managers, staff produce a development plan which folds in both technical and leadership skills to improve their overall career progression. Furthermore, the training offered through Upskilling@Work has increased the overall desire within the company to undertake training, with some staff progression to further ILM levels and others attending advanced management courses at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Undertaking training through Upskilling@Work has expanded Techsol's network, allowing them to identify good practice from their industry as well as meet potential new customers. Moving forward, Techsol are eager to continue upskilling their management through ILM qualifications, as well as specialise into new technical fields such as developing accounting software.

8.5 Bradley's Garage

Bradley's Garage is a retail fuel station and property letting company. They decided to undertake training through the Upskilling@Work programme because of the imbalance between experience and qualifications among accounting staff, who wanted to have their existing knowledge reflected through formal accreditation.

Staff took advantage of the fully-funded nature of the Upskilling@Work programme to undertake the AAT Level 2 qualification provided by the NPTC Group. This training has strengthened the business accounting operations beyond their initial desire to simply close the gap between experience and qualifications. Confidence among staff has improved greatly, which has contributed to improvements in the quality of work produced. Working relationships internally have also improved, and the formality of the training and qualification level obtained has encouraged internal mentoring for junior staff from those more senior.

“Investing in people has given people more job satisfaction, you know you've got staff who know what they're doing” **(Bradley's Garage Interviewee)**

While staff praised tutors and the quality of the training provided by the NPTC group when the organisation aspect was running smoothly, personnel changes within the mentoring team caused disruption which affected their experience of the training quality.

Perceptions of training at Bradley's Garage are noticeably more positive after their involvement with Upskilling@Work. Not only are staff keen to undertake further training to achieve higher levels of the AAT to enhance their knowledge and understanding, directors have also enrolled staff into training programmes in other business areas such as health and safety following the Upskilling@Work scheme.

8.6 Home Instead

The Cardiff North branch of Home Instead provides personal care services for residents of Cardiff and Penarth within their own homes. They provide services ranging from live-in care and dementia care to more general health and companionship to support independent living. The business attributes their status as a market leader to their commitment to staff continuity, ensuring that staff can form good relationships with the people that they consistently support.

Home Instead were enthusiastic about responding to the Welsh Government's calls to upskill workers in the care sector. The Cardiff North branch were seeking training providers that offered level 2 health and social care qualifications. The locality of Cardiff and the Vale College made them an ideal training provider for Home Instead, they noted that the funding also influenced their decision to take Upskilling@Work's offer.

The business was particularly appreciative of the training offer's flexibility, which allowed staff to continue meeting their care recipients, minimising disruption for the business. The training has given Home Instead a more confident workforce who can now evidence their skillset with their Health and Social Care qualifications. The training from Upskilling@Work has improved Home Instead both as a service provider and employer, consolidating staff knowledge to provide the best possible care and strengthen their training offer to prospective staff.

"The training was very flexible and delivered well, none of our staff had any issues. It was ideal because staff were still able meet their calls."
(Home Instead Interviewee)

The business generally felt that the training needs of the care sector were already catered for. However, Upskilling@Work offer added significant value in its flexibility and funding, allowing Home Instead to upskill their staff without making any significant trade-offs.

8.7 Alrod

An engineering firm in Merthyr Tydfil, Alrod specialises in the fabrication of aluminium extrusions. They were keen for staff to undertake basic training in welding in order to strengthen the skillset of employees. The locality and funded nature of the Upskilling@Work programme provided through Merthyr Tydfil College were the key drivers of staff's enrolment onto training programmes following Upskilling@Work's contact with Alrod. Staff praised the quality of the training and reported that it had fulfilled all the needs they had when embarking on the welding course.

“Prior to Upskilling@Work contacting us, we weren't aware that there were such training courses available. The course was very informative and well-run, it was better than we expected. The members of staff who went on the course feel more confident in their roles, and the more confident the staff are the better in terms of winning future work.” **(Alrod Interviewee)**

Following the Upskilling@Work programme, staff have become more open-minded and willing to put themselves forward for further training. Perspectives towards training as a means to improving business among management staff have also become much more positive.

