I-WORK

External Evaluation by Ecorys UK: Executive Summary

December 2020

Executive summary

I-WORK programme

The I-WORK (Improving Work Opportunities – Relaying Knowledge) programme was established with the objective to support skills strengthening systems and enhance TVET in Commonwealth countries, with the overarching aim of improving job opportunities for young people. The programme was funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as part of the Commonwealth 18-20 programme, and included Ghana, South Africa, India (Punjab) and Malaysia as target countries. The programme had an overall budget of £2 million and ran from November 2018 to March 2020.

By promoting good practice, partnership working and knowledge exchange between Commonwealth member states at a policy and delivery level, the programme aimed to drive improved opportunities for young people whilst raising the knowledge and understanding of the Commonwealth and strengthening relationships with the UK.

Key Features of the I-WORK programme

The British Council’s work within technical and vocational education and training (TVET) aims to improve technical and vocational skills systems so that they are inclusive and relevant to labour market needs. Their work in TVET is characterised by sharing UK and international experience from skills policy and practice; encouraging mobility and exchange for young people, practitioners and policymakers; supporting innovative and sustainable partnership working; and helping to build the capacity of teachers, practitioners and policy-makers so that there is a better fit between skills provision and labour market needs.

The I-WORK programme uniquely combines support for multilateral partnerships as well as systems-strengthening for apprenticeships, as well as a focus on disseminating learning:

The **partnership strand** focussed on fostering partnerships between TVET colleges in the UK, Ghana, South Africa, India (Punjab) and Malaysia to develop innovative, inclusive and employer-led education approaches that equip students to take their place in the future job market.

The **apprenticeship strand** focussed on supporting national authorities in Ghana, South Africa, India (Punjab) and Malaysia to strengthen key areas of their apprenticeship systems through Technical Assistance projects.

The **dissemination strand** sought to synthesise the partnership and apprenticeship strands through a series of National and International workshops, which took place in the five I-WORK countries in early 2020.

The focus on involving high-level stakeholders and national governments as part of the apprenticeship strand was intended to contribute to a shift in public perceptions of vocational training as a viable, and even prestigious alternative to further academic study, as is the case in other countries with more established vocational training systems such as Germany and the Netherlands.

Skills gaps and youth unemployment present a significant barrier to economic growth, social cohesion, and personal enfranchisement across the world. However, the negative impact of skills gaps and youth unemployment is most acutely felt in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, where young people make up much of the population.[[1]](#footnote-1) Ghana, South Africa, India (Punjab), and Malaysia were selected on the basis that all four countries suffer from high rates of youth unemployment and under-employment are in receipt of Overseas Development Assistance. All four countries are engaged in skills reform and could benefit from international collaboration to enhance their apprenticeship policy frameworks.

While the British Council has traditionally engaged with other countries on a bilateral basis, the I-WORK programme piloted a multilateral approach which has sought to engage with several countries at once. It is hoped that collaboration between the countries involved will continue beyond the lifespan of the programme. This innovative partnership approach to system strengthening in TVET is being piloted by the British Council as an approach that could be potentially be translated to other areas of programming.

Objectives of the evaluation

Ecorys was commissioned by the British Council to assess the I-WORK programme, with a view to support learning from the experience of the programme, to inform British Council’s future strategy and programming, and provide useful insights for others interested in furthering skills development and job opportunities for young people.

The study focusses on the learning generated in the following areas:

* The accomplishments of the first iteration of the programme, and accomplishments of the three programme strands in each of the four countries; and to what extent these accomplishments could be replicated in other contexts.
* The potential for sustainability of outcomes, and of impact trajectories and longer-term impacts following on from the programme.
* The reasons for what was accomplished, and the necessary conditions and circumstances to support transferability of learning.
* Good practices from the programme, for example processes such as the participatory model, adaptive management approach, benchmarking and baseline tools and partnership/multilateral approach.
* The relevance of the two strand partnership and apprentice approach, and the extent to which this approach has contributed to the design of well targeted, tailored projects which meet the specific needs of the country in which they are operating.
* The inclusiveness of the programme, particularly in relation to gender.

Key findings

The apprenticeship strand

The apprenticeship strand adopted a “cultural relations” approach, which “combined developing an understanding of each country’s context, supporting collaborative and partnership working between countries and building trusted relationships between social partners”*[[2]](#footnote-2)*. This approach was found to be useful and facilitated collaborative and partnership working between countries and building trusted relationships between social partners. In addition, the approach enabled the development of projects tailored to their socio-political, cultural and economic context.

