



Disability Discrimination Act Phase 2 Regional action research projects

Site final report

Project title: Raising awareness: working with partners including employers

Region: South West

Organisation: Wiltshire College

Executive Coordinator: Ken Onions

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

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LSDA FINAL REPORT

23RD. MAY 2006

Executive Summary

Our project was to try to improve information for Employers, to ensure they understood the requirements of our Learners with Special Needs. In doing this we hoped to widen the field of employment for Learners with disabilities and other disadvantaged young people. We hoped to get at least 20% of our Learners with Special Needs into employment and develop a positive working relationship with employers. By developing a small working party comprising of Training co-ordinators and a Job coach, it was envisaged that the whole staff team could take "ownership" of any materials which were developed through the eighteen month period of the project. Regular updates were shared with the whole staff team throughout the process and Senior management colleagues were update at significant intervals. Dealing with major policy changes during this time has been a challenge and has at times meant considerable adaptations to the working processes. However, it has enabled us to keep abreast of changes in an atmosphere of positive encouragement and been a rewarding project to be involved in.

Research Process

Once we had been designated as a site for the project, our first task was to consult with Managers on the composition of the "working party" and agree a time scale for the initial meetings.

The first two months was an informal time talking to existing Learners and Employers with whom we had already developed a positive working relationship. At our first formal working group meeting in April 2005, we quickly realised the need to develop a questionnaire and other mechanisms of acquiring information both from Employers and Learners. The development of these required us to meet as a group fortnightly initially and reducing to monthly for most of the duration of the project.

Our action plan required us to share our findings with the whole staff team which we began to do in the fortnightly team meetings.

Within the first quarter of the project we realised we were in changing times with government introducing changes in LSC/ Connexions roles and major proposed differences in Training allowances for our young people. All these issues had an impact on our action plan which changed on a couple of occasions along the way. Cost implications were also a factor and the employer pack was reduced to a more manageable leaflet.

However the main activities highlighted in the action plan were achieved albeit in a modified way.

One of the most positive outcomes was the small group development which has now been used as a model to initiate other changes in working practices throughout our staff team. Another positive has been our relocation to premises in the centre of town which has meant we are much more accessible to Learners and also enables us to met employers more easily. Restraints on staff time were difficult especially when trying to meet to

develop new materials for use with both Learners and Employers. Questionnaires, although very useful when returned, were recognised not to be as effective as face to face interviews both with Learners and Employers. As the project ran over an eighteen month period it was difficult to keep the momentum going and the morale of the small group did dip especially when pressure of other work was great. The most effective way to re-motivate was to set deadlines not too far apart and keep meetings as short and succinct as possible.

All information we have gathered has been shared not only with the e2e team but the whole Work Base Learning team. We hope to have opportunities to share it in a wider context and forum with Connexions and as the Government initiative Train for Gain rolls out there may be other possibilities which evolve.

Outcomes

The main achievements of the project have been the production of a questionnaire for Employers and a fact sheet for the whole team to use with them, resulting from this. Our success in getting 21% of our disabled young people into paid employment of over 16 hours a week has been very positive. As one Learner said ***“my placements helped me prepare for the working world in which I am now a part of”***.

Another outcome is the “Guide to e2e” leaflet which has been very well received and now adopted for use by the whole staff team. The clearer identification of Employer needs was very beneficial and as one of them said ***“the more information we have helps us to know how we can best help Learners and it would be nice to see if it suits their needs before the placement commences.”*** The fact sheet devised as a result of this is widely used and is a valuable tool for the team.

The initial questionnaire devised to gather Learner information became a model for a fuller feedback survey which has subsequently been sent to all e2e Learners who have left the programme in the past 12 months. This benefit was unexpected and produced a sharing of knowledge between our staff team, thus better utilising the skills and qualities of a wider group and saving considerable time and resources for the Work Base Learning Team and the College as a whole.

The whole process has had a beneficial affect on our relationship with Employers, who now have a higher degree of understanding of Learner needs. The Learners too, have enjoyed the involvement in the project and feel it has benefited them in terms of making them feel more valued and that their opinions really do matter. As one Learner said ***“yes people actually listened to me for a change”***.

Main Themes

The two main strands which emerged during the project were that of Travel and Finance. Wiltshire is a rural county and access to employment is difficult, especially for those not living in the centre of towns. In some cases the Learners had to be taught how to use buses and trains effectively before we could begin to think about employment. The cause of this was a combination of over protectiveness by parents and a lack of time to train those slower to

learn, whilst they are still in mainstream education. The amount of time these Learners were on programmed was significantly longer than those more able and this is yet another barrier which has to be surmounted for those disadvantaged by a disability, whether it be learning or physical.