8.8 Accolade Academy Business Coaching

Founded in the US, now based in Wales, Accolade Academy are an international business coaching service, primarily providing support for businesses with high growth ambitions in the UK, US and Canada. They specialise in developing business plans which seek to increase the niche of businesses' products and services.

Accolade Academy have been seeking to strengthen their market in Wales by offering more structured educational courses for adults. Through Upskilling@Work, an Accolade Academy coach undertook a Level 3 City and Guilds qualification in Education and Training.

“The mentors really went above and beyond, they helped us understand how we could shape delivery to our own clients.” **(Accolade Academy Interviewee)**

Despite facing unprecedented delivery challenges at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Accolade Academy praised the trainers very highly for their ability to keep individual attendees motivated while also succeeding in bringing them together to network frequently. Accolade Academy felt the main benefit of the training came through the new avenues it opened for the business: being able to provide courses from an accredited trainer and expanding their network through meeting other business owners at the training courses. The business noted that training and self-development have always been one of their priorities, engaging in this training has allowed them to “practice what they preach”.

Moving forward, Accolade Academy feels there is a need to develop a more consistent standard for business coaching by training and accreditation to ensure a more consistent quality, which they felt had become more volatile following significant labour market changes in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

8.9 Cwtsh Nursery

Cwtsh Nursey is a day nursery and after school care in Newbridge, caring for children from 6 weeks to 12 years old. While there are other early years centres locally, they are increasingly closing down as a result of issues of recruitment and affordability shared among providers in the sector nationally.

Alongside this challenging socioeconomic environment, the level of scrutiny of Care Inspectorate Wales inspections motivated management at the nursery to enrol their staff onto the 'Transition into Playworks' qualification provided by Coleg y Cymoedd through the Upskilling@Work programme. As this qualification is always funded, the convenient locality of Coleg y Cymoedd determined Cwtsh's decision to undertake this training through Upskilling@Work.

Staff found the process of undertaking the course straightforward, reporting that the training was of good quality. Following the training staff are more confident in letting children take risks, an important element of development among older children in particular. Their skills in managing groups of children have also improved, and management have observed an increased quality of care as a result. Staff cite the impact this training has had on the children as the most significant outcome, however, and believe that this training would benefit both the development of children cared for and the confidence of staff working throughout the sector. Management are keen to continue training staff through Coleg y Cymoedd as a result of their positive experience of Upskilling@Work.

9. Conclusions & Recommendations

Upskilling@Work has operated through a variety of contextual challenges which have influenced an underperformance in targets and yet the programme has demonstrated an effective approach and some good impacts.

Despite the challenges in reaching the targets set at the start of the programme, Upskilling@Work has been able to support 6,432 individuals to gain a higher qualification than they already had. While operating for nearly seven years, the original design of the Upskilling@Work programme was proved to be effective, and the collaboration between the college partners a key strength which enabled them to overcome challenges including the Covid-19 pandemic. Upskilling@Work functioned smoothly alongside other college delivery and was well embedded into the skills provision landscape in South Wales. Training was delivered through the existing colleges structures which was useful and brought benefits that will last beyond the lifetime of the operation. The courses themselves were highly regarded by a large majority of the participants and the flexibility of approach and mix of online and in work practice was seen as a clear advantage of the Upskilling@Work programme after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The teams worked hard to embed the cross-cutting themes and Well-being of Future Generations agenda into their delivery. Despite making all appropriate efforts to facilitate provision in Welsh, it was challenging to offer a bilingual service given the levels of demand for Welsh language, the capacity of the teaching staff to deliver in Welsh and the restrictions of translation to participants who spoke English thereby making a translator redundant. The Upskilling@Work team looked to overcome this by providing course material and conducting written assessments in Welsh, and none of the participants surveyed suggested this had been a limitation. The operations did fall short of some of their ESF demographic targets and potentially could have done more to promote greater diversity among the staff that employers sponsored to access the training. Given the focus of the project on improving skills and the impacts that it has had on job security and earnings, there is a good demonstration that Upskilling@Work has also helped with the tackling poverty agenda. Over one third of employees for example reported increased remuneration as a direct result of training whilst almost two thirds reported clearer career aspirations

