

# Working Together? Research into the Role of Inter-agency Co-operation in Improving Employability

Ronald W. McQuaid, Colin Lindsay, Matthew Dutton, Employment Research Institute, Napier University, Edinburgh

Martin McCracken, Business and Management Research Institute, University of Ulster

**This article reports the summary of findings of research commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning on best practice in inter-agency co-operation on employability in 15 countries. The research was conducted by the Employment Research Institute at Napier University, supported by colleagues at the University of Ulster<sup>1</sup>, with the overall aim of comparing forms of inter-agency co-operation, and identifying strengths and weaknesses in different partnership models.**

## Introduction

New forms of partnership working and inter-agency co-operation have gained increasing prominence in the delivery of employability policies in Europe and elsewhere. This has been largely driven by changes in governments' policy stances with regard to employability. For example, in some countries a lessening in the direct role of government in employability issues has opened up new possibilities for more market driven or private sector involvement. The range of factors influencing peoples' employability means that often no single agency has the services and expertise required to deal with all of the key issues, so necessitating increased inter-agency collaboration to provide effective support. When unemployment is low and there is strong demand for labour there is a particular need to improve the employability of those with multiple barriers to work. Faced with increasingly complex and harder to reach client groups, employability stakeholders have come to accept that job search and training services are not alone sufficient to move many job seekers towards work. Promoting inter-agency co-operation and partnership is therefore a priority for the future development of approaches to employability in NI and elsewhere.

There are a multitude of definitions of partnership. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD) (1990: 18) has provided a useful definition of partnerships as: "Systems of formalised co-operation, grounded in legally binding arrangements or informal understandings, co-operative working relationships, and mutually adopted plans among a number of institutions. They involve agreements on policy and programme objectives and the sharing of responsibility, resources, risks and benefits over a specified period of time." As is explained later in the article, viable partnerships are fundamental to the success of inter-agency co-operation.

The agencies referred to in this review tend to be organisations which are similar, or broadly equivalent, to what exists in NI. Examples are government departments (particularly those engaged in providing or facilitating job search, employment support and training), voluntary and community-type organisations and purely private sector organisations engaged in improving the employability of various types of clients. Inter-agency co-operation refers to the ways in which these organisations interact with one another, in order to provide services aimed at improving the employability of their clients.

## Methodology

The initial research involved a review of literature and policy documents on partnership working, combined with a survey



<sup>1</sup> Full report will be available in due course on [www.delni.gov.uk](http://www.delni.gov.uk)

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completed by national experts located in each of the 15 study countries: Australia; Belgium; Canada; Denmark; Finland; France; Germany; Rol; Italy; Netherlands; Norway; Spain; Sweden; UK; and the USA. In addition four extensive case studies were then undertaken in: Denmark; the Netherlands; and the Rol. Research was conducted into practice in GB and NI, where six examples of good practice in partnership working were studied. This constituted the fourth case study.

## Key Issues in Inter-Agency Co-operation and Partnership

Policy makers have increasingly sought to promote inter-agency co-operation due to a number of potential benefits accruing from such approaches. Effective partnership working can: produce more flexible and innovation policy solutions; result in the sharing of knowledge and pooling of resources; build capacity in organisations and communities; gain the 'buy in' of key stakeholders including at the local level; and engender a more integrated, consistent and aligned approach across policies, agencies and local areas.

However, there can also be significant additional costs of partnerships, and the benefits of inter-agency co-operation can be limited by organisational

constraints, lack of leadership and accountability, partners' conflicting interests and priorities, and a lack of capacity among different stakeholders to fully participate. The research sought to explore these issues and identify 'critical success factors' that need to be in place to improve partnerships promoting employability.

## A Review of Practice in 15 Countries

There were considerable variations in how different countries have applied inter-agency co-operation and partnerships on employability. However, the evidence from the 15 countries revealed a number of common themes that should be considered, including:

### Strengthening the Personal Adviser model

Personal Adviser (PA) services (where a PA tailors services for a job seeker to meet their particular needs) are at the centre of many countries' approaches to delivering intensive job search counselling and support. In countries like Australia and the Netherlands these services have been outsourced by the Public Employment Service (PES) to the private sector, with variable results. In countries such as Belgium and Canada these responsibilities are shared between the PES and regional and local authorities.

### Early assessment and early intervention

Policy makers in a number of other countries have particularly prioritised early assessment of job seekers, and the routing of the most disadvantaged to employability services almost immediately. These aims define Australia's Jobseeker Classification Instrument, the Dutch 'Kansmeter' tool, and Denmark's 'employability profiling toolbox'. These tools appear to have offered benefits, by facilitating early intervention, rather than 'waiting for people to become long-term unemployed', and by identifying and addressing fundamental problems at an early stage.

### Paid work placements and getting employers to 'buy in'

Work and training placements paid at or near the 'rate for the job' are an important part of provision in Belgium and the Netherlands. The Danish case study showed how local authorities have shared ownership of the design and delivery of training with employers, who have offered job guarantees in return. The message appears to be that engaging with employers, sharing ownership of programme development with them, and using them to provide work placements (and potentially interview or even job guarantees) can be an effective route to high quality training and job entry for job seekers.



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## **Responding to regional and local labour market conditions**

There has been a recent shift across many countries towards a localisation of employability services, in an attempt to move services closer to communities and make programmes more responsive to local labour market conditions.

