



**HARDISTY JONES
ASSOCIATES**

FINAL REPORT

GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience – Final Evaluation

December 2022



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1 Introduction

1.1 Hardisty Jones Associates Ltd (HJA) has been appointed by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to provide evaluation services in respect of the GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience (AtWE) operations. These are European Social Fund (ESF) funded operations managed by HEFCW and delivered in partnership with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs, often referred to as joint beneficiaries) in Wales.

1.2 There are separate operations in the East Wales (EW) and West Wales & The Valleys (WWV) programme areas, case IDs 80987 and 80884 respectively. Whilst funded separately, and with separate output targets and operation business plans, the operations are to all intents and purposes identical. This evaluation sets out analysis of the achievements of the two operations separately, but in terms of qualitative issues, these are predominantly the same unless otherwise specified.

1.3 The evaluation has been undertaken in two phases. An initial Phase 1 formative evaluation reported in December 2017. At that time the operation was funded for the period April 2016 to March 2019. The operation has subsequently been extended to December 2022.

1.4 This Phase 2 summative evaluation was originally planned to be undertaken in 2018/19, but was delayed to 2021/22 in response to the extension of the operations' timetable and funding.

1.5 The Phase 1 evaluation report should be considered alongside this Phase 2 evaluation report.

1.6 The Covid-19 pandemic has been a very significant external influence on the GO Wales operations in the period since the Phase 1 evaluation. The periods of lockdown and requirements for social distancing had huge impact on the ability to deliver work experiences for students and for the operational staff themselves. Adjustments had to be made to the operations, this included offering virtual (and latterly blended) work experiences, rather than in person activities. It also impacted on recruitment and marketing activities, as well as requiring other operational adaptations with delivery staff required to work from home.

Summative Evaluation Objectives

1.7 The aim of this Phase 2, summative evaluation is to provide a clear understanding of the overall achievements of the operations, benchmarked against the originally prepared business plans and subsequent revisions as part of extensions granted to the operations. This will contribute to the ongoing development of GO Wales and potentially the further refinement of targeted employability support to students from under-represented groups and/or lower socio economic backgrounds beyond the life of the current European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) period.

1.8 The following objectives have been set out for the Phase 2 Summative Evaluation:

- i. An assessment of the performance of the operations against agreed indicators and targets;
- ii. An assessment of the impact of the operations on participants, including an assessment of the value of the various modes of work experience that participants can access via the operations and an assessment of the effectiveness of the associated support offered to participants;
- iii. An assessment of what works for whom and in what circumstances;

- iv. An assessment of whether there have been unintended or un-thought of outcomes;
- v. An assessment of how the operations contributed to the cross cutting themes (CCTs);
- vi. An assessment of how the operations contributed to regional priorities identified by the regional learning partnerships;
- vii. An assessment of how the operations worked with other ESF operations and key organisations / stakeholders;
- viii. Examination of value for money on the basis of outputs, outcomes and modes of delivery, including variations among joint beneficiaries; and
- ix. Consideration of the potential legacy of the operations and how the operations may inform future activity.

Method and Approach

1.9 This evaluation is based on a range of evidence:

- Analysis of operation monitoring data collected throughout the delivery period by HEFCW. This includes data on activities, outputs, expenditure;
- Analysis of 1,967 students' completed Employability Assessment Tool (EAT) scores which are used to track progress of student participants from first engagement and throughout their journey with the operation;
- Analysis of 1,797 student participant feedback forms;
- Analysis of 1,602 host employers feedback forms;
- Analysis of destinations survey of 1,429 student participants;
- Collation and analysis of wider evidence including relevant academic research and policy documents;
- Consultations with 14 project stakeholders including delivery staff and key individuals and organisations that have had interactions with the operation. A list of consultees is provided at Appendix 1; and
- Telephone surveys¹ of 139 participants that have engaged with the operation and 80 employers that have hosted work experience opportunities.

Structure of the Report

1.10 The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 includes a brief overview of GO Wales AtWE including a summary of Covid-19 induced changes and an update on Phase 1 evaluation recommendations;
- Chapter 3 includes an updated literature review confirming the ongoing rationale and strategic fit of the operations;
- Chapter 4 provides analysis of delivery against target profile (objective 1);
- Chapter 5 includes analysis of the impact of the operations on participants (objective 2);

¹ Telephone surveys were undertaken during the nine months of 2022. Securing engagement with the surveys was challenging, both for participants and employers. This was markedly different to levels of engagement with previous evaluations of GO Wales and the pilot survey undertaken as part of the Phase 1 evaluation. Discussion with the survey research partner has identified notable issues with telephone survey engagement in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Chapter 6 includes discussion of wider project delivery issues raised through the evaluation evidence gathering (objectives 3 and 4);
- Chapter 7 considers the contribution of the operations to the programme level cross cutting themes (CCTs) (objective 5);
- Chapter 8 considers the relationships of the operations externally (objectives 6 and 7);
- Chapter 9 considers the value for money of the operations (objective 8);
- Chapter 10 considers the ongoing legacy of the operations (objective 9); and
- Chapter 11 sets out summary conclusions and recommendations based on all the evidence gathered.

1.11 Further detail is set out in appendices (forming a separate volume) this includes:

- List of stakeholder consultees interviewed for the evaluation;
- Progress against Phase 1 evaluation recommendations;
- Employability Assessment Tool (EAT);
- Analysis of EAT scores;
- Analysis of participant feedback;
- Analysis of employer feedback;
- Beneficiary survey research tool;
- Beneficiary survey analysis;
- Employer survey research tool;
- Employer survey analysis; and
- Operation logic chains.

Acknowledgements

1.12 HJA would like to extend its thanks to all those that contributed to this evaluation through giving up their time to be interviewed. This includes project delivery staff, external stakeholders, participants and host employers. Without good quality evidence it is not possible to deliver effective evaluation. We are also grateful to the GO Wales management team at HEFCW for providing information in a timely fashion and engaging positively with the evaluation process throughout.

2 Overview of GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience

2.1 This chapter sets out a brief summary of the GO Wales: Achieve through Work Experience operations (henceforth 'GO Wales'). This is intended to provide the reader who is unfamiliar with the operations with sufficient information to understand the remainder of the report.

2.2 It also summarises changes to the operations that have occurred since the original funding decision in Spring 2016² and previous evaluation (December 2017).

Overview

Aims

2.3 GO Wales exists to reduce the risk of young higher education (HE) students who are at risk of becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training) upon leaving HE. GO Wales operates on the underlying principle that work experience reduces the likelihood of young people becoming NEET by helping them to acquire, develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, attributes, and experience that employers are seeking.

2.4 In tandem with the focus of reducing the risk of young people becoming NEET, GO Wales also addresses cross-cutting themes associated with EU funding requirements. These include equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming, the Welsh language, sustainable development, and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Eligibility and Suitability

2.5 To participate in the operations students must meet both eligibility and suitability criteria.

2.6 In terms of eligibility students must be under 25 years of age studying full time in a Welsh HEI and be drawn from at least one of the following groups:

- those with disabilities or work limiting health conditions;
- those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds;
- those who are care leavers or estranged from family³;
- those with caring responsibilities; and/or
- those from low HE participation neighbourhoods.

2.7 Students in these groups have been found to be at a disadvantage in the labour market⁴, so the operations aim to ensure that students from these groups that exhibit risk factors to becoming NEET successfully transition from HE into employment by using work experience as a vehicle for support.

² East Wales Operation (80987) – received Funding Award Letter WEFO dated 06 May 2016 approving project 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019 (mobilisation 1st October 2015 – 31st March 2016). WWV (80884) – received Funding Award Letter from WEFO dated 11 March 2016.

³ The estranged student eligibility criterion was added in 2019

⁴ Operation business plans and discussion at Chapter 3 of this report.

2.8 Suitability criteria are used to ascertain whether a student is at risk of becoming NEET, in addition to meeting the core eligibility criteria. The following suitability criteria are used, measured through a bespoke Employability Assessment Tool:

- An inability to easily take part in career relevant work experience;
- A lack of understanding of the need to undertake career relevant work experience;
- A lack of ability to seek out and secure work experience opportunities;
- An inability to reflect on and learn from work experience;
- An inability to articulate the knowledge, skills and attributes that employers require of graduates;
- Poor knowledge of labour market opportunities leading to poor career choices and lack of flexibility; and
- Poor self-awareness leading to poor career choices and lack of flexibility.

Partners

2.9 The operations are a partnership of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the major higher education institutions (HEIs) in Wales: Aberystwyth University; Bangor University; Cardiff Metropolitan University; Cardiff University; Swansea University; The Open University in Wales; The University of South Wales; The University of Wales Trinity Saint David; and Wrexham Glyndŵr University. GO Wales is managed by HEFCW with the HEIs listed as joint beneficiaries. The joint beneficiaries are the primary delivery organisations of the operations.

Activities

2.10 Front-line support is provided by GO Wales teams operating within the careers/ employability services of HE institutions. These teams work alongside student-facing staff within their institutions, such as careers advisers, disability advisers, student money and advice advisers and personal tutors, as well as undertaking direct outreach and marketing activities. As a result, students are recruited or referred to the project team, who can then work with students intensively to reduce the risk of them becoming NEET upon leaving HE.

2.11 Tailored work experience opportunities broadly in the form of unpaid work shadowing (one to three days), unpaid work tasters (two to 20 days), and paid placements (21 to 30 days) are secured for students. Participants receive support in preparing for their placement, as well as reflecting on it and identifying appropriate next steps.

Covid Induced Operation Changes

2.12 The Covid-19 pandemic created widespread impacts across all aspects of society; the GO Wales operation was no different. The first lockdown in March 2020 caused significant disruption to the operations, with impacts on students, employers, delivery staff and the management team. Operational delivery issues related to the pandemic are discussed more generally at Chapter 6 of this report.

2.13 In response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the public health mitigations that were put in place by government, the GO Wales teams investigated how the operations could adapt, such that work experience opportunities could continue to be offered. This included the inclusion of virtual (and later blended) experiences as well as a new opportunity type known as 'Meet the Professional'. This provided students with the opportunity to have a discussion with an experienced person

working within their chosen sector/field to ask questions. The intention was that this would achieve at least some of the benefits of a work experience opportunity through building social capital, by enabling the student to make a contact in the relevant sector, and boost knowledge of what employers were looking for, recruitment processes, and key skills requirements etc.

2.14 Further discussion of the Meet the Professionals (MTP) activity is set out at Chapter 6 of this report.

Previous Evaluation Phases

2.15 A formative Phase 1 evaluation was undertaken in 2017, with the final report published in December 2017. At the time of the Phase 1 evaluation the operation was funded to March 2019.

2.16 The Phase 1 evaluation made six recommendations. The GO Wales management team at HEFCW have sought to action each of the recommendations. Appendix 2 to this report sets out progress as at December 2021.

3 Rationale and Strategic Fit

3.1 This chapter provides a brief summary of literature relevant to the evaluation. The Phase 1 evaluation included a similar review to test the rationale and strategic fit. As part of this Phase 2 evaluation an update to the original analysis has been undertaken, considering new evidence.

3.2 A list of references is appended to the report.

The NEET Problem

3.3 The NEET problem is particularly acute in Wales and contributes to poorer outcomes for the individual in the long term.

3.4 Longitudinal cohort studies have demonstrated the long-term negative impacts of young people becoming NEET. Research by Feng et al (2015) for the Scottish Government followed two cohorts, one between 1991-2011, and the other between 2001-2011⁵. The results demonstrated the 'scarring' effect of NEET status in relation to long-term socioeconomic outcomes over the follow up period. NEET young people remained disadvantaged in their level of educational qualifications. Research conducted by Bäckman and Nilsson (2016)⁶ on three Swedish cohorts born in 1975, 1980, and 1985 has found that being NEET may be 'both a step on an already unfavourable life career and a triggering factor for social exclusion.'

3.5 The proportion of young people in Wales who are NEET has been a significant policy challenge for many years. The latest (2020) Welsh Government figures available indicate that 11.1% of 16 to 18 year olds and 15.2% of 19 to 24 year olds in Wales were NEET, which in absolute terms equates to 11,300 and 36,400 young people, respectively⁷.

3.6 Data suggests that the proportion of young people (aged 16-18) who were NEET in the UK in 2020 was 7.5%, rising to 13.9% for 19-24 year olds, shown in Figure 3.1. This also shows that NEET rates in Wales are clearly higher than the UK average. [Wales data is from a different source to that quoted in paragraph 3.5 to enable fair comparison].

Figure 3.1 – Estimates of the proportion of young people who are NEET (Q2 of 2020)

	16-18 year olds % NEET	19-24 year olds % NEET
Wales	8.4	16.0
Scotland	9.8 ⁸	12.2
Northern Ireland	6.7 ⁹	13.8
England	7.2	14.0
UK	7.5	13.9

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS

⁵ One cohort were aged 16-19 in 1991 and were followed up until 2011 when they were aged 36-39, the other were aged 16-19 in 2001 and followed up to 2011 when they were aged 26-29.

⁶ Backman, O. and Nilsson, A. (2016) Long-term consequences of being not in employment, education or training as a young adult. Stability and change in three Swedish birth cohorts, European Societies, 18:2, 136-157

⁷ <https://gov.wales/young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-july-2020-june-2021> (accessed 17th November 2021)

⁸ Statistics are classed as limited quality as they are based on between 25 and 40 responses

⁹ Statistics are classed as low quality as they are based on less than 40 responses

3.7 It has been evidenced elsewhere¹⁰ that the proportion of 15 to 24 year olds who were NEET was higher in the UK (11.6%) than the OECD¹¹ average (10.9%). Given that the proportion in Wales has been consistently higher than the UK average, the level of young people in Wales who are NEET is evidenced to be higher than the OECD average.

