



Evaluation of the GLA Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund

Final report – Executive Summary

21 December 2021

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from an external evaluation of the Skills for Londoners (SfL) Innovation Fund programme delivered by the Greater London Authority between March 2020 and August 2021. The programme funded innovative adult skills initiatives that addressed London's skills priorities. In total, 27 projects by 25 providers successfully bid for funding of between £100,000 and £500,000

The evaluation draws out examples of effective practice in delivering adult skills provision that can be used more widely across London. It therefore examined the effectiveness of projects delivery, the scalability of the projects and their impact.

The evaluation employed a mixed methods approach. This included case studies with 16 projects where we interviewed delivery staff, learners and partners (45 in total, at an average of 7.5 per case study). This was complemented with analysis of the ILR R14 data return. The R14 data return contains information on learners that have been enrolled on the SfL Innovation Fund projects by the end of the 2021 academic year.

Key findings

Overview of the projects

- Most projects provided basic skills/ESOL or employability courses, primarily short courses below Level 2. These were targeted at hard-to-reach groups, including the unemployed, individuals with basic skills needs, new arrivals and those with learning difficulties and disabilities. A few also targeted low skilled adults in employment. Only two of the projects had originally planned to deliver provision online, with around a third planning to deliver provision in community venues.
- For most case study projects, the innovative aspect of the programme was engaging hard-to-reach learners through using new outreach methods and in making provision more accessible by delivering provision in community settings. Some providers reported that these practices were not wholly new, but rather had been built on good practice that was identified from previous projects or existing activities. A few projects also reported that the innovative practice related to their partnership working with employers or in the innovative use of new technologies, which came about largely because they needed to develop online learning models that were a new element to usual delivery models.
- The programme providers claimed 61% of the total funding allocated for the projects, (£4,402,105 was claimed against a total programme budget of £7,219,523). The underspend was largely due to a delayed start caused by the initial pandemic lockdown in March 2020 and then delays due to having to transfer provision online. In the first year of the programme (from March to August 2020) the projects collectively achieved 31% of their forecast spend for the academic year (£1,224,749 against a forecast of £3,894,297). Provision in the second academic year of the programme (2020/21) was far closer to profile at 92% (£3,166,043 against a forecast of £3,425,226).
- Overall, 21 of the 25 SfL Innovation Fund providers delivered project activities. Of these, three providers achieved and exceeded their targets (Camden LBC, Ealing LBC and Wandsworth LBC) and a further six providers achieved over 75% of their targets (Kingston Adult Education, Westminster City Council, WEA, City Lit, Harrow LBC and South Thames Colleges Group).
- A high proportion of the programme learners were from disadvantaged groups. Across all the projects, 62% of learners had a prior attainment of Level 2 or below and most (41%) had a prior attainment of below Level 1. The programme has also engaged a higher

proportion (61%) of ethnic minority learners than those that enrolled on AEB grant funded programmes in 2019/20 and 2020/21 and a similar proportion of learners with learning difficulties or disabilities (14%).

Delivery of project activities

- In the case studies there were a range of different approaches employed to recruit learners. The most common were using outreach partners (including community groups, jobcentres and youth organisations), basing staff in community centres and in utilising family learning. Some projects also expanded their usual methods of recruitment. The use of outreach partners was generally believed to be effective. However, the number of referrals provided by different partners varied considerably. Organisations that gained a higher proportion of their learners through referrals, such as WEA, and Harrow LBC were generally able to build on strong pre-existing relationships with community organisations, especially the local Children's Centre, to disseminate information and gain referrals.
- Programmes that engaged employees generally recruited the employers or agencies and asked them to promote the training to their employees. This was felt to be effective as employers were in a good position to promote the value of the training to their staff. It was particularly common in the Health and Social Care sector.
- All the case study projects made changes to their projects as a result of the pandemic. The most notable change was the widespread shift to online and remote teaching and learning. For some this was a substantial change in their delivery model. However, a few case study projects extended their training offer to reflect the evolving needs of their community. Most notably Croydon Adult Education and Redbridge LBC introduced a digital skills strand to their offer because they felt that because of increased online activities during the lockdown, there was a pressing need to provide training on this subject.
- Learners generally felt the training delivered by the programme was well delivered and valuable. For some it provided a valuable social activity during the lockdowns. The online learning was not generally considered difficult to access, with many learners reporting that they were comfortable with using Zoom or Teams. Some also felt it provided benefits by reducing travel and childcare costs and making it easier to fit the training around their day.
- Another key strength of the projects was in the provision of holistic support providing employability, basic skills and vocational learning. In particular, the provision of extensive pastoral support for learners was a key part of their offer. Project staff in these providers believed this was essential to build learners' confidence and emotional resilience in order for them to complete the courses. It was felt to be particularly valuable for long-term unemployed people and ESOL learners, as well as those that had been outside education for a long time.

Programme outcomes

- In all the case study projects, most learners said that the project had improved their personal development. The most common reported changes were improved self-efficacy and confidence (reported by learners on most case study projects); and improved skills and ability to manage and improve health and wellbeing (reported in three projects). The programme also had a substantial impact on developing individuals' basic and ESOL skills. It has had less of an impact on developing vocational skills, as few projects delivered this provision.
- In the case study projects, the most common progression outcome for learners was going into further education or training. In some projects, and particularly those providing first-

steps learning, this was part of the design of their project. In some cases, learners progressed to a course at a higher level. However, it was relatively common for learners to progress from shorter courses to longer courses, and from non-qualification bearing courses to accredited programmes.

- In the case study interviews there were relatively few examples of learners progressing into employment. This was attributed by project staff to many learners on their project remaining a substantial distance from entering the labour market, and because there have been limited job opportunities available during the last year as a result of the lockdowns. It was also affected by project activities being delayed and therefore backloaded, which meant most learners had only recently completed their training by the time of the case studies.
- Around half of the case study projects planned to continue to deliver some or all of the elements of their SfL Innovation Fund project in 2021/22 through their AEB budget. Other projects wanted to continue some of the projects but did not have the funding to do so. Other projects were exploring the feasibility of delivering some new programmes through the Mayor's new Sectoral Academies Programme.
- Most of the case study projects reported that they had the ability to scale up their provision. Some programmes were however less scalable than others. The City Lit project for deaf learners for example required specialist teachers that were difficult to recruit. Similarly, the Camden LBC project required a very tailored programme of support and therefore would be difficult to provide to a larger group.

Recommendations

The study identified the following recommendations

1. GLA to consider mechanisms that support the provision of non-accredited training to provide entry routes for those furthest from the labour market. This includes taster programmes on basic skills/ESOL and employability skills, as well as some first steps recreational learning programmes and personal development topics such as self-efficacy.
2. The GLA to incentivise the delivery of basic skills programmes targeted at low skilled workers in key London sectors in future commissioning programmes or through increasing the funding rate. This could include functional skills courses contextualised for particular sectors, which has been shown to be effective for engaging learners in sectors such as construction and health and social care.
3. Providers to expand the delivery of online programmes of first steps/basic skills programmes as well as potentially other subjects such as health and safety qualifications and food safety.
4. The GLA to explore the possibility of developing and rolling out new learning programmes that bring together basic skills/ESOL provision, employability skills and vocational learning, linked to industry experience.
5. Providers to continue to engage and develop links with third sector organisations in order to create referrals and progression pathways for those furthest from the labour market.
6. The GLA to continue to run small scale competitions to encourage innovation, but this should include different Lots with fixed budgets to encourage a more diverse range of projects.