## **Joined-up employability services and one-stop shops**

There is a need for job seeker support and services beyond job search and training and many countries have moved towards a one-stop shop or jobcentre model that brings together a range of service providers. One-stop shop models of local provision are usually led by the Public Employment Service (PES), with social work, health, financial and housing services. At the most basic level, as in the UK, this involves the co-location of benefits and employability services. However, Finland's Labour Force Service Centres (LAFOS) have brought together a wider range of employability, health and social service providers. In some parts of the United States 'Job Centers' have similarly seen the co-location of job search, lifelong learning, health and welfare services.

The Netherlands case study reported progress resulting from the co-location of benefits and employment services that has opened the way to a number of innovative demonstration projects, which may offer

valuable lessons involving: piloting the 'boundaryless' offices, with different employability agencies brought together within one team sharing all administrative and service duties (and therefore learning from each other); testing a 'single employer service point' dealing with all inquiries from employers and acting as a gateway and broker for work placement and training opportunities for all client groups; and developing shared 'digital dossiers' (on-line client records) which can be accessed and updated by all relevant/accredited stakeholders.

However, the outsourcing of virtually all structured employability services for harder-to-help clients to private providers means that professionals working in government Centres for Work and Income have less experience in addressing the day-to-day problems of clients. There is also some evidence that employability funders are not always convinced of the value of the client assessment procedures undertaken by PES staff.

## **Critical Success Factors**

There appear to be a number of 'critical success factors' that need to be in place if key stakeholders are to reap the benefits of partnership, including:

## **A clear strategic focus**

Formalising partnerships, and an agreed clear strategy, is a defining feature of effective local and regional co-operation in a number of countries. In Denmark, the Regional Employment Councils work to annual plans agreed with government, outlining targets and priorities and the roles of stakeholders involved in both planning and delivery. Canadian labour market development agreements (LMDAs) have helped national and regional government stakeholders to agree their different roles and shared responsibilities. Among our GB cases, a clearly defined, formalised strategy detailing a service delivery model and different organisations' roles has been important to Edinburgh's Joined Up For Jobs partnership.

## **Strategic leadership and support**

The leadership of the PES and other central government agencies can be vital to making inter-agency co-operation work. This leadership may be primarily through present and future control of resources and regulation (casting a 'shadow of the future') or through culture or by acknowledging expertise and leadership. It is also important that partnership working is strongly supported across departments within government.



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## ***The importance of organisations and people in partnerships***

The best examples of inter-agency co-operation appear to bring together professionals with different but complimentary resources and expertise. This has been the case with the PES-health service partnerships that have been a key feature of Pathways to Work in the UK, and some of the more effective one-stop shop models there and elsewhere. Employers are key players in successful partnerships to promote employability – employers have knowledge of the skills needed if job seekers are to succeed in the labour market; and they have the capacity to offer training and work placements for clients, and incentives to job seekers such as interview or job guarantees. Effective work placement programmes, such as those featured in our Copenhagen and Edinburgh case studies, engaged employers by sharing ownership of the design, development and delivery of employability interventions with them. The result has been programmes that provide clients with tailored, job-specific training, and in some cases ‘real work experience’, often waged, and supported by employers. Such demand-led models are often at the centre of successful, high quality employability programmes.

## ***Capacity for co-operation and mutualism***

Organisations and individuals involved in partnerships need to have both the authority and the flexibility to engage in mutual decision making. This is perhaps particularly the case for the PES and other key government funders/stakeholders. A further issue is the need to explicitly invest in and develop joint working and partnership development and management skills among the full range of operational and policy staff of the partners.

## ***Organisational complementarity, co-location and co-terminosity (i.e. same or coincident boundaries for service delivery)***

Inter-agency co-operation on the planning of employability measures requires input from stakeholders with complimentary areas of expertise, responsibility and competency. The co-location of employability provision with complimentary services has been seen in countries including Belgium, Canada, France and Norway. There is much to learn from various models including the LAFOS facilities in Finland that have co-located complimentary education, social and childcare services alongside employability providers.

## ***Incentives for partners and inter-dependency for mutual benefit***

PES officials will only be able to draw other stakeholders into employability partnerships if they can demonstrate that there will be benefits for all partners (these benefits may include financial leverage, expansion of competencies and influence, achievement of organisational goals, or the opening of new markets). The drive for efficiencies in private sector provision appears to have been counter-productive in some cases, as companies seek to gain savings by standardising provision, or target the more employable job seekers so as to claim job entry rewards – the ‘parking and creaming’ of clients seen in countries such as Australia and the Netherlands.

## ***The value of action-and outcome-oriented procedures***

Effective partnerships are formed out of a need for action, and focus on achieving agreed outcomes. Good practice in inter-agency co-operation has tended to be characterised by partners undertaking joint action to achieve measurable goals as articulated in annual action plans, such as those governing Regional Employment Councils in Denmark or simply memoranda of understanding, such as in the Pathways to Work and Working Neighbourhoods



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pilots in the UK. These arrangements have ensured clarity about goals and responsibilities, with senior managers 'close to' and well informed about the progress of delivery. Where outcome agreements and the roles of organisations and managers are less clear, activities can become more fragmented and services tend to be less consistent, as in some Job Centers in the United States.

## Use of Research Findings

The research findings can be used to compare current practice in inter-agency co-operation in NI, with 'best practice' elsewhere - whilst having due regard for the differences between NI and other countries, in terms of culture and the policy environment. Any lessons learned have the potential to feed into improving the ways in which employability issues are tackled in NI.

## For further information contact:

Professor Ronald McQuaid  
Employment Research Institute  
Napier University  
Edinburgh  
EH14 1DJ  
E-mail: [r.mcquaid@napier.ac.uk](mailto:r.mcquaid@napier.ac.uk)

