

using the Microsoft Teams communication platform and the Mural collaboration environment. A private access document repository was established on Google Drive to share recorded videos, presentations, templates, and worked materials. All of the content used over the course of the programme is ‘persistent’. Participants retain access to the Google Drive document repository, and the materials remain available for re-use should they be required.

Fifteen of the sixteen participants in the pilot group successfully completed the course. One participant became ineligible to continue the programme when they gained employment, therefore achieving the programme’s primary objective.

7. Measuring Impact

The efficacy of the pilot programme was evaluated using a mixed methods approach to gather data across three dimensions. The first two data points involved capturing self-assessed quantitative and qualitative data from at the immediate conclusion of the course. Participants were invited to share their views on the course via an online survey tool. Thirteen participants (80 per cent) chose to complete the survey.

A quantitative Kirkpatrick Level 1 questionnaire was used to evaluate participants’ satisfaction with the non-formal learning intervention; a Kirkpatrick Level 3 qualitative data gathering approach was employed to evaluate the extent to which participants practiced the skills acquired during the course in their return-to-work related activities. The Kirkpatrick Level 1 component of the online survey comprised five 5-point Likert-style questions designed to capture participants’ reactions to the education intervention. This level been described as a “measure of (internal) customer satisfaction” (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2006, p.22) [6]. In order to evaluate participants’ self-assessed changes in behaviour as a result of the learning intervention (Kirkpatrick Level 3), they were asked a series of open-ended questions in the survey. Free-text boxes were provided to enable participants to answer with the freedom and space to provide as much or as little information as they preferred.

The third data point was collected six weeks after the programme concluded in May 2022. With all 16 participants’ permission, DSP caseworkers reported on the pilot cohort’s employment status, and any further feedback the participants communicated based upon their lived experience of applying their return-to-work strategy in real-world scenarios. In cases where participants had acquired jobs, their status was registered as ‘Full-time employed’.

Figure 4 shows the participants’ employment status in May 2022. According to the data, eleven participants were in a category of employment; five participants remained unemployed. Two of the five indicated that completing the Grad2Work programme had enabled them to clarify their employment objectives: each one had decided to seek appropriate

further training opportunities to reskill or upskill in relevant disciplines. The remaining three participants

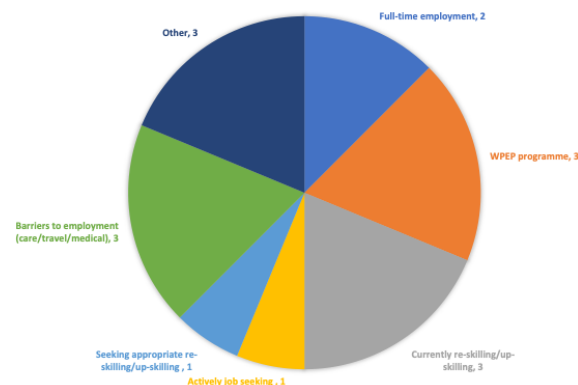


Figure 4. Grad2Work pilot participants' employment status, May 2022 (n=16)

indicated that barriers including travel-related challenges, medical concerns, or care responsibilities mitigated against their capacity to engage in job seeking gain employment in the short to medium term.

8. Discussion

Participants were generally positive in their evaluation of the programme, and its capacity to enhance their employability. Figure 5 illustrates participants’ satisfaction with the programme at its conclusion.

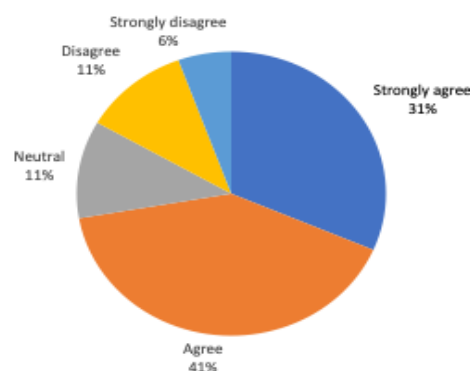


Figure 5 Participants' satisfaction with the Grad2Work programme (n=13)

One commented that they found the course “highly beneficial”. Another participant stated that they were “delighted” to take part in this programme. A third asserted that having the course objectives clearly identified “up front helped [them] to understand the journey [they] are taking” and enabled them to “monitor their progress to the end goal”.

