

Executive summary

Introduction

This is the second interim report evaluating Mayor's Skills Academies Programme. The programme consists of a series of distinct yet complementary elements:

- The establishment of a **network of over 20 hubs** focused on one or more of six London priority sectors (Creative, Digital, Green, Health, Hospitality and Social Care). Each hub is expected to bring together key providers, employers and other local stakeholders to address skills challenges in their priority sector.
- An accredited and branded **Quality Mark** for training providers in each of the priority sectors is included. The Quality Mark is intended to promote high standards amongst providers and enable learners and employers to more easily identify providers that offer high-quality, accessible sector-relevant training.
- Additional **Adult Education Budget (AEB) 'good work' funding**, where eligible providers engaged with a Hub to receive £400 AEB funding per learner that achieves a 'good work' job outcome in the hub's priority sector, up to a maximum £100,000 per hub.
- **The Workforce Integration Network (WIN)** provides support to increase the representation of currently under-represented groups in the workforce of priority sectors. This includes **Design Labs** that bring together large employers in particular priority sectors to develop initiatives to support Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) practices, the development of **Inclusive Employer Toolkits** for each priority sector and **Toolkits Implementation Support**.
- **The GLA communications campaign** aims to engage key stakeholder organisations in London and raise awareness of skills opportunities and careers in priority sectors among residents.

The primary focus of the evaluation is to assess the effectiveness and impact of the programme's hubs, but there is also a requirement to assess each of the other programme elements. This report specifically focuses on the implementation of the programme in the first two years of the three-year period.

Evaluation methodology

The research conducted for this year's interim evaluation has followed a very similar structure to the 2023 interim research. It comprised:

- Interviews with GLA staff involved in programme management and delivery.
- Analysis of programme monitoring data up to Quarter 1 2024/2025 (April-June 2024)
- Qualitative case study research with 10 of the Hubs. (West London College (Green); Groundwork London (Green); City of London Adult Education Service (Digital); Capital City College Group (Digital); NextGen Skills Academy (Creative); Capital City College Group (Hospitality); North East London Integrated Care Board (Health); South West London Integrated Care Board (Health); North West London Social Care (Social Care); and North Central London Integrated Hub (Health and Social Care) combined.
- Interviews were also conducted with personnel in all the non-case study hubs, including those that had dropped out of the programme after Year Two.

A total of 119 people were interviewed or took part in group discussions: 45 hub staff, 21 training providers, 20 employers, 14 learners and 19 wider stakeholders.

Research findings

Programme implementation

- Most hubs have strong staffing arrangements in place, which is a substantial development from the first year of the programme. All hubs have a well-established coordinator in place and most hubs also reported having other staff in place who add value (e.g. a senior hub manager/lead, dedicated employer and community engagement officers, and other roles).
- The coordinator role was considered critical for the effective delivery of the hubs. Those that performed particularly well had effective coordinators able to mobilise partners and drive forward sector innovation. Coordinators require a complex blend of skills, however, making the role particularly challenging.
- The relationship between hubs and training providers has matured over the last year. While some difficulties remain in mobilising training providers to respond quickly to emerging skills needs, most hubs have developed strong relationships with a few key providers who actively support sector priorities..
- Overall, hubs have performed well against their employer engagement targets. There was, however, some variation by priority sector. Hospitality and Social Care hubs performed less well against their targets. This was due, in part, to a shortage of employers in both sectors offering entry-level roles that met the programme's 'good work' definition. In the Digital sector, employer recruitment was reported to be difficult due to a high level of competition for the engagement of larger Digital employers.
- In the last year many hubs had also benefited from developed relationships with wider partners. Relations with job centres, in particular, had enabled hubs to engage with more Londoners on training and job opportunities. Engaging London Borough Councils (LBCs) and industry bodies had provided an additional route into hub employer engagement.
- There was no uniform model for how hubs communicated with their partners. The most effective hubs had structures in place to communicate with senior staff in partners on a strategic level and team managers/curriculum leads within partner organisations in a position to implement changes on the ground.
- GLA management and support for hubs were widely praised and appeared to be operating effectively, however, the hubs' ability to meet the quarterly KPI monitoring data requirements for the programme is an ongoing challenge. Hubs understood the importance of the data to the GLA, but some issues were still reported with the reporting for key employment outcomes.

