

Using Realist Synthesis to Understand What Works in High Level Skills Interventions



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At a Glance

As part of a wider study on high level skills in Yorkshire and Humber, the Realist Synthesis approach to evidence analysis was piloted in order to test its ability to derive lessons on 'what works'. One specific type of skills intervention,

graduate skills utilisation, was selected for the study as this appears to be particularly relevant to Yorkshire and Humber. The Realist Synthesis approach proved to be time consuming and most effective when considering very narrowly

defined intervention types. However, it was effective in drawing out lessons from literature relevant to a Yorkshire and Humber context.

Background & Methodology

Realist Synthesis is an approach to evidence review developed by Ray Pawson. It is designed to assess the potential effectiveness of social interventions through testing assumptions about causal processes and the outcomes they are likely to deliver. Consideration of contextual factors is central to the approach, with the emphasis being on the

relationship between context, delivery mechanism and outcome. As part of a study on high level skills in Yorkshire and Humber, ekosgen and Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research tested out the Realist Synthesis methodology to see if it could provide evidence of 'what works' in high level skills interventions.

Before embarking on the full Realist Synthesis, an initial review was carried out to identify types of interventions undertaken in the high level skills arena, ranging from incentives through to levies and regulatory approaches. This was used to ascertain the most potentially relevant and deliverable types of intervention for Yorkshire and Humber (See Table 1 overleaf).

Table 1. Intervention Type	Potential relevance in Yorkshire and Humber*
Employer networks / inter-employer collaboration	5
Information advice and guidance (IAG) for employers	5
Collaboration with higher education / supporting the infrastructure for learning	5
Developing skills for clusters	5
Attracting and retaining people with high level skills	4-5
Skills utilisation	4
Raising demand for high level skills training by individuals	4
General subsidies	4
Quality assurance standards	3
Levies	2
Occupational licensing	1
Tax breaks	1

*5 = most relevant

Skills utilisation interventions were chosen as the focus for the Realist Synthesis as these appeared particularly relevant to the context for high level skills in Yorkshire and Humber¹. Skills utilisation seeks to ensure the effective application of skills within the workplace, leading to increased business productivity and competitiveness and,

ultimately to increase demand for higher level skills. Although there are clearly wider issues around skills utilisation, it was decided to focus on graduate skills utilisation as this would ensure a clear focus on high level skills and a balance between demand and supply side factors. With a large pool of graduates across the region, it was

also considered that the intervention would potentially be applicable across a wide range of sectors and firms in Yorkshire and Humber.

The methodology for Realist Synthesis, as set out by Pawson, comprises six stages, as outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Stages in a Realist Synthesis

Stage 1: Formulating the review question , where the key focus was on understanding the theory which underpins an intervention. This involved a mapping of the territory through an initial literature search, prioritising review questions, and formalising a model to show the assumed theories of change between implementation and outcome. A total of 20 references were identified from an initial list of 800.
Stage 2: Searching for primary studies comprised three main elements. Firstly, the application of standard search approaches (using terms focused on graduates and graduate development with incentives, productivity, commitment etc). Secondly, other theories which might explain skills utilisation were identified, such as 'sectoral issues' and 'graduate development programmes'. Finally, a more purposive searching strategy was used, focused on 'high performance working'. The outcome of this stage was a long list of 66 references.
Stage 3: Quality appraisal where articles were assessed for relevance using five broad tests including presentation of original empirical evidence. A scoring system was established and a relevance threshold identified: i.e. articles needed to be at least 70 percent relevant. The result of the appraisal was that the long list of 66 articles was reduced to 20 articles.
Stage 4: Extracting the data involved three inter-related tasks: annotation (extracting data against original theories of change), collation (comparing data against each other to support or refute rival theories), and reportage (where evidence on each step of the realist synthesis is pieced together). The focus for this section was to test the model identified in Stage 1 in particular the interaction between demand (employer) and supply (graduate) factors.
Stage 5: Synthesising the data examined whether all the key aspects of high level skills incentives for employers had been considered, where other processes might be at work or whether the same theory would work better for some firms, in certain sectors or different locations. This analysis informed the final conclusions and policy implications.
Stage 6: Dissemination comprised primarily preparation of the final report and review and challenge by the study steering group.

