



Disability Discrimination Act Phase 2 Regional action research projects

Executive coordinator final report

Project title: Raising awareness: working with partners including employers

Region: South West

Executive Coordinator: Ken Onions

Organisation: Kingston Maurward College

Sites: Kingston Maurward College, Bridgwater College, Strode College, Wiltshire College

June 2006

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The Disability Discrimination Act: Taking the work forward – phase 2

Regional Action Research Projects 2005/06

Southwest Region

“Raising awareness: working with partners including employers”

Project Co-ordinator’s Final Report July 2006

1. Project Co-ordinator

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1.2 The following colleges have been part of the Southwest region

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|---|---------------------------|----------------|
| ○ | Bridgwater College | Liz Hutchins |
| ○ | Kingston Maurward College | Ken Onions |
| ○ | Strode College | Mandy Holloway |
| ○ | Wiltshire College | Jacqui Gower |

1.3 Executive Summary

The Southwest region project experienced some initial difficulties regarding the clarity of site projects, availability of other staff and commitment and direction from some senior management. Each site had different issues requiring some similar and some dissimilar solutions.

Attendance at action research training network meetings and regionally based network meetings has been good despite the pressures in FE generally and reorganisation (and its inherent potential redundancy) in a number of the sites involved in this project.

It is a credit to my regional colleagues that the project has continued and maintained the current momentum. Four sites have completed the project with only one site having to withdraw in January 2006.

Action research has certainly been the norm and we have all had to modify our plans as the projects have unfolded. The team have adopted an open and constructive critical approach to the overall project and to those of individual sites. Our lively and sometimes challenging style has been a benefit to members and we have established a good rapport which has brought dividends.

All site managers are naturally student focussed and passionate about effecting change to improve the way disabled people are treated. Much of our work has concentrated on working with other agencies and employers to create a more empathetic understanding of disabled students. Wherever possible learners have been included in meetings held with employers and partners

These last few months have resulted in some significant changes on emphasis in individual site project outlines, all of which have considerably improved the value of the projects as far as students and other customers are concerned.

Each of the reports can be commended in their own right and project managers would welcome the opportunity to discuss individual outcomes and benefits in sharing this good practice.

2 Major Focus

2.1 Bridgwater College

This project looks at proven models of employment; local employer needs and identifies what the college can do to develop more specialist routes to employment. The project clearly shows the progress employers have made which is reflected in the student involvement and comment.

The outcome is one of improving employment prospects and raising awareness.

The report includes a variety of one to one interviews with students talking about their disabilities and experiences of and aspirations towards employment. Students have also been involved in producing information about themselves for prospective employers to consider. These have been recorded on DVD and CD rom and illustrate the wide-ranging student involvement.

Support and guidance from Social Services, Job Centre and work placement advisors has informed the report.

2.2 Kingston Maurward College

This project looked at ways of setting up a Forum for all disabled people to engage with partners and employers. The enthusiasm of

local agencies and disabled people had been gratifying and progress is attributable to their commitment.

The project identifies existing resources and establishes a partnership of enlightened employers and disabled people. This is an excellent example of disabled people (their organisations) and employers working together.

Work has progressed during the project and the Forum will be launched at a conference in September. The event will be managed by disabled people and will encourage employers to identify employment opportunities on the day. The Forum will then monitor progress.

2.3 Strode College

This site has experienced a reduction in their funding for work based learning and this has had a direct impact on the employment of disabled people

The project team was disbanded and a new group established in early December.

The new project centres on a group of learners working with Sainsbury as part of their work experience programme.

There is also a focus on student progression working within the Sainsbury disabled workers' scheme and a celebration of individual employment successes.

Project team members and support staff have been developed as job coaches and this is a key feature of their success.

Sainsbury are to be commended for their commitment to the project and their policy of creating employment opportunities for disabled people.

2.4 Wiltshire College

This project concentrates on improving information for employers to ensure they understand the needs of learners with special needs.

E2E staff are playing a key role in collecting data. Feedback from existing learners and employers has resulted in a questionnaire response rate of 50%.

The project has widened the field of employment for disabled learners and other disadvantaged young people.

The project has benefited from the support of a job coach and training co-ordinators throughout.

3 Progress so far

- 3.1** The regional action plan and has been used to complement individual site action plans. It has also been used to monitor and progress chase to ensure we met targets.
- 3.2** The overall aim was to raise awareness by a practical approach to improving employment opportunities by encouraging partners and employers to understand the needs of disabled people.
- 3.3** Our success criteria was to ensure disabled people have an opportunity to influence the range of services provided for them. They are welcomed and recognised for the contributions they can make to education and employment and partners and employers develop imaginative ways to include disabled people.
- 3.4** Each of the site projects re-enforces these aims and success criteria.
- 3.5** Much of the earlier part of these projects was devoted to applying action research techniques and modifying plans based on the evidence from the research. All sites have responded to these challenges and the work has been enriched by the process.
- 3.6** The first few months were spent in identification of inputs from others, establishing the resources and sources of advice and good practice, together with establishing working relationships with students, disabled people and employers.
- 3.7** The next phase was to establish parameters and encourage participation. This created a wide range of difficulties which had to be overcome. Some employers and disabled people expressed a feeling of overload and a reluctance to take part due to previous experiences. Overcoming this required imaginative solutions and the creation of win: win situations.
- 3.8** The final phase was managing and developing the individual project, keeping everyone focussed and driving forward initiatives.
- 3.9** It is rewarding to see the enthusiasm resulting in the outcomes and involvement of learners and employers. The examples of best practice resulting will be very useful for future readers.
- 3.10** The team attended national action research days and regional meetings, both of which contributed significantly to the progress and final reports.