The outcomes for the Upskilling@Work programme have been widespread and notwithstanding some differences in performance against between EW and WWV, there are similar findings in both areas and across the SOs. Businesses were able to benefit from the courses available and the skills it brought to their staff. Employees were able to upskill and apply their learning to improve their confidence in performing their role but also generate career benefits.

Given the changing funding situation towards the Shared Prosperity Fund it is still unclear whether there will be any similar provision of training available in Wales now that Upskilling@Work has closed. The Flexible Skills Programme³⁵ will be the only business led training programme available unless something is designed at the local level under the Shared Prosperity Fund, and this potentially creates challenges for business planning and the forward operating models for colleges and training providers. Upskilling@Work has demonstrated that collaborative training programmes delivered at scale through existing and enhanced capacity can help support businesses, and without them there is likely to be a gap in this space.

Below are some key findings and conclusions on Upskilling@Work looking at the efficiency of the programme, its' effectiveness, and the impacts it has generated.

9.1 Efficiency

Processes established for managing and administering Upskilling@Work were strong, with good teamwork, division of responsibility and use of shared central systems. The CRM that was developed to capture the activity from all colleges adopted best practice and allowed for effective management and oversight of the operations. Issues could be easily resolved within colleges or collectively at the SMB or OMB level which were appropriately brought together towards the end of the operations. The strong communication between the teams was enhanced by the longevity of the staff working on Upskilling@Work as well as prior experience of delivering similar programmes. All administrative processes were robust, with accountability clearly established and support available from the lead colleges to help ensure there were no issues or challenges. Overall, the functioning of the programme was highly efficient given the number of partners involved and scope of delivery activity. Utilising college led delivery was an efficient means of implementing Upskilling@Work and building on existing resource.

Paperwork being completed by administrative teams within the colleges to allow the trainers to concentrate on course delivery was a strong advantage of Upskilling@Work compared to some other programmes. In addition to the monitoring processes being enabled through the CRM the creation of forms and clear data inputs that could be managed centrally allowed for best use of resource across the partner colleges. Further, with the shift to online deliver, there were administrative benefits from using online signatures and communication.

³⁵ <https://businesswales.gov.wales/skillsgateway/flexible-skills-programme>

The split between East Wales and West Wales and the Valleys has been particularly challenging for the operation given the arbitrary nature of the divide, and the effect this has had on administrative requirements but also delivery. While acknowledged as part of the way European funding has been structured in Wales, having the distinction made aspects like engagement of businesses more challenging given some businesses may be in a different area to the college who could offer the most appropriate course or support. It also caused issues with monitoring and reporting, with different approaches being taken by each of the lead beneficiaries.

9.2 Effectiveness

That the programme was able to continue to operate and adapt to the post pandemic landscape was considered a key strength showing the effectiveness of the Upskilling@Work team and operations. The adaptation to online learning and then a blend of digital provision and face to face learning was one factor that allowed the programme to ramp up delivery in the March 2020 to June 2023 period despite the challenges caused by Covid-19. The blended learning approach that was then adopted is now being deployed across the colleges for wider course delivery based on the improved effectiveness.

Upskilling@Work has demonstrated the demand for shorter courses that are aligned with the needs of businesses or specific sectors. Apprenticeships and other offers such as PLA are important, but there remains a need for training that provides specific support for an individual that is accredited.