Some found that using the Design Thinking tools a positive experience, with the potential to provide “clarity and direction on how to move forward” in their careers. However, other respondents claimed that it would take more time to use some of the tools.

According to Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, Level 3 measures that learning has taken place "...when one or more of the following occurs: Attitudes are changed. Knowledge is increased. Skill is improved. One or more of these changes must take place if a change in behaviour is to occur."

An important stakeholder objective from this pilot was to study the feasibility of the programme. Running it as a small-cohort, short-term deployment provided an understanding the logics, and dynamics and mechanics of how a large-scale (regional or national) project implementation might operate. A key component of feasibility evaluation was to gather participants' feedback on their lived experience of undertaking the programme. The benefit of this approach is that participants' views on where the course could be improved can be incorporated into future iterations of the course, building congruence between programme intention and outcome.

With regard to the instructional component of the programme, a number of the cohort suggested that Teams-based break-out discussion rooms might be arranged for "personal reflections, sharing and connecting with peers". They felt this would "add hugely for processing emotional, personal and professional learnings and experiences" and may help to build confidence with those who "don't volunteer themselves for sharing / discussions so easily." One participant considered that it would be helpful for course facilitators to know more about each participant's background "provided that was allowed" to ensure topics were relevant to the majority of the learners. In a similar vein, it was proposed that future courses would benefit from greater input from participants' articulating their specific skills needs and wants.

The design rationale for including an opportunity for participants to join an organisation operating in an area related to their preferred industry or market segment was to support skills practice reinforcement in a professional environment, and to introduce the participant to a network of practice that might improve their employment opportunities. However, five participants identified the two-week work placement duration as a weakness of the pilot programme. When operationalising this element of the plan, it emerged that both participants and prospective work placement employers considered that a two-week engagement was insufficient to provide value to either the programme participants or the prospective host organisation.

A consensus emerged that a placement with substantively longer duration (for example 3-6 months) would provide a more beneficial opportunity for participants to engage in a workplace environment, and for host firms to positively engage with the participants. Similarly it was suggested that managing a placement through the standard DSP sponsored Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP). WPEP is for jobseekers that are currently

getting a qualifying social welfare payment and who have been unemployed for six months or more. The perception was that the scheme is already well understood by DSP caseworkers, service users, and prospective employers. Therefore it would provide less bureaucracy and better value for money for both Grad2Work participants and host companies.

It was noted that travel to or from a work placement might increase financial and travel-time burdens on participants, especially those with care responsibilities. Additionally, two DSP caseworkers reported that COVID-19 mitigation measures caused a number of firms to decline joining the programme because of barriers created by. DSP caseworkers subsequently reported that firms independently made arrangements for Grad2Work participants to join them under the provisions of the WPEP scheme.

9. Conclusion

This paper describes an innovative approach to developing a non-formal digital education programme for long term unemployed graduates in Ireland. Based on the data and the responses from participants and prospective employers, this approach is validated by pilot testing it with a cohort drawn from the target audience. These findings imply that the approach will have applications in future Design Thinking for Teaching and Learning projects, and that there is potential for process frameworks to support return-to-employment strategy formation and transversal skills development for adult learners.

It shows the value of a Design Thinking based approach to continuing professional development for postgraduates. A multidisciplinary approach to developing a programme, which draws on a processual theoretical career and learning theory framework is efficacious in achieving measurable learning outcomes for participants. A conspicuous strength of the approach was the use of online communication, collaboration, and information sharing platforms. This allowed for community of practice formation among participants, and on-going refinement of programme structure, tools, and goals in response to learners' skills development.

A key insight from this non-formal learning intervention was that participants who actively applied their purposefully acquired skills to create a 'back-to-work' plan reported that the course was beneficial to them achieving their goal. Using Vygotsky's scaffolding techniques to support skills' development [7] and creating common purpose by building a community of practice [8] are effective strategies to sustain participant motivation and momentum for successful course delivery and participant benefits' realisation.

For practitioners, design thinking for training and development enables flexibility in learning programme design and delivery, particularly in maintaining alignment between course outcomes and

participants' individual expectations. While still relatively understudied, projects like Grad2Work provide research evidence on how to appropriately adapt learning theories and pedagogies to design and deliver an effective and beneficial course in a sophisticated, multifaceted, situational online learning environment.

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