Estyn

Delivery of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeship programmes

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Executive summary

This report focuses on the delivery of Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications in work-based learning apprenticeships. During May and June 2023, inspectors visited nine of the ten lead providers offering Welsh Government-funded apprenticeship programmes. We held meetings and spoke with learners, managers, delivery staff and employers. We observed group teaching sessions and one-to-one reviews. We carried out an anonymous online survey for learners, delivery staff and employers investigating respondents' attitudes to ESW qualifications and the development of literacy, numeracy and digital skills on apprenticeship programmes.

Providers have developed a range of delivery models which are effective in enabling learners to complete their ESW qualifications. We categorise the models providers are using into six broad categories and outline their advantages and disadvantages.

We identify the characteristic features of effective programmes, including:
- the role of initial assessment, communication and co-ordination within a provider
- learners have a meaningful programme of study – whatever the delivery model used by the provider – which allows them to develop and practice their essential skills and prepare for the external assessments
- flexible provision which adapts to learners' needs
- professional learning for delivery staff
- the support of an apprentice's employer.

Although providers are effective in enabling learners to achieve their ESW qualifications, we found that the learning and teaching of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in apprenticeships is unhelpfully skewed towards preparation for external assessment. Three main factors contribute to this: the time that apprentices have to complete their ESW qualifications over the relatively short period of their apprenticeship, the significant learning challenge often faced by learners to develop the skills needed for their ESW assessments, and an assessment model for ESW qualifications which is largely generic and requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

There was a consistent message from learners, providers and employers that having good literacy, numeracy and digital skills is important for life and work. However, learners strongly prefer and value learning these skills through the context of their work and vocational study. This presents a dilemma for providers: how best to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills, drawing on learners' clear preference for learning through their vocational context, while at the same time preparing them for external assessment which requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

There were three areas, related to the narrow focus on assessment, where the quality of learning was a concern. The first is learners' ability to retain the skills that they have developed, summarised by one learner as, 'I learn it for the test and then instantly forget it.' The second is that learning is largely focused on preparing for

external assessment tasks, reducing the skills being learnt to 'things needed to get through the test', rather than 'useful skills that will help me in my work or wider life'. The third is the extent to which learners are able to apply the skills they have learnt to help them in their job roles or wider lives.

Given the limitations to learning outlined above, in the sessions we observed, most learners had a sound understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy, numeracy and digital skills and many were clear about their progress and what they needed to do to improve. The majority made steady progress in developing the skills that were being addressed in that session. Most learners in our visits and online questionnaire reported receiving helpful support and feedback from their tutors or assessors, which helped them understand what they needed to do to improve and actions they needed to complete to do so.

Providers reported that failure to attain the ESW qualifications is not now a significant cause of learners not completing their overall framework. However, learners with additional learning needs or other barriers to learning such as not being a Welsh or English first language speaker may struggle to attain their ESW qualifications, and this is a barrier to them achieving overall framework success.

Very few apprentices carry out assessments for ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh. Overall, providers are not working in partnership well enough to support learners who wish to study their ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh.

While providers are effective in enabling learners to attain the ESW qualifications they need for their framework, learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy do not continue to develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills consistently.

We identify seven recommendations in total, intended to support the work of the Welsh Government, contract lead providers and providers of work-based learning apprenticeships.

Introduction

This report considers the delivery of Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications in Welsh Government-funded apprenticeships in Wales. Essential Skills Wales are a suite of qualifications intended to develop and confirm learners' communication, application of number and digital literacy skills. Apprentices – unless they already have certain qualifications which allow exemption – are required to attain specified ESW qualifications to achieve their full apprenticeship framework.

The report has been written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Estyn's annual remit letter from March 2022. The report is of relevance to providers of work-based learning apprenticeships, employers who offer apprenticeships and learners, as well as to the Welsh Government, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, awarding organisations and Qualifications Wales. Qualifications Wales are carrying out their own concurrent independent review of Essential Skills Wales qualifications.

The report draws on visits by inspectors to nine of the ten lead providers who hold contracts to deliver Welsh Government-funded apprenticeship programmes, data analysis of published outcome data and data provided to us by the lead providers, an online questionnaire for learners, employers and delivery staff, and evidence from inspections and monitoring visits of work-based learning providers. The visits and the online questionnaire took place during May and June 2023.

In section 1, we identify the characteristic features of effective delivery of ESW qualifications within apprenticeship programmes, including the role of initial advice and guidance, coordination and communication within providers, the planning and delivery of programmes, professional learning for staff, leadership and management, and the importance of employers in supporting and motivating their apprentices.

In section 2, we discuss learners' outcomes, based on information in published data and on data provided to us by providers, including information on the rate at which learners complete ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh. From our observations of teaching and learning and from conversations with staff and learners, we identify three areas in which the quality of learning is a concern.

Section 3 details learners', tutors' and employers' views about essential skills in apprenticeships. While nearly all value the importance of developing literacy, numeracy and digital skills as important for work and life, many expressed reservations about the suitability of Essential Skills Wales qualifications as a means of doing this in apprenticeship programmes.

Section 4 includes an overview of the most effective practice we observed in relation to initial advice and guidance.

In section 5, we describe the six delivery models currently or recently in use by providers across Wales to deliver ESW qualifications or develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills. We discuss each model's advantages and disadvantages

and give examples of the benefits and challenges faced by providers using different approaches to delivery.

The report concludes with a consideration of leadership and management of essential skills programmes, including self-evaluation, the importance of communication in effective delivery, professional learning to support delivery staff and the role of the essential skills specialist tutor.

We thank all the learners, staff from work-based learning providers and employers who took part in our electronic survey, observations and meetings for their contribution to this report.

Background

Apprenticeships in Wales

Apprentices are employed and work in a range of jobs. Apprentices enter their training at different levels depending upon the job, their previous experience and the needs of employers. As well as developing their job-related skills in the workplace, apprentices work towards achieving a series of recognised qualifications.

Apprenticeships are open to anyone over the age of 16, including those with a disability, health condition or learning difficulty. There is no upper age limit. As apprentices are employed by the organisation in which they work, they must apply when vacancies are advertised like any other job. The employer who advertises the apprenticeship will state the qualifications, skills and experience they require.

Apprenticeships combine practical training in a job with study. In Wales an apprentice follows an approved apprenticeship framework, which includes a set of mandatory qualifications, outlined under the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for Wales (SASW) specification (Welsh Government, 2016).

Apprenticeships have three tiers[1]:

- Foundation Apprenticeships – level 2 (equivalent level to GCSEs graded A* to C)
- Apprenticeships – level 3 (equivalent level to A levels)
- Higher Apprenticeships – level 4 and above.

The mandatory components of the apprenticeship framework vary from framework to framework and usually include technical or vocational qualifications, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). They also usually include a requirement for the apprentice to complete specified Essential Skills Wales qualifications at specified levels. Details of requirements for each framework are available at the website of Apprenticeship Certification Wales (2023).

The apprentice must complete all the mandatory components of their framework to successfully complete their full apprenticeship.

From August 2021, the Welsh Government has contracted 10 lead training providers to deliver apprenticeships across Wales. These lead providers work with provider partners and subcontractors to deliver apprenticeship programmes. Of the lead providers, six are further education colleges, one is a training provider owned by a further education college and three are independent training providers. For more information on how apprenticeships are delivered in Wales, see Welsh Government (2023a), Estyn (2023a), Estyn (2023b).

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[1] There are also degree apprenticeships offered through universities. These are not part of the Welsh Government contract with the ten work-based learning lead providers and are not considered as part of this report.

The history and background to Essential Skills Wales qualifications

The Essential Skills Wales (ESW) suite of qualifications comprises:

- Essential Application of Number Skills (AoN)
- Essential Communication Skills (Com)
- Essential Digital Literacy Skills (DL)
- Essential Employability Skills

Essential Skills Wales qualifications are available from entry level 1 to level 3, except for Essential Employability Skills, which are available from entry level 3 to level 3. The focus of this review is on the ESW qualifications of Application of Number, Communication and Digital Literacy. Essential Employability Skills are not usually a requirement in apprenticeship frameworks and are not considered as part of this report.

The roots of the current Essential Skills Wales qualification suite can be traced back to the Curriculum 2000 reforms. At that time, their precursors, 'Key Skills' qualifications, were developed to assess and accredit a similar range of skills. Originally, assessment for Key Skills was through production of a portfolio of evidence, intended to be produced through a learner's programme of study, combined with a confirmatory test. Subsequent reviews of Key Skills led to the removal of the confirmatory test in Wales from 2004 (Welsh Government, 2003 – as archived on Wired-Gov.net).

This approach was continued in the development of the Essential Skills Wales qualifications suite in 2010. This allowed learners and practitioners considerable flexibility to produce a portfolio of evidence that met the criteria for assessment from their own subject or vocational studies. This is often referred to as a 'contextualised' approach to assessing skills (see Glossary). While the approach allowed for flexibility, it also received criticism for lack of rigour and for the possibility for practitioners to over-support candidates as they prepared their portfolios (Welsh Government, 2012). The tension between flexibility and contextualisation on the one hand, and the rigour and thoroughness of assessment on the other, has characterised the debate about skills qualifications over the last two decades.

The rigour of assessment has been particularly important because, over this period, the qualifications have had high value, for example: carrying UCAS points for university entry or being requirements for the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification, or as is the focus of this report, as mandatory components of apprenticeship frameworks.

In 2012, the Welsh Government published their findings following their review of qualifications available for 14 to 19-year-olds in Wales (Welsh Government, 2012), which recommended a review of the content and assessment of Essential Skills qualifications. The report recommended that a new suite of Essential Skills qualifications should be developed with 'more robust, consistent and reliable assessment methods, and a greater proportion of externality' (p. 13). This led to the development of the current Essential Skills Wales qualifications, which were introduced for teaching from September 2015.

The revised qualifications are considerably different to their predecessors, most notably in the way that they are assessed. The revised qualifications are assessed via a controlled task and confirmatory test (for Application of Number and Communication), or a controlled task and structured discussion (for Digital Literacy), in place of the internally assessed portfolio that was used in the legacy qualifications. The confirmatory test has a 'generic' context (see Glossary). It is possible for the controlled assessed task to be tailored to the vocational context of a learners, but, for reasons discussed elsewhere in this report, it usually also has a generic context.

In 2017, Qualifications Wales published a review of the implementation of the revised Essential Skills qualifications (Qualifications Wales, 2017). It noted several positive findings including that providers perceived the new qualifications to be more rigorous and robust than their predecessors and that the majority of providers were delivering the qualifications using qualified essential skills practitioners, which was not common practice for the legacy qualifications.

However, there were challenges, notably in relation to delayed assessments, availability of suitably contextualised controlled tasks and availability of Welsh-medium assessments. In relation to work-based learning, the review also noted concerns, including:

- Apprenticeship providers' view that insufficient funding is available for the delivery of ESW qualifications within apprenticeships
- The limited time that apprenticeship providers allocate to teach and assess ESW qualifications
- The challenge of completing all the qualifications that are required within apprenticeship frameworks
- Some learners are required to complete ESW qualifications at a significantly higher level than their initially assessed level
- The challenge for learners to be released by their employers

The 2017 review by Qualifications Wales and its accompanying action plan led to quick actions to address some of the concerns identified, including updates to the design principles for ESW qualifications (Qualifications Wales, 2018) and guidance on developing bespoke tasks for the controlled task component (Qualifications Wales, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a range of mitigations were put in place with relaxed assessment regimes (see WJEC, 2021; Pearson Edexcel, 2022a). These mitigations have now been removed and the full assessment requirements for each qualification have been reinstated. Arrangements for remote invigilation for on-screen tests, put in place during the pandemic, are still in place (see Pearson-Edexcel, 2022b).

Definition of 'skills' and evidence from inspection

The term 'skills' requires some clarification. In this context, the term can mean both formally assessed skills – Essential Skills Wales qualifications – and more generally, the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, numeracy and digital literacy. On inspections of work-based learning providers, inspectors look at skills using Estyn's guidance on the inspection of apprenticeship programme providers (Estyn, 2022). Of

course, the term 'skills' has a broader meaning as well, when applied to practical competencies, such as using a lathe in a workshop, or preparing a meal in a restaurant kitchen, but in this report we are referring to skills either in relation to Essential Skills Wales qualifications or the skills involved with reading, writing, speaking and listening, numeracy and digital literacy.

In some cases, learners may have prior qualifications (referred to as 'proxy qualifications' or 'proxies' – see Apprenticeship Certification Wales, 2019), which exempt them from having to attain ESW qualifications as part of their apprenticeship framework. For example, GCSE mathematics grades A*-C acts as a proxy for Application of Number level 2, GCSE English or Welsh Language grades D-G acts as a proxy for Communication level 1. There are no proxies, however, for the ESW qualification of Digital Literacy.

On any apprenticeship programme, it is likely that some learners will need to attain all the ESW qualifications at the level required by the framework, some will have proxies for one or two, and some will not need any as they have proxies for all the requirements. This diversity presents a challenge for work-based learning providers: how to ensure that all learners meet the minimum requirements of their frameworks, and yet still stretch and challenge those learners who have proxies to continue to develop their skills. On inspection, we consider the progress learners make in attaining their Essential Skills Wales Qualifications, and the quality of experience they have in working towards them. We also consider if providers offer sufficient challenge to learners who already have proxies.