Activities delivered through the hubs

- Awareness raising activities were a major part of most hub's sector offer. In some cases, this was to address recruitment challenges (e.g. in Hospitality and Social Care) but in other sectors it focused on increasing the diversity of new entrants. Activities mostly consisted of attending or running recruitment events, complemented by online marketing. Some also targeted schools to improve the talent pipeline.

- Awareness-raising activities with employers were more limited. However, there were some notable examples, particularly among the Health hubs, of employer events to discuss recruitment practices.
- Overall, the programme's hubs facilitated the introduction of a wide range of new courses. However, there was substantial variation across sectors. In some sectors, most notably Digital and Creative there was a greater emphasis on shorter training. Some, such as Green and Social Care, also focused more on CPD provision, with other sectors focused on career entry provision, including both technical and employability programmes. In most cases there was a clear rationale and need for the programmes.
- The hubs used a wide range of funding sources to deliver new training courses, including the European Social Fund (ESF), Strategic Development Fund (SDF), and Department for Education (DfE)-funded Bootcamps. Some stated they preferred these to AEB because they could support non-accredited programmes.
- All the hubs stated they had undertaken activities to identify training gaps in their sectors. However, the scale and level of this work varied considerably, with some adopting a more comprehensive approach than others.
- Work placements and apprenticeships have also been a major focus for nearly every hub from the outset. All hubs were able to give examples of activities that they had undertaken to source work placements.
- There were some interesting examples of hub-led support to improve recruitment into the priority sectors. One example was the use of work coaches. There was also innovative work undertaken in some Health hubs to improve sector recruitment practices.
- There was mixed feedback on other programme elements. While initiatives such as WIN were valued by hubs and their partners, there were concerns that the delayed launch of the Inclusive Employer Toolkits, particularly in some sectors, meant interest and momentum was lost. Some also felt the Design Labs target group of large employers was too restrictive for some sectors.
- The take-up of the AEB good work funding increased from last year, but still remains low. Some felt the amount of funding offered (£400 per outcome) was not a sufficient incentive, there was also a sense that some felt there were risks of clawback associated in accessing the funding.
- GLA promotion of the programme and capacity building funding were both valued by hubs and their partners, but some felt they would have benefited from more support earlier in the programme. It was also noted that there was limited GLA promotion of the Quality Mark, which limited its value in promoting to employers and learners the quality of a hub providers sector offer.

Progress towards programme outcomes and impacts

- Hubs have achieved nearly double the target of Londoners participating in training and education relating to the priority sectors. This success could, in part, be attributed to the promotional activities undertaken by hubs to raise awareness of local, sector-level training offers.
- The hubs are also performing well against their targets for learners on new training and education as a result of hub activity. They have once again surpassed the cumulative target for the programme. This is, in part, the result of new training being developed and increased promotion of existing courses through engagement events.