The impact of Covid-19

3.8 Early evidence suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has not had an immediate significant impact on the number of young people who are NEET. In the year following the Covid-19 outbreak, the proportion of young people in the UK who were NEET fell from 11.4% in Q1 of 2020 to 10.6% in Q1 of 2021. Amongst those who were NEET, the proportion of those who were unemployed rose from 41% to 44% between Q1 of 2020 and Q1 of 2021¹². However, a similar number of young people moving from economic inactivity to education offset any increase in unemployment so that overall, the number of young people who were NEET has actually decreased slightly over the period.

NEET Risk Factors

3.9 The NEET population is a highly diverse group, as are the risk factors associated with becoming NEET. Many young people find themselves NEET as a result of a range of complex circumstances.

3.10 The literature review undertaken for this evaluation has found a relative paucity of research on the specific issues of becoming NEET after leaving higher education. The GO Wales Business Plans draw on the expertise of careers professionals within Welsh HEIs to identify particular at risk groups and risk factors for becoming NEET. Risk factors identified in the Business Plans include particular circumstances or additional needs such as being disabled or having a caring responsibilities which make it difficult to access standard work experience offers, while others face barriers such as difficulty in articulating their knowledge, skills and experience in a way which enables employers and training providers to view them as suitable recruits.

3.11 GO Wales is designed to reduce the risk in the specific minority of young HE students who are at risk of becoming NEET upon leaving HE. Where data is available it indicates a higher propensity for unemployment post university within the GO Wales target groups than the average for all students. The groups that students will be drawn from are shown below (the headline unemployment figure for Welsh university leavers is 7%).

- Disabled people
- Individuals with Work Limiting Health Conditions
- Individuals from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds
- Individuals who are care leavers
- Individuals with caring responsibilities
- Individuals from low participation neighbourhoods
- Individuals who are estranged from their families

¹⁰ House of Commons Library (2021), NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training

¹¹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. This is an international organisation working for better policies and better lives. Part of its work includes providing knowledge, data and analysis to inform better public policy and international benchmarking. There are 38 full member countries.

¹² House of Commons Library (2021), NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training.

3.12 Students in these groups have been found to be at a disadvantage in the labour market, so the operation aims to ensure that employability is not a barrier to securing employment post graduation.

The case for LGBTQ+ inclusion

3.13 Phase 1 of the GO Wales Evaluation highlighted that the LGBTQ+ community are not explicitly served by the GO Wales operation. The report established that there was insufficient evidence to suggest that the operation should be extended to include the LGBTQ+ community, but that GO Wales should explore in more detail whether the group exhibited sufficient NEET risk factors to be included.

3.14 Since the Phase 1 evaluation, additional research has become available which examines the barriers that members of the LGBTQ+ community face when entering the labour market. The LGBT in Britain- Work report by Stonewall¹³ based on YouGov research found that 18% of LGBT people who were looking for work said they were discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The report also found that 11% of trans employees had lost their jobs in the previous year because of being LGBT, excluding them from employment, education or training. When questioned on how comfortable they were disclosing their sexuality and gender identity at work, 51% of trans and 35% of all respondents answered that they have hidden or disguised that they were LGBT in the previous year. This highlights that in many cases LGBT people do not disclose their sexuality or gender identity in surveys, questionnaires or the workplace, which may explain why there is limited research available on this matter.

3.15 BritainThinks and Stonewall¹⁴ also published a study into the experiences of LGBT young people not in education, training or work in the UK (2020). One key finding is that challenges specific to being LGBT¹⁵ negatively impact young people's mental health and their subsequent engagement with education, training and employment. Furthermore, once in work and apprenticeships, experienced and expected discrimination such as anti- LGBT harassment and bullying prevented many LGBT people from starting and staying in employment. The loss of confidence that followed leaving education, training or employment resulted in young LGBT people facing significant barriers to re-entry. An important barrier to re-entry was the lack of good quality careers guidance. Many of the respondents involved had developed expectations about which career routes would be welcoming and believed that certain workplaces would not be 'for them'.

3.16 Therefore, given the arrival of new evidence highlighting that LGBTQ+ people exhibit substantial NEET risk factors, policy makers and providers should consider the employability support provided to LGBTQ+ students'.

The Role of Work Experience

3.17 There is a range of evidence on the role of work experience in improving employability among graduates and young people.

¹³ Stonewall (2018), LGBT in Britain- Work Report

¹⁴ Stonewall (2020), Shut Out: The Experiences of LGBT Young People not in Education, Training or Work.

¹⁵ These included but were not limited to; rejection from family members, a lack of peer support, anti LGBT bullying at school, invisibility of LGBT people amongst teachers at school, other pupils and in the school curriculum, fearing isolation in school upon coming out, the limited support available to trans people at university and gendered workspaces.

3.18 A Department for Education report (2017)¹⁶ found a strong relationship between undertaking work experience and accessing and maintaining employment. It also found that those who undertook work experience were more likely to find work in professional or managerial employment than those who did not undertake work experience. A Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)¹⁷ work experience impact assessment confirmed the relationship, finding that taking part in work experience increases the time 19-24 year old Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants spend in employment and that there is a continual impact of this for at least two years following participation.

3.19 Based on data from a Swiss graduate survey in 2021, Oswald-Egg & Renold¹⁸ reported the impacts on post graduate employment from gaining work experience during vocational education and training. The report found that work experience gained during this time leads to significantly higher wages one year after graduation and two months less search time for first employment, although it must be noted that these effects were found to be temporary.

3.20 A 2014 report from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) re-confirmed the importance of work experience for young people¹⁹. In this report youth unemployment is claimed to be higher than in comparable countries, and high levels of youth unemployment are identified as being structural in cause. The report considers international comparators and states that access to the workplace during education is important in improving access to work for young people.

3.21 A 2022 study²⁰ on inequity in work placement year opportunities and graduate employment outcomes in the UK analysed whether the positive relationship between graduate employment prospects and participating in work placements is found across all student cohorts. A key finding was that amongst students that completed a work placement year, there was a lower percentage of females with positive graduate prospects than males. The study also found lower graduate outcomes following a work placement for; disabled graduates versus non disabled, students from lower socio economic backgrounds versus higher socio economic backgrounds and Black, Asian and minority ethnic students compared with White students, however these differences were not deemed significant and further studies would be required to strengthen this result. This study emphasises the need for activities that support all students to access work experience.

Rationale for Intervention

3.22 The HM Treasury Green Book²¹ states that before any intervention by government it is important to identify a clear need which it is in the national interest for government to address. The rationale for government intervention is usually founded in either market failure or where there are clear government distributional objectives to be met.

3.23 The GO Wales operations are specifically concerned with employability i.e. skills, behaviours, attitudes and personal attributes that are necessary for an individual to seek, gain and sustain

¹⁶ Department for Education (2017), Planning for success: Graduates' career planning and its effect on graduate outcomes.

¹⁷ Department for Work & Pensions (2016), Work Experience: a quantitative impact assessment

¹⁸ Oswald-Egg & Renold (2021), No experience, no employment: The effect of vocational education and training work experience on labour market outcomes after higher education

¹⁹ UKCES (2014) Precarious Futures?: Youth Employment in an International Context

²⁰ Aysha Divan, Colin Pitts, Kate Watkins, Stephanie J. McBurney, Tim Goodall, Zografou Gina Koutsopoulou & John Balfour (2022) Inequity in Work Placement Year opportunities and graduate employment outcomes: a data analytics approach, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 46:7, 869-883

²¹ HM Treasury (2003) The Green Book: Appraisal and Evaluation in Central Government

employment and function effectively in the workplace in order to reduce the risk of becoming NEET.

3.24 Market failures in this regard are primarily information failures, including:

- Individuals lacking the information to understand or appreciate the benefits of developing their employability; and
- Students lacking the information or skills to know how, or be able to secure a work experience placement.

3.25 The operations' business plans identify that young people from disadvantaged or diverse backgrounds are less able to access the kind of work experience placements that will help them climb onto the first rung of the labour market ladder. In part, this can be ascribed to information failure, where young people from disadvantaged or diverse background do not have access to the same level of industry knowledge and networks of contacts as many other people in the labour market, making it much more difficult for them to get their 'foot in the door'. There are also issues of lack of confidence to be able to pursue any such opportunity. In addition, there can be an underestimation of the value of work experience in a competitive job market. These theories are supported by available evidence (e.g. DBIS, 2013; and Evans et al, 2009), although it is qualitative in nature – quantitative evidence is sparse.

3.26 The research highlighting the importance of additional support for the target groups, in particular work experience, is highlighted below.

Individuals identifying as disabled people or having a work limiting health condition

3.27 The DWP's 2013 report 'What works for whom in helping disabled people into work?' highlights a number of important issues in supporting disabled individuals to successfully navigate the labour market. It concludes that there appears to be a consensus that support needs to be geared towards the workplace, as this has proven more successful than training-based programmes. Research by Eurofound (2012)²² found that support for disabled young people targeted at helping them gain skills for a specific job is more successful than offering more generic training courses. In order for such an approach to succeed, it is necessary to identify local labour demand by engaging employers so that the support provided meets the local demand. For disabled people, volunteering several times a year has been found to have a positive impact on labour market success (Paine et al, 2013)²³. Combined with the evidence for support that is focused on specific jobs, this creates a strong case for work experience as a necessary support mechanism for disabled individuals post-HE. In 2005, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation²⁴ (JRF) reported that work placements would be an effective approach to help disabled individuals to transition from HE to work.

Individuals from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds

3.28 Considerable improvements in educational attainment among Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups have not been matched by sustained progress in labour market outcomes (JRF,

²² Eurofound (2012) Active inclusion of young people with disabilities or health problems, Brussels: Eurofound

²³ Paine, A.E., McKay, S., and Moro, D. (2013) Does volunteering improve employability? Evidence from the British Household Panel Survey, Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre

²⁴ JRF (2005) The education and employment of disabled young people, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

2015). The two main challenges are identified as unemployment and over-qualification. Given the problem of over-qualification in particular, there is a clear case for support to be targeted at Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (JRF, 2015). A report by the Scottish Government (2014)²⁵ found that work experience is a good way for people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds to develop employability skills when they have never entered the labour market, or have been out of it for a long time. Their research found that people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities are often underrepresented in such vocational training programmes, therefore awareness raising is important in ensuring that they are able to access the available support. Engagement with employers was highlighted as an important aspect of any programme, in particular because it can help reduce levels of discrimination. A report on Poverty and Ethnicity in the Labour Market (2017) finds that employment support providers should explore what personalised advice and progression look like for different groups. This is important because individuals from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups experience different barriers to entry to the workforce²⁶.

Individuals who are care leavers

3.29 Care leavers are often at high risk of social exclusion, poverty, and worklessness. Evidence shows that young care leavers tend to be disadvantaged when trying to enter the labour market. The Reed in Partnership report²⁷ into improving employment outcomes for care leavers suggests that this can often be due to more intangible factors such as lack of confidence, and a lack of knowledge about what work experience involves and why it can be beneficial. This is often exacerbated for young care leavers who will have historically lacked the tacit benefits that family support networks offer, such as providing advice and encouragement, the advantages of tapping into family members' existing work networks, and having expectations and assumptions challenged by relatives. Work experience can be a vital component in care leavers transitioning into employment post-HE as they will often have missed out on these alternative ways of experiencing the work environment.

Individuals with caring responsibilities

3.30 Scottish Executive research has shown that young adult carers are at a greater than average risk of becoming NEET²⁸. The impact of poor-attendance during education as a result of caring responsibilities has been identified as a major barrier to accessing employment post-education (2010)²⁹. The need for flexible working to accommodate potentially disrupted daily routines is highlighted by JRF (2014) as an important aspect of support. Employers also need to be engaged to ensure that they do not discriminate against young carers due to the possibility of disrupted work patterns.

²⁵ Scottish Government (2014) Working with Minority Ethnic Clients to Promote and Progress Racial Equalities: A Toolkit for Employability Partnerships and Projects, Edinburgh: Scottish Government

²⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2017), Poverty and Ethnicity in the Labour Market.

https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/files-research/web_poverty_ethnicity_round_up_amend.pdf

²⁷ Reed in Partnership (2011) From Care to Independence: Improving employment outcomes for care leavers, London: Reed in Partnership Limited

²⁸ Scottish Executive (2006) More Choices, More Chances: A Strategy to Reduce the Proportion of Young People not in Education, Employment or Training in Scotland, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive

²⁹ Ryan, G. (2010) 'How no?' Young adult carers' experiences of barriers to further education, training and employment in Dundee, Dundee: Dundee Careers Centre

Individuals who are estranged from family

3.31 There is a paucity of evidence which directly links students who are estranged from their families to being NEET. However, there is evidence to suggest that for those without a family network, higher education retention rates are lower which indirectly increases the likelihood of being NEET. Scottish Funding Council research into estranged young people in higher education³⁰ found that this group of students are considerably more likely to drop out of university. The survey found that 41% of estranged students had considered or had suspended or withdrawn from their course. The main driver for students considering dropping out of university is financial pressure, followed by health issues and wellbeing. Students who experience these difficulties whilst at university are likely to benefit from receiving support to secure work opportunities.