On inspection, we also pay considerable attention to the more general skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, numeracy and digital literacy, which are not formally assessed. We consider the standards of all skills that all learners (not just those taking Essential Skills Wales qualifications) achieve in their context of their daily work, and the extent to which:

- providers have clear operational processes to develop learners' skills from their individual starting points
- trainers and assessors (please see the [glossary](#) for notes on how we refer to these roles for the purposes of this report) guide learners effectively to identify their targets
- trainers and assessors provide learners with appropriate opportunities and resources to develop their skills
- there are sufficient opportunities for learners to practice their skills in their programme work, practical work and assignments
- there are sufficient processes for measuring and recording learner progress in developing their skills

Estyn's Annual Reports for 2017 to 2020 (Estyn, 2018a, 2019, 2020) summarise the strengths and areas for improvement in skills development and ESW qualification outcomes in apprenticeships. Strengths included that the majority of learners developed strong speaking and listening skills and that most achieved Essential Skills qualifications at levels required for the framework, that a few achieved at levels above framework requirements and many made progress through effective use of the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) resource. However, the reports noted

variability in the quality of provision, and shortcomings in learners' awareness of what they needed to improve and target setting to do so. Additionally, providers were not doing enough to promote the benefit of the Welsh language as an employment skill or encouraging Welsh-speaking learners to use and develop their language skills in the workplace.

Our thematic review of higher apprenticeships (Estyn, 2018b) reported that, generally, completing ESW qualifications helped learners to upskill or update their literacy and numeracy skills. Many learners who had high-level qualifications, such as university degrees in specialist subjects, may not have undertaken a maths or English qualification for a number of years. As a result, they reported that the ESW qualifications helped them to refresh and further develop their literacy and numeracy skills. However, a few learners reported that undertaking these qualifications was unnecessary and also felt that their existing qualifications should be used as proxies. In many cases, providers were not aware of, and did not use, proxy qualifications appropriately. We reported that while all providers carry out the Wales Essential Skill Toolkit (WEST) assessment process to identify and determine learners' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs at the start of their programmes, learners found the assessment process time consuming.

The report acknowledged that delivery of ESW qualifications was 'very challenging for most providers'. Many learners faced barriers undertaking a test in examination conditions, for example, where learners do not have appropriate facilities in the workplace to undertake the tests, or the need for learners to attend 'offsite' controlled tasks. However, in the best cases, providers worked well with learners and employers to devise strategies to overcome barriers and make supportive arrangements to complete their ESW qualifications.

Main findings

Learning and teaching

1   The learning and teaching of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in apprenticeships is unhelpfully skewed towards preparation for external assessment.

2   Three main factors contribute to this: the time that apprentices have to complete their ESW qualifications over the relatively short period of their apprenticeship, the significant learning challenge often faced by learners to develop the skills needed for their ESW assessments, and an assessment model for ESW qualifications which is largely generic and requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

3   This presents a dilemma for providers: how best to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills, drawing on learners' clear preference for learning through their vocational context, while at the same time preparing them for external assessment which requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

4   Providers have developed a range of delivery models which are effective in enabling learners to complete their ESW qualifications. We categorise the models providers are using to deliver ESW qualifications in apprenticeship programmes into six broad categories and outline their advantages and disadvantages.

5   Most learners had a sound understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy, numeracy and digital skills and many were clear about their progress and what they needed to do to improve. Most learners in our visits and online questionnaire reported receiving helpful support and feedback from their tutors or assessors, which helped them understand what they needed to do to improve and actions they needed to complete to do so. In the sessions we observed, the majority of learners made steady progress in developing the skills that were being addressed in that session.

6   However, we identified three areas, related to the narrow focus on assessment, where the quality of learning was a concern. The first is learners' ability to retain the skills that they have developed. This is summarised by one learner's comment: 'I learn it for the test and then instantly forget it.' The second is that learning is largely focused on preparing for external assessment tasks, reducing the skills being learnt to 'things needed to get through the test', rather than 'useful skills that will help me in my work or wider life'. The third is the extent to which learners are able to apply the skills they have learnt to help them in their job roles or wider lives. This means that learners are not developing, to the fullest extent they could, the skills that would be most helpful to them in their work or in their wider lives.

7   While providers are effective in enabling learners to attain the ESW qualifications they need for their framework, learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy do not continue to develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills consistently.

8   Providers reported that failure to attain the ESW qualifications required by their framework is not now a significant cause of learners not completing their overall framework. However, learners with additional learning needs or other barriers to learning such as not being a Welsh or English first language speaker may struggle to attain their ESW qualifications, and this is a barrier to them achieving overall framework success.

9   Very few apprentices carry out assessments for ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh. Overall, providers are not working in partnership well enough to support learners who wish to study their ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh.

Learners', tutors' and employers' views

10   Learners value the importance of developing literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Many learners felt that they have had good support from their providers in helping them develop their skills. Nearly all learners found learning literacy, numeracy or digital skills most worthwhile when they perceived them to be relevant to their job roles.

11   Learners frequently expressed frustration at why and how they were required to attain ESW qualifications as part of their apprenticeship framework. Learners with negative attitudes to ESW qualifications found the assessment of the qualification demotivating and a barrier to them achieving their framework.

12   Employers also generally supported the importance of literacy, numeracy and digital skills. On the whole, employers were supportive of ESW qualifications, although with some reservations about the time and effort required to complete them.

13   Many tutors and assessors felt that it was a valuable part of their role to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills. They noted the challenge of fitting in teaching and learning for ESW qualifications while at the same time guiding the learner through the vocational component of their framework.

Characteristics of effective programmes

14   We identify the characteristic features of effective programmes, including:

- Initial advice and guidance ensure that learners understand what ESW qualifications they need complete for their framework, and by when.
- Initial assessment identifies a learner's strengths and weaknesses. Learners understand clearly what they need to do to improve.
- Communication and co-ordination between teams, tutors and assessors delivering different aspects of a learner's programme is clear, structured and formalised. Within the provider, it is clear who is responsible for tracking and monitoring a learners' progress in completing their ESW qualifications.
- Learners are offered meaningful opportunities to study and complete their ESW qualifications in Welsh. If staffing this is not possible, opportunities for partnership or collaborative working with other providers are explored and taken up.
- Learners have a realistic timeline for completion of their Essential Skills qualifications. If learners begin to drift away from their timeline, this is identified

quickly, and remedial support is put in place to ensure that learners complete their ESW qualifications and achieve their full framework.

- Learners have a meaningful programme of study – whatever the delivery model used by the provider – which allows them to develop and practice their essential skills and prepare for the external assessments.
- A learner's programme of study takes into account their initial and ongoing assessments. It allows the learner the opportunity to focus on developing weaker skill areas and to consolidate strengths.
- Provision is flexible. It allows for opportunities for intensive support should a learner struggle to develop their skills.
- Providers encourage and support their delivery staff – whether vocational assessors or essential skills specialists – to develop their personal literacy, numeracy and digital skills and to take ESW qualifications themselves.
- Providers offer professional learning that develops tutors' and assessors' understanding of the pedagogy for delivering essential skills.
- Providers ensure that essential skills are properly considered in self-evaluation and quality improvement processes.
- Employers are clear about their role in supporting apprentices achieve their ESW qualifications, maintain motivation and develop resilience. Employers ensure that apprentices are given the necessary time off-the-job to carry out these activities.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government should:

R1 Work with Qualifications Wales and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research to review the use of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeships

R2 Refresh the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) and resources

R3 Working with partners, develop opportunities for professional learning to enhance practitioners' understanding of the pedagogy and capacity to deliver essential skills

Work-based learning apprenticeship providers should:

R4 Develop partnership working approaches to ensure that:

- learners have meaningful opportunities to study and take assessments bilingually or through the medium Welsh
- learners' additional learning needs are promptly identified, evaluated and appropriately supported

R5 Ensure that learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy continue to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills

R6 Offer professional learning that develops tutors' and assessors' pedagogy to deliver essential skills

Lead providers should:

R7 Ensure that self-evaluation reflects on the effectiveness of the delivery models in use across the provider's partners and sub-contractors and takes action to reduce the potential disadvantages identified in this report

(1) Characteristics of effective programmes

We found a range of delivery models in use for ESW qualifications. These are discussed in the section of this report on teaching and learning. Across the range of delivery models, the following features were characteristic of the most effective programmes:

Initial advice and guidance

- Initial advice and guidance ensure that learners understand what ESW qualifications they need to complete for their framework, and by when.
- Learners understand the potential benefits – in addition to just completing their frameworks – that improving their essential skills might bring to their apprenticeship studies, their capabilities in work and to their wider lives. Learners understand the potential value of what they are studying.
- Where this is helpful to stretch learners' abilities and to improve their progression into subsequent further apprenticeships, learners are challenged to attain higher level ESW qualifications than needed for their framework.
- Certificates for proxy qualifications are collected and processed as soon as possible in learners' programmes, to minimise the possibility that learners misplace certificates they had achieved at school, and to reduce the possibility that learners may have to complete ESW qualifications for which they originally thought they had proxy.
- Learners are offered meaningful opportunities to study and complete their ESW qualifications in Welsh. If staffing this is not possible, opportunities for partnership or collaborative working with other providers are explored and taken up.
- Learners who may have additional learning needs or who may require adjustments to assessments are referred promptly to appropriate staff in order for these to be evaluated. Lead providers use partnership approaches to ensure that all providers in their contract have access to the specialist staff needed to carry out these evaluations. Any support needed is put in place and guidance for delivery staff on how to support the learner is communicated effectively. Any adjustments are recorded with the awarding organisation promptly.
- Initial assessment identifies a learner's strengths and weaknesses in skills. Learners understand clearly what they need to do to improve.

Co-ordination and communication about learners' progress

- Within the provider, it is clear who is responsible for tracking and monitoring a learner's progress in completing their Essential Skills Wales qualifications.
- Communication and co-ordination between teams, tutors and assessors delivering different aspects of a learner's programme is clear, structured and formalised. The provider's systems support effective sharing of information about learners' progress.
- Learners have a realistic timeline for completion of their ESW qualifications. The timeline allows sufficient time for learners to settle into their programme, to

develop their skills and to gain the necessary accreditations. The timeline includes margin for slippage.

- If learners begin to drift away from their timeline, this is identified quickly and remedial support is put in place to ensure that learners complete their ESW qualifications and achieve their full framework.

Planning and delivery of ESW programmes

- Learners have a meaningful programme of study – whatever the delivery model used by the provider – which allows them to develop and practise their essential skills and prepare for the external assessments.
- A learner's programme of study takes into account their initial and ongoing assessments. It allows the learner opportunity to focus on developing weaker skill areas and to consolidate strengths.
- Provision is flexible. It allows for opportunities for intensive support should a learner struggle to develop their skills. Examples include additional support from specialist tutors, online or in-person workshops or 'masterclasses', and practice assessment opportunities.
- Providers recognise the range of demands placed on apprentices as employed adult learners. Providers support learners to balance the workload from their study, their job role and the demands of their wider lives.
- Providers support learners to maintain motivation and develop resilience. This is particularly important for those learners who find attaining ESW qualifications particularly challenging.
- Providers plan and take advantage of assessed controlled tasks which allow learners to demonstrate their skills in vocationally relevant contexts.
- Providers ensure that learners with additional learning needs, or potential barriers to learning such as not being a Welsh or English first language speaker, receive appropriate support. Arrangements for appropriate adjustments to assessments or special dispensation to modify the ESW qualification requirements for frameworks are made quickly and effectively.
- Providers deploy specialist essential skills tutors appropriately, either directly working with learners or in support of non-specialist assessors.
- Providers ensure that learners who have already attained their ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy continue to develop and improve their skills in a meaningful way.

Professional learning

- Providers encourage and support their delivery staff – whether vocational assessors or essential skills specialists – to develop their own personal essential skills and to take ESW qualifications themselves.
- Providers offer professional learning that develops tutors' and assessors' understanding of the pedagogy for delivering essential skills: staff have strategies for teaching and supporting learners to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Leadership and management

- A manager with sufficient authority has oversight of the essential skills component of the provider's programmes.
- Providers ensure that essential skills are incorporated into self-evaluation and quality improvement processes.
- The lead provider has appropriate oversight of the essential skills programmes offered across its contract and has mechanisms for ensuring that good practice is shared.

Employers

- Providers and employers maintain good communication about learners' progress and circumstances.
- Employers are clear about their role in supporting apprentices to achieve their ESW qualifications, maintain motivation and develop resilience. This is likely to include allowing time spent off-the-job in workshops or undertaking assessment activities. Employers ensure that apprentices are given the necessary time off-the-job to carry out these activities.
- Employers have enough information about apprentices' learning commitments (eg off-the-job workshops or assessment activities) so that they can plan apprentices' work accordingly.

(2) Learners' outcomes

National published data for apprenticeship framework completion

The most recent national published data for apprenticeship programmes is the Welsh Government's learning outcome report for the academic year 2021-2022 (Welsh Government, 2023b). This is the first set of standard outcome measures published since the academic year data for 2018-2019, with reports for the two intervening years not produced due to the pandemic.

The key measure in the learning outcome report is the full framework success rate, which is the rate at which apprentices successfully complete their framework, including all the mandatory elements, such as NVQs and ESW qualifications. The report shows that the full framework success rate of apprenticeships overall was 14.6 percentage points lower in 2021-2022 than before the pandemic in 2018-2019, falling from 80.9% to 66.3%.

The largest decreases in success rates were for foundation apprenticeships; apprenticeships in the health, public services and care; hospitality and catering; and hair and beauty sector subject areas; and those taken by apprentices aged 20 to 24. The gap in success rates between learners living in the most deprived areas and the least deprived areas widened compared to 2018-2019, with a gap of nine percentage points in 2021-2022 compared to three percentage points in 2018-2019.