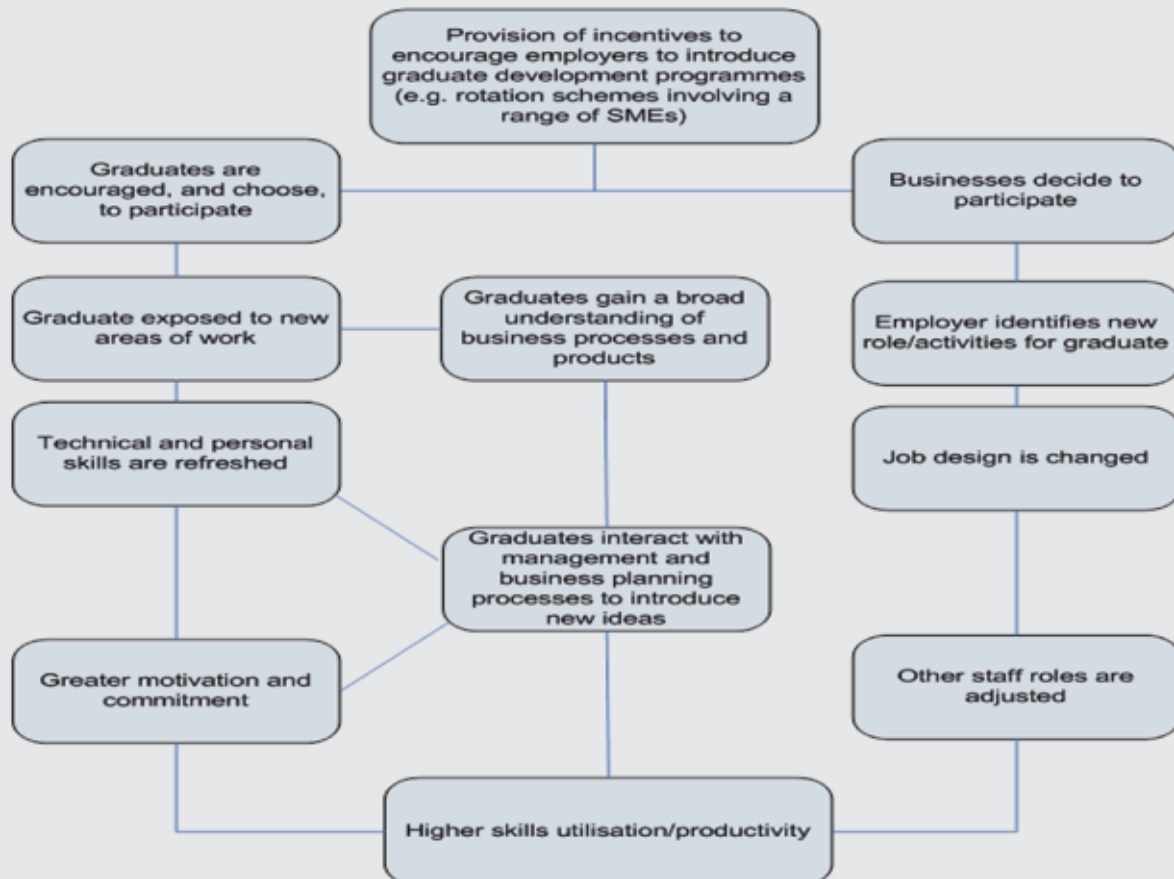
¹ See Insights 17 High Level Skills in Yorkshire and Humber: Understanding the Drivers of Change.

A model was developed that incorporates a number of theories about how a

graduate skills intervention might work to generate the desired outcomes of

increased skills utilisation and improved business competitiveness (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Graduate skills utilisation: the intervention theory



Source: High Level Skills in Yorkshire and Humber: Understanding the Drivers of Change - Phase 2 report (ekosgen/CRESR, August 2010).

In total, 20 studies were included in the final synthesis. These were mainly from the UK, were a mixture of academic studies,

material from the professional press and covered research undertaken on behalf of government departments. The material

covered a time span of 41 years, with the majority produced within the last 20 years.

Findings

From the graduate perspective, there is reasonably strong evidence that graduates will be motivated to take part in schemes that use and develop their skills and further their career opportunities (albeit this may overstate the motivation of some graduates in non-graduate roles). Significant emphasis is placed on developing soft skills, the effectiveness of which is strongly linked to the presence of effective management skills within the business. Given the high levels of turnover in graduate roles, a focus on retention is also key if the

employers' return on investment is to be maximised². Generally, a scheme involving a number of different companies, with graduates either in close contact or potentially being placed in different organisations, may raise particular challenges in this respect as firms may worry about competitor poaching.