The design of Upskilling@Work was appropriate at the time and given the rationale for introducing part funded training provision into Wales though this was necessarily disrupted by the pandemic. While the movement to a de minimis model was prudent given the circumstances, it did counteract some of the ground gained in the early part of the programme in relation to encouraging employers to invest in upskilling. By not returning to a part funded model this has left businesses still seeking to access funded training. This has had implications for businesses potentially not valuing the training as highly or not completing but also permitted businesses to access who may otherwise not have sought training. Though 61% of businesses reported that they would be happy to fund some of their future training, the shift to part funding has reduced the benefits the programme could have had on changing the business culture in Wales.

Engagement of new businesses and the development of new courses was an area where Upskilling@Work could have been improved. The programme had intended to deliver new courses in response to demand from businesses and expand the reach into new organisations. During the March 2020 to June 2023 period, and while facing other challenges, the number of new courses added to the approved list slowed markedly and colleges reportedly returned to existing contacts more frequently. While this may have been because the operation of Upskilling@Work was settling into a delivery pattern (as well as resolving other challenges caused by Covid-19) it may also have been a limitation of the programme design and ESF structure. The key driver for the programme was getting volumes of course completions with existing clients in order to meet target outputs which conflicts with notions of introducing new courses. Once demand has been established the emphasis is to meet this rather than explore new potential demand with all the risks that this entails. This, along with resource capacity, has meant that Upskilling@Work largely stopped introducing new courses and became another delivery vehicle among a range of programmes, albeit still a useful one.

We could have done more to push the offer more widely but faced challenges with capacity to deliver new courses with existing staff.

9.3 Impact

Upskilling@Work has led to a range of impacts for both the businesses and the individuals who received the training:

- Businesses have reported increasing opportunities to enter new markets and offer new services with the skills developed which has driven up revenue and profitability.
- Leadership and management within organisations have improved and employees have taken on increased responsibilities as well as some receiving greater remuneration or promotion (though this has not exceeded the natural rate of progression).
- Staff report being more satisfied with their job role, and this has led to an increase in staff retention which supports business resilience and productivity.
- There has been a change in attitudes towards training among both businesses and employees and many have followed up on the Upskilling@Work course with further training, often with the same college.
- Employees cited a range of new skills developed and implemented, both specific to the role but also core skills such as planning and communication.
- There were also enhancements in career aspirations among staff and many were more confident about performing their job role and either remaining with their current employer or seeking other work.

Partnership working under Upskilling@Work has generated a culture change within the colleges in South Wales, enhancing collaboration and strengthening regional approaches. Prior to the Upskilling@Work programme the partner colleges considered their activity in part to be competing with each other and have now embraced the benefits of being more transparent, sharing delivery and working to each other's strengths. This should be one of the important legacies of the programme and supports the direction of travel with the CTER but is currently being challenged by the lack of future investment for operations like Upskilling@Work with the funding landscape shifting to a local level through Shared Prosperity Funding. The potential loss of these relationships as people move on and if activity becomes smaller and local in scale would be detrimental to the advantages of colleges working together in this space. The findings of the Upskilling@Work evaluation are consistent with insight from other ESF projects which suggest that the enablers of effective delivery are the strength and positive relationships between partners and previous experience of delivering funded programmes.³⁶

Upskilling@Work has faced a number of challenges which have limited the value for money it could generate including a major pandemic, the capacity of the colleges and limitations in attribution which served to raise the cost per output achieved. One advantage of the PLA programme was that delivery could be subcontracted which helped to build a network of local providers generating some social benefits, and scaling the offer; something that Upskilling@Work was not able to do. There is clearly further added value from the skills improvements and effects on businesses that would suggest that Upskilling@Work has had a positive impact where it could. Strategically though the impact has been to transform some of the ways of working among the colleges and offers new opportunities for collaborative delivery going forwards.

9.4 Recommendations & Learning

1. Future programmes should look to emulate the management and monitoring processes adopted by Upskilling@Work as they have demonstrated effective approaches to coordinating a large consortium programme.
2. Future programmes should operate for a five-year period with options to extend to allow sufficient time for scaling up and delivery but to avoid competing delivery and encourage innovation and development in the offer whilst not detracting from the original ambition.