4 Success and Challenges

- 4.1** Three main successes are:-

- “Keeping four sites in the project”. Some sites have struggled at times but the supportive network we have established has overcome many of the difficulties.
- “Maintaining the focus on Students”. We have all needed to follow action research principles to triangulate data and assumptions with a focus on the learner. This can be seen in the quality of the outcomes and progress made to date.
- “Engaging employers and partners”. This has been difficult at times but there is a better awareness and understanding of each others prime business objectives. This has resulted in a more meaningful developments and more enlightened participants.

4.2 Three main difficulties are:-

- “Significant change in some project plans”. Two sites have had to significantly change their project focus. This has been necessary due to changing circumstances and not due to the sterling efforts of the site managers concerned.
- “Some site managers are working in isolation”. This is due to a variety of factors preventing significant involvement of others. Fortunately site managers have overcome most of these difficulties without distracting from the quality of the outcomes.
- “Some employers and partners have little empathy with disabled people”. This is born from a mixture of fear and ignorance of the DDA. This is despite the efforts of a variety of agencies over the last five years.

5 Outcomes and benefits

5.1 The main outcomes are in the progress made, the realignment in some cases and the continuing enthusiasm despite a series of setbacks. Changes in LSC funding and a redistribution of the same levels of funding has been a major challenge for the southwest. This has detracted from the focus and progress for those site managers directly affected.

5.2 Unexpected outcomes have been seen with the success of most sites in engaging both students, partners and employers. Projects have taken advantage of initiatives within their area resulting in closer working with all stakeholders.

5.3 Final site reports are excellent and reflect commitment to including disabled people at all times. Successes with employers will be built upon as these initiatives develop.

6. Emerging Themes

6.1 Action Research is key to effective project management

The Project executive ensured all sites fully understood “action research principles” and encouraged site managers to review against action plans and be prepared to change emphasis as their projects developed.

Some site project plans changed significantly as a result of action research but were enriched and enhanced by the experience.

Action research support was provided by the Project executive through national/regional meetings and advice from research staff as required.

6.1.2 Enthusiasm and commitment from learners and employers has been exceptional

Learners have been encouraged to work with site managers at all stages. They have been keen to share their experiences of employment and to explore their understanding of their disability. This has been invaluable in developing site projects to ensure the process and the outcomes have been focussed on the student.

Employers have been prepared to go the extra mile and create opportunities for disabled people. There are many examples of creative approaches to including disabled people and ensuring they are treated the same as any other employee.

6.1.3 Data and details of other associated projects completed locally or Nationally are informing individual focus and priority

Regional team meetings shared examples of best practice to inform the site projects. The LSDA and LSC websites were invaluable. The team also had a “web surfing” session when we worked together using a lap top connected to the web, a data projector and a 10ft x 8ft screen.

We also discovered examples of work by other local FE Providers which was invaluable in setting individual project outlines. Whilst some of this work was done some time ago it was relevant to inform our initial thinking. The team were surprised to discover projects which had not been well promoted.

6.1.4 Regional meetings provided the best opportunity to share best practice

Regional meetings were scheduled to supplement and complement national meetings attendance at national meetings in London caused difficulties for the south west regional sites at times which placed a greater reliance on regional meetings for some colleagues.

Regional meetings were used to disseminate information and guidance from the Project executive together with providing mutual support between colleagues.

6.1.5 Experience from each project has supported others

Initially this was in the form of exchanging ideas through regional meetings and our email group supplemented by progress telephone calls from the regional co-ordinator. These were very practical and pragmatic situations where the seemingly un-resolvable difficulty was shared and an effective solution devised.

One of the national events was an information café where each project had a display sharing progress they were making. This included DVD, CD, electronic and hard copy. Delegates had an opportunity to learn more about each other's projects and to benefit from the experience of others. Southwest sites benefited from this opportunity and used their newly acquired knowledge to inform final project reports.

6.1.6 Employers and partners are willing to commit provided support is available

Although some employers were experienced in working with disabled people, many were relatively new to the experience and required guidance and support.

It was necessary to overcome initial resistance and to provide ongoing help and support. Larger employers and partners had positive engagement policies but these did not result in many applications from disabled people. Employers/Partners tended to be concentrating on full or part time equivalent employment opportunities and tended not to consider portfolio working. The notion of matching individual skills to tasks rather than complete jobs has had to be carefully developed.

Employers and Partners also needed support (practical, emotional and sometimes financial) from the various agencies (e.g. community employment services)

In some instance it was also necessary for the site manager to act as co-ordinator between the employer and the agency. Without early intervention employment placements would probably have failed.

6.1.7 Win:win situations achieve the best results

Employing disabled people is not uppermost in the minds of most employers. They often feel they are "enlightened"; "positive about disabled" or "investors in people" if they employ people who have a physical disability (e.g. wheelchair users).

The notion of providing employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities/difficulties or those who have mental health problems is difficult for many employers to comprehend.

It has been necessary to create opportunities where employers and partners can see positive benefits to their organisations of employing disabled people. These ranged from local positive publicity or specific awareness training for staff to providing discounted prices to use college facilities or providing resources to supplement organisations core business.

7 Useful resources

7.1 In addition to the resources mentioned in individual site interim reports, the team have obtained most benefit from the following:-

- Regional meetings
- Regional training
- Telephone conferencing
- Accessing the worldwide web as a team at one of our regional meetings
- Support of project executive staff

8 Future work

8.1 The team will continue their email group and share progress.

8.2 There are a number of aspects of individual site reports which will continue to the benefit of disabled people. The momentum will continue as these initiatives cascade within the organisations.

8.3 There will be a regional LSC conference arranged in the autumn to disseminate best practice resulting from these projects.

Ken Onions
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5th July 2006