During the life of this project we introduced 12 free driving lessons to all who wished to participate. This was done as part of the Duke of Edinburgh award skills section and also gave them a key skill level one in improving their own learning. The lessons comprised of 2 theory and 10 practical sessions and enabled Learners to have a head start in their driving career.

The issue of finance was highlighted strongly in the duration of this project as the government ended the long-standing Minimum Training Allowance (MTA) and introduced the Educational Maintenance Award (EMA). Before April 10th 2006 Learners could receive £40 weekly for doing a minimum of 16 hours a week rising to 30 hours maximum. Now learners can receive only a maximum of £30 weekly for the same hours. The EMA is dependent on total household income so will exclude some from receiving any monetary reward whilst on programme.

Any literature we were preparing had to be amended as a result of these changes and far from aiding clarity with employers it added to the confusion in an often complex situation. However the percentage of Learners entering paid employment of over 16 hours weekly has not been lowered as yet. For the future of those Learners yet to be employed the “jury is still out!”

Messages for others

Learners

As a result of the project it is hoped that Learners will now feel that they are important and of value to Employers, that they have something worthwhile to contribute to the workforce. If they engage in the learning process their views will be listened to and they can expect providers to advocate on their behalf and assist them in every way possible to get on the first step of the working ladder.

Practitioners in Provider Organisations

In the main I believe that practitioners usually have the best interests of the Learners at heart. However we hope they will be more flexible and creative in their approach to finding appropriate employment for Learners, that they will think “outside of the box” and treat each Learner individually. If we can break down some of the “supposed barriers” e.g. access, reliability, cost effectiveness, with employers, then the research will have been a positive piece of work. Practitioners need to challenge the views and restraints imposed on them from above to ensure we are offering the best of services to Learners.

Managers in Providers Organisations

During this project it has been apparent that although Managers are keen to be involved in these types of schemes, the time constraints on them are such that they rarely offer support directly or even enquire how Learners are doing. However if there is money attached to the completion of the project they are always interested in knowing when that will be forthcoming.

Having been asked to be kept in the information loop, some feedback or advice on reports written would be welcome and too often Managers appear

to lose sight of the very Learners we are there to provide for. It would be very pleasing to think that this piece of work will impact on Managers, however I believe that resources are so limited it will be very slight, if at all.

LSC

Given the changing nature of LSC work in the past few months I feel that it is unlikely that this project will affect it in anyway.

It would be wonderful to think that Learners could all receive an individual package of learning, that those with more specific disabilities/disadvantages could get a higher degree of support and longer on programme. It would be great to feel that the "Learners voice" will be more widely heard as a result, however bureaucracy is always with us and government target have to be met. Nevertheless, if even one Learner benefits more widely that they would have before the research process then it will have been worth-while.

Project Support

There was very little direct communication between sites, this usually came via the co-ordinator. However on the occasions we had regional meetings the encouragement and understanding of others involved in the same process was of great benefit. The occasion when some-one from the LSDA came to one of these meetings provided the most clarity and confirmation as to whether what we were doing was on the right track.

The Network meetings were of mixed value, certainly the early ones felt that the time spent travelling was not worth the effort. However our views and expectations were listened to and these did improve. Nothing could alter the fact that the London venue was not easily accessible for those of us in rural counties and the length of these days was costly in terms of time and energy.

Without doubt for my particular project the greatest support mechanism was the small group working together. It was of great benefit to share ideas and spur one another on when motivation was flagging.

Our Regional Co-ordinator was always available by e-mail and his prompt answers to queries and willingness to champion our cause were much appreciated.

Geography will always be a problem in projects of this size, however it may have been wiser to meet with LSDA regionally more often and maybe have had only two meetings (one at the beginning and one at the end) nationally.

Future Work

Our project will continue as we seek to continuously get feedback from previous Learners and Employers to see how we can improve. The literature we have produced will need to be monitored and evaluated regularly to ensure it remains current and authentic and as long as e2e stays on the government agenda, our work will continue to evolve.

Materials

Learner Questionnaire

Employer Questionnaire

Learner Perceptions of e2e

Fact sheet for Employers 1) MTA 2) EMA

Guide to e2e

Statistical graph of learners on e2e into employment

Statistical graph showing % of Learners with disabilities, into employment

Minutes of e2e Team meetings evidencing sharing of knowledge

Minutes of small group meetings indicating progress and changes and developments

Action Plans 1) Start of Project

2) Interim

3) Final

Conclusion

At the beginning of the project in February 2005 I set certain goals to achieve for our Site, the Learners and Myself. I am generally satisfied with the outcomes we have achieved and have found the challenge both stimulating and rewarding.

My main regret is the lack of interest shown in the project by Senior colleagues, however if the work carried out can influence the future direction of the team as a whole then it is work that has been worth doing.