Strategic Fit

3.32 There is a strong alignment between the focus of GO Wales and Welsh strategy and policy.

3.33 The Welsh Government has historically placed a high priority on reducing the number of young people who are NEET. It has published a number of policies and targets in recent years in an attempt to impact what has traditionally been a stubborn issue to address.

3.34 In 2013, targets for reducing the number of young people who were NEET were set out in the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty Action Plan³¹. The targets committed to reducing the proportion of 16 to 18 year olds who are NEET to 9% by 2017, and to reduce the number of 19 to 24 year olds who are NEET relative to the overall UK level by 2017. Since then, updated targets have not been set as the Tackling Poverty Action Plan has seen no revisions. However, in more recent years further initiatives and programmes have been implemented to reduce the proportion of young people who are NEET in Wales.

3.35 The Future Generations Report published by the Welsh Government in 2020³², which derives from the Well-being of Future Generations Act, determines that creating 'a more equal Wales' is a key well-being goal. The goal was prioritised because people with certain characteristics were still disadvantaged in areas of life including work, participation and education. The journey to a more equal Wales centres around a number of tenets. The fair work tenet is to ensure equal access to decent jobs and recognising everyone's value. Participation is also highlighted as a key tenet and surrounds giving people equal opportunities to participate in decision-making to enable equal outcomes.

3.36 In 2021, the Welsh Government's Young Person Guarantee³³ was launched to provide everyone under the age of 25 in Wales the offer of work, education, training or self-employment. The first phase of the guarantee provides young people in Wales access to traineeships, help finding an apprenticeship as well as Working Wales which provides support and advice for finding employment.

³⁰ StandAlone (2015), Focus on access and retention. Risks for students who are estranged or disowned by their family.

³¹ Welsh Government (2012) Tackling Poverty Action Plan 2012 – 2016. Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee CELG(4)-20-14 Paper 5

³² Future Generations Report (2020). <https://futuregenerations2020.wales/english>

³³ Welsh Government Young Person Guarantee (2021). <https://workingwales.gov.wales/how-we-can-help/young-persons-guarantee>

3.37 The Employability Plan (2018)³⁴ includes reducing the number of people aged 16-24 who are NEET as one of the Welsh Government's main targets. The vision of the plan specifies that the Welsh Government will work to remove any barriers which inhibit people from contributing to the world of work. The new and updated Plan for Employability and Skills (2022)³⁵ has tackling economic inequality at its heart, targeting those under-represented in the labour market and ensuring employability support to ensure no one is left behind. This cites the percentage of 16-24 year olds in education, employment, or training as a key target, with the ambition to achieve a minimum of 90% by 2050.

Lessons from Previous Research

3.38 The following identifies lessons from previous research which are specifically relevant to GO Wales.

3.39 One concern expressed by the Public Health Research Consortium in their 2009 review was that 'cream skimming' was a suspected issue amongst support providers, with 'easier' cases coming to dominate the client load in order to boost outcomes. It will be important for this evaluation to consider whether or not such 'cream skimming' has taken place in the GO Wales project. The use of the Employability Assessment Tool is designed to ensure the operation works with suitable as well as eligible candidates in an effort to avoid such 'cream skimming' activity.

3.40 Existing evidence also highlights the need for employer engagement as well as a focus on working with the individual. Given the centrality of work experience to the GO Wales operation in removing barriers to employment, it is important to bear this critical perspective in mind and recognise that it is focused primarily on the individual participant, rather than generating widespread cultural change within the employer community³⁶.

3.41 Whilst recent evidence confirms that access to work experience can result in long term employment³⁷, long standing evidence persists that the standard of work experience placements needs to be high. Birdwell et al (2011)³⁸ assert that where the quality of work experience placements is high, it is the most disadvantaged³⁹ young people who benefit the most from the opportunity, although Margo et al (2010) highlight that such high-quality placements are all too rare, and the fact that disadvantaged individuals struggle to access them compounds the issue.

Stakeholder Consultations

3.42 As part of the evaluation fieldwork, stakeholders were asked about the current and ongoing need for the type of intervention delivered by the operation and its fit with wider strategy and policy ambition. This also explored any particular issues relating to each of the target groups of students.

³⁴ Welsh Government (2018) Employability plan

³⁵ Welsh Government (2022) Stronger, fairer, greener Wales: a plan for employability and skills: summary

³⁶ GO Wales delivery staff work with host employers to ensure appropriate arrangements are in place for each work experience. However, this is different to an employer focused operation looking at changing recruitment cultures in respect of the target groups.

³⁷ Learning and Work Institute (2020), Evidence review: What works to support 15 to 24-year olds at risk of becoming NEET?

³⁸ Birdwell, J.; Crist, M; and Margo, J. (2011) The Forgotten Half, London: Demos

³⁹ Young people not in education, employment or training, former young offenders, young people leaving care, those with no qualifications – these are considered 'disadvantaged' according to Birdwell et al.

3.43 Consultees were unanimous in their view of the clear ongoing need for the type of employability support offered through the GO Wales programme. This was based both on operational experience and from a strategic and policy perspective.

3.44 From a policy perspective the operation is viewed as having a very good fit with the widening access agenda which remains very strong in Wales. The employability agenda is also continuing to increase in importance across HEIs.

3.45 Operationally, delivery staff are faced daily with students clearly needing targeted employability support and significant pastoral and mentoring support to ready them for the work experience opportunities that GO Wales can offer. It is clear that the service offered by the GO Wales operations is markedly different in intensity to that which is offered through mainstream employability and careers services. Without the project the students that GO Wales supports would be left at a significant ongoing disadvantage and therefore risk of becoming NEET.

3.46 Consultees flagged a number of issues relating to additional target groups that would fit well with the ethos of GO Wales and its rationale. These include:

- Older students and potentially graduates. The age constraint was cited by many consultees as restrictive. Of most relevance is the fact that many students within the target groups may go to university later than others as a direct result of the barriers they face e.g. caring responsibilities or health related issues. The employability challenges and NEET risks in many cases are exactly the same as for younger students. It is worth noting that the programme targets 16–24 year olds to meet Priority Axis 3 of the European Structural Fund Programme⁴⁰ which focusses on reducing the number of young people who are at risk of becoming NEET and those who are already NEET. Although widening access and the lifelong learning agenda prioritises all age recruitment to enter HE, as the GO Wales operation comes to a close future policy in this area could expand priorities to include at risk students of all ages.
- Refugees and asylum seekers. This group can face many of the same and potentially more barriers than estranged students. They also have challenges around social capital.
- Military service veterans. This group may have work experience, but in a very different environment. Suitability criteria would be required, as with other target groups. However, supporting the transition into civilian workforce is a potential area for consideration for policy makers and providers.

Summary

3.47 The number of young people that are NEET is a problem in Wales and there is evidence that it is a precursor to poorer long-term outcomes. NEET levels in Wales are higher than the UK average which in turn are above the OECD average. It is therefore a focus of Welsh Government policy.

3.48 Whilst there are some gaps in academic evidence surrounding NEET issues and higher education, there is evidence of higher rates of unemployment and other negative outcomes among many of the target groups. This aligns with the expert knowledge of careers staff of HEIs in Wales in terms of at-risk groups and risk factors.

⁴⁰ ESF West Wales and the Valleys: [west-wales-esf-operational-programme-summary.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#). ESF East Wales: [east-wales-esf-operational-programme-summary.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#)

3.49 The GO Wales operation has so far not directly⁴¹ included LGBTQ+ people from receiving support due to a lack of robust evidence on the matter. Recent evidence suggests that people from this group do exhibit risk factors of becoming NEET and therefore the case could be made for inclusion in future policy making.

3.50 Evidence suggests that career support providers should explore more personalised advice given to people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, as different minorities face different barriers to employment.

3.51 There is evidence⁴² that work experience and employability skills are valued by employers and will aid the employability of the student. However, this seeks to address only one side of the employability equation, with employer attitudes also cited as a significant issue.

3.52 There is evidence⁴³ of market failure leading to the target groups being likely to under invest in employability skills and work experience and not having the opportunity to develop softer skills such as confidence.

3.53 Overall there is a strong underpinning rationale for the operations and the business plans are based on sound underlying principles.

⁴¹ LGBTQ+ persons are supported if they are eligible via another route.

⁴² See Oswald-Egg & Renold (2021), Department for Work & Pensions (2016), UKCES (2014).

⁴³ See Eurofound (2012), JRF (2015), Ryan, G. (2010), StandAlone (2015).

4 Outputs Against Target

4.1 This chapter sets out analysis of each operation's targets and final output performance against these targets. This includes analysis of operation level total outputs, as well as a breakdown by joint beneficiary.

4.2 Further discussion on operational issues which have impacted performance against target are set out as part of the wider discussion at Chapter 6.

Headline Targets

4.3 The headline targets for the overall operations are shown in Figure 4.1. Funding is split across West Wales and the Valleys (WWV) and East Wales (EW), so targets have been established for each of these areas and progress against these is monitored separately.

Figure 4.1 Targets for GO Wales Operations (Approved January 2020)

	West Wales and the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Participants [at risk of becoming NEET (11-24)]	1,503	837	2,340
Participants undertaking work experience	1,262	713	1,975
Participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET (11-24) upon leaving	1,118	652	1,770

4.4 These targets have changed twice since operation inception due to timetable extensions. The operations were due to end in March 2019, initially these were extended to January 2022, before subsequently being extended to December 2022. Final targets were approved by WEFO in January 2020.

4.5 In WWV the targets were reduced for "*participants*" and "*participants undertaking work experience*" and increased for "*participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET upon leaving*" in 2018 from the initial 2016 targets. In 2019, the targets were increased across all three categories to above the 2016 and 2018 targets, to take account of the extended timeframe. In EW the targets were increased in 2018, and again in 2019.

HEI Targets

4.6 Each of the nine joint beneficiary HEIs have individual targets that contribute to the overall WWV and EW totals. Some HEIs have targets in either WWV or EW, and some HEIs have targets in both areas. Targets were set to reflect the location, scale and context of each HEI.

4.7 The overall targets for each of the HEIs are shown in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 Overall targets for GO Wales Operations by HEI

	Participants [at risk of becoming NEET (11-24)]	Participants undertaking work experience	Participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET (11-24) upon leaving
Aberystwyth University	330	265	237
Bangor University	228	189	166
Cardiff Metropolitan University	227	195	180
Cardiff University	371	316	293
Swansea University	286	243	220
The Open University in Wales	80	70	63
University of South Wales	445	378	322
University of Wales Trinity Saint David	223	190	170
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	150	129	119

Performance Against Target

4.8 The overall operation level output performance against target at end of October 2022 is shown in Figure 4.3.

4.9 The colours associated with the delivery against target are as follows:

- Green – achieved 86% of target or above
- Orange – achieved 71% to 85% of target
- Red – achieved 70% of target or below

4.10 These categorisations align to WEFO tolerance levels.

Figure 4.3 Overall performance against target for GO Wales Operations (31 October 2022)

	West Wales and the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Participants [at risk of becoming NEET (11-24)]	1,392 (93%)	821 (98%)	2,213 (95%)
Participants undertaking work experience	1,066 (84%)	630 (88%)	1,696 (86%)
Participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET (11-24) upon leaving	945 (85%)	610 (94%)	1,555 (88%)

Source: GO Wales database

4.11 The EW operation has achieved final output performance within acceptable tolerance levels for each of the three headline indicators. The WWV operation is within acceptable tolerance for the participants indicator, but very slightly below tolerance for those participants undertaking work experience and those classified at reduced risk of NEET.

4.12 With the headline participant indicator falling below target (within acceptable tolerance) it causes an increased likelihood for activity (work experience) and output (reduced risk of NEET) indicators also being below target. Figure 4.4 shows the target and actual conversion rates. This shows that the conversion of participants into those that undertook work experience fell below the anticipated level, but for those that did undertake work experience the numbers that were assessed as at reduced risk of becoming NEET were at or above target level.

4.13 These data suggest that whilst the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly had an impact on recruitment, and on the ability to arrange work experiences, leading to performance below the target levels, the fundamental approach and ability to reduce the risk of becoming NEET has been achieved, and indeed has exceeded target expectations.

Figure 4.4 Conversion rates

	West Wales and the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Target			
Participants to work experience conversion	84%	85%	84%
Work experience to reduced risk of NEET conversion	89%	91%	90%
Actual			
Participants to work experience conversion	77%	77%	77%
Work experience to reduced risk of NEET conversion	89%	97%	92%

HEI Level Performance Against Target

4.14 Overall performance by each of the delivery partner HEIs is shown in Figure 4.5. This is colour coded using the same categorisation as set out at paragraph 4.9.

4.15 Two joint beneficiaries (Aberystwyth University and Cardiff University) have achieved above 100% against each of the three headline indicators. Swansea University has also achieved within accepted tolerance levels for each indicator.

4.16 Across other joint beneficiaries the picture is more mixed, with Bangor University, University of South Wales, University of Wales Trinity St David and Wrexham Glyndŵr University achieving amber or a mix of green and amber across the categories. Only Cardiff Metropolitan University and The Open University in Wales had indicators in the red category,.

4.17 In keeping with operation level targets, performance against the participants indicator was stronger than the other indicators. Where participant numbers were below target (at or close to amber level) this directly made achievement of activity and output indicators far more challenging.