The learning outcome report identifies, in broad categories, the reasons that learners do not successfully complete their frameworks. About half of learners who did not successfully complete their frameworks in 2021-2022 were categorised as 'failure'. The learning outcome report does not identify the proportion of learners who failed to complete their full frameworks because of failure to complete ESW qualifications.

It is not always straightforward to identify the exact reason for a learner to 'fail' their full framework. Usually, learners decide that they no longer want to complete their full framework and leave without having achieved all the components. This can be for a range of reasons relating, for example, to the vocational qualification component, repeated failure to attain ESW qualifications, pressure of work, gaining alternative employment outside the sector, or personal reasons. Providers report that failure to achieve ESW qualifications is not now a significant cause of overall failure to complete frameworks. Although there are differences in framework completion outcomes between providers, and between different vocational routes, we were not able to attribute these differences to different approaches to the delivery of ESW qualifications or to the different delivery models in use. We discuss this, and the range of delivery models in use in the section of this report on teaching and learning. Providers noted an exception, in the case of learners with additional learning needs (ALN), where the Essential Skills Wales component of frameworks creates a barrier to successful completion that learners struggle to overcome. We address this specifically later in this section.

An additional aspect to the published data is the potential for 'hidden failure'. The statistics for the learning outcome report are based on learners who are active and on programme eight weeks after the start date. Learners are defined as 'early dropouts' if they: end their learning within eight weeks of their start date, did not complete that learning and the learning had an expected length of 24 weeks or greater. Learners who drop out early are excluded from the learner outcome measures. The 2021-2022 learner outcome report (Welsh Government, 2023b) records that 12.1% of the total number of learners who start apprenticeship programmes were early dropouts. Providers reported to us that an unquantified but potentially significant component of early dropouts could be learners who, when they realise the scale of the challenge they face in completing the ESW component of their framework, decide not to continue.

Data request to providers

We asked the nine lead providers that we visited for this study to complete a data request of their own data for all the providers and sub-contractors in their contract. The request asked for:

- the current number of learners on different programmes and at different levels
- the number of learners who were exempt by proxy from at least one of the essential skills qualifications required by their framework
- the number of learners taking at least one ESW qualification at a higher level than that required by their framework
- the number of learners taking any ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh

All nine lead providers responded, although we were not able to make full use of the data from one lead provider because it was not in the requested format. The data we discuss here is therefore a sample of the WBL apprenticeship provision in Wales, rather than a full picture of all the provision. We do not identify individual providers' data returns in this discussion.

Data from providers: proxy qualifications

Table 1 shows a summary of the responses from eight of the ten lead providers. Overall, 61% of learners in the sample were exempt from at least one ESW in their framework because they had proxy qualifications. This was highest for Higher Apprenticeship learners, at 67%. Sixty-four per cent of Apprenticeship learners and 53% of Foundation Apprenticeship learners were able to claim at least one proxy. This pattern is what might be expected, since Apprenticeship and Higher Apprenticeship learners will be more likely to have attained GCSEs or to have already completed ESW qualifications as they progress through lower-level apprenticeship frameworks.

Table 1 – Responses from eight lead providers showing percentage of learners exempt by proxy, achieving higher ESW levels than required by their framework and taking their ESW qualifications in Welsh.

Apprenticeship level	No. Learners	% learners who are exempt from at least one ESW by proxy	% learners taking any ESW higher than framework requirements	% learners taking any ESW in Welsh
Foundation Apprenticeship (L2)	10,013	53%	15%	2%
Apprenticeship (L3)	10,620	64%	3%	3%
Higher Apprenticeship (L4/5)	5,745	67%	5%	3%
Total	26,378	61%	8%	2%

Data from providers: ESW qualifications at a higher level than framework requirement

Table 1 also shows the summary of responses from eight lead providers in relation to the proportion of learners taking any ESW qualifications at a higher level than their framework requires. Overall, 8% of learners were taking higher level ESW qualifications than required by their framework. This proportion was highest for Foundation Apprenticeship learners. Again, this might be expected, as learners at this level will be likely in the future to progress on to higher-level apprenticeships (Apprenticeship or Higher Apprenticeship) where they would need to attain ESW qualifications at a higher level. Therefore, completing higher-than-needed ESW qualifications during their Foundation Apprenticeship will allow learners to 'bank' their ESW qualifications to provide exemption in future programmes.

Data from providers: ESW qualifications though the medium of Welsh

Table 1 shows that, overall, 2% of learners (645 of a total of 26,378) in the sample of eight partnerships carried out their ESW qualifications in Welsh. Of these, 437 learners (68%) were at one lead provider and their contract partners. The other seven lead providers recorded between 0% and 11% of their learners taking ESW qualifications in Welsh.

Clearly, the number of learners at any provider who might choose to take ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh will depend to some extent on the underlying proportion of Welsh speakers in the provider's local population. However, the pattern of learners taking ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh suggests that this is not the only factor, and that variation in practice between providers is also likely to play a part, with some providers supporting learners to take ESW qualifications in Welsh more effectively than others. For example, a lead provider with over 2,000 learners across the partners in its contract reported that none of its learners was taking ESW qualifications in Welsh. In another lead

provider's contract, all providers had relatively high numbers of learners taking ESW qualifications in Welsh, except one, which reported zero.

Observations of learning

In our visits to nine lead providers, we observed online and classroom-based essential skills sessions, workshops, off-the job one-to-one sessions and on-the-job sessions at employers' premises.

We identified three related areas where the quality of learning was a concern. The first is learners' ability to retain the skills that they have developed. While learners showed short-term improvements in their skills as a result of working on supported self-study tasks, activities provided by their tutors or in practice assessment sessions, they frequently reported not retaining these skills once the external assessment for the ESW qualification had been completed. This is summarised by one learner's comment: 'I learn it for the test and then instantly forget it.'

The second is that learning is largely focused on preparing for external assessment tasks. In much of the learning we observed, learners were working on 'bite-sized chunks' of learning consolidated by a practice assessment, often derived from sample confirmatory tests. This has the effect of reducing the skills being learnt to 'things needed to get through the test', rather than 'useful skills that will help me in my work or wider life'. For example, when learners and their tutors spoke with each other as part of the learning process, they frequently referred to the external assessment as the purpose of their learning:

> *Why do I need to learn this?*

> *You need it to get through the test.*

This approach to learning is partly driven by the short time scales that learners have to complete their ESW qualifications and partly because the confirmatory tests and assessed tasks generally require learners to demonstrate skills in generic contexts, rather than through their vocational or subject learning.

The third is the extent to which learners are able to apply the skills they have learnt to help them in their job roles or wider lives. Learners expressed a clear preference for learning skills though their vocational context and in ways which help them in their job roles, yet the generic nature of the assessment of ESW qualifications means that learners are, in effect, required to learn the skills – or at least demonstrate them for assessment purposes – in a way which is largely divorced from their job role. This means that learners are not developing, to the fullest extent they could, the skills that would be most helpful to them in their work or in their wider lives.

These three areas are related by the key question raised by this report, which is the suitability of ESW qualifications as a means of structuring the development and assessing apprentices' numeracy, literacy and digital skills on work-based learning programmes. The assessment model for ESW qualifications contributes to skewing learning and teaching towards preparation for external assessment.

We outline the models being used to deliver ESW qualifications in apprenticeship programmes in the section of this report on Teaching and Learning. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Providers have developed these models in order to 'get learners over the hurdle of assessment' so that they can attain their full apprenticeship framework, and, as described above, teaching and learning is geared rather narrowly towards external assessment.

Given the limitations to learning described above, in the sessions we observed, the majority of learners were making steady progress in developing the skills that were being addressed in that session. For example, if the session was focused on the use of punctuation, the learner had made discernible improvement in their understanding of the use of punctuation over the course of the session. Frequently, the session concluded with a practice test paper question or an opportunity to carry out a 'skills check' assessment using WEST.

Most learners had a sound understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy, numeracy and digital skills and many were clear about their progress and what they needed to do to improve. Where learners were regularly making use of their initial assessment 'spikey profile' derived from WEST, the WEST skills checks or feedback from practice paper questions, they were able to monitor their own progress and repeatedly check their skills development.

Most learners reported receiving helpful support and feedback from their tutors or assessors which helped them understand what they needed to do to improve and actions they needed to complete to do so.

Learners with additional learning needs

Providers reported that, for learners with additional learning needs (ALN), attaining the ESW qualifications required for their framework was frequently a significant challenge and a barrier to their success. This included learners who were competent and successful in their job roles but unable to attain the necessary ESW qualifications because they could not pass the ESW assessments.

In addition to providing additional teaching support for learners with ALN, providers have two sets of actions they can take to mitigate the impact of a learner's ALN on their outcomes. The first is to apply to the awarding organisation for the ESW qualification to request special access arrangements to ESW assessments (the controlled task and/or confirmatory test), for example additional time, a reader or a scribe to support learners who would otherwise not be able to complete the assessment due to their disability or learning difficulty.

The second is to apply a special adjustment (a 'dispensation') to reduce the ESW qualification requirements specified in that learner's apprenticeship framework. These occur rarely and require special conditions to be met – (see Welsh Government, 2022b, sections B90 to B122).

Providers report that, in practice, these processes are themselves barriers to learners with ALN receiving the dispensation they need to help them attain their full

frameworks. This is particularly the case for smaller providers who may not have the expertise or experience to apply for special adjustments with confidence.

In the most effective providers, lead providers ensure that resource and staff with ALN expertise are available across the sub-contractor partners and consortium members so that all partners and their learners have equitable opportunities for access and adjustments.

Essential Skills Dispensation Panel at B-wbl consortium

Learners who self-declare an ALN do not always have the statement evidence to support the application of the ESW qualification dispensation. At B-wbl consortium, led by Pembrokeshire College, a panel is in place to support providers who do not have a level 7 qualified ALN Lead.

The panel brings together ALN leads from within the consortium to review evidence from assessors and ESW tutors. This panel identifies if the ESW framework requirements can be supported through reasonable adjustment, or if an ESW dispensation should be applied, lowering the level of the ESW qualifications required for that framework.

The panel enables all providers to have confidence they have the evidence required to support the application of the dispensation.

Skills development for learners who already have their ESW qualifications or are exempt by proxy

A significant proportion of apprentices will be exempted from the requirement to attain ESW qualifications because they have proxy qualifications, such as GCSE mathematics, English or Welsh, or because they already have attained ESW qualifications in their previous studies.

For these learners, provision to raise skills levels (often referred to as 'upskilling') is usually the responsibility of the vocational assessor – described as Model 6 in the table identifying the different approaches to teaching and learning (see Appendix). Evidence from inspection indicates that the extent to which learners engage with this is variable, with few learners actively developing their literacy, numeracy or digital skills beyond the extent required for their immediate job roles.

(3) Learners', tutors' and employers' views

Learners

We spoke with a wide range of learners as part of our visits to providers for this review. We held face-to-face or online conversations with learners who were studying or had recently studied essential skills in on-the-job and off-the-job settings. In total we spoke with about 120 learners on our visits to providers and employers. We also invited learners – through emails circulated to providers with a request to forward to their learners – to respond to an online questionnaire about their experience of ESW qualifications in apprenticeships. We received 668 responses from learners to our online questionnaire.

Apprentices are employed, adult – or at least aged 16 and over – learners. They are often motivated to study in order to become better at their job or gain qualifications that will lead to better job prospects. Time is frequently at a premium for these learners and they are strongly aware of the value – or otherwise – of their learning. They are also aware of the 'opportunity cost' of studying: 'What *could* I be doing if I was not doing this right now?'.

Learners' comments about ESW qualifications were frequently complex and nuanced, drawing distinctions between the potential value of learning the skills underpinning the ESW qualifications; the format, structure and assessment of the qualifications themselves; and the role of their tutors in supporting them to learn the skills and 'get them through' the qualifications.

On the whole, respondents to the online questionnaire were more positive and less critical in their attitudes to learning ESW qualifications than the learners we spoke to on our visits.

Learners: support offered by providers and their tutors

Learners, both in visits and in responses to the questionnaire, acknowledged the support offered by their providers to develop their skills and 'get them through' the assessment. For example, 80% of learners in the online questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed that they had received good support from their provider in helping them develop their essential skills, although 12% neither agreed nor disagreed and 8% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Conversations with learners on our visits revealed a more nuanced picture. Nearly all learners acknowledged and valued the support given by their assessors and tutors, and drew a distinction between the personal support assessors and tutors offered and the challenge that they faced in helping learners complete their qualifications in the timeframe and with the resource available. For example, learners commented:

> *My tutors have been very helpful, giving me work to take away and revise with, especially maths*

> *I am not a fan of maths and have now completed my maths [AoN]*
> *qualification. My tutor provided lots of support and helped me be confident for*
> *my exams.*

Learners: perceptions of the value of studying ESW qualifications

In both the online questionnaire and our visits to providers, we asked learners about their perceptions of the value of studying ESW qualifications in helping them improve their skills, in their apprenticeship and in their job role. There was a marked difference in learners' responses in the online questionnaire compared to responses during our visits. Sixty-three per cent of respondents to the online questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed that studying ESW qualifications had helped them improve their literacy, numeracy or digital skills. Fifty-eight per cent and 54% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that studying ESW qualifications had helped them study for their apprenticeships, or in their jobs, respectively.

In conversations with learners on our visits, learners were markedly less positive about the value that studying ESW qualifications brought to their learning and to their job roles, and only a few expressed positive attitudes. Typically, learners who expressed positive attitudes enjoyed developing skills they had not learnt before or had not understood well at school or in their previous experience, or felt the benefit of brushing up on skills not used for a long time:

> *It was great to see my skills levels were being maintained – being a mature*
> *student it's a good thing to review them.*

These learners frequently gave examples of how the initial assessments identified areas where they were weak and how they enjoyed improving these areas. For example, learners reported developing understanding of using spreadsheets and that this improved their productivity at work. Learners who had moved to the UK from other countries or who were not first-language English or Welsh speakers valued opportunities to develop their language skills as part of their apprenticeship programmes.