- Hubs are, however, behind their target for Londoners going into work experience placements. Hubs in some sectors have struggled to mobilise work placements more than others, including in the Health sector, due to sector-specific factors.
- The hubs are also behind their targets for Londoners progressing into good work, paid work placements or apprenticeships. While training providers often struggle to collect employment outcome data, various sector specific reasons were also given for these low numbers, including a high volume of low-paid jobs.
- The number of Londoners from underrepresented groups entering into employment, apprenticeships or paid work placements was also below target. This was, however, proportionate to the overall underperformance of employment targets. Overall, the proportion of beneficiaries from marginalised groups achieving positive outcomes is in line with expectations. A key challenge in achieving this target was collecting relevant information from training provider MI teams. This was particularly challenging when the hub was not led by a training provider.
- Short- and medium-term outcomes included employers being more actively engaged in responding to sector skills gaps, increased awareness of activities taking place in the sector and avenues for signposting, alongside more industry-relevant training offers and curricula. Beneficiaries were also felt to have a better understanding of priority sectors and access to a more holistic support offer, leaving them better equipped to work in the Academy sectors.
- Longer term outcomes were harder for interviewees to identify. However, some of the emerging outcomes noted included training provision being more aligned with the needs of the sector, better awareness of roles available in the sector, and a more diverse workforce with better representation from local areas.

Conclusions and recommendations

Across all the hubs, the activities were generally grounded in sector needs, although the scale of activity varied. This reflected the different focus of different hubs. Some hubs, such as those in Hospitality and Social Care, focused on attracting new individuals into the sector, whereas others focused on increasing the diversity of new entrants. However, this resulted in a strong focus among all hubs on raising awareness of the sector among Londoners, leading to widespread organisation and participation in job fairs and careers events, as well as engagement with jobcentre advisors. A few hubs also engaged with schools to strengthen the talent pipeline.

The hubs' performance in meeting their targets is mixed. The hubs have collectively performed well against their targets for Londoners participating in priority sector training and in undertaking new training programmes, but less well in achieving outcomes related to work experience placements and in placing Londoners in employment, paid work experience or apprenticeships. This is despite some hubs investing significant resources in engaging employers. This reflects the challenging nature of these targets. Some sectors face long-standing difficulties in recruiting new entrants or systemic issues with a high proportion of low-paid work, challenges that the programme is unlikely to fully address within such a short time period. However, there are also challenges with collecting evidence of employment outcomes, which suggests that the current employment outcomes data may be an under-estimate.

The recommendations from the interim evaluation are as follows:

1. **The GLA to support hubs (or hubs that will not be supported in future) in developing realistic sustainability plans.** At present, it is not clear how some of the

new provision developed through the programme will be continued, including whether it will be delivered through AEB (now Adult Skills Funding, ASF) or employer funding.

2. **The GLA to review the long-term role of the Quality Mark.** While hubs perceived the Quality Mark as potentially valuable, its effectiveness depends on strong promotion so that learners and employers recognise it as a sign of high-quality sector learning.
3. **The GLA to continue to support collaboration between employers and providers, either through a hub model or something similar.** A potentially rationalised model of a few hubs for each priority sector may be more valuable. It would also be valuable to reconsider where the hub model adds more value, whether it is for sectors where training supply does not always meet demand or in addressing recruitment challenges, or both.
4. **The GLA to require Governance groups to oversee individual hubs, chaired by employers.** Where this is in place it has been effective in mobilising key partners to support the agenda of the hub. An independent governance group can also help ensure the sustainability of programmes after project funding has ended.
5. **The GLA to stress test delivery plans for all applicants for new initiatives.** The lesson learnt from the programme was that many hub project plans were unrealistic as they underestimated the time required to have staff in place. GLA can also input into initial job descriptions and recruitment processes could also potentially assist hubs in filling the key roles (e.g. that of the coordinator) quickly and effectively.
6. **The GLA to consider adding in its scoring criteria for future hub activity a measure of in-kind employer staffing contribution to support the hubs.** Hubs where the lead has invested senior and operational staff resources to support delivery (e.g. employer engagement functions) were generally found to be more effective.
7. **The GLA to 'relaunch' the WIN toolkit among the hubs continuing in 2024/25.** The initial promotion of the toolkit took place before the toolkits were available, which lost the initial momentum generated at the start of the programme.
8. **The GLA should continue to support peer learning among hubs, making events more interactive.** This should include more discussions to enable hub leads to discuss challenges to many of the problems that they all face.