Figure 4.5 Overall performance against target for GO Wales Operations by HEI (31 October 2022)

	Participants [at risk of becoming NEET (11-24)]	Participants undertaking work experience	Participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET (11-24) upon leaving
Aberystwyth University	360 (109%)	273 (103%)	252 (106%)
Bangor University	190 (83%)	146 (77%)	132 (80%)
Cardiff Metropolitan University	191 (84%)	129 (66%)	124 (69%)
Cardiff University	378 (102%)	318 (101%)	308 (105%)
Swansea University	284 (99%)	221 (91%)	200 (91%)
The Open University in Wales	73 (91%)	46 (66%)	37 (59%)
University of South Wales	376 (84%)	284 (75%)	261 (81%)
University of Wales Trinity Saint David	225 (101%)	170 (89%)	132 (78%)
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	136 (91%)	109 (84%)	109 (92%)

Source: GO Wales database

Sub Targets

4.18 There are sub targets for participants across the target groups. These relate to participant characteristics. Performance against these targets is directly impacted by the overall number of participants accepted onto the operations. Overall sub targets for the operations are set out in Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6 Sub targets for GO Wales Operations

	West Wales and the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Male	588	315	903
Female	915	522	1,437
Disabled or Work Limiting Health Condition (WLHC)	734	481	1,215
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	238	231	469
Low Participation Neighbourhood (bottom two quintiles of POLAR4 ⁴⁴)	661	337	998
Care leaver / Estranged from family	68	36	104
Caring Responsibilities	139	69	208
Migrant (EU / Non EU)	86	53	139

HEI Sub Targets

4.19 The sub targets by HEI for the overall GO Wales operations are set out in Figure 4.7.

⁴⁴ The POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education. POLAR4 is the fourth iteration of the methodology, which remains the relevant measure.

Figure 4.7 HEI sub targets for GO Wales Operations

	Male	Female	Disabled or Work Limiting Health Condition (WLHC)	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	Low Participation Neighbourhood (bottom two quintiles of POLAR4)	Care leaver / Estranged from family	Caring Responsibilities	Migrant (EU / Non EU)
Aberystwyth University	145	185	220	50	125	12	28	18
Bangor University	80	148	115	26	88	12	21	13
Cardiff Metropolitan University	102	125	121	75	104	8	17	21
Cardiff University	117	254	182	99	125	16	32	19
Swansea University	106	180	125	85	110	15	23	28
The Open University in Wales	29	51	22	11	30	4	18	2
University of South Wales	171	274	200	83	260	17	36	15
University of Wales TSD	91	132	120	22	100	12	20	12
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	62	88	110	18	56	8	13	11

Output against Sub Targets

4.20 Performance against overall sub targets for the operations are set out in Figure 4.8. This is colour coded using the same categorisation as set out at paragraph 4.9.

4.21 Notably, some institutions had participants that did not subscribe to either the male or female gender categories⁴⁵. The programme does not have any sub-targets in relation to these participants and the WEFO/European Commission reporting systems do not allow for categories beyond male/female gender designation. It was agreed between GO Wales and WEFO that participants that do not identify as male/female could be supported, but these participants are not formally recorded against the gender categories⁴⁶. In future, consideration should be given at any relevant programme and operation level to have a more suitable gender categorisation system.

4.22 The vast majority of participant sub targets are within accepted tolerance levels. There is very strong performance (over achievement) in nine of 16 categories (WWV and EW only). Only three of 16 fall into the amber category. This highlights the greatest challenges in recruiting male students and those that are care leavers, estranged from family or those with caring responsibilities.

Figure 4.8 Performance against sub targets for GO Wales Operations

	West Wales and the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Male	515 (88%)	261 (83%)	776 (86%)
Female	867 (95%)	554 (106%)	1,421 (99%)
Disabled or Work Limiting Health Condition (WLHC)	858 (117%)	477 (99%)	1,335 (110%)
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	282 (118%)	293 (127%)	575 (123%)
Low Participation Neighbourhood (bottom two quintiles of POLAR4)	691 (105%)	392 (116%)	1083 (109%)
Care leaver / Estranged from family	52 (76%)	40 (111%)	92 (88%)
Caring Responsibilities	118 (85%)	60 (87%)	178 (86%)
Migrant (EU / Non EU)	104 (121%)	77 (145%)	181 (130%)

Source: GO Wales monitoring records

⁴⁵ As a result the sum of male and female participants is not equal to operation totals.

⁴⁶ But are reported to WEFO via quarterly progress reports.



HEI Level Performance Against Sub Targets

4.23 Performance against overall sub targets for the operations are set out in Figure 4.9. This is colour coded using the same categorisation as set out at paragraph 4.9.

4.24 Of the 72 cells in Figure 4.9, 56 are within accepted tolerance levels (44 of which are at or above 100% of target). Six are recorded as amber and ten in the red category. Unsurprisingly the red and amber category performance is largely contained within those areas which have performed less strongly at operation level. This highlights that challenges in recruiting from male, care leaver and caring responsibility populations was an issue across multiple HEIs and not isolated in one or two institutions.

Figure 4.9 HEI performance against sub targets for GO Wales Operations

	Male	Female	Disabled or Work Limiting Health Condition (WLHC)	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	Low Participation Neighbourhood (bottom two quintiles of POLAR4)	Care leaver / Estranged from family	Caring Responsibilities	Migrant (EU / Non EU)
Aberystwyth University	156 (108%)	199 (108%)	252 (115%)	59 (118%)	164 (131%)	18 (150%)	30 (107%)	23 (128%)
Bangor University	55 (69%)	135 (91%)	133 (116%)	37 (142%)	88 (100%)	4 (33%)	11 (52%)	14 (108%)
Cardiff Metropolitan University	58 (57%)	133 (106%)	88 (73%)	101 (135%)	91 (88%)	4 (50%)	6 (35%)	23 (110%)
Cardiff University	102 (87%)	274 (108%)	200 (110%)	133 (134%)	169 (135%)	23 (144%)	28 (88%)	26 (137%)
Swansea University	106 (100%)	175 (97%)	123 (98%)	130 (153%)	103 (94%)	10 (67%)	11 (48%)	38 (136%)
The Open University in Wales	12 (41%)	61 (120%)	31 (141%)	8 (73%)	43 (143%)	5 (125%)	24 (133%)	3 (150%)
University of South Wales	137 (80%)	237 (86%)	235 (118%)	67 (81%)	245 (94%)	10 (59%)	38 (106%)	25 (167%)
University of Wales TSD	92 (101%)	132 (100%)	162 (135%)	22 (100%)	113 (113%)	10 (83%)	18 (90%)	12 (100%)
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	58 (94%)	75 (85%)	111 (101%)	18 (100%)	67 (120%)	8 (100%)	12 (92%)	17 (155%)

Source: GO Wales database

Expenditure

4.25 Operations level expenditure against budget is set out in Figure 4.10. Total expenditure is at 92% of budget. This is marginally below the achieved level of participants at operation level, and slightly above activity and output indicators.

Figure 4.10 Performance against sub targets for GO Wales Operations

	West Wales and the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Eligible expenditure	£6,597,607	£3,667,896	£10,265,503
Budget	£7,206,682	£3,970,392	£11,177,074
ESF Grant	£4,610,453	£1,675,770	£6,286,222
Spend as percentage of budget	92%	92%	92%

Source: GO Wales records

Other Monitoring Data

4.26 Whilst not part of the formal target and output data it is illustrative to consider some of the wider statistics available from the GO Wales monitoring records.

- Almost 3,000 work experience opportunities arranged. 2,555 eligible⁴⁷ opportunities were undertaken of which 97% were completed.
- 54% of experiences were 'in person'. 42% were undertaken virtually and 4% blended.
- 42% of experiences were work shadowing (1-3 days), 57% work tasters (2-20 days) and just 1% subsidised or unsubsidised placements (21-30 days).
- 66% of participants undertook a single work experience. 22% undertook two experiences, 7% three, 2% four and 3% undertook five or more experiences.

Summary

4.27 Overall the operations have performed well against activity and output indicators. Those headline indicators which fell outside the accepted tolerance levels were marginal (within 1-2 percentage points), and resulted from lower than anticipated participant numbers. Without sufficient participant numbers it became increasingly hard to achieve follow on activity and output targets. Conversion from work experience to reduced risk of NEET is at or ahead of target.

4.28 Participant recruitment across many of the eligible groups was very strong, but some areas were more challenging, particularly male students, care leavers and those with caring responsibilities.

4.29 Given the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, and no further reprofiling of targets since January 2020 the ability to deliver within accepted tolerance levels across the majority of indicators is positive.

⁴⁷ 421 arranged opportunities were deemed ineligible. The primary reason was the student withdrawing from the process (54%). In a small minority of cases (6%) the employer withdrew from the process. In 21% of cases the required paperwork was not in place to ensure eligibility. In 19% of cases the experience did not proceed for another reason. If some or all of these had completed or been deemed eligible in other ways this would have made a substantial impact on wider target achievement.

5 Impact on Participants

5.1 This chapter sets out analysis of impacts arising from the operations on student beneficiaries.

Employability Assessment Tool

5.2 The operations use an Employability Assessment Tool (EAT) to assess the employability of each student participant at the outset of their engagement with GO Wales, and after each work experience opportunity completed. The same 10 questions are answered on a scale of 1-7. The EAT that is used is attached as Appendix 3 to this report.

5.3 Detailed analysis of EAT scores for 1,260 participants is attached at Appendix 4 to this report. This considers the impact of the work experiences undertaken. This analysis shows that there is a clear improvement in reported scores across all 10 questions of the EAT. Participants that undertook more than one work experience opportunity reported lower levels of improvement after first experience and the figures suggest they continued to undertake opportunities until their average scores were ± 5 . The data is summarised in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 EAT Scores

	Average Initial Score	Average EAT Score After 1 Experience	Average EAT Score After 2 Experience	Average EAT Score After 2 Experience	Average EAT Score After 4+ Experience
EAT 1	2.67	4.80			
EAT 2	2.55	3.61	4.93		
EAT 3	2.34	3.28	3.94	5.12	
EAT 4+	2.53	3.72	4.08	4.40	5.27

Source: GO Wales monitoring

Note: Small numbers of participants completed four or more work experience opportunities

5.4 The detailed data suggests very similar improvements in EAT scores across target groups.

5.5 Overall this suggests there is benefit to having flexibility in how many work experience opportunities are offered. Whilst for some students there is clearly a substantial improvement in the EAT scores after a single experience, for others there is a requirement to complete multiple experiences to achieve the same end point.

Stakeholder Consultations

5.6 Consultees were clear that the impacts on student participants go well beyond the work experience opportunities. In particular the pastoral, mentoring and coaching support that builds confidence and readies the students to undertake and get the most out of the subsequent experiences (including job application and interview skills). Consultees were unanimous in their opinions of the confidence that is built in participants and were able to cite feedback from employers which corroborated their views of the impact on the student. As has been noted elsewhere in this report, a number of examples were given of students that were considering or very close to dropping out of university, but remained as a result of the support provided by GO

Wales staff. This data is not tracked anywhere, but it was indicated there may be some impact on student retention⁴⁸.

5.7 There are examples cited of students that are now working for the employer with which they undertook a work experience opportunity. This is discussed in more detail based on the participant and host employer survey analysis below.

Survey Based Analysis

Student Views

5.8 Appendix 8 and 10 set out results of two telephone surveys. The first of student participants in the GO Wales AtWE operations and the second with host employers. These surveys covered a range of issues including feedback on their experiences of taking part in the operations, as well as the impact of participation on both the student participants and host employers. This section of the report considers the key messages emerging from the analysis in terms of impact.

5.9 Almost 90% of student participants reported that their work experience was a very valuable experience, with a further 9% reporting some value.

5.10 91% of student participants reported that they had achieved the objectives they set for their work experience.

5.11 Participants reported gaining a range of skills and benefits from participation, most notably communication skills, confidence and understanding of the working environment.

5.12 The chart below shows the responses to a range of employability related statements from student participants. This further confirmed the range of positive benefits of participation upon the students that undertook work experience opportunities, particularly in terms of confidence and clarity.

5.13 Around half of participants did not believe they would have undertaken any work experience if they had not participated in GO Wales. Of those that indicated they may have participated many were not confident they would have been able to find anything, nor had made any progress towards organising such experiences. Only 18% indicated that they believed they would have arranged work experiences of the same quality and only 10% reported that they would have gained the same skills and experiences. These responses suggest the benefits accruing to work experience supported through GO Wales have high levels of additionality and attribution.