On our visits, while a few learners expressed positive attitudes to learning and completing their ESW qualifications, a much larger proportion of learners did not enjoy taking the ESW qualifications component of their apprenticeship framework. Overall, many learners reported not seeing the relevance or value of taking ESW qualifications. Frequently, these learners reported emphatically that they did not find the qualifications relevant to their work role or to their wider lives.

Nearly all learners – whether they had positive or negative attitudes to the ESW qualifications required as part of their framework – found learning literacy, numeracy or digital skills most worthwhile when they perceived them to be relevant to their job roles.

In our online questionnaire, we asked respondents if they felt their literacy, numeracy or digital skills had improved during their apprenticeship. Learners generally responded positively to this question, with 62% agreeing or strongly agreeing for literacy, 57% for numeracy and 64% for digital skills. This picture was similar with the

learners we spoke with on our visits to providers. However, in conversations with learners on our visits, while the majority of learners acknowledged they had indeed learnt new skills or revised existing skills, they frequently reported retaining skills they had learnt for a short time only, and that they had few opportunities to consolidate the skills they had learnt in their job roles or wider lives. Many learners reported using cramming-type techniques such as repeated use of past-papers to 'get through' the confirmatory test. Once they had completed and passed the test learners frequently reported not retaining the skills they had revised.

Learners expressing negative views often drew a distinction between the value of some of the underpinning learning that had relevance to their job roles and that which did not. For example, carpentry and construction learners reported positively on the value to them of learning more about the '3-4-5 rule' [the term they used to describe Pythagoras's theorem for calculating the sides of right-angled triangles] in making sure door frames and wall footings were square, or in calculating volumes, areas and perimeters. In contrast, these learners found much of the other learning they carried out for their application of number qualification irrelevant and distracting:

> *What's the point of me learning about BODMAS* [the order in which calculations are carried out] *or mode, median and mean? I learn it for the test and then instantly forget it.*

Learners frequently referred to the time they need to dedicate to the ESW qualifications component of their framework:

> *Time is the biggest barrier for me. It's very hard to fit everything in.*

> *Working full time, it was difficult to fit it all in. But I managed. It's important to ensure that the candidates are aware of the extra work at the start of the qualification.*

Learners also raised the perceived opportunity cost to them of having to achieve ESW qualifications as part of their framework, especially when the learning was carried out in off-the job sessions. The time taken to study the underpinning skills and carry out the assessed task and test was considered time that could be spent developing their vocational skills – perceived by learners as more valuable to them:

> *I feel this has taken time which could have been used more productively. I only have one day in college each week with limited hours, and I have to waste time going to a pointless lesson. My numeracy, communication and digital literacy skills adequately cover my job needs. I don't feel the time I have spent on WEST has been beneficial to me. I am also having to give up 2 days in work to complete a digital literacy exam on topics that I have no need of or interest in.*

Nearly all learners who had negative attitudes to ESW qualifications found the assessment of the qualification demotivating and a barrier to them achieving their framework. Many learners found the confirmatory test required for Application of Number (in particular) and Communications to be very challenging, to the extent of being a significant demotivating factor in their learning, especially if they had needed

to resit the test a number of times. Many reported that they found the test had little connection with their workplace or real life use of communication or numeracy skills. They found the 'generic' format (i.e. not set in vocational context) of the test made it hard to connect with the underlying skills they had learned, or through their use of skills in their work context. Learners also reported that the duration of the test was too short (30 mins) and did not give them time to complete all the components of the test.

Learners: the role of proxy qualifications

Learners frequently commented on the role of 'proxies'. These are qualifications, such as GCSE mathematics, English or Welsh which exempt learners who have achieved them from having to complete the ESW qualifications of Communication or Application of Number as part of their framework.

A few learners – especially those with higher level qualifications or high-level professional experience – questioned the range of proxy qualifications that applied, or cited the difficulty they had in obtaining certificates to prove they had achieved qualifications many years before. For example, learners with accountancy qualifications or English degrees are unable to use these for proxies in Application of Number or Communication. Learners commented:

> *I am a post grad (Degree and PGCE) manager with nearly 30 years in employment.*

> *I was a teacher, have a Masters and A level English Language and Literature (but I couldn't find the certificates). My literacy skills are stronger than the requirements of the framework.*

> *I did essential skills years ago but can't find the certificates so I'm having to do them again. I find it pointless and not anything to do with the course I'm on.*

In particular, learners referred to the fact that frameworks requiring the ESW qualification of Digital Literacy do not permit any proxy qualifications. For example, learners who possess GCSE or A level digital qualifications or an IT-related degree are unable to claim proxy for digital literacy ESW and so have to complete the full ESW qualification to attain their framework. Learners, especially those with pre-existing high level digital qualifications or experience expressed their frustration:

> *I have been using IT packages since 2006. I have experience on well over 20 bespoke databases therefore I disagree with having this as a mandatory element to my course as I already have high level digital skills.*

> *I work with technology all day as part of my job role – being asked to show how to do a Google search or a power point presentation is very basic and was a waste of a full day. There should be criteria to omit learners from this essential skill.*

> *I'm [an experienced IT professional]. Being required to attend a lengthy digital literacy course was a ridiculous and infuriating waste of resources.*

Learners: studying through the medium of Welsh

Especially in areas of Wales where Welsh is commonly spoken, learners carried out the informal elements of their learning in Welsh and spoke with peers and tutors in Welsh. However, only a small proportion of apprentices take ESW qualifications as part of their apprenticeship through the medium of Welsh.

The learners we spoke with as part of this review who were taking any of the ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh expressed a strong cultural commitment to the Welsh language. In addition to their cultural commitment, these learners valued their use of Welsh as a workplace skill, in communicating with clients and colleagues, and in expanding their future career and promotion opportunities. A few learners also referred to maintaining continuity of language with their previous learning in school, for example in using mathematical terminology in Welsh.

Most learners recalled, during their induction onto their apprenticeship programme, being offered the opportunity to carry out their ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh. Welsh speaking learners who had declined this offer cited a range of reasons for doing so, including:

- a perception that written assessment through the medium of Welsh was more challenging for them
- the relative lack of learning resources available to them in Welsh
- a desire to stay with peers in an English-speaking class or group
- a perception that there were administrative barriers to taking ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh, such as the need for a separate Welsh-speaking assessor
- a perception that carrying out their ESW qualifications in Welsh would add an element of complexity to their studies – often expressed as a desire to 'keep things straightforward'.

Learners: well-being and barriers to achieving ESW qualifications

A few learners, both in the online questionnaire and in our visits to providers, raised the impact of the requirement to do ESW qualifications as part of their apprenticeship framework on their well-being. It is worth noting that learners who are doing the ESW qualifications of Application of Number and Communication are usually those who did not attain at school the proxy qualifications (usually GCSEs in mathematics, English or Welsh) that would exempt them from having to do those ESW qualifications during their apprenticeship. The group of learners doing ESW qualifications is therefore a group who may not have had positive experiences of learning these subjects at school.

Those learners who expressed concerns on the impact of studying essential skills frequently cited the time they had to commit to attaining the ESW qualifications, which they considered to be disproportionate. In particular, learners referred to the time needed to complete the controlled assessed tasks, which required blocks of time away from their workplace. Although many learners reported that their employers were supportive of them taking the time away from their workplaces to carry out controlled task assessments, a few reported having to take the time as

leave. This would not be in keeping with the apprenticeship agreements that employers sign with providers which specify that learners will be supported to carry out off-the-job activities related to their apprenticeship.

A few learners reported being demotivated and losing confidence by repeatedly failing the online confirmatory test element of the ESW assessment. Learners can repeat the tests as many times as necessary until they pass. These learners frequently described the test as a significant barrier to their completing the framework and that preparing and sitting the tests were a particularly stressful element to their studies:

> *I've never been good with exams. That's partly why [I] started an apprenticeship – because they are assignment based.*

Learners who cited the AoN online confirmatory test as a barrier typically mentioned the time pressure in the test itself (too many questions for the time available), the lack of relevance of the test to their vocational use of mathematics (including that the test did not allow the use of calculators) and difficulty in 'decoding' the language:

> *I don't like the maths side of my essential skills as I don't understand most of the questions and struggle with trying to make out what the question is asking me.*

Employers

Two hundred and forty-seven employers responded to our online questionnaire. We also spoke with a small number of employers on our visits to learners during their on-the-job training. On the whole, employers were supportive of the notion of learners developing and using their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. They were generally positive about the support and communication offered by their apprentices' assessors. Employers were more split about the balance of time required of apprentices to carry out the ESW component of their framework and of the disruption that this caused to employers' businesses.

Employers generally supported the importance of literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Seventy-eight per cent of employers agreed or strongly agreed that strong literacy, numeracy and digital skills are important in their apprentices' job roles. Slightly fewer (62%) agreed or strongly agreed that their apprentices improved in these skills over the course of their apprenticeships, and 58% agreed or strongly agreed that their apprentices were motivated to do so.

We asked employers about their perceptions of the value of ESW qualifications in apprenticeships. On the whole employers were supportive of ESW qualifications, although with some reservations about the balance of time and effort required to complete the ESW qualifications and apprentices' vocational learning. Overall, 70% of employers agreed or strongly agreed that taking ESW qualifications are a good way of assessing their apprentices' literacy, numeracy or digital skills. Fewer (62%) agreed or strongly agreed that taking ESW qualifications helps learners improve in their job role. Fifty-one per cent of employers agreed or strongly agreed that the balance in the apprenticeship framework between developing literacy, numeracy and

digital skills and developing vocational skills is about right. A frequent theme in respondents' comments on this question was that the balance of time spent on the ESW element was not right:

> *I have found that there is too much focus on developing the literacy, numeracy and digital skills in a way that is totally unrelated to the way they would use them in their job role and therefore can become demotivating for the apprentice. If they were more linked to how they would be used in their roles, I feel they would be more beneficial;*

> *The amount of time taken to sit the tasks is hard for apprentices and business – need more naturally embedding of this within the learners' overall course.*

Others commented that ESW qualifications can be daunting, or cause stress and anxiety:

> *I feel the essential skills numeracy, literacy and digital skills are too much. They are daunting for candidates, especially those not straight from school who we are encouraging to take a qualification for the first time since leaving school which can be daunting enough without the essential skills on top.*

> *ESWs add more pressure and concern to those that lack confidence in their abilities.*

We asked employers about the interactions they had with apprentices' assessors in relation to ESW qualifications. They were generally positive about the role of assessors in supporting their apprentices. Sixty-nine per cent of employers agreed or strongly agreed that their assessor gives them a clear picture of how well apprentices were doing in developing their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Seventy-four percent agreed or strongly agreed that the provider supports apprentices in developing these skills well.

When asked to indicate how much they agree or disagree with the statement 'The time required by the ESW qualifications assessed task is disruptive to my business', opinions were approximately evenly split between the respondents. Thirty-three per cent either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, 37% of respondents neither agreed or disagreed, and 31% either disagreed, or strongly disagreed. Of those who felt that completing ESW qualifications was disruptive to their business, a frequent theme was the challenge of managing apprentices' workload and the time needed to complete ESW assessments:

> *The ESW [assessments] take up too many sessions in a week and it is very difficult to ensure that staff get this off as they need to do it in their own time. In an already sparse work force and when staff are working days as well as nights, this is very difficult to manage especially as staff are losing their well-earnt days off in the process.*

It was also common for respondents to suggest that the requirement to complete ESW qualifications can in some cases lead to learners dropping out of their apprenticeship:

I feel that some learners are not as confident as others and this may deter them from pursuing courses. In fact, I have an employee that has decided not to carry on for the time being because of the Essential Skills.

The balance between work-based learning and theory-based exams is now totally wrong. Apprentices choose this route of qualification generally because theory-based learning and exams wasn't their preferred method of learning and yet these qualifications are now heavily theory and exam based rather than practical. This is becoming a real barrier to gaining qualified individuals in the childcare industry and we are seeing people leave the industry before gaining their qualification because they are disillusioned with the qualification process, believing they will never qualify and are going into a different industry not requiring an apprenticeship for a similar pay grade. As a company we have discussed these issues with our training provider with the hope that some change will be implemented as soon as possible!

Tutors and assessors

On our visits to providers as part of this study, we spoke with approximately 90 tutors and assessors, in focus groups or one-to-one as part of our observations of teaching and learning. Two hundred and forty-two staff also responded to our online questionnaire about their experience of delivering ESW qualifications in apprenticeships.

In both our conversations on visits and from our questionnaire, many staff (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that it was a valuable part of their role to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

However, staff were less in agreement on the extent to which deficits in literacy, numeracy or digital skills held learners back in their learning (61% agreed or strongly agreed) or in their job roles (48% agreed or strongly agreed). Some felt that ESW qualifications were highly relevant, some felt they were not relevant at all:

This of course is highly dependent on the job role, but in some areas, for example horticulture, agriculture and hospitality, these skills are not essential at the levels they are currently assessed. The ability to do the job in hand and relate with their customers is more essential.

Within certain sectors literacy, numeracy and digital skills have a vital role within job promotion.

I fully agree that there should be certain levels of competency but the content should be sector specific for the tasks and not so random. If they could be completed and make progress with the main body of the qualification (eg [in a childcare context] a plan for a Xmas party for the children, hold a discussion on policy review for the childcare setting, or designing a leaflet to distribute to parents about an up-coming event) then this would make the tasks of completing them less daunting and more relevant to learning.