The evidence on potential employer involvement and adjustment in any scheme supported the view that skills are a derived demand i.e. linked directly

to product strategy. A common theme is that the burden of adjustment lies largely with employees rather than employers - the expansion of higher education, for example, has led to a one-off upgrading of jobs in some areas (notably HQ administrative and clerical functions) but not to greater skills utilisation.

Moreover, the evidence indicates that any potential scheme would only work if there is a latent demand amongst participating firms. The scope for employers to redefine graduate roles

in companies will be driven by their particular product strategies or market area. Similarly, the evidence for the impact of job design, including high performance working, on skills utilisation is mixed (skills utilisation is directly connected with wider corporate objectives and levels of investment in innovation).

Turning to potential outcomes, there was mixed evidence on the extent to which graduates increase their understanding of business processes and products through participating in schemes which rely heavily on rotation and placement elements. Rotation schemes and placements were assessed as not always having positive benefits, highlighting the need for careful design and

implementation. Networking with other staff was considered to generate more positive results. Overall, whilst the potential for graduates to gain exposure to wider working practices is clear, how this is best achieved is less obvious from the evidence reviewed.

The final part of the review looked at the link between skills utilisation/high performance working practices and improvements in business performance. Here, the evidence was clear - skills utilisation measures do have a wide range of positive impacts, including enhanced innovation and productivity. Caution was placed, however, on the transferability of successful practices between high and low value added firms. This might limit the applicability of

an incentive scheme to a wide range of firms in Yorkshire and Humber. The way in which interventions are implemented is very important - key features include effective management, consistent (but flexible) application and clear alignment with organisational goals.

In conclusion, the synthesis has identified the potential efficacy of initiatives to enhance the deployment of graduate skills as a means to boost skills utilisation and in-firm productivity. It also highlights, however, the strength of contextual factors, such as existing levels of innovation within firms and leadership/management, in determining whether they will work or not.

² It should be noted that generating a public sector return on investment does not necessarily require continued employment with the original firm but does imply retention within a given geographical area.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Skills Utilisation

These findings led to a number of policy implications for partners in Yorkshire and Humber:

- Targeting within the company base will be crucial to the scale of potential outcomes generated - it is evident that there is a trade-off between a narrow focus on working with firms who already generate medium to high levels of value added and a broader targeting strategy.
- A focus on a narrow segment of the graduate cohort would be appropriate - there is increasing segmentation in the graduate labour market, reflected in the levels of staff turnover and the consequent returns to the employer of investing in skills development. This may be sectoral, for example those employed in engineering or logistics. An alternative focus could be on those whose skills are most likely to be under-utilised such as those employed in non graduate jobs.
- Securing employer commitment is very difficult, highlighting the importance of the incentive as a mechanism to secure behaviour change. In designing such a scheme, careful consideration would need to be given to minimising deadweight (the extent to which impacts would have occurred without the intervention) alongside balancing the firm's return on investment with that of the public sector.
- The design of the scheme is crucial with mentoring, peer support and the quality of the receiving manager just three of a number of success factors identified as essential to the achievement of positive outcomes.

Realist Synthesis

The objective of the study was to examine the potential of the Realist Synthesis method to inform policy in other aspects of economic development (most realist syntheses to date have been conducted around social policy interventions e.g. crime or healthcare).

Realist Synthesis is a time consuming and iterative activity. In the time and resources available, the study was able to provide an introductory application of the Realist Synthesis approach. Even within the scope of this exercise, it has been possible to produce a reasonably comprehensive assessment and relevant policy advice for one type of high level skills intervention. Given further time and resources an extended search within other policy areas/academic fields may have yielded useful evidence about different aspects of implementing incentives, around employer and employee behaviours and more generally about how introducing organisational change impacts on business competitiveness.

The experience of the research team undertaking the study suggest that the Realist Synthesis approach is most effective in narrow and clearly defined interventions where a body of comparable evidence exists. In this way, the likelihood that precise conclusions emerge on whether it will work will be maximised.

Further Information and Project Details

The full report 'High Level Skills in Yorkshire and Humber: Understanding the Drivers of Change' is available from the Yorkshire Futures website www.yorkshirefutures.com

yorkshire futures
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