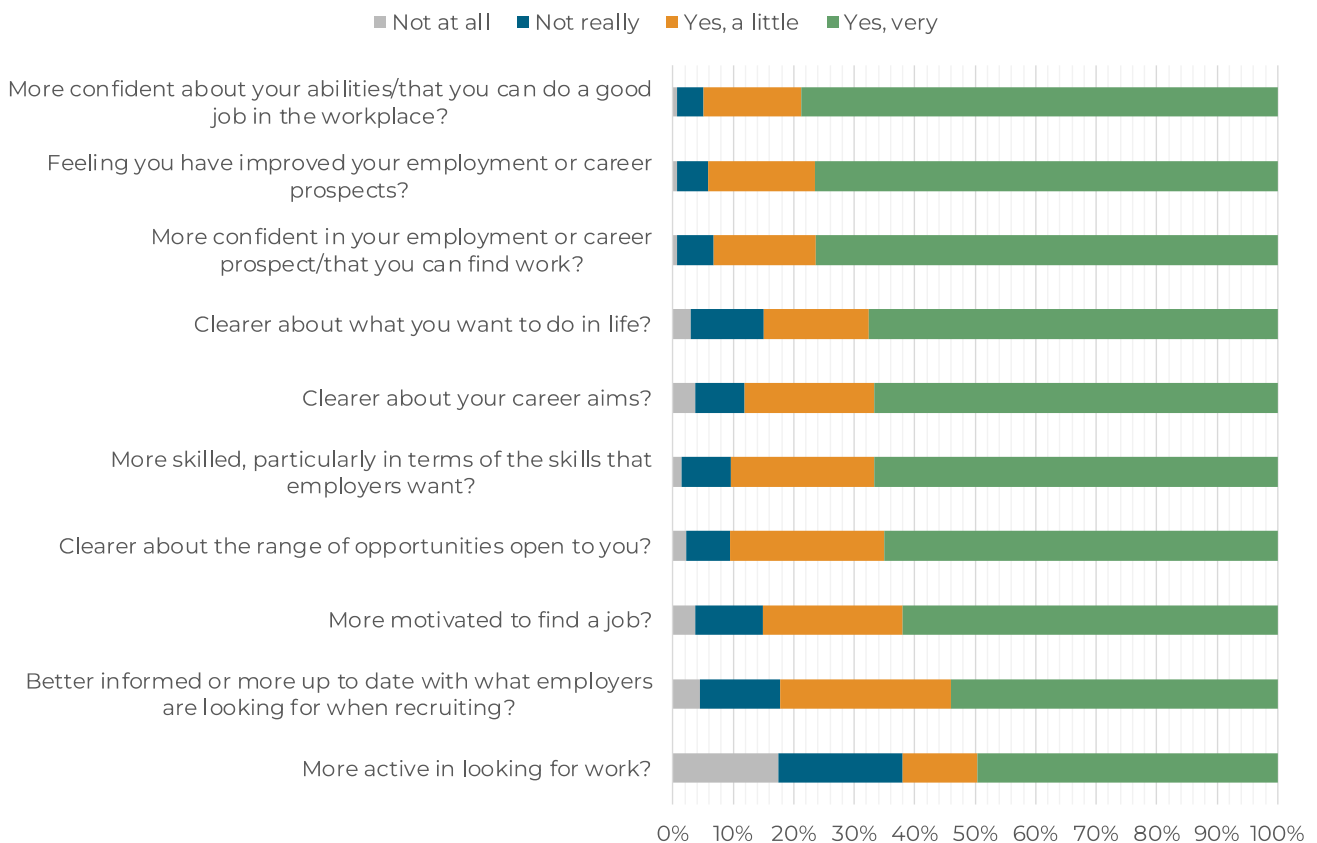
5.14 When asked how the experiences and skills gained from participating in GO Wales might have already impacted, or impact in the future approximately 90% reported a positive impact on their employability and 80% a positive impact on them getting a job. More than 75% also reported positive impacts on areas outside their work life.

5.15 At the time of the survey 59% were employed and 27% were in education or training. Just 6% were unemployed and 2% neither in or looking for work, education or training. As set out in Figure 3.1 this compares to 16% of 19-24 years olds across Wales in 2020. Those surveyed that were NEET reported that this was due to being disabled, sickness or caring responsibilities which restricted their ability to work at the current time. Five of the seven participants (that answered the

⁴⁸ This issue was not highlighted until after commencement of student participant survey fieldwork so has not been tested as part of this evaluation.

question) that were not currently in employment or looking for work or education/training indicated that they were planning to look for work or education/training in the next year. There were also indicators of positive engagement in volunteering activities where work or education/training was not being undertaken.

Figure 5.2 As a result of participating in GO Wales AtWE are you...



Source: Student participant survey

5.16 54% of those in employment (including self employment) and 46% of those in education or training indicated that participation in GO Wales was a major contributory factor in their current status. Responses are summarised in Figure 5.3. These data clearly indicate that the operations not only reduce the risk of participants becoming NEET but are actively contributing towards participants entering employment or continuing in education and training.

Figure 5.3 Contribution of participation to current status (n=131, other=5)

Category	In employment (including self employment)	In education or training	Unemployed and looking for work	Not in or looking for work or education/ training
Yes, a lot	54%	46%	0%	0%
Yes, a little	20%	11%	57%	0%
Not really	13%	22%	0%	33%
Not at all	14%	22%	29%	17%
No. of responses	77	37	6	3

Host Employer Views

5.17 Host employers were also asked about the impact on student participants. 92% indicated there was a positive benefit to the student of some form (48% a significant impact). The most commonly reported benefit was increased confidence, other impacts included increasing sector specific knowledge, understanding of the working environment, improved sense of career direction and improved communication skills.

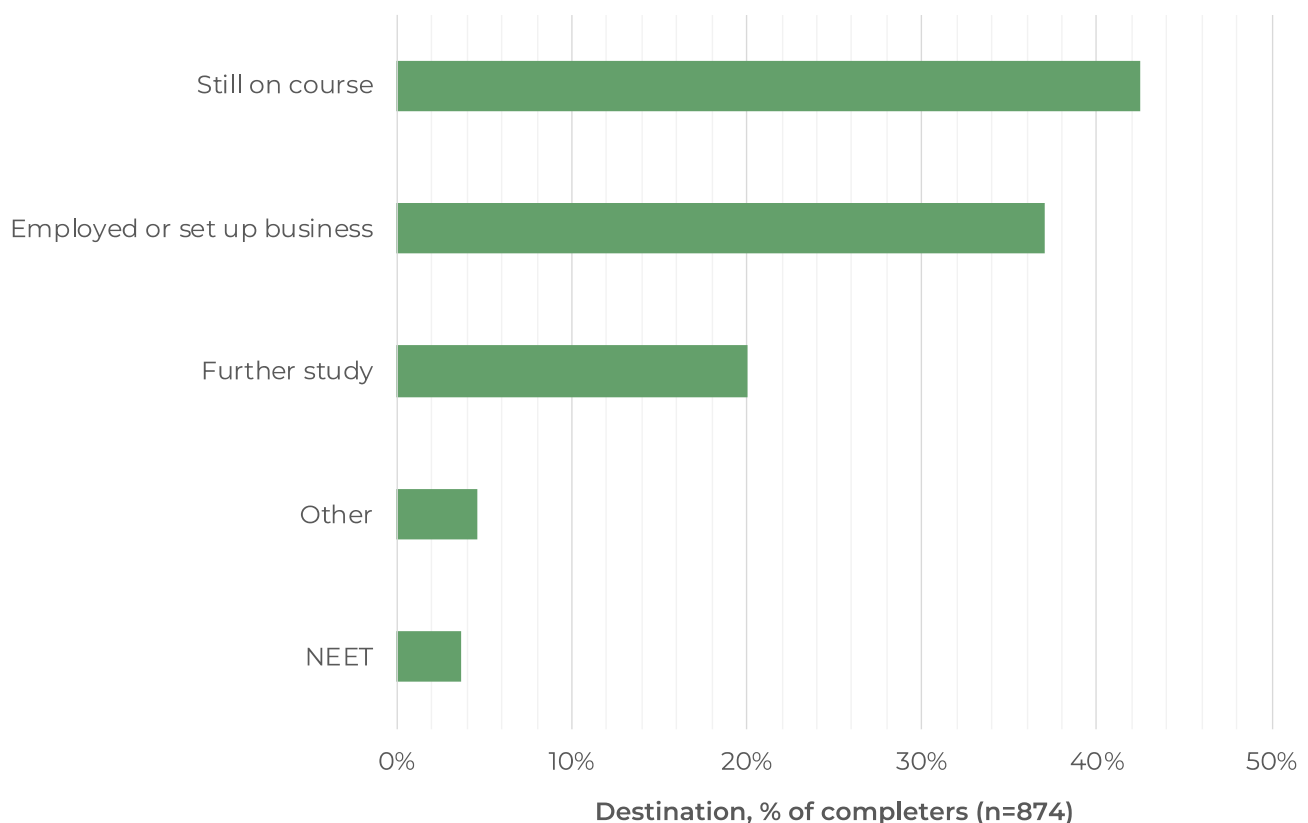
5.18 The nature of positive impacts reported by employers are broadly consistent with those reported by student participants.

Destinations Data

5.19 A destinations survey was undertaken with 1,429 students that completed their participation with the operations, six months after participation ended. This included 554 students within the East Wales operation and 875 within the West Wales and the Valleys operation.

5.20 Valid destinations data was secured from 874 completers. This analysis found that 4% of participants that had completed their participation were recorded as NEET. 42% were still on the course they had been studying when participating in the programme. If these are excluded the NEET rate rises to 6%. This is slightly lower than the rate recorded in the survey undertaken as part of the evaluation, but also has a much larger sample size. It is substantially lower than the NEET rate for 18-24 year olds in Wales.

5.21 37% of operation completers were in employment (or had started their own business), and 20% had entered further study.

Figure 5.4 Destinations of GO Wales AtWE completers, six months after completion

Summary

5.22 Overall there is consistent evidence, through the Employability Assessment Tool, the views of project delivery staff, the self reported views of participants and the third party views of host employers of positive impacts on student participants. These are many and varied, across a range of employability related skills and attributes.

5.23 There are widely reported impacts on confidence, with project delivery staff articulating in detail the journey that many participants make in this regard.

5.24 The evidence points towards participants clearly at a reduced risk of becoming NEET, with actual reported levels of being NEET well below national averages across participants. The operations have led to more than 1,500 student participants being assessed as at reduced risk of NEET.

5.25 These impacts are realised through both the support provided by the GO Wales advisors and the work experience opportunities that are undertaken.

5.26 The logic chain developed as part of the Phase 1 evaluation is attached as Appendix 11 to this report. The evidence shows that the operations are delivering the activities, outputs and outcomes that were anticipated. These will in turn contribute to the wider impacts that are to be assessed through programme level evaluation.

6 Wider Delivery Matters

6.1 This chapter sets out a discussion of wider delivery considerations that have been identified through the evaluation process.

Feedback Form Analysis

6.2 Feedback from participants is overwhelmingly positive. This included the support received from their GO Wales adviser, and their experiences with a host employer. Appendix 5 sets out more detail on the feedback received.

6.3 Equally positive feedback was received from host employers about the administration of the operation and were very positive about recommending work experience to others and hosting subsequent experience opportunities themselves. Further details of employer feedback is set out at Appendix 6.

6.4 Overall the feedback collected throughout the operation does not raise any concerns about project delivery.

Stakeholder Consultees - General Operational Issues

6.5 The Phase 1 evaluation focused on process issues, and particularly the way in which the operations had grappled with engaging with the target groups. Whilst this evaluation was not focused on delivery issues, the disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the passage of time since the Phase 1 evaluation led to a range of issues being discussed with delivery partners. These are summarised below.

6.6 There is consistently positive feedback about the support received from and the working relationships with the management team at HEFCW. Whilst there is a recognition of the need for strong compliance and project administration, the relationships between HEFCW and the delivery teams are clearly very positive and support the effective delivery of the operations. The experienced management team at HEFCW is also seen as a strong positive for the robust delivery of the operations.

6.7 Consultees continue to report the targets set as being challenging. This is predominantly due to an underestimation of the amount of work it takes to support participants in the target groups. Individual student needs are very different and require bespoke support. As noted in the Phase 1 evaluation there has been a significant amount of learning of how to best support students with complex needs and understanding the barriers they face.

6.8 The workload for delivery staff can be significant. It was reported that there is very little slack built into the system, so if a staff member leaves or is off sick this can create significant workloads and affect staff morale and wellbeing. Related to this, as one of the primary activity indicators is the number of 'participants undertaking work experience', rather than the number of work experience opportunities undertaken this was cited as a challenge. Many students undertake multiple work experiences which adds significantly to staff caseloads but doesn't contribute to the activity indicator⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ It should be noted that participants undertaking subsequent work experiences contributes towards reducing the risk of that student becoming NEET

6.9 The evidence from consultees clearly demonstrates the suitability criteria are applied to ensure support is targeted to those students that are most at risk of NEET and in need of the GO Wales operations. There was no evidence of ‘cream skimming’ – selecting student participants that would be very easy to support in order to achieve targets. This is leading to narrow and deep interventions. This can clearly have implications for the overall number of students that can be supported.

6.10 In terms of achieving targets, many partner HEIs fell behind early on in the operational period, in some cases due to delays in recruitment of suitable staff and more widely, as a result of grappling with challenges around recruiting and supporting students from the target groups. As a result they have been playing catch up and this has been very challenging. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this process (see following section). It is understood a further target reprofiling exercise to reflect the impact of Covid was prepared but was not agreed with WEFO⁵⁰ and therefore no adjustment has been made.

6.11 Whilst there are variations in terms of exactly how the operations are delivered at HEI level, which makes it highly complex to unpick the variable levels of progress against target; at a simplistic level the best performing HEI in terms of outputs was able to retain most of its staff from the previous phase of GO Wales and therefore hit the ground running. The HEI with the poorest performance in terms of target achievement was not able to do so and has reported a high level of staff turnover. This gives a clear indication that having a strong staff team in place early and consistently has a direct impact on results. Other HEIs also reported staff absences that had a material impact on output achievement.

6.12 Having the right staff in place has also been highlighted as a critical success factor in previous GO Wales operations. One HEI reported that they have recruited project staff at slightly higher grades than other parts of its careers and employability service, reflecting the level of pastoral support required. This illustrates a wider issue of HEIs adapting in response to learning how best to support the target groups which was reported by multiple consultees.