Respondents also suggested that ESW can hold learners back from completing their overall qualification:

The way that essential skills is delivered is not appropriate to their framework or job role and therefore is off very little benefit to them. Often learners pass their technical qualifications with ease and are held back by essential skills.

Sometimes the essential skills holds back learners as [the learners] are at a lower level than needed. They get overwhelmed by essential skills and often leave the course without completing their qualification due to ESQs.

We asked staff about their perceptions of whether learners value ESW qualifications and are well motivated to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. In both our visits and in the online questionnaire, these questions produced a mixed response from delivery staff. When asked to comment, staff frequently questioned whether the structure of the qualification and its assessment was appropriate for work-based learning apprentices:

I think that currently the system is too focused on simply getting them ready to complete controlled tasks and tests. It should be embedded into the NVQ [National Vocational Qualification – the vocational qualification element of the apprentice's framework] and linked to their vocation. That way I think learners would be more motivated and not feel like they were back in school.

The assessments do not look at skills that are actually used within working environments or in daily life. Learners do not value the qualifications as they do not understand the significance of gaining the qualification compared to gaining a GCSE.

It was also common for respondents to suggest that learners perceive ESW qualifications as just an 'add-on' or even an inconvenience:

Speaking from my own experience, despite how I frame it, learners are typically interested in their core NVQ and essential skills are generally seen as 'extra'.

Finding the time to fit in the demands of ESW qualifications was a common issue raised, which affects both learners and their employers:

Learners are required to take substantial time away from the workplace for upskilling and assessment activities which can be a challenge in sectors such as health and social care and childcare.

We need to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills and the ESQs are a great way to do that in work-based learning. However, the current form of assessments are not fit for purpose in work-based learning. They take too long to complete and this is a barrier to learners and employers.

A majority of staff were positive about the use and helpfulness of the WEST initial assessment and toolkit, and about their having access to useful resources to help them support learners develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. However, when asked if they had sufficient time to support learners with their ESW qualifications, the opinion of respondents was split roughly in thirds, with one third generally agreeing, one third disagreeing and one third neither agreeing or

disagreeing. In comments, respondents noted the challenge of fitting in teaching and learning for ESW qualifications alongside a range of other content, while at the same time guiding the learner through the vocational component of their framework:

> *As expectation on delivery and the quality to be identified in reviews is increased, including Essential Skills Wales [and other 'additional' topics], the restricted time we have supporting on a one-to-one level is compromising the quality of the main body of the qualification. Being totally honest, the fact that we have to embed all these additional key themes is taking time away from the actual subject we are trying to teach, support and develop - the practice and knowledge of the early years sector.*

We asked staff about their confidence, ability and training to support learners with their ESW qualifications. In our questionnaire, many staff reported feeling confident in their ability to support learners, and that their own personal skills were not a barrier to them delivering effectively. A majority felt they had received good training in how to support learners with their essential skills. However, in our face-to-conversations with staff, many acknowledged that they would benefit from further training. In both our questionnaire and on our visits, staff reported the value of having 'essential skills specialist' colleagues to whom they could turn for advice and support.

We asked staff to identify what they considered were the most significant barriers to learners achieving ESW qualifications. In addition to the factors already mentioned, staff identified the sheer scale of the challenge for learners who had not enjoyed learning English or Welsh and – particularly – mathematics, at school:

> *I have had learners consider leaving the whole qualification due to nerves at taking what they perceive to be exams, due to poor school experiences or anxiety when in test situations. It has taken a lot of time, patience, and guidance to get them to continue with the overall qualification with the support of myself and the ESW assessors. To add to this however, when they pass it is a delight to see their improved confidence.*

> *Poor school experiences are a barrier to learners and the ESW qualifications are very 'school like' in design.*

> *Fear, particularly of maths, is a huge barrier for learners to engage with AoN.*

> *Learners who spent 10+ years in school and struggled with maths, as an example, have less than 12 months with us to do AoN. Many left school 10+ years ago as well so are stressed and panicked by this.*

Others raised concerns about the suitability of ESW qualifications for learners with additional learning needs (ALN):

> *Learners who have declared ALN have… extra time and/or rest breaks. This does help for reading but not for the actual calculations or arithmetic problem solving. Many of my learners have slow thought processing skills and this impacts on them greatly in some of the questions asked in AoN level 2 test.*

There are some learners with additional learning needs who are older and who have not had an assessment for many years so don't have any evidence to support special arrangements for assessments. The completion of Essential Skills is a huge barrier for them, they often don't have proof of disability. Many then just want to try to complete without special arrangements, which causes extra stress and anxiety. Most are still struggling with essential skills long after completing their main award as it is the hardest part for them.

(4) Induction and initial advice and guidance

A learner's first contact with their training provider is an important opportunity for providers to explain the structure, content and level of demand of their apprenticeship programme and ensure that learners understand what they are signing up for. Initial advice and guidance and induction processes should ensure that learners understand what ESW qualifications they need to complete for their framework, and by when.

All providers have processes for providing initial advice and guidance to learners and inducting them into their apprenticeship programmes. In some providers, induction for all apprentices – whatever their vocational route – is carried out by a specialist induction team. In others, induction is route-specific, carried out by vocational assessors from that route.

In effective induction processes, any outcomes from induction (for example, learners' initial assessment information or choices about Welsh medium assessment) are communicated clearly between those carrying out the induction and those with responsibility for working with the learner on their vocational and ESW programmes.

In nearly all providers, the induction includes the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) initial assessment, which gives an indication of learners' starting levels of Communication and Application of Number and their strengths and areas for improvement (see the section of this report on Teaching and Learning for further discussion about WEST).

In our conversations with learners, nearly all recalled having an induction, which included relevant and useful information about their apprenticeship and the Essential Skills Wales component. However, they frequently described their memories of the induction as somewhat 'blurry' due to the amount of information they needed to take in and the inevitable unfamiliarity of the situation. In a few cases, learners reported not being aware of the purpose of the WEST initial assessment and therefore not applying their full effort to it. A very few learners reported that they had come away from their induction with the misconception that the WEST initial assessment was their ESW summative assessment and that they had in fact completed the ESW component of their framework.

Overall, learners reported that the induction was a useful opportunity to learn about the ESW component of their framework, but that by the end of it they did not really appreciate the importance of ESW qualifications in attaining their framework or the time commitment that would be required to complete them. Where most effective, learners understand the potential benefits – in addition to just completing their frameworks – that improving their essential skills might bring to their apprenticeship studies, their capabilities in work and to their wider lives.

Providers use the induction period to record and gain documentary evidence of learners' proxy qualifications. All providers have effective processes for doing this. Certificates for proxy qualifications are collected and processed as soon as possible

in learners' programmes, to minimise the possibility that learners misplace certificates for qualifications they had achieved at school, and to reduce the possibility that learners may have to complete ESW qualifications for which they originally thought they had proxy. Learners and providers noted however that learners, especially those who left school several years ago, may no longer have access to their certificates. These learners either have to go through the process of obtaining duplicates (in practice, often not feasible), or take ESW qualifications they should not need to.

Effective induction processes consider the potential progression routes available to a learner. Learners are challenged to attain higher level ESW qualifications than needed for their framework where this is helpful to stretch learners' abilities and to improve their progression into subsequent further apprenticeships.

All providers use the induction process to offer learners the opportunity to study and complete elements of their apprenticeship or ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh. However, across Wales, only a very few learners take this opportunity. We outlined some of the reasons learners decline to take ESW assessments through the medium of Welsh earlier in this report. In the most effective partnerships, learners are offered meaningful opportunities to study and complete their ESW qualifications in Welsh. If staffing this is not possible, opportunities for partnership or collaborative working with other providers are explored and taken up.

Induction is often the first opportunity that a provider has to identify any additional learning needs that a learner might have, or requirements for adjustments to assessments. In effective processes, learners are promptly referred to appropriate staff for any additional learning needs or adjustments to assessments to be evaluated. Support is put in place and guidance provided to delivery staff.

In the most effective providers, the exchange of information between the provider and the learner at induction is revisited periodically, to ensure that learners are properly informed about their programme choices and that delivery staff are able to best support their learners.

(5) Teaching and learning of essential skills in apprenticeships

The message from learners throughout this review is that they value the importance of developing their literacy, numeracy and digital skills, for both their job roles and wider lives, but that they much prefer and value learning, practising and developing these skills through their vocational context. Providers and employers understand this and have reinforced the same message to us in our conversations with them. This presents a dilemma for providers: how best to develop learners' skills in these areas, drawing on learners' clear preference for contextualised learning, while at the same time preparing them for an assessment model which is largely generic and requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

We found a variety of delivery models in use, characterised by differences in approach to: on- or off-the-job delivery, use of ESW 'specialist' tutors, the extent to which the content of learning is based on learners' initial assessment outcomes and the extent to which learners learn, practise and develop their skills through their vocational context.

Although there are differences in framework completion outcomes between providers, and between different vocational routes, we were not able to attribute these differences to different approaches to the delivery of essential skills or to the different delivery models in use. All providers have models for supporting learners through their ESW qualifications. However, as indicated in below and tabulated in the [Appendix](), there are advantages and disadvantages to each model, which we explore later in this section.

Providers reported that they were now returning to a steady state after the disruption caused by the pandemic. All providers reported re-evaluating and adjusting their delivery models following the period of disruption caused by the pandemic compared to how they delivered ESW qualifications before the pandemic. In particular, nearly all providers offered at least some delivery through online or blended approaches.

Characterising the range of delivery models in use

We characterise the main models in use across Wales, below. A spectrum of delivery models is in use, ranging from off-the-job delivery by tutors identified as 'essential skills specialists' teaching whole classes using a generic approach (i.e. not contextualising learning for a particular vocational group), to on-the-job delivery by vocational specialist assessors (i.e. not essential skills specialists). As noted above, we were not able to attribute differences in framework completion outcomes to the use of any particular model – providers using different models had broadly comparable outcomes.

Each of the models offers advantages and disadvantages. Models 1 to 5 relate to delivery intended for learners who are taking ESW qualifications. Model 6 relates to delivery that is intended for learners who do not need to attain ESW qualifications for their framework (because they already have proxies or ESW qualifications are not

specified for that framework) but nevertheless carry out 'upskilling' to improve their skills.

Lead providers work with a number of other providers, in partnership or sub-contracting arrangements. The number of provider partners or subcontractors varies, from four partners or sub-contractors in some lead providers to more than ten in others. Typically, within any lead provider's provision, partners and sub-contractors may use a range of the different models identified below. We found, for example, in one provider with four main partners, two partners use Model 1 and two partners use Model 5. In a different provider with four partners, all the partners use a combination of Models 3 and 4. In a provider with twelve partners, partners use all the models (except Model 2).

Model 1 – Off-the-job, centre based, 'WBL-owned' delivery

This model tends to be used most by college-based apprenticeship providers, or independent training providers who have the necessary classroom space and teaching staff. In the college examples we observed, the college's work-based learning arm 'owned' the delivery. Learners typically attend timetabled ESW sessions during day-release or block-release periods. Teachers who deliver the sessions are usually identified as essential skills specialists. Learners can be taught in subject based groups (e.g. construction trades learners in the same group) or in mixed subject groups. This model is relatively straightforward to manage since learners are timetabled to attend classes in a conventional way and allows the teacher to follow a planned programme of study. It also allows efficient timetabling of essential skills specialist teachers. The assessment (both the confirmatory test and the controlled task) can be timetabled and managed relatively straightforwardly. Teachers and learners have access to good quality learning environments and resources.

However, this model, especially where providers use mixed subject groups, does not lend itself to contextualised delivery and so learners do not learn the underpinning skills in vocationally relevant ways. In our conversations with learners studying ESW qualifications using this model, they frequently described the process of learning as like 'being in school again' – something they did not enjoy. Learners also expressed frustration that they were required to attend ESW classes on their day release while their peers who had already achieved ESW qualifications or had proxy qualifications were in timetabled classes perceived to be more relevant to their job and apprenticeship:

> We're stuck in here while our mates are learning new carpentry skills in the workshop!

This approach generally uses whole-class teaching approaches, which follow a planned programme of study. While this means that the teacher covers the full – or at least a substantial – range of the qualification content, in the sessions we observed learners' individual strengths and weaknesses (their 'spikey profile') were generally not taken into account as strongly as in other models. Asa result, learners spent time covering areas they already knew well, or not covering other areas in which they were less strong.

Provider 1 – FE college in a large consortium

Our delivery model

Typically, our learners come to college on day release from their employers for one day per week. Learners who already have required ESW qualifications or are exempt by proxy attend workshops and taught sessions to work on their vocational skills and attain the technical elements of their framework. Learners who need to get ESW qualifications do a similar programme but also attend half-day essential skills workshops. We try to timetable learners in subject-specific groups so that they are learning with their peers from similar vocational backgrounds.

Advantages for us

- We deploy specialist essential skills tutors who have a strong background in essential skills and a good understanding of the pedagogy for delivering ESW qualifications. Tutors are usually PGCE qualified and paid at the qualified FE teacher rate.
- We use our resources efficiently by bringing learners together to learn in high quality classroom environments where they have access to good learning technology and study support.
- We can support learners who wish to study through the medium of Welsh by timetabling them with a Welsh-speaking tutor.

Our challenges

- The learners sometimes struggle to see the relevance of ESW qualifications and are not always motivated to study essential skills during their day release time.
- Learners are not always in subject or vocational groups and so it can be difficult to present the learning in vocationally relevant ways to the whole group.
- Learners come with a wide range of starting points and spikey profiles. This presents a challenge for tutors to differentiate learning to match the needs of all the learners in their class.