The apprenticeship projects were successful in securing the engagement of key stakeholders, including government ministers, college representatives and industry representatives, to support progress and delivery. The activities and outputs were largely delivered in line with expectations and to the satisfaction of stakeholders, and outputs remained relevant to the objectives for strengthening of apprenticeship systems in each country. The benchmarking tool and adaptive approach meant the projects were able to focus on areas where there was sufficient commitment from stakeholders, and to deliver in areas where it was feasible to make a difference in the 7-8 months of the project duration. There were positive indications of the activities carried out under I-WORK being continued in India (Punjab), South Africa, Ghana and Malaysia. While aspects of sustainability appeared positive, it is too early to be able to substantively assess the impact of the programme in the long-term.

The partnership strand

The partnership strand also drew on a cultural relations approach, and focussed on promoting a multilateral model, creating partnerships between five different Commonwealth countries rather than a single partnership between the UK and the other countries involved. This approach was found to be particularly relevant as it enabled close collaboration and information sharing between the focal countries and UK partner colleges. Moreover, the support from the UK colleges was found to be very useful, due to their strong technical experience of work-based learning approaches.

While not all colleges involved were equally effective in achieving their intended outcomes, there was consensus among the in-country leaders that the most effective aspect of the partnership approach was knowledge exchange and sharing of best practice as part of an international programme. While the condensed timeframes presented a challenge, there was also a sense that the limited time may have lent to the efficiency of the programme, as the in-country colleges were compelled to be strategic with their time and resources to focus on addressing their most pressing challenge. There is good indication that the pilot activities will continue, and in many cases, be scaled up, either in the same setting or different settings. Funding limitations presented a challenge to the sustainability of the partnership strand activities, and while all the colleges were keen to continue their activities, some were unable to due to lack of alternative sources of funding.

Dissemination strand

The workshops were generally very well-received and provided valuable forums for knowledge-sharing and exchange of best practice, as well as the opportunity to network and build professional relationships. The British Council were successful in securing the attendance of key, high profile stakeholders.

Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation yielded a number of conclusions in relation to the general approach, and the design and implementation of the programme. The multilateral partnership approach to system-strengthening in TVET has been positive and is something that could be applied to future programming, as well as the combination of support for policy dialogue and development alongside support for individual college-level sharing of knowledge. Due to the restraints in time and resources, the programme is best viewed as a catalyst. Support for vocational education is best supported as a part of a longer-term engagement, but short-term programmes can act as a useful catalyst, leading to longer-term systemic change. In order for future programmes to have a more substantial and sustainable impact, longer timeframes could be considered, as well as embedding funding considerations into the design of the programme, such as establishing funding partnerships with national stakeholders, to ensure that they are able to continue their activities beyond the lifespan of the programme.

The evaluation identified a series of recommendations, both in relation to each strand of the programme, as well as recommendations relating to TVET programming more broadly:

**Apprenticeship strand**

1. Where funding conditions allow, future programmes should utilise a flexible cultural relations approach to ensure activities are tailored to country contexts and there is buy-in for the programme at all levels.
2. Future iterations of the benchmarking tool should take into account the stage of maturity of TVET systems, optimism and pessimism biases and include some elements of peer review, in order to verify responses to the self-assessment questions.
3. Additionally, future iterations of the benchmarking tool could consider a two-stage process, in which a simpler, more condensed version of the tool could be offered as “taster” experience and then a more comprehensive version for those who would like to conduct a more rigorous inquiry of their apprenticeship system.
4. In order that future BC programmes address inclusion issues more directly, programme tenders should reflect this requirement and include specific criteria to be addressed by the activities of the programme.

**Partnership strand**

1. The British Council should continue to employ a multilateral approach in future partnership programmes and focus on encouraging collaboration between the different countries with which they have built up strong relationships.
2. Future programmes should commence with a thorough initial briefing, covering the ambitions and scale of the programme, clarity on expectations and budget, to ensure alignment between different stakeholder groups and clear communication.
3. A more collaborative selection process, involving the UK and in-country colleges for the clusters would have ensured greater alignment between the partners in each cluster, based on affinities and shared interests.
4. Future TVET programmes aiming to work with a diverse range of colleges should consider tailoring the support offered to the needs and experience levels of the colleges involved and have a dual track offer for more and less experienced colleges, so that all colleges involved are able to benefit from the programme.

**Dissemination strand**

1. Future programmes should continue to gather a range of high-level stakeholders to increase political commitment to TVET provision in the form of National Workshops or dissemination events.
2. Future programmes could employ a wider range of complementary dissemination activities such as online webinars, to engage a wider range of employers. In addition, shorter events, timed outside office hours would have enabled greater industry engagement.

1. FCDO (2018), Business Case: Improving Work Opportunities for Young People in the Commonwealth, p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. FCDO (2018), Business Case: Improving Work Opportunities for Young People in the Commonwealth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)