6.13 One administrative challenge that impacts on achievement of targets for the WWV operation in particular is the recording of student addresses. For HEIs that have both WWV and EW targets, with the HEIs predominantly located in the EW area, there are specific difficulties. It was suggested that both term time and home addresses are recorded so that student eligibility for the WWV operation can be clearly established. It was reported that many students only record their term time address and therefore it is harder to achieve WWV outputs⁵¹.

6.14 The paperwork and administration associated with the operations was an issue flagged by consultees. This has been consistently raised as an issue through previous evaluations of GO Wales, but is also well known as an issue across EU funded operations. Whilst delivery staff learn to adapt to the requirements, and those with a history in EU funded schemes are able to do this more readily; there are two specific impacts that should be recognised. Firstly, the paperwork forms a barrier to participation for some students and employers. This is not just in terms of the administrative burden, although that is significant. But for some students from the target groups this is a real challenge to complete and has led to students choosing not to engage. Secondly, it

⁵⁰ Reprofiling requires a significant volume of work. In order to focus resources appropriately WEFO sought to reprofile only those operations where there was likely to be a significant underspend.

⁵¹ Guidance to HEIs is compliant with the criteria set out within WEFO/Welsh Government (2019) *Eligibility Rules and Conditions for Support for the European Structural Funds 2014-20 v4 (para 25.1)*

diverts resources away from delivering to participants towards back office administration. Whilst there is a universal recognition of the need for good governance of public funds, there is a need to continually explore how the administrative burden can be reduced. The introduction of digital signatures for authorising paperwork was hugely welcomed by delivery partners.

6.15 Recruiting to the operations from within the target groups has continued to be a challenge. This was a key issue explored in the Phase 1 evaluation. The ability of delivery staff to access data that enables targeted marketing continues to be highly variable across HEIs and patchy at best. Exploring how improved data can be accessed should be considered as part of any legacy programme. Some consultees reported low cohorts of some target groups within the HEI which caused challenges recruiting and delivering outputs.

6.16 Within HEIs engagement across other services continues to be variable, however this is significantly improved from the Phase 1 evaluation and previous rounds of GO Wales. This is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this report.

6.17 From a work experience perspective, consultees reported much wider use of the third sector and public sector for hosting, given the needs of many student participants. It was noted that private sector host employers are actually looking for much more out of the placement, as a quid pro quo for the time cost of supervising and hosting. That has not always been as easy to provide in GO Wales AtWE as with previous iterations of GO Wales.

Stakeholder Consultees - Covid Impact

6.18 The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have been far reaching across the economy and society at large within Wales, the UK and globally. The introduction of lockdowns and other public health measures created an unexpected need to adapt rapidly to an unprecedented external influence. Consultees have reported both positive and negative outcomes of this period.

6.19 The six months from March 2020 to September 2020, following the start of the first lockdown, were the most challenging period for the operations. Each of the key stakeholder groups were having to grapple with the implications of the lockdown and as a result, there was little or no opportunity to deliver outputs. In particular:

- Student participants were having to adjust to online teaching. For some the pandemic increased the barriers to participation, e.g. where there was a requirement to shield for one's own health or the health of a household member, or where caring responsibilities increased as a result of respite or other services not being available.
- Host employers were having to focus on adapting their organisational practices and in some cases focused on survival. This included putting staff on furlough (Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) and rapid adaptation to home working where possible or significant operational adjustments where not.
- Operation delivery staff were equally having to adapt to homeworking. Some HEIs were better placed than others to make this adjustment rapidly, with varying levels of mobile technology and software tools in place before the pandemic struck.
- GO Wales managers, in partnership with delivery staff, rapidly explored how the operations could adapt to the ongoing situation in order that there was a way forward as the initial public health situation started to ease.

6.20 As a result, organising new work experience opportunities, and completing those already scheduled, was not possible. Operation delivery staff did not want to add to the burden on employers, with hosting work experience not a priority. There was a need to act with sensitivity.

6.21 Recruiting new students to the operations was also highly challenging in this new environment. The focus therefore became maintaining engagement with students already enrolled with GO Wales. Consultees unsurprisingly reported reduced student engagement through this period.

6.22 In agreement with WEFO, virtual work experience options were developed, including a new Meet the Professionals (MTP) strand of activity. This enabled one or more students to meet virtually with an employer in a relevant industry to explore issues within that sector and organisation. These virtual tools rapidly became a key part of GO Wales.

6.23 Consultees are in agreement that the MTP strand has been an excellent addition to the operations. It was noted that in many cases it provides the student participant(s) with greater access to senior professionals in the given organisation than a short work taster or shadowing opportunity. Multiple consultees independently cited the fact that students had to get more engaged in an MTP to ensure they had well researched questions to put to the employer and therefore very often took away greater learning, knowledge and insight than might be the case from other short form experiences. MTP is seen as a very helpful first step and has provided significant value in the process of clarifying the career direction students may wish to take.

6.24 However, it was also recognised there are limitations to MTP and other virtual experiences. Whilst some students find them easier to engage with, it was suggested by multiple consultees that they do not push the student out of their comfort zones in quite the same way, and do not provide the genuine workplace experiences that are available via other strands. There are also particular disadvantages to those students seeking work experience opportunities in practical environments. Not all experiences can be arranged virtually.

6.25 Overwhelmingly the view of consultees is that MTP should be retained alongside the other strands moving forward as it provides something different and is a clear positive of the pandemic.

6.26 Restarting in person experiences was made more complicated by frequently changing public health advice including subsequent lockdowns. From an administrative perspective this was very challenging. Experiences that had been organised had to be cancelled or postponed. This highlights the ongoing disruption to output achievement that has resulted from the pandemic.

6.27 The other major positive coming out of the pandemic response was a significant boost to cross HEI working arrangements. Whereas there had always been provision for a degree of knowledge sharing within the operations (e.g. through national meetings), consultees were clear in the benefits that have arisen following the establishment of task and finish groups and other joint working arrangements across institutions, that have continued to be maintained. This has led to a reduction in parochialism across the partner HEIs and there were many examples cited of sharing work experience opportunities, particularly MTPs, to the benefit of student participants in other institutions.

6.28 There are also examples of improved intra HEI collaboration as a result of the pandemic both with other student services teams and also academics. The widespread use and more importantly familiarity and confidence with remote meeting tools was reported to have enabled much greater engagement, in particular the ability to have more frequent but less intensive contacts which have

built stronger relationships over time. Remote engagement tools have also allowed for greater efficiency in dealing with students and employers.

6.29 Multiple consultees referenced challenges to staff morale in the early part of the pandemic in particular, and that it was ‘soul destroying’ trying to arrange experiences before MTP was introduced. The caseloads of delivery staff were also raised as a problematic area in some instances, with students often staying longer with the operations through the pandemic and seeking greater numbers of virtual experiences.

6.30 At time of consultations (early 2022) there was a much more positive outlook reported by many consultees in terms of employer engagement and face to face opportunities coming back etc.

What Works for Whom in What Circumstances

6.31 The evidence gathered and assessed to inform this evaluation has shown that there are impacts across all the eligibility groups. The analysis of EAT scores in particular found no evidence of variation relating to the eligibility criteria. However, there are variations in the success of engaging with some target groups, particularly care leavers and those with caring responsibilities. In many cases this relates to the ability to market directly to such groups which is discussed elsewhere in this report.

6.32 The EAT analysis shows that some participants require more work experiences before they are assessed at reduced risk of NEET. This is consistent with the views expressed by project delivery staff that highlighted the additional needs of some students and the need flexibility to tailor the support package to the individual needs of the student, with the greatest support being provided to those with the greatest needs.

6.33 Across the two evaluation phases it is clear there has been significant learning and development across the project delivery staff as to how best to recruit and support students from the target groups. With this learning and experience has come an ability to effectively tailor support flexibly to deliver positive outcomes.

6.34 To enable this to continue will require retention of project staff where possible, as well as continued efforts in knowledge sharing across HEIs to ensure appropriate support can be delivered.

Unthought of or Unintended Outcomes

6.35 Through the course of the operations there has been significant learning and developments that were not envisaged at launch.

6.36 Firstly, the scale of pastoral and mentoring support required by many of the student participants that were eligible and suitable was not fully understood at the inception of the operations. This was a significant topic of discussion within the Phase 1 evaluation report. Over the course of the six-years of the operations there has been a substantial amount of experience and expertise acquired across the delivery staff which is being deployed for the benefit of student participants. This serves to meet an identified need that cannot be met through mainstream careers services.

6.37 Secondly, the Meet the Professionals activity emerged as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was developed out of necessity and has proved to be very popular. Consultee feedback clearly suggests this should be retained, alongside the other experience formats.

6.38 The pandemic has also contributed to a wider acceleration of virtual experience models and remote working protocols. This is reported to have aided efficiency of working practices among delivery staff and created much more collaborative delivery models across HEIs which were not present previously.

6.39 Thirdly, the operations are focused on student participants' employability skills and experiences. The survey of students found that 75% of participants reported impacts in areas of their life not related to work. This shows a wider effect on the students from both the work experience opportunities and the associated support provided by the GO Wales advisers. This aligns with the evidence gathered through consultations with delivery staff citing impacts such as contributing to student retention within HE in some cases.

6.40 Fourthly, whilst the operations are targeted at impact on the student participants there is clear evidence of positive impact on host employers that would not have happened in the absence of the operations. Employer impacts are not a core objective of the operations, but throughout the history of GO Wales there have been positive benefits to employer participants as well as students. This includes increased likelihood of offering further work experience opportunities, improved awareness and understanding related to recruiting employees from disadvantaged and/or diverse backgrounds, learning new things and having an increased awareness of what universities have to offer.

7 Cross Cutting Themes

7.1 This chapter addresses the fifth evaluation question, assessing how the operations contributed to the cross cutting themes (CCTs). This draws on operation level monitoring and quarterly reporting, as well as consultations with project managers, delivery staff and external stakeholders.

7.2 There are three CCTs included as part of the European Structural Investment Fund Programmes:

- Equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming (including the Welsh language) – this aims to reduce injustice and promote social inclusion, providing opportunity for all those eligible to participate. ESF programme level objectives include reducing the numbers NEET, and reducing the over representation of certain ethnic groups, care leavers and disabled young people who are NEET.
- Sustainable development – at its core this seeks to ensure economic development will not adversely impact the environment. ESF programme objectives include promoting environmental awareness and good practice, integrating sustainable development into operations and promoting social justice and equality of opportunity.
- Tackling poverty and social exclusion – this is focused on creating employment and progression opportunities and improving access to those opportunities, increasing the mobility of those that are unemployed, work ready or underemployed.

7.3 These are intended to “*add value, raise awareness and understanding while ensuring maximum participation and mitigating adverse impacts*”⁵². A key ambition is for the benefits of the 2014-20 European Structural Investment Fund programmes in Wales to be spread equitably across people and communities.

7.4 The GO Wales operations have a very strong focus on the CCTs of tackling poverty and promoting equal opportunities. At its core, the operation is seeking to reduce prospects of future poverty by tackling the risks to becoming NEET and is focused on a set of target groups that are facing particular barriers to workforce engagement. The operations are therefore contributing to CCTs through all that they deliver.

WEFO Indicators

7.5 On the following page Figure 7.1 shows the WEFO CCT indicators for East Wales and West Wales and the Valleys. These are binary indicators (i.e. either achieved or not). However, in many cases a range of activities have contributed to the indicators being deemed achieved. All indicators have been met aside from childcare provision in East Wales. Examples of activities which have contributed to these indicators having been met are set out in the remainder of the chapter.

⁵² European Structural Funds 2014-20 (WEFO, March 2020) Cross Cutting Themes Key Document – European Social Fund, Integrating the Cross Cutting Themes across 2014-20 European Structural Funds.

Figure 7.1 WEFO Indicators to 31 May 2022

WEFO Indicator	East Wales	West Wales
Operations integrating sustainable development into awareness raising education and training programmes	1	1
Positive action measures – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people	1	1
Positive action measures - disabled people	1	1
Positive action measures - other	1	1
Activity supporting speakers of the Welsh Language	1	1
Childcare provision	0	1
Mentoring / advocacy activity	1	1
Developing an Eco-code	1	1
Resource efficiency measures	1	1
Developing / engaging CCT champions	1	1

Source: GO Wales database

CCT Work Experience Opportunities

7.6 A total of 880 work experience opportunities have taken place where the opportunity itself was concerned with activities directly related to one of the CCT's⁵³, this is equivalent to 34% of all opportunities between the period April 2016 and October 2022.

Figure 7.2 Work experience opportunities contributing to Cross Cutting Themes (From 01/04/2016 to 31/10/2022)

CCT	Number	Percentage of total opportunities
Opportunities starting in period	2,620	100%
Opportunities challenging stereotypes/encouraging working in a non-traditional sector	125	5%
Opportunities contributing towards Equal Opportunities and Gender Mainstreaming	237	9%
Opportunities contributing towards Sustainable Development	174	7%
Opportunities towards Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion	344	13%
Total opportunities that contribute to Cross Cutting Themes	880	34%

Source: Go Wales database

⁵³ As assessed by GO Wales delivery staff within HEIs

7.7 The largest proportion of work experience opportunities which contributed to cross cutting themes were those which tackled poverty and social exclusion. Only 5% of opportunities challenged stereotypes or encouraged working in a non-traditional sector. However, this is not surprising given that generally students have a fair understanding of the sector in which they would like to work after they have chosen their degree course.