Model 2 – Off-the-job, centre based, 'FE-owned' delivery

This model is similar to Model 1 but differs in that the delivery is 'owned' by a college's further education vocational departments, rather than by the work-based learning arm. In our visits, we did not actually see this model in use, but one provider reported using the model previously and recently having moved away from using it because of the difficulty in co-ordinating and monitoring learners' attendance and progress, and we include it in this categorisation for completeness.

In theory, it has the advantage of grouping apprentices for ESW teaching in subject or vocational groups and using a tutor (who may or may not be an essential skills specialist) to provide contextualised delivery. In this case, the provider's self-evaluation processes had identified a lack of ownership of the provision in the

college's further education vocational departments. Poor co-ordination between these and the college's work-based learning arm meant that learners were not completing their ESW qualifications or that late completion of ESW qualifications was slowing down apprentices' overall framework completion. The provider had subsequently changed their approach to Model 1 and had seen an improvement in learners' outcomes.

Model 3 – Off-the-job, workshop style delivery for Digital Literacy or master classes on particular topics

This model is used widely, across the range of providers, usually in combination with other delivery models. It is most frequently used to deliver stand-alone one- or two--day intensive courses for Digital Literacy or to provide specific top-up, assessment-preparation sessions or master class-type delivery for groups of learners.

Providers use their learning centres to host these sessions. A few also use community venues or hired rooms in locations across their area to minimise travelling distances for learners. Many providers offer remotely delivered workshops where learners can join and interact online.

Providers may timetable a workshop-style session for learners across their provision who may be struggling with a particular aspect of an essential skill so they can receive more intensive support. Providers also use these sessions for revision or exam preparation sessions as learners approach their controlled assessments or confirmatory tests.

This is the most common model for delivering the ESW qualification of Digital Literacy where, because there are no proxies, all learners who have this as part of their framework will need to complete the controlled task assessment.

In the best examples, providers use workshop approaches in a well-coordinated way to respond to learners' needs. Workshop approaches can be an efficient way of matching learners and specialist tutors for specific elements of learning. In the case of digital literacy, the centre-based workshop approach means that learners have access to appropriate IT equipment and the software needed to complete the assessment.

While many learners we spoke with on our visits appreciated the workshop approach as a way of concentrating their learning and assessment, they also frequently raised the issue of the time taken out of their normal work and the inconvenience of travel to the workshop.

Model 3 – Workshop delivery by essential skills specialists – independent training provider

Our delivery model

Most of our essential skills delivery is carried out by our vocational assessors in on-the-job sessions at the learner's workplace. We also have a team of essential skills specialist tutors who deliver two-day workshops to prepare learners for their Digital Literacy controlled assessments. These take place at our learning centre. We also occasionally use or hire other venues across Wales to try to minimise the distance learners need to travel to attend. In some of our larger employers, we also use training rooms at the employer's premises, if the IT facilities are appropriate.

Our essential skills specialists run online workshops for groups of learners to prepare them for online assessments or if a few learners are struggling with particular areas (frequently in relation to numeracy).

We also deploy our essential skills specialists to help with assessment tasks where it may be necessary to bring groups of learners together (for example in discussions and presentations for Communication).

Advantages for us

- We have a team of specialists who understand the knowledge and assessment requirements of the ESW qualifications. They can offer specialist support to learners who need it most.
- We can bring together learners from across vocational routes to carry out group tasks and assessments.
- By having workshops at different venues and online, we try to minimise the distance learners have to travel and the disruption to their work.

Our challenges

- Although we offer workshops in a range of venues, and online, it is still a challenge for some learners to attend, and for employers to release apprentices for two-day workshops.
- There are no proxies for Digital Literacy and learners come with a wide range of digital skills – some are already highly skilled, some have very limited experience. It is a challenge to pitch sessions at the right level so that all learners benefit and are comfortable with the assessment.

Model 4 – On-the-job delivery by essential skills specialists

In this model, learners are visited in their workplace by a specialist essential skills tutor. These sessions are also frequently carried out through online one-to-one meetings. In nearly all providers we visited, tutors used a mix of in-person and online meetings with their learners.

In this model, tutors frequently use WEST initial assessments effectively to identify a learner's 'spikey profile' and focus their teaching on supporting learners to develop

their weakest areas. Tutors are essential skills specialists and therefore have expertise in supporting learners to develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills. They may not, however, have a detailed understanding of a learner's vocational context and so may not be able to contextualise learning effectively to the learner's work. In a few providers, essential skills specialist tutors are assigned to specific vocational routes and so develop an understanding of the subject content of those routes, allowing them to support their learners through their vocational context more effectively.

In the most effective examples, essential skills specialist tutors attend team meetings of the vocational routes they work with and share information about learners' progress effectively with learners' vocational assessors. This helps to co-ordinate learners' progress through their overall frameworks and reduces the chances of learners drifting beyond their target dates. However, where the work of the essential skills specialist tutor and the vocational assessor is not well coordinated, the danger of the learner drifting is increased.

In this model, it can be more difficult to organise activities which require groups of learners – for controlled task assessments for example – than in classroom-based approaches. Learners also need to be brought together to manage the invigilation of controlled tasks or online assessments.

The model also requires the provider to deploy both an essential skills specialist and a vocational assessor for each apprentice who is taking ESW qualifications as part of their apprenticeship framework. Since the number of learners who will need to take ESW qualifications and those who have already qualified by proxy will vary from year to year, it may be difficult to balance the case load of essential skills specialist tutors across the provider's provision.

A few providers employ essential skills specialist tutors who also have a role in supporting learners with additional learning needs (ALN). Where this approach is employed, providers are able to provide specialist support to learners in on-the-job settings.

> **Model 4 – On-the-job delivery by essential skills specialists – large independent training provider**
>
> **Our delivery model**
>
> We have a team of essential skills specialist tutors who support learners to develop and attain their ESW qualifications, usually in on-the-job settings or through online one-to-one sessions. Essential skills specialist tutors co-ordinate with vocational assessors to make sure that learners stay on track and don't slip from their timeline. If learners start to slip, we put in place additional support to help them catch up.
>
> Depending on a learners' initial assessment and the requirements of their framework, we use WEST resources, bespoke resources developed by our tutors, online learning materials and exemplar assessment materials. We also use workshop approaches to support learners in their assessment for Digital Literacy.
>
> Our essential skills specialist tutors often have backgrounds as school teachers or

have completed training and qualifications in the pedagogy of skills development. They are also expected to attain their own ESW qualifications to have a better understanding of the learners' experience.

Advantages for us

- Specialist tutors have a detailed understanding of the pedagogy of skills development.
- Specialist tutors focus on skills development and ESW qualifications in their sessions with learners – they do not need to worry about the learners' vocational programme.
- The team of specialist tutors are able to share resources and good practice with each other.

Our challenges

- It is a challenge to recruit and train specialist essential skills tutors.
- The model is expensive to resource as it requires us to deploy both an essential skills tutor and a vocational assessor for each learner doing ESW qualifications.
- We try to deploy essential skills specialists to learners in vocational areas where they have some vocational experience, so that tutors understand the learners' vocational context, but this is not always possible

Model 5 – On-the-job delivery by vocational assessors.

This model is similar to Model 4 except that the vocational assessor carries out all the visits to the learner's workplace and is responsible for supporting the learner to develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills and complete the ESW qualifications' assessments.

This model has advantages in that the vocational assessor is familiar with the vocational route and so is able to contextualise learning. Unlike Model 4, only one person needs to visit the learner at their workplace, making the model less costly.

In the examples of this model that we observed, assessors drew effectively on the learners' initial assessments results and focused the learner on developing the weakest areas of their spikey profile.

The main disadvantage of this model is that the vocational assessors are not necessarily essential skills specialists and so may not be aware of the most effective methods to support learners to develop their essential skills or prepare for the ESW assessments. In the examples of providers using this model, we found a variety of approaches to the use of essential skills specialist tutors to support vocational assessors. For example, in one provider, vocational assessors supported most of the learners' essential skills development and then essential skills specialist tutors provided 'top up' revision sessions, prepared learners for assessments and supervised the assessed controlled tasks. In the best examples we observed, assessors were supported by a team of essential skills specialist tutors who were able to provide advice or teaching resources.

In both Models 4 and 5, much of the learning is carried out by the learner between the visits by the essential skills specialist tutor or vocational assessor. Learners are required to engage with WEST or other resources in a supported self-study mode. For learners who are struggling with the either the content or with motivation to learn, these models can lead to learners feeling isolated or demotivated, if they are not supported effectively.

Model 5 – One the job delivery by vocational tutors – small independent training provider

Our delivery model

We are small independent training provider operating as sub-contractor in a large consortium. We specialise in apprenticeships in only two vocational routes. Our vocational assessors support learners to develop their essential skills and gain their ESW qualifications. Nearly all our delivery takes place during regular on-the-job or online review sessions. During the reviews, assessors combine monitoring and supporting learners' progress through their NVQ and work with them on developing their essential skills.

Assessors use the initial assessment from WEST and regular skills checks to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses. Learners use WEST resources and other materials to work on their skills between visits. Learners have frequent contact by email with their assessors and assessors give feedback to learners on the work they have completed between visits.

We make good use individual learning plans to make sure that learners know what they need to do between visits – both for their vocational work and their essential skills.

Advantages for us

- Assessors develop good professional relationships with learners. They get to know their learners well and understand their strengths and barriers to learning.
- Assessors are vocational experts and so know how the skills contribute in to apprentices' real work. They can often explain concepts in ways that are relevant to learners' work.
- The vocational assessor has an overview both of the learner's vocational and essential skills progress. This makes lines of responsibility clear and reduces the possibility of miscommunication between different staff.
- This is a cost effective model for us as it does not require additional visits by essential skills specialist tutors.

Our challenges

- Although all our vocational assessors have had training in essential skills, and are expected to attain ESW qualifications themselves, they are not essential skills specialists and so may not have the full awareness of the pedagogy for skills.
- Learners need to do much of the work for essential skills between visits. For learners struggling with motivation, this can be very challenging.

Model 6 – Non-accredited skills development by vocational assessors – 'upskilling'

This is the predominant model, used by nearly all providers, to support learners who, by virtue of proxy qualifications or by having already achieved the required ESW qualifications, are not working towards accredited ESW qualifications.

In the best examples of this model, learners are supported by their vocational assessors to work on the weakest elements of their spikey profile or to develop skills most useful to them in their job role. Learners may use WEST skills check assessments to identify their strengths and weakness and then use resources from the WEST package or other learning materials to 'upskill'. Learners may then repeat the WEST skills check assessments to self-assess their progress.

This review has concentrated on providers' approaches to supporting learners who **have** been required to achieve ESW qualifications as part of their framework and so this model has not been the focus of our observations or our discussions with providers. It is, however, frequently observed during our inspections of work-based learning apprenticeship providers where we sample both learners who are working towards ESW qualifications and those who have already achieved their ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy. Evidence from inspection indicates that quality of upskilling is highly variable. Inspection reports frequently identify shortcomings, for example, in the extent to which providers set meaningful targets for learners to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills throughout the duration of their learning programme or in the extent to which learners are routinely challenged to improve these skills.

Timing of ESW delivery

Nearly all providers aim to introduce and get learners started on their Essential Skills Wales Qualifications within the first third of the duration of their programme, with an intention to complete their ESW qualifications within about two-thirds of the duration of their programme. This practice is referred to as 'front loading'. The rationale for this approach is sound, as it gives learners an opportunity to start to build and develop skills in the first half of their programme and potentially benefit from applying those skills in their work roles or wider lives, as well as using them in the ESW assessments. It also allows some margin for unexpected contingencies and slippage.

A very few providers use intensive workshops (Models 1 or 3) within the first few weeks of learners' programmes. This has the potential advantage of getting the ESW qualification assessments 'out of the way'. However, this approach may have the unintended effect of overwhelming or demotivating learners who had signed up for a work-based learning apprenticeship. While a very few providers use this model, other providers reported moving away from this approach over recent years towards flexible or longer delivery models for ESW qualifications.

Most providers try to spread out the teaching and assessment for ESW qualifications within two-thirds of a learner's expected programme duration. Many adopt flexible approaches which are tailored to meet learners' needs. For example, one provider has 'long and thin' models for learners with weaker skills and so require more

upskilling; and 'short and thick' fast-track models for learners whose WEST assessment indicates they are at or almost at the level required by their framework.

The most effective approaches are tailored and flexible to the needs of the learner, taking account of their start points, the level of support needed to attain the ESW qualifications required by their framework and their job roles and wider lives.

Monitoring learners' progress towards attaining their ESW qualifications is a critical component of a successful programme. In the most effective providers, it is clear who is responsible for monitoring a learner's progress towards attaining their ESW qualifications and there is effective co-ordination between, for example, vocational assessors and essential skills specialists. The software used to monitor learners' progress in their framework includes consideration of ESW qualifications. Learners who take longer to complete their ESW – for example because of lower starting points, additional learning needs, complications in their work or wider lives – are supported and remedial action taken to help them stay on track. Managers have effective oversight of learners' progress and identify if a learner's progress is beginning to drift, placing them at risk of not completing their programme on time or becoming demotivated.

The use of the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST)

All the providers we visited as part of this study reported using the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST – see https://www.walesessentialskills.com). This is a set of online tools developed for use by education providers in Wales with support and funding from Welsh Government. The toolkit was originally released in 2014.