³⁶ Evaluation of the European Social Fund 2014-2020 Programme in England, Qualitative Case Study Research, Department for Work and Pension, March 2022.

3. Wales still needs to move away from the fully funded training approach that it has become somewhat dependent on and while Upskilling@Work has provided a good start, another part funded intervention may be necessary to encourage businesses to invest in this provision.
4. With the closure of Upskilling@Work and the lack of alternatives, a training programme offering short course, accredited qualifications for businesses to access for their staff is needed in Wales.
5. Programmes that are trialling and developing new courses should take more risks in introducing provision that explores other gaps in the market or responds to smaller businesses.
6. Future programmes should consider how they can integrate training provision in Welsh more fully to accommodate those who may wish to learn through the medium of Welsh. This would need to be balanced against the resource requirements and levels of demand.
7. Consideration should be given to in future programmes to minimise fully funded provision to larger organisations or those who may have accessed the training anyway. Potentially setting targets for numbers of employers engaged may encourage colleges to reach beyond their core groups. Alternatively, there could be targets on amount of private sector investment levered in where suitable businesses were accessing the support.
8. Flexibility in types of courses delivered is positive if the approved list is constantly refined to ensure it is filling gaps in the market, but more stakeholders should be involved in helping to determine approved courses and what demand should be responded to, including strategic stakeholders or labour market intelligence based judgements. Greater national coordination of workforce development provision is necessary and important to avoid duplication.
9. One area of opportunity for the monitoring would be to capture baseline data on the earnings for the participants at the start of the training support to provide a variable that can be reviewed during subsequent rounds of evaluation to understand impacts.

Appendix 1 – Theory of Change

Objectives →	Inputs →	Activities →	Outputs →	Outcomes →	Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SO1 – To increase the skills levels, including work relevant skills, of those in the workforce with no or low skills • SO2 – To increase the number of people in the workforce with technical and job specific skills at an intermediate and higher level • Provide accredited job specific training through workplace learning • Encourage employers to see the value of training their employees • Support sectoral thematic opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £18.9 million in funding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £11,428,713 ESF provided by WEFO, spread across WWV and EW regions and SO1 and SO2 priority areas • £6,305,487 in match funding from the JB and LB colleges • £1,192,525 in co-investment from employers • Delivery staff at the LBs and JB. • Project team staff at the LBs and JB. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach activities and marketing to existing and new employers • Realignment of courses to fit the U@W programme • Identifying suitable training provision for the business • Provision of courses • Eligibility criteria and compliance checks • Monitoring and data capture • Strategic management of programme (recently pivoting in response to Coronavirus) • Operation management of the programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SO1 WWV: 1,652 participants • SO2 WWV: 2,128 participants • SO1 EW: 1,799 participants • SO2 EW: 3,161 participants • Participants to have received an accredited training course raising their skill level (SO1) or providing higher level skills (SO2) • Contribution to Cross Cutting Themes including equal opportunities (includes targets on gender, age, Black, Asian or minority ethnic, disabilities, migrants and childcare) and Welsh language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised skills and qualifications level for employees • Improved efficiency and output among businesses whose employees have received training • Improved job security for trained employees and progression opportunities • Increased earnings for employees • Recognised value of paid training by employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising the overall skill level • Raising productivity • Increasing the output and growth • Increased employment rates • Higher skills leading to innovation • Higher skills leading to higher value jobs with multiplier effects on sectors • Reduction in worklessness and poverty • Responsive skilled labour market • Long term skills management by employers