7.8 The evidence gathered through stakeholder consultation clearly demonstrates GO Wales as a student centred operation. As a result the level of pro-action that delivery staff can take to influence CCTs in terms of the types of work experiences arranged is limited. For example, if a student is exploring a career in the film industry and wishes to gain work experience in that industry, it would be inappropriate for the delivery staff to suggest a placement within the sustainable energy sector. That may be a crude example, but it illustrates a point made by multiple consultees. As a result, direct contributions to supporting the CCTs is viewed as limited, with actions being primarily reactive, dependent on the expressed preferences of student participants.

7.9 Further, the impact of Covid-19, and before that, the challenges of getting to grips with working with the target groups, have meant that the focus of delivery staff has been primarily on the core delivery of the project and seeking to hit headline targets. As a result, focus on work experience opportunities directly contributing to CCTs has been limited at the partner HEI level. However, activity contributing to CCTs beyond work experience opportunities, as detailed above, continued to be an important focus for HEI's throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

7.10 Notwithstanding, consultations have clearly evidenced that the operation is focused on the target groups, and within that, using the suitability criteria to ensure support is targeted at those with the greatest need. There is certainly no evidence of 'cream skimming' in order to achieve targets by engaging with those without real need of support. Consultees highlighted that the operations as a whole have the CCTs of tackling poverty and social exclusion, and equal opportunities at their heart.

Themes Discussion

Equal Opportunities and Gender Mainstreaming (and Welsh language)

7.11 Evidence from the data and progress reports suggests that GO Wales operations were particularly successful amongst students identifying as being disabled or having a work limiting health conditions and Black, Asian and minority ethnic students. Figure 7.2 also highlights the number of work experiences specifically related to equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming activities, and those challenging stereotypes.

7.12 Positive actions delivered to these groups can be measured through the numbers of those engaging with the programme, as shown at Figure 4.8, but importantly it is shown through the support provided by the GO Wales teams at the HEIs as highlighted in the progress reports. These directly contribute to achieving the positive action measures indicators. Some examples of support provided include:

- Cardiff University ran at least one panel aimed at Black, Asian and minority ethnic students, to raise the profile of the programme and provide an opportunity for students and staff to ask prominent Black, Asian or minority ethnic business people or staff from the university questions publicly

- The GO Wales team at Cardiff University hosted a student on placement as a student consultant. The placement was developed to enable the team to gain a better understanding of how the messages about the programme were received and perceived by Black, Asian and minority ethnic students at Cardiff University. The student produced a report of the findings from the study, undertook consultations with other students for feedback on the GO Wales programme and delivered a presentation at a Careers and Employability workshop on her lived experience as a Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and as a Muslim. The findings of this project were shared with HEFCW and other HEI's and GO Wales teams.
- Cardiff University held a Careers & Employability Disability Leaders Panel Event. It was seen as a great success, with students and staff hearing inspirational stories from five panellists, followed by a lively Q&A sessions.
- The GO Wales team at Aberystwyth University led a project to understand how the programme could best support students on the autism spectrum through the pandemic. This involved organising tasters for the students, compiling questionnaires and producing a report which was shared within the HEFCW and across multiple HEI's.
- In January 2021, HEFCW met with the National Deaf Children's Society which runs several campaigns to empower young deaf people (up to the age of 25) to gain work experience, as well as awareness courses for employers who do not understand the challenges faced by young people with hearing impairments or sensory loss. It was agreed that HEFCW would send relevant information to Joint Beneficiaries for promoting within universities, as well as inviting an Adviser to present information on the GO Wales project at one of the Society's webinar sessions. HEFCW facilitated the link and ongoing engagement between the Joint Beneficiaries and the National Deaf Children's Society.

7.13 There have been 17 participants to date who have chosen Welsh as the preferred language of communication and 12 opportunities that have started fully through the medium of Welsh. The GO Wales management team is exploring whether future data recording around the use of the Welsh language can be enhanced, such as asking whether the Welsh language was used as part of the opportunity, rather than the current recording which only identifies those opportunities undertaken fully in Welsh, as requested by WEFO. A small number of work experience opportunities have been undertaken primarily in a Welsh language setting. One example includes a student that helped to archive Welsh medium recordings of the public for the National Library of Wales.

7.14 GO Wales operations were less effective in engaging students who are care leavers or who have caring responsibilities, as shown in engagement figures set out at Figure 4.8. This is partly due to the low numbers of care leavers that receive a university education, but also that few care leavers identify as such. To tackle this and increase participation amongst this group of students, teams in the joint beneficiaries collaborated with financial support teams and creches/nurseries at the universities to try to identify carers. In Sharing Good Practice meetings, Carers Trust and Carers Wales were invited to present sessions to encourage HEIs to develop relationships with these organisations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the flexibility of the GO Wales programme provided significant benefits to this group of students who often struggle to find time for work experience and can't easily participate in mainstream employability programmes.

7.15 The one unmet indicator (childcare provision) results from no requests for funding to cover childcare costs in the East Wales region. There were 11 such requests in the West Wales and the Valleys region. No specific reasons for this were cited within the evaluation fieldwork, however, the

wider issue of lower take up among those with caring responsibilities is likely to be a key contributing factor.

7.16 Some queries were raised by joint beneficiaries regarding how to register students who did not identify as male or female. The GO Wales project management team responded by introducing a gender sub-category for 'other gender identity' in the period January to March 2021. This enabled these students to register more easily on the programme and to provide a formal acknowledgement that these students have engaged with the GO Wales operations previously and will continue to benefit from HEIs employment support in the future.

Sustainable Development

7.17 As set out at Figure 7.2 there have been 159 work experience opportunities directly related to the sustainable development themes. Examples of these experiences include:

- A student undertook a taster on a project seeking to identify new sustainable energy sources and storage solutions. The student investigated technologies to ascertain their applicability for ammonia combustion and storage.
- A student worked with a sustainability group in a public sector organisation, using their skills to produce illustrations for promotional materials.
- An environmental science student undertook a 'Sustainability Strategy Development' placement with a research project designed to develop energy systems research capability in Wales.
- A taster was arranged for a disabled student within a department of a local authority that is tasked with conservation of the heritage coastline. The student supported the rangers in ensuring that footpaths and places of interest were accessible, sharing the knowledge of the local ecosystem that they had gained from their geology degree.

7.18 The Eco Code developed as part of the operations is available online at <http://www.gowales.co.uk/ecocode.html>

Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion

7.19 GO Wales is designed to support students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with low social or financial capital to obtain graduate level jobs with accompanying wage levels. By nature of the students targeted, the social capital required to secure work placements in certain industries is not held by a vast majority of students that GO Wales supports. Through providing students with the opportunity to gain an insight into a working environment that they otherwise may not have acquired through family and friends, the programme directly tackles poverty and social exclusion. A key example of how the GO Wales programme actively tackled poverty and social exclusion is through financial support. This was offered to students undertaking work experience opportunities, as for many of the students work experience was not an affordable option without the reimbursement of costs, for example for travel and clothing.

7.20 In addition, as set out at Figure 7.2 a total of 306 work experience opportunities were related to activities which seek to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Examples include:

- A student undertook a taster with a third sector domestic violence and abuse support service. The student helped to facilitate the children's group, shadowed assessments, observed casework and undertook reception and admin work.

- A student undertook a taster for the student with a third sector employer working on a project seeking to reduce the stigma around mental health and young people.
- A social sciences student undertook a taster with an initiative run by a housing association to provide a support service to fathers. The student was involved in undertaking research for an evaluation of the initiative, to further develop the programme and to help secure funding and promote the programme.
- A student undertook work experience on a project working with those most disadvantaged in society within hard to reach groups. The student was involved in supporting groups from very disadvantaged areas at real risk of social exclusion, their role included building relationships and helping them to engage with the project which offered skills and social development opportunities.

Delivering CCTs beyond GO Wales

7.21 It is anticipated that the long-lasting impacts of GO Wales will persist beyond the operational period, and this will include the cross cutting themes of tackling poverty and social exclusion, and promoting equal opportunities.

7.22 Joint beneficiaries have created exit strategy plans which consider how approaches used in the GO Wales programme can be adapted into mainstream provision, potential sources of funding beyond the funding period and how activities will be cease once all funding stops.

7.23 Whilst joint beneficiaries generally share the intention of ensuring aspects of GO Wales continue through the mainstream provision of employment support to students, the level of detail provided in each plan is wide ranging. What is generally agreed upon is that GO Wales has provided an insight and understanding into different demographics of students and how best to engage with these students to ensure they are given equal opportunities to those from more advantaged backgrounds. Some universities intend to retain staff from the GO Wales programme in the careers team of the university to ensure that their skills and experience gained from GO Wales are not lost. Other universities have committed to exploring the benefits of work placements for students during university, rather than focussing on the success of students finding permanent work after graduation. Some will maintain changes made during the GO Wales operation, such as those made to their institutional Student Privacy Notice, which allows universities to proactively offer support to students based on certain characteristics, rather than relying on students self identifying and asking for help.

7.24 In July 2022, HEFCW made funding available for the academic year 2022/2023 to enable HE providers to continue to provide targeted employability support to students from under-represented groups or from lower socio economic backgrounds, following the end of the GO Wales programme⁵⁴.

7.25 Structural changes like those detailed above demonstrate that cross cutting themes of tackling social poverty and promoting equal opportunities will continue to persist beyond the funding period for GO Wales.

⁵⁴ HEFCW (2022) Targeted employability support for students – Confirmation of arrangements. Circular.

8 External Relationships

8.1 This chapter considers the relationships of the GO Wales operations externally. This includes within the partner HEIs and with external organisations and other operations. This chapter also considers how the operations have contributed to regional priorities.

An assessment of how the operations worked with other ESF operations and key organisations / stakeholders

Within HEIs

8.2 The consultations have identified far stronger relationships with other teams and departments across the partner HEIs than has been present in previous rounds of GO Wales and earlier in the operational period. There remains some variation, and personalities undoubtedly play a role in the effectiveness of relationship building. However, the GO Wales project is far better integrated within wider careers and employability services than previously, and is also far better engaged with other student support services and academic departments than previously. The primary reason for this cited by delivery staff is the focus on students, as opposed to graduates, in the current operations. It is also cited that increasing focus on employability and widening participation across institutions is raising awareness of some of the issues and needs of target groups among academic staff.

8.3 Consultees reported that GO Wales is increasingly seen as a vital service to refer students towards within institutions. The positive way in which consultees described the volume of referrals was markedly different to the Phase 1 evaluation which evidences the establishment of the operations over time.

8.4 Whilst the evidence points towards substantial improvement in engagement across what can be very large institutions, there is clearly further scope for improvement. The pattern is not universal, either across partner HEIs, or within partner HEIs. In many cases there are strong referral links relating to one or more of the target groups, but ongoing struggles with others. This can reflect the wider provision of support services in those institutions.

8.5 It is also reported that in some instances GO Wales continues to be viewed differently, due to its external funding, than core university careers and employability services. This can lead to a degree of separateness for delivery staff, but more significantly, does not offer a seamless and joined up provision for students.

Outside HEIs

8.6 Engagement between HEFCW, GO Wales teams and external organisations continued throughout the funding period. In some instances, HEFCW initiated engagement with organisations and then passed on operational links to HEIs.

8.7 A good example of positive cross sector working was the inclusion of GO Wales delivery teams in the All Wales Virtual Careers Fair organised by Target Jobs in 2021. The overarching aim of the All-Wales Virtual Careers Fair was to provide opportunities for increased employability, careers, confidence, knowledge, and networking for students and graduates and increase community engagement and links with employers. These aims all contributed to the promotion of and delivery of the aims of the GO Wales Programme. All HEIs understood the importance of involvement of

GO Wales delivery teams and to this end ensured that the programme was fully included in this event.

8.8 Another mechanism through which engagement occurred was HEFCW organised events which involved introducing advisers/external organisations to HEIs and allowing links to follow. A key example of this was the meeting between HEFCW and representatives from the National Deaf Children's Society in January 2021. The outcome of this was for HEFCW to facilitate a link between the Society and Joint Beneficiaries with the aim of the universities taking this engagement forward in the future. Following this, several Joint Beneficiaries reported engagement with the Society. Furthermore, Joint Beneficiary staff members attended training sessions delivered by the Society focused on helping employers to understand the different types of deafness, the barriers faced by individuals with hearing impediments, as well as information on reasonable adjustments.

8.9 Other organisations in which HEFCW initiated engagement (inviting to present at events) include Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru, Carers Wales, Carers Trust, Disability Wales, Leonard Cheshire and Barnardos. Individual HEIs were then able to follow up on the contacts made. There were also connections to Regional Engagement Teams in north Wales and south east Wales, as well as the Welsh Government's Disabled People's working group.

8.10 Consultation with Disability Wales, as part of this evaluation, was very positive and cited within the legacy chapter. The representative spoke of GO Wales in glowing terms and noted that it *"Would be catastrophic if GO Wales stopped and no legacy project was left"*.

An assessment of how the operations contributed to regional priorities identified by the regional learning partnerships

8.11 Employability is a key theme across the regional skills plans covering south east, north and, south west and mid Wales. The GO Wales AtWE operations are therefore directly contributing to a key regional priority which is clearly evidenced from employer feedback across all regions and all sectors.