The WEST tools include a '10 minute screener' which gives a quick indication of a learner's starting level for Application of Number or Communication (in English or in Welsh). There is also a more in-depth initial assessment for these ESW qualifications which identifies a learner's 'spikey profile', giving an indication of their current performance in the relevant set of skills. An illustration of the outcome of an initial assessment for Communication is shown below (adapted from Tribal, 2016; p.10). In this example, the learner is relatively strong at speaking and listening, writing relevant and appropriate text and punctuating correctly, and relatively weak at reading and understanding words, reading text to find information and using correct grammar.

Your result: Level 2

The results show that you are currently assessed in Communication (English) at Level 2.

Your profile

	E1	E2	E3	L1	L2	L3
Communication (English)	→	→	→	→	**→**	
Speaking and listening	→	→	→	→	→	
Reading	→	→	→	**→**		
Read and understand words	→	→	**→**			
Read and understand text	→	→	→	**→**		
Read text to find information	n/a	→	**→**			
Writing	→	→	→	→	→	
Write relevant and appropriate text	→	→	→	→	**→**	
Spell correctly	→	→	→	**→**		
Punctuate correctly	→	→	→	→	**→**	
Use correct grammar	→	→	**→**			

The toolkit has further assessments – 'skills checks' – which give more detailed feedback on a learner's strengths and weaknesses in specific skills, for example, 'words, signs and symbols'. These in turn link to self-study learning materials included within the toolkit that learners can work on independently or with support.

For tutors, the toolkit includes a learner management function that allows learners to be assigned to groups. Learners can monitor their own progress as they work through the learning materials and take repeat skills checks to check if they have improved. Tutors can monitor their learners' or groups' activity and progress.

All the providers we visited reported using the WEST initial assessment to identify a learner's individual start points. However, the extent to which providers made further use of the WEST tools and resources depended somewhat on the model of delivery being used. In off-the-job classroom-based delivery (Model 1) tutors tended to use whole-class teaching approaches. These included the use of WEST learning materials and other resources. In these sessions, tutors paid less attention to their learners' spikey profiles and tended to follow a programme of study that covered all or nearly all of the content of the relevant essential skill. As a result, not all learners in any group were working on areas where they most needed to improve.

Typically, in both the on-the-job training models described above (Models 4 and 5), WEST was used to identify a learner's individual strengths and weaknesses. Teaching input from the tutor and the learner's supported self-study were focused on developing the learner's weakest areas, using WEST resources, practice paper

questions and similar exercises. In these models, learners are required to work independently on their self-study materials - a challenge for learners who need additional support or those with poor motivation.

On the whole, providers reported that the WEST tools and resources were useful, but identified a number of shortcomings, including:

- The interface and many resources now look and feel outdated.
- Not all resources now available or usable, in some cases because they required outdated software to work.
- Some links to external resources are no longer working.
- Not enough resources are available through the medium of Welsh.
- For work-based learning apprentices, all of whom are employed, generally post-16 or adult learners, many of the resources felt like they were designed for school-aged learners.
- Resources are only available in generic contexts, i.e. they are not contextualised for any particular vocational route.

Online and blended delivery

Nearly all providers we visited offer some element of their essential skills provision through online or blended approaches. These could take the form of online one-to-one sessions with an assessor as part of the normal review process (an online version of Model 5), online one-to-one support sessions with an essential skills specialist tutor (online Model 4) or scheduled group drop-in sessions or master classes (online Model 3).

Many of the resources used by tutors to help learners develop their skills are available online and therefore accessible to learners wherever they are studying. This allows for straightforward blended delivery approaches: a mixture of in-person and online sessions with a tutor or vocational assessor, with learners working independently on study materials which are electronic or available online.

Learners and delivery staff expressed a range of views about their preferences for online learning and delivery. Some learners have a clear preference for online learning, citing convenience, minimal disruption to their work, and the ability to complete their work wherever they are. Others preferred in-person approaches where they felt that communication with the tutor and learning was more effective with the tutor physically present.

On the whole, we found that online and blended approaches were being used appropriately and flexibly by providers, taking into account learners' preferences.

How are tutors and assessors teaching essential skills and how are apprentices learning them?

Tutors and learners face a dilemma in how to best teach and learn essential skills in apprenticeships. Both learners and tutors prefer learning the skills in their vocational contexts, and learners report retaining skills learnt in this way more effectively and valuing their learning more highly. However, the generic test and the controlled task

requires learners to demonstrate their skills in unfamiliar contexts and so teaching tends towards generic approaches, which are less valued by learners and less relevant to their work and wider lives.

Overall, the teaching and learning for essential skills in apprenticeships is focused on preparing learners to pass the online test and the lengthy controlled task required for the ESW qualifications. As a result of this narrow focus, learners report struggling to see the value of their learning and its relevance to them in their apprenticeship, job role or wider lives.

We identified five delivery models in use by providers to deliver Essential Skills Wales qualifications (including Model 2 that had recently been used but evaluated by the provider as not effective and discontinued). In every model, tutors' approaches were necessarily focused on preparing learners to pass the assessment. Within the narrow focus of teaching identified above, in nearly all cases, we found tutors and assessors used teaching approaches which were appropriate to their provider's model.

In providers using off-the-job classroom-based delivery (Model 1), tutors used whole-class teaching approaches such as presentations from a white board, whole-class expositions and explanations, worked examples of practice assessment questions and tasks, pair and small group tasks, and individual tasks focused on practising the skills being developed in the session. Tutors used a range of questioning strategies appropriately.

In whole-class sessions, tutors frequently attempted to use contextualised examples to make the skills in question more relevant to learners. However, this was limited by the tutor's knowledge of the vocational subject area of the learners and the extent to which learners from mixed subject or vocational backgrounds were in the same class. The extent to which tutors tailored their delivery towards addressing individual learners' strengths and weakness was rather limited. In whole-class approaches, sessions were generally timetabled in weekly slots or in block release sessions. Learners were usually not expected to carry out additional self-study in between sessions.

In one-to-one sessions (Models 4 or 5), tutors and assessors used appropriate teaching methods, including talking through presentations, demonstration of techniques, worked examples, practising assessment tasks and questions, deconstructing examples to show errors and alternative methods. In one-to-one sessions, tutors were more able than in whole-class sessions to use contextualised examples related to the learner's subject or vocational background and to tailor their explanations accordingly. In these sessions, many tutors referred to the learner's spikey profile and to previous work using the WEST skills check. Tutors generally directed learners effectively to focus on the weaker parts of their profile.

In most cases, one-to-one sessions were spaced several weeks apart, and learners were expected to carry out further independent study as directed by the tutor – such as completing exercises or skills checks from WEST, completing practise assessment exercises or other preparatory work for the next session.

In both whole-class and one-to-one delivery models tutors used a range of teaching resources including WEST resources and online resources such as BBC Bitesize or other sites – often identified as offering GCSE mathematics or revision resources. The majority of tutors also used resources they had prepared or had been prepared with colleagues and shared in their team. In a few cases, tutors used teaching resources that were contextualised for a learner's vocational background.

Summative assessment

In our conversations as part of this review, tutors and learners frequently expressed frustration at the time required and the nature of the assessment for ESW qualifications and how this influences their teaching and their learning. We observed that teaching is geared towards preparing apprentices for the externally assessed component of the qualifications and, as a result, apprentices who are taking ESW qualifications do not have full opportunity to develop their literacy, numeracy and/or digital skills in the context of their job role or vocational area. Providers' focus in 'getting learners through their assessment' means that apprentices who do not need to attain ESW qualifications because they have previously attained them or are exempt by proxy make inconsistent progress towards developing these skills.

For Communication and Application of Number, the external summative assessment is a controlled task and a confirmatory test and, for Digital Literacy, a controlled task and a structured discussion. The format of the assessment is set out in the design principles for the ESW qualification suite (see Qualifications Wales, 2022).

The confirmatory test is set by the awarding organisation and requires candidates to complete multiple choice-type responses to generic questions and scenarios.

The controlled tasks are carried out under controlled conditions within a maximum of a consecutive eight-week period. The duration of the tasks depends on the level. Level 1 tasks take up to four hours, level 2 tasks up to five hours and level 3 tasks up to eight hours. The tasks require candidates to apply their skills in a holistic manner to scenarios such as planning an event or preparing a fact sheet for young people (Agored Cymru, 2023). Awarding organisations prepare controlled tasks, which meet the design principles and are live for a defined period. Providers have choice to select the live tasks for their learners from the range of tasks prepared by their awarding organisation (City and Guilds, 2023). These include tasks set in vocational contexts and do give some opportunity for providers to choose assessments that have vocational relevance.

Providers also have an opportunity to develop their own controlled tasks, which must be approved by their awarding organisation before use (Qualifications Wales, 2019). However, the process of developing and gaining approval for suitable tasks that meet the design principles is complex and time consuming and, in practice, few providers take the opportunity.

Delivery, assessment and accreditation through the medium of Welsh

While we found that most learners recall being offered the opportunity to carry out their ESW qualifications in Welsh, only very few learners actually do so. The data

supplied to us by providers indicates that the majority of learners who do carry out qualifications in Welsh do so only at one lead provider and its partners.

At a few lead providers, there is variability in the pattern of take up of Welsh-medium ESW qualifications between providers in the lead provider's contract, which suggests that it is not simply the underlying population of learners that affects the proportion who take up the opportunity to be assessed through the medium of Welsh, but that differences in providers' approaches have an impact.

Providers report that recruiting and retaining assessors and tutors who have the specialist vocational competence required for work-based learning and are also capable of teaching and assessing bilingually or through the medium of Welsh is a particular challenge.

Where provision is effective, providers work with partners and sub-contractors to pool the resource of Welsh-speaking staff, or develop relationships with third parties, such as the Urdd. In this example, learners from across a range of different partnerships carry out their ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh with the Urdd and do the rest of their apprenticeship with their main provider.

Hwb Sgiliau Hanfodol yr Urdd – The Urdd's Essential Skills Hub

Urdd Gobaith Cymru provides opportunities for children and young people through the medium of Welsh. For the past decade, the Urdd has been employing and training apprentices, beginning in the sports sector, and now covering the outdoors, childcare, school-based Sport, and youth work.

The Urdd employs 30 of its own apprentices, but also works with other providers and employers to provide Welsh language and bilingual apprenticeships to over 150 individuals. These apprentices have access to tutors, personalised training and to the Urdd's Hwb Sgiliau Hanfodol (Essential Skills Hub).

The Hwb was established to give learners across Wales the option of developing their communication, numeracy and digital literacy skills through the medium of Welsh or bilingually. A 'roll-on roll-off' delivery model and digital delivery methods means that that learners across Wales can start at any point during the year.

The Hwb allows the Urdd to work in partnership with other providers so that learners can do their ESW qualifications bilingually or through the medium of Welsh with the Urdd while doing the rest of their apprenticeship with their main provider.

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(6) Leadership and management

Self-evaluation

Overall, we found that providers were self-evaluating their essential skills provision effectively. Nearly all had reflected on their provision following the period of disruption caused by the pandemic. A few had made adjustments to their delivery models, including at least one provider that had changed its delivery model after identifying that poor ESW qualification outcomes were limiting learners' overall framework completion.

However, providers do not always make full use of the range of information available to them, such as the failure rates for ESW tests.

In a few cases, providers do not identify and act on variations in the take up of Welsh-medium ESW assessments and opportunities for partnership provision.

Co-ordination and communication

Apprenticeships are complex programmes to manage. In order to successfully complete their full apprenticeship framework, learners must complete a range of different components, usually including Essential Skills Wales qualifications. A key element to successful essential skills delivery is effective communication and co-ordination:

- Communication and co-ordination between teams or tutors delivering different aspects of a learner's programme is clear, structured and formalised. Within the provider, it is clear who is responsible for tracking and monitoring a learners' progress in completing their ESW qualifications. Learners beginning to 'drift' or make slow progress are identified quickly.
- The 'ownership' of a learner's ESW qualifications and their progress towards them is clear.
- A nominated manager has overall responsibility for ESW provision and monitoring of learners' progress.
- Learners' proxies are recorded effectively and copies of their certificates are made.
- IT systems and tracking processes flag up when a learner is making slower than expected progress or have an element of an ESW qualification uncompleted.

The role of the essential skills specialist

Nearly all providers have at least one member of staff with some specialism in Essential Skills Wales qualifications and assessment. The number and role of essential skills specialist tutors depend on the delivery model in use by the provider.

Although all providers have, to some extent, essential skills specialists, there is not a consistent expectation of what qualifies a person for this role. While providers do

advertise and recruit essential skills specialist tutors through external recruitment, typically, essential skills specialist tutors have developed into the role by demonstrating an aptitude and desire to work in the role. In a few cases, essential skills specialists have previously been primary or secondary school teachers, or had a mathematical, communication or IT vocational background. Nearly all providers reported that recruiting essential skills specialist tutors was a challenge.

A common expectation is that essential skills specialist tutors, especially when delivering in whole-class settings, should hold or be working towards the full post-16 teaching qualification – the Professional Certification in Education (PCE) or Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PgCE). In most cases, essential skills specialists had completed the ESW qualifications themselves. A minority of essential skills specialists reported having formal qualifications that specifically prepared them for delivering literacy, numeracy or digital literacy skills to adults, such as the Level 3 Essential Skills Practitioners' certificates awarded by Agored Cymru or City & Guilds. One provider reported currently offering this course for their own staff.

On the whole, we found good collaboration within providers between vocational assessors and essential skills specialist tutors. Many vocational assessors felt well supported by colleagues in their organisation who were essential skills specialists, for example, in providing materials and resources for teaching particular topics or guidance on teaching strategies. There were also reciprocal examples of where vocational staff mentor essential skills specialists to give them a deeper insight into the vocational route and so deliver better contextualised learning.