<p>Assumptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That businesses will be able to access the U@W programme • That businesses will want to access the U@W provision • Co-investment challenges will be overcome and businesses will be willing to pay for the training • There will be sufficient employees who participate which meet the CCT targets (gender, Black, Asian or minority ethnic, age, disability etc) • That colleges can deliver the courses demanded by the businesses • That existing staff resource will be able to deliver the U@W programme, or new staff can be brought in • That colleges will be able to deliver the volume of provision and outputs to meet the delivery profile • That beneficiary colleges will be able to collaborate and coordinate effectively to run the programme • Monitoring and reporting will be effective and embedded within colleges 	<p>Barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The requirement of businesses to co-fund the cost of training • The opportunity cost to employers of staff participating in training is perceived as too great • The existing skill levels of the employees in unrelated jobs or sectors precluding them from accessing support in their current career • The range of sectors who see FE training provision as beneficial to business • Employers wanting to access U@W rather than other competing provision • Courses and accreditations being available in Welsh • Capacity of staff in colleges to deliver the U@W programme in addition to existing provision • Courses required by the business community are not on the eligible list for U@W to provide • Ability of the programme to select participants based on equal opportunities targets such as Black, Asian or minority ethnic 	<p>Risks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost overruns exceed project budget • Delivery does not meet the profile • Beneficiaries compete for delivery outputs with a limited pool of employers • Insufficient numbers of businesses use U@W for training provision • Insufficient eligible employees being put forward for training by their employers • Other, shorter term funding opportunities distract delivery from U@W • Other training provision is more desired by the business community • Colleges are unable to secure sufficient resource to deliver the U@W courses • There is insufficient demand for some courses which leave few businesses • Coronavirus pandemic shifts business priorities away from upskilling • Outreach activities in the aftermath of the lockdown are a distraction from business priorities • Returning to a part-funded programme after the revised de minimus status ends
<p>Enablers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill and experience of the colleges and their teams • Access to network of businesses who may be able to benefit from the U@W supported courses • Commercial intelligence and insight from the colleges • Communication and collaboration between the LBs and JBs 		

Appendix 2 – Programme Targets

Operation	Indicator	Bridgend	Cardiff & the Vale	Coleg Gwent	Cymoedd	Merthyr	NPTC Group
EW SO1	Output: Participants with no formal qualifications - male		206	91			93
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - male		154	66			72
	Output: Participants with no formal qualifications - female		419	89			83
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - female		317	72			59
	Output: Participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - male		161	70			140
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - male		120	52			103
	Output: Participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - female		242	72			108
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - female		176	56			77

Operation	Indicator						NPTC Group
		Bridgend	Cardiff & the Vale	Coleg Gwent	Cymoedd	Merthyr	
EW SO2	Output: Participants with a Level 2 qualification - male		127	170			188
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male		95	128			139
	Output: Participants with a Level 2 qualification - female		335	101			181
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female		245	79			149
	Output: Participants with a Level 3 qualification or above - male		528	187			276
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male		332	146			208
	Output: Participants with a Level 3 qualification or above - female		597	150			197
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female		335	107			155
WWV SO1	Output: Participants with no formal qualifications - male	35		155	362	181	
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - male	26		112	261	131	
	Output: Participants with no formal qualifications - female	35		160	66	44	
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification upon leaving - female	26		116	48	32	
	Output: Participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - male	82		90	90	146	
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - male	59		65	65	105	
	Output: participants with qualifications up to and including Level 2 - female	80		30	47	49	
	Result: Gaining an essential skill or technical or job specific qualification at lower secondary (Levels 1 and 2) upon leaving - female	58		22	34	35	

Operation	Indicator	Bridgend	Cardiff & the Valley Colleg Gwent	Cymoedd	Merthyr	NPTC Group
WWV SO2	Output: Participants with a Level 2 qualification - male	66	425	212	93	
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male	41	263	127	56	
	Output: Participants with a Level 2 qualification – female	79	200	118	86	
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female	47	123	71	52	
	Output: Participants with a Level 3 qualification or above – male	57	95	236	97	
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - male	33	58	142	58	
	Output: Participants with a Level 3 qualification or above – female	71	76	123	94	
	Result: Gaining a technical or job specific vocational qualification upon leaving at Level 3 or above - female	43	47	74	56	

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