8.12 Discussion with operation staff has identified that whilst there is not proactive sectoral targeting of work experience opportunities from a policy perspective⁵⁵, there are hosted opportunities which contribute to regional target sectors. Whilst these will make a positive contribution to regional priorities these are reactive and not by design.

⁵⁵ The focus is on a participant focused delivery model, providing work experience opportunities relevant to the individual, their course and career aspirations.

9 Value for Money

9.1 This chapter sets out a consideration of the value for money delivered by the operations.

9.2 The nature of the operations, as a significant departure from previous GO Wales projects, does not allow for benchmarking against historic performance. Therefore, actual cost per activity/output indicators are benchmarked against agreed budget and target levels.

9.3 Figure 9.1 sets out anticipated value for money indicators based on agreed operation budget and target activity and output levels⁵⁶.

9.4 Figure 9.2 sets out the same information based on actual final performance in terms of operation's expenditure and activity/output indicators.

9.5 Figure 9.3 shows percentage variance between planned and actual performance.

9.6 These data show that cost per participant was lower than expected. Cost per activity was slightly higher than expected. Cost per positive output is slightly higher in WWV but lower in EW. All figures are comfortably within $\pm 10\%$ of the planned level.

9.7 Final targets were agreed with WEFO in January 2020, before the Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdowns led to significant disruption to the operations, with fixed costs continuing but much lower levels of activity. To achieve value for money indicators comfortably within 10% of the anticipated level should be considered a positive outcome showing the responsiveness of the operations and their delivery staff to the change in circumstances.

Figure 9.1 Target/budget based value for money indicators (planned)

	West Wales & the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Participants [at risk of becoming NEET (11-24)]	£4,795	£4,744	£4,777
Participants undertaking work experience	£5,711	£5,569	£5,659
Participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET (11-24) upon leaving	£6,446	£6,090	£6,315

Figure 9.2 Output/expenditure value for money indicators (actual)

	West Wales & the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Participants [at risk of becoming NEET (11-24)]	£4,740	£4,468	£4,639
Participants undertaking work experience	£6,189	£5,822	£6,053
Participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET (11-24) upon leaving	£6,982	£6,013	£6,602

⁵⁶ Total budget divided by relevant target for each indicator.

Figure 9.3 Variance of actual compared to planned value for money indicators

	West Wales & the Valleys	East Wales	Wales Total
Participants [at risk of becoming NEET (11-24)]	-1%	-6%	-3%
Participants undertaking work experience	8%	5%	7%
Participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET (11-24) upon leaving	8%	-1%	5%

9.8 As shown at Figure 4.4 the conversion rates from recruitment of participants to those undertaking work experience were below those expected. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are believed to be the primary reason behind this. The conversion from those undertaking work experience to those assessed as at reduced risk of NEET are at or above the target levels, which suggests very good value for money in terms of delivering outcomes from the activities undertaken.

10 Legacy

10.1 This chapter sets out reflections on the legacy of the GO Wales operations. This is focused at organisational level, separate to the impacts upon participants.

Legacy within HEIs

10.2 It has been noted elsewhere that there has been a huge amount of learning across operational delivery staff as to the support needs of the target groups and how to engage and work with them effectively to overcome their barriers to becoming NEET. Through formal and informal engagement activities this has led to a significant highlighting of the needs of the target groups within institutions more widely. This includes impacts on wider careers and student support services, as well as on academic staff in some cases. Examples were cited of staff that were resistant or reluctant to recognise the additional needs of some students, but through engagement had their opinions changed.

10.3 Notwithstanding, it is a generally held view across consultees that without a specifically funded follow-on project the level of service to the target groups would be substantially diminished. This is despite the work undertaken to develop exit strategies. However, there is a belief that there would be (and have been) some improvements to mainstream services as a result of the knowledge transfer and awareness raising that has taken place within careers and employability services as a result of GO Wales. It was indicated that some careers and employability services would likely seek to embed some elements of GO Wales type delivery if there was a total absence of future funding, but this would likely be at a much less intensive level, and is far from certain.

10.4 Based on the evidence gathered the knowledge transfer beyond the GO Wales team has been more actively pursued in some HEIs than others, and is largely ad hoc and a result of individual relationships; rather than an operation level or structured programme to 'mainstream' the learning. That is not a criticism, as the GO Wales operations were not designed with this in mind.

Wider Legacy

10.5 The evidence gathering has identified at least two examples of legacy impacts beyond the immediate institutions.

10.6 Within the Open University, there are active efforts to share knowledge gained as a result of delivering the GO Wales operations across OU England, Scotland and Ireland.

10.7 Within Disability Wales (DW), the success of hosting GO Wales placements has led to a separate initiative being established to enable DW to host placements, with the students placed within other much smaller organisations across Wales. This enables these smaller organisations to accept placements and overcome the barriers they may face, in terms of capability to supervise or physical space to accommodate. This initiative was viewed as a key project for getting more young people involved in the third sector, and particularly disability focused organisations, which are facing a critical shortage of staff and dwindling numbers of volunteers.

11 Conclusions and Recommendations

11.1 This chapter sets out summary conclusions and recommendations for HEFCW to consider as it plans for the future.

Conclusions

11.2 Drawing on the evidence set out in this report summary answers to each of the evaluation objectives are set out below.

An assessment of the performance of the operations against agreed indicators and targets

11.3 As set out at Chapter 4 of this report, final output against target for all output indicators and expenditure is within accepted tolerance levels.

11.4 This good performance has been achieved despite the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic. After an initial period of severe disruption, the adaptation of the operation to introduce the Meet the Professionals opportunities to students has enabled strong performance.

11.5 There is variation across the partner institutions. The vast majority of partner HEIs delivered within the accepted tolerances for indicators.

11.6 With participant number below target it causes increased challenges in achieving interrelated activity (work experience) and output (reduced risk of NEET) indicators. Analysis shows the conversion from those that participated in work experience to those at reduced risk of NEET to be at or above target levels.

An assessment of the impact of the operations on participants, including an assessment of the value of the various modes of work experience that participants can access via the operations and an assessment of the effectiveness of the associated support offered to participants

11.7 Overall there is consistent evidence, through the Employability Assessment Tool, the views of project delivery staff, the self reported views of participants and the third party views of host employers of positive impacts on student participants. These are many and varied, across a range of employability related skills and attributes.

11.8 There are widely reported impacts on confidence, with project delivery staff articulating in detail the journey that many participants make in this regard.

11.9 The evidence points towards participants clearly at a reduced risk of becoming NEET, with actual reported levels of being NEET well below national averages across participants. The operations have contributed to more than 1,500 student participants at reduced risk of becoming NEET.

11.10 These impacts are realised through both the support provided by the GO Wales advisors and the work experience opportunities that are undertaken.

11.11 Overall the evidence indicates the operations have delivered the activities, outputs and outcomes as set out in the operation logic chains, which will underpin the wider economic impacts to be considered through programme level evaluation.

An assessment of what works for whom and in what circumstances

11.12 The evidence collected does not indicate any substantial variations by target group, but has identified the need for some participants to undertake multiple work experience opportunities (potentially with additional advisor support) in order to achieve the same outcomes as measured with the Employability Assessment Tool. The key variation by group is that of recruitment with some groups being much harder to identify and therefore market to and engage.

11.13 The evidence collected via the delivery staff highlighted the importance of being responsive to the particular student needs, and overall this evaluation has found that the approach has provided this. As a result there are very high levels of satisfaction and positive views expressed of the programme and advisor support, alongside evidence of positive outcomes for participants.

An assessment of whether there have been unintended or un-thought of outcomes.

11.14 As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic there have been unexpected positive outcomes. In particular, the development of the Meet the Professionals strand of the operations has added a further string to the bow which has been vital in the short term, but is also strongly recommended to be retained for the future. Also, the need for rapid adaptation led to far more integrated joint working across HEIs than has been achieved previously and has been warmly welcomed. However, the feedback from employers was generally for in person work experiences.

11.15 Evidence gathered from participants found that as well as positive impacts in key target areas around employability, there were also positive impacts in other areas of student participants' lives. These spillover effects are an added benefit of the support, and were reported by three quarters of participants.

11.16 There were also a range of benefits to host employers. These are broadly 'soft' outcomes relating to improved understanding and insight.

An assessment of how the operations contributed to the cross cutting themes (CCTs)

11.17 The operations have at their core the CCTs, in particular tackling poverty and equal opportunities as a result of the target groups and accompanying eligibility and suitability criteria that form the basis of the intervention.

11.18 There is evidence of a wide range of work experience opportunities that have been undertaken that are directly specific to CCTs. However, the focus of work experience opportunities that have been arranged is very much student driven. Because of the interests of the target groups many of these have a CCT focus, however, this is an output of the process, rather than an input.

11.19 The operations have developed a substantial bank of knowledge and understanding of how best to engage and work with the target groups. As well as forming the basis for future GO Wales type projects, there is evidence of some knowledge exchange within HEIs in particular through engagement between delivery staff and other teams and departments (including both student services and academics).

11.20 The operations have achieved all but one of the WEFO CCT indicators.

An assessment of how the operations contributed to regional priorities identified by the regional learning partnerships

11.21 Employability is a key theme running through all the regional skills plans in Wales. The operations directly contribute to this, supporting improved employability and work readiness skills alongside academic qualifications, particularly for those least likely and able to acquire these skills for themselves.

11.22 The operations also provide work experience opportunities in key sector areas, however, these are a by product of a student centred delivery approach, and not a proactive policy driven approach.

An assessment of how the operations worked with other ESF operations and key organisations / stakeholders

11.23 The evaluation evidence has found the operations have established stronger working relationships within and across HEIs than previous editions of GO Wales. In particular this includes much greater integration with wider careers and employability services, as well as other general and specialist student support services, and academic departments. However, these strong relationships are not ubiquitous and can vary on an institution by institution level.

11.24 There have been widespread efforts to build relationships with a range of external organisations, particularly those of relevance to the target groups as well as wider careers and employability activities. The evaluation consulted with Disability Wales as an example external stakeholder and received glowing feedback on the operations.

Examination of value for money on the basis of outputs, outcomes and modes of delivery, including variations among joint beneficiaries

11.25 The cost per participant, per work experience and per participant at reduced risk of NEET are all well within 10% of planned levels (based on agreed budgets and targets). This shows strong performance following the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, with significant fixed costs (operation staff) and the ensuing need to adjust delivery models, and challenges in recruiting through the lock down periods.

11.26 Whilst the pandemic has undoubtedly impacted on participant and activity levels, the conversion from those that undertake work experience to those that are assessed as at reduced risk of becoming NEET are at or above target levels showing good value for money in delivering outcomes from the level of activity undertaken.

Consideration of the potential legacy of the operations and how the operations may inform future activity

11.27 Beyond the direct impact of the operations on participants there has been a substantial learning opportunity to develop institutional knowledge related to supporting the target groups. This is predominantly with operation delivery staff, but there have been opportunities to share knowledge more widely within institutions in order to build capacity.

11.28 However, it is a widely held view that without specific funding the additional support requirements of many of the supported students would not be met through mainstream provision.

11.29 A series of recommendations is set out below drawing on the evidence collected through the evaluation process. In a post EU funding environment there is the potential for greater flexibility in delivery approach.

Recommendations

11.30 The following recommendations are based on the gathered evidence:

1. Continually looking to reduce the paperwork burden, particularly in a post EU funding environment. Seeking to ensure maximum funding is directed to delivery rather than administrative overheads and enabling improved engagement from both student participants and host employers.
2. Considering, ahead of future versions of a similar project, what success looks like. Is it based on quality of outcomes achieved through intense and deep interventions with those facing the greatest need; or is it quantitative, based on the number of students supported with less intense support? As part of this process there should be consideration of how to track and measure impact.
3. Seeking to overcome data barriers to allow greater targeted marketing at both HEI and national levels. This may include using HEFCW brand equity and influence to seek/access data from sources such as Student Finance Wales/England and the Student Loan Company.
4. Retaining the Meet the Professionals opportunity as part of the range of experience opportunities on offer to students.
5. Retaining cross HEI working groups to share best practice and build genuine working relationships.
6. Considering refinements to eligibility criteria to align with the wider participation agenda which could include⁵⁷:
 - a. Inclusion of a new target group for LGBTQ+ participants;
 - b. Inclusion of a new target group for asylum seekers and refugees;
 - c. Inclusion of a new target group for veterans;
 - d. Flexibility over the age limit, particularly where the student has had to delay participation in higher education as a result of the barriers faced by being within one or more of the target groups;
 - e. Flexibility over the proxy measures used to evidence low socio-economic backgrounds or deprivation, to ensure support is targeted to those that face the greatest challenges;
7. Running focus groups with a range of student participants to discuss the EAT to ensure it is clearly understood.
8. Considering ways to pool resources, potentially across smaller HEIs, to increase collaboration.

⁵⁷ Additional flexibility has already been designed into the proposed successor activities as set out in HEFCW Circular (2022) Targeted employability support for students – Confirmation of arrangements. This will ensure that the students most at need of support due to socio economic background or other circumstances receive the support that is needed regardless of age, where they live or format of study etc.

9. Including a buffer within the resourcing budgets relative to targets to ensure capacity to deal with unexpected changes such as staff turnover and sickness. Targets should also be reflective of the intensity of support required to engage with the student participants most at need of the service (subject to recommendation 2)
10. Considering whether paid placements should be dropped from the range of experiences, with the focus being on shorter form activities to reduce the risk of NEET; particularly where longer form placements are being offered through other means or as part of course requirements.

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