Embedded essential skills specialists at Educ8 Training Group

Educ8 is an independent training provider and is the lead provider in a partnership with four sub-contracting partner providers.

At Educ8, essential skills specialist tutors are embedded in vocational routes and work in a team with route vocational assessors. This means that essential skills specialist tutors develop an understanding of the vocational context of their learners and are therefore able to explain concepts and modify learning materials so that learners find them more relevant.

Essential skills specialist tutors follow a flexible learning programme with learners and combine visits to the learner's workplace with online one-to-one sessions [Model 4], supplemented by group teaching sessions where necessary [Model 3]. They tailor their delivery to individual learners based on information from the WEST initial assessment, supplemented by a series of diagnostic questions based on the design principles of the ESW qualifications. These help triangulate a learner's initial assessment outcomes and make sure that teaching is pitched at the right level for the learner.

In addition to the route specific essential skills specialist tutors, there is also a team who work across the vocational routes to support learners with additional learning needs, or who need intensive support, to develop skills and attain their ESW qualifications.

> A manager has oversight of the work of all the essential skills specialist tutors across the provider, and this helps with co-ordination of their work, development of teaching resources and expertise, and identifying and sharing good practice.

Frequently, vocational assessors had themselves carried out the WEST initial assessment and so were aware of the strengths and weaknesses in their own personal skills. In a majority of providers, vocational assessors were also encouraged or required to complete ESW qualifications themselves.

Managers, essential skills specialist tutors and vocational assessors recognised the value of maintaining and developing their personal skills – their own literacy and numeracy and digital skills. Although in our electronic questionnaire, many staff reported feeling confident in their ability to support learners, and that their own personal skills were not a barrier to them delivering effectively, in our face-to-face conversations, staff, especially those who were not essential skills specialists, were more ready to report a lack of confidence across the full range of literacy, numeracy or digital skills required by the ESW qualifications.

About half the vocational assessors we spoke with reported not carrying out recent professional learning to develop their own awareness of the pedagogy for teaching essential skills. They often reported not having full confidence or awareness about the range of teaching strategies available for teaching adults to develop their underpinning literacy, numeracy or digital skills.

Across the majority of providers there is a lack of structured professional learning whose focus is developing the pedagogy skills of either essential skills specialist tutors or vocational specialist assessors in order that they can teach and support learners taking ESW qualifications more effectively.

Appendix – a summary of the range of delivery models in use

Model	Name	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Comments
1	Off the job, centre based, 'WBL-owned' delivery	Learners attend a centre for classroom-based delivery, usually on day release or block release. If in a college, the delivery is 'owned' by the college's work-based learning arm. Delivery is usually generic – groups of learners are not grouped by vocational route. Tutors are usually ES specialists. Teaching is not contextualised to learners' vocational backgrounds.	ES specialist tutors are familiar with the ESW qualifications and will have specialist pedagogy skills to support learners. Efficient use of resources as learners from a range of routes can be timetabled to attend classes on day or block release sessions. Learners have consistent access to learning technology and software of a high standard.	Mixed groups and/or 'generic' delivery mean that learners are not motivated by their experience or see limited relevance of ES to their work role. Tutor may not be able to explain the skills in vocationally relevant contexts that learners are able to connect with. Potential for disconnect between the classroom-based delivery and the learners' vocational learning – who 'owns' ES? Opportunity cost for learners: while learners are in ES sessions, their peers are vocational sessions. ES learners miss out on vocational experiences or learning. Learners must take time off the job to attend centres. Learners must travel to the centre. As frequently delivered in a whole-class setting, delivery is not easy to tailor to individuals' strengths and weaknesses. As a result, learners cover areas they may already know	

Model	Name	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Comments
				and do not focus on their weaknesses.	
2	Off the job, centre based, 'FE -owned' delivery	Learners attend a centre for classroom-based delivery usually on day release or block release. Delivery is 'owned' by the college faculty for that route (e.g. Engineering, Health and Social Care) but not the college's work-based learning arm. Delivery is by route-based tutors who may or may not be ES specialists. Delivery is contextualised where possible.	Similar advantages to Model 1. Route based tutors will be able to contextualise learning for learners on their vocational route.	Danger of poor co-ordination between WBL arm and the college-based staff. In practice, this leads to poor co-ordination of learners' attendance and progress.	Not used currently by any provider in our sample. Had recently been used by one provider, but they had moved away from this approach (towards Model 1) because of high non-completion rates
3	Off the job, workshop style delivery for Digital Literacy or master classes on particular topics	Learners attend off the job, workshops for the purpose of learning skills, preparing for assessment, carrying out controlled tasks or assessments or 'master classes' in particular topics. This model is commonly used for Digital Literacy but is also used flexibly by providers who use models 4 and 5 to bring learners together for masterclasses or focused teaching on particular topics, or to prepare or carry out controlled tasks or assessments. Providers may use a range of premises for these workshops, including employers' premises, their own centres, hired community venues.	For DL, allows intensive upskilling and opportunity to take the controlled task assessment with suitable IT equipment & software. For general workshops, is an opportunity to give focused delivery on specific aspects using master classes (e.g. workshop on using percentages, workshop on CV writing).	Requires time off the job for learners.	At one provider, specialists are only used for assessment. Underpinning skills delivery is done by vocational assessors.

Model	Name	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Comments
4	On the job delivery by ES specialists	Learners have visits to their workplace for one-to-one ES sessions with ES specialist tutors. In some cases the ES specialists may also have some route specific vocational experience. In other cases, the ES specialists do not have route specific vocational expertise.	Delivery by specialists with experience of ES. Delivery takes place on-the-job and so is more easy to contextualise. On-the -job delivery means that learners don't need to leave their workplaces. Learning can be more easily tailored to meet a learner's individual strengths and weaknesses.	Harder to organise activities which need to be carried out as a group (eg group discussion) Harder to organise assessments because there may not be suitable equipment / room at employer's premises. Harder to allocate substantial chunks of time for extended tasks or assessment when learners are at work. May be hard to coordinate the work of the ES specialist and the vocational assessor. Requires duplicate visits to the employer's premises (from the Voc assessor and from the ES specialist). Model potentially has higher costs since ES specialists need to be employed and deployed.	Patterns of deployment of ES specialist vary, on the basis of: • Route specific back ground • Geographical location • Case load and availability • Special circumstances relating to learner need (e.g. learner has ALN / ESOL etc)
5	On the job delivery by vocational assessors	Learners have visits to their workplace for one-to-one sessions with their vocational assessors. In this model the tutor is responsible for both ESW and the vocational aspects of a learner's programme.	Assessor knows the learner and is able to contextualise ES content to learner's job role or vocational context. Learner may perceive ES as a more integrated part of their framework.	Vocational assessor may not have the personal or pedagogy skills to deliver essential skills. Risk of lack of ownership of ES by vocational staff.	

Model	Name	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Comments
			Assessor can schedule the ES component to complement learner's work or study. Learning can be more easily tailored to meet a learner's individual strengths and weaknesses.		
6	Non-accredited skills development by vocational assessors – 'upskilling'	For learners who by virtue of proxy or by having already achieved the relevant ESW qualification, or whose framework does not require ESW qualifications. General upskilling in literacy, numeracy or digital skills.	Learners develop relevant skills to their job role though vocationally relevant examples, or generic self-study materials, such as WEST	Learners who do not need to get accredited ESW qualifications do not develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills in a planned or systematic way.	This tends to occur through *ad hoc* teaching to support a learners' need to upskill in order to meet their job role (e.g. learning to use presentation software or learning the '3,4,5 rule' as a carpenter). Or through supported self-study where vocational assessors encourage learners to upskills using WEST or other resources.

Methods and evidence base

The findings of this report are based on:

- In-person visits by His Majesty's Inspectors and Peer Inspectors to nine of the ten Welsh Government-funded WBL apprenticeship providers
- Responses to a data request to lead providers about their own partnership's provision
- Responses to anonymous electronic questionnaires for learners, employers and delivery staff
- Information from our recent inspections and link inspector visits to work-based learning apprenticeship providers.

Visits to providers

Visits took place during June 2023. They were usually based at the lead provider's premises and included representatives from the lead provider, partners and sub-contractors. The nine lead providers we visited were: Associated Community Training Ltd, Cambrian Training Company, Cardiff and Vale College, Coleg Cambria, Educ8 Training Group Ltd, Gower College Swansea, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, ITEC Training Solutions Ltd and Pembrokeshire College. We did not visit the tenth lead provider (Skills Academy Wales) as they had a core inspection during the sampling period for this study.

Visits involved the following activities:

- Meeting with senior or curriculum managers responsible for ESW
- Meeting with essential skills specialist tutors (if that role existed at the provider)
- Meeting with vocational assessors
- Learning walks or observations of essential skills sessions at centre-based provision including speaking with learners
- Meetings with learners who were nearing the end of their programme at the provider's premises (or online) and included Foundation Apprenticeship, Apprenticeship and Higher Apprenticeship learners from across the range of providers in the partnership's provision
- Meetings with learners in on-the-job training at their employers' premises

Overall, we spoke with about 120 learners.

We also asked the nine lead providers we visited to return a data request about their own partnership's provision including information on:

- the current number of learners on different programmes and at different levels
- the number of learners who were exempt from at least one of the essential skills qualifications required by their framework by proxy
- the number of learners taking at least one ESW qualification at a higher level than that required by their framework

- the number of learners taking any ESW qualifications through the medium of Welsh

All nine partnerships responded, although we were not able to make full use of the data from one partnership because it was not in the requested format.

Online questionnaires

We invited lead providers to share a link to the anonymous online questionnaires to their contract's providers and sub-contractors. The questionnaires were open from 22 May to 12 June 2023. The questionnaires contained a mix of closed and open response questions, with the open responses being analysed to identify key themes. We received 668 responses to our learner questionnaire, with 40% of respondents doing an Apprenticeship (level 3), 31% a Foundation Apprenticeship (level 2) and 29% Higher Apprenticeship (level 4/5).

We received 247 responses to the employer questionnaire. Most of the respondents (31%) had 11-50 employees. Twenty-six per cent had fewer than 10, 22% had 51-250 and 21% had more than 250 employees.

We received 242 responses to the staff questionnaire. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents were vocational assessors, 15% were essential skills specialist tutors and 12% were assessors who also deliver ESW qualifications. Sixteen per cent of respondents selected 'other'.

Meetings with other stakeholders

We attended meetings with a range of other stakeholders to discuss aspects of the report, including the National Training Federation Wales Essential Skills Wales Working Group, Qualifications Wales Essential Skills Wales Sector Qualification Group and representatives from awarding organisations.

A concurrent review of Essential Skills Wales qualifications by Qualifications Wales

Qualifications Wales has been carrying out its own review of Essential Skills Wales qualifications at the same time as this Estyn study (see Qualifications Wales, 2023). Findings and recommendations from Qualifications Wales' review will be published in 2025. The two reviews have been carried out independently, although Estyn and Qualifications Wales liaised in the planning stages to minimise unhelpful duplication of each study's research aims.

Glossary

AoN	Essential Application of Number Skills
Assessor and tutor	In the WBL sector, there are a range of different terms in use to describe the staff roles which directly support apprentices' learning. These include assessor, trainer, training adviser, tutor, teacher, and others.
	For the purposes of this report, we attempt to distinguish two roles, 'vocational assessor' and 'essential skills specialist tutor'. The vocational assessor role typically involves visiting a learner at their employer, supporting their vocational knowledge and skills development, assessing vocational competence, monitoring a learner's progress, pastoral support. Assessors, depending on the model in use by the provider, may also support learners with their ESW qualifications or with their general literacy, numeracy and digital skills.
	The role of essential skills specialist tutor is specifically to support learners to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills and in their ESW qualifications. Depending on the model in use by the provider, it may involve one-to-one teaching with a learner in on-the-job or off-the-job settings or in whole-class settings.
Com	Essential Communication Skills
Contextualised delivery	Used here where learners learn, practise and develop their mathematical, literacy or digital skills in the context of their vocational subject. For example, hairdressers might learn about ratios and proportions using examples from hairdressing practice, such as mixing hair dyes or other products. Carpenters learn about using formulae using the '3-4-5 rule', which is the term used by carpenters to describe how Pythagoras' Theorem can be applied straightforwardly to make joints square. Motor vehicle mechanics learn how to format text and apply spelling and grammar conventions by preparing invoices to customers or writing vehicle defect reports.
	See also 'generic delivery'
DL	Essential Digital Literacy Skills

Front loading   The practice of concentrating ESW delivery during the early part of a learner's programme

Generic delivery   Generic used here where the mathematical, literacy or digital content is taught or learnt either in a 'context-free' way, or in using hypothetical contexts that might be relevant to anyone. A context-free approach to learning the formula for Pythagoras' Theorem, for example, might be to use algebraic notation – $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ without applying it in a practical context. A generic hypothetical context to learning about proportion, for example, might be to say, "Jack has two sweets, Siân has three. What proportion of the sweets does Jack have?". Although the example has context (sweets shared between two children), it is hypothetical and not vocationally relevant to any particular learner.

See also 'contextualised delivery'

Spikey profile   A learner's range of strengths and weakness. The term derives from the output of initial assessment software which shows in a graph format how well learners have performed against the various skills checked in the assessment. Strengths are shown as peaks, weaknesses as troughs – hence 'spikey profile'. The term recognises that all learners have things they can do relatively well, and others relatively less well. If the initial or diagnostic assessment tool is accurate, tutors are able to use a learner's profile to concentrate learning on areas of existing weakness or build on existing strengths.

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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