

Phase 2 Green Paper Project: Support and aspiration

Employ Ability Cluster: A student led showcase event with a clear legacy



What has been developed and by whom?

A cluster of providers in Coventry and Warwickshire are working to improve the employment prospects of young people with a range of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). A major focus for this work has been the development and delivery of a student led Employ Ability showcase event, intended to improve understanding of the employment related abilities of students with SEND, and of the benefits to businesses of employing them. The event has provided the launchpad for partnership and legacy actions to ensure that the impact is sustained and further developed.

Cluster partners include Hereward College (lead), Warwickshire College, Round Oak School, and Slated Row School representing a Teaching School Alliance in Milton Keynes. Slated Row School was not an original member of the cluster, but funded through a separate Department for Education initiative designed to work with and complement the Further Education (FE) led cluster work. The school has become an integral part of the cluster, demonstrating the particularly strong and dynamic partnership that is a feature of this cluster.

Why was it developed?

The cluster was established with the aim of improving the employment prospects for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. Members identified that whilst young people had a range of training and education options that could increase their knowledge and skills, movement into work was still difficult and success patchy.

To tackle this particularly difficult challenge, partners felt that a student led showcase event would serve a threefold purpose to:

- help persuade employers of the talents of young people with SEND and of the business benefits of employing them;
- raise aspirations, increase understanding and address the anxieties about moving into employment that are experienced by some employers, young people, teachers and parents/carers, and
- provide the catalyst for new/enhanced partnership working, curriculum development and other activity, forming the legacy to sustain improvements in employment for students with SEND.

‘Seeing beyond the event’ was particularly important to partners, to ensure that the significant work to deliver the event successfully did not end there but was the starting point for new ways of supporting increased employment not only for the young people involved in the event, but subsequent cohorts of students across the four partner organisations.

How was it developed and how is it being taken forward?

Partners began by sharing with each other their existing approaches and methods for supporting their students into jobs and careers. This enabled partners to understand how each other worked and to exchange good practice and ideas. It also ensured that the showcase event and cluster work would extend and develop new ways to help young people into work rather than delivering ‘more of the same’.

The event took around seven months from the initial idea to delivery in May 2013. In all, over 130 delegates attended the event, drawn from large and small employers, local authorities, colleges and schools, as well as senior colleagues from the Department for Work & Pensions, NATSPEC and LSIS.

Below is presented a summary of key challenges in the planning and delivery of the showcase event, how they were tackled and key learning points for future events and for other organisations interested in delivering something similar:

- ***Involving young people in every step of the event planning, preparation and delivery:*** This meant thinking creatively about how students from four different organisations and with varying degrees and types of SEND could all be actively included. Students from the different partners didn't know each other and there were also practical issues of bringing them together from Coventry, Warwickshire and Milton Keynes so that they could plan and rehearse.

This required a high degree of organisation as well as firm commitment to take forward actions in between monthly cluster meetings and to take the student led approach across all the work. Students delivered all aspects of the event including hosting the day, introducing speakers, registration and greeting, catering, table decorations, performing a flash mob dance, role play/drama and presenting with employers. This worked extremely well, amply demonstrating the talents of the students.

The first 'student cluster meeting' was partially successful, but staff realised that these meetings needed more in depth planning on their part to create the right conditions for students to 'bond' and work together in a very short period of time. This was achieved with significant preparation within each partner organisation before the next meeting and ice breaking exercises at the meeting, the latter serving as a rehearsal for their use at the event. EDMODO (a networking tool for educational settings) was set up for all students to be able to communicate in between meetings. It helped with specific tasks such as choosing the song for the 'flashmob' dance performed at the event but some partners didn't find it very easy to use.

Significant time and effort was put into ensuring accessibility and promoting aspiration for all students: guiding students to choose activities that were accessible to all; using accessible materials for planning and delivery (available from contacts given at the end of this case study); encouraging students with communication difficulties to be involved in roles such as meet and greet, host etc. to raise their aspirations and challenge expectations, and in depth preparation to ensure that the venue could accommodate several wheelchair users.

* ***Key learning points:***

- Start student cross partner meetings earlier to allow more time for students to develop working relationships.
 - Get EDMODO or a similar internet based networking platform up and running earlier in the process (possibly using limited access Facebook eg: college/school pages only).
 - On the event day, get students there earlier so that they set up the sign in area as well as run it.
 - Rehearse more with students so that key learning points for the audience are fully carried through in the 'performance'.
- ***Developing an aspirational event that could be delivered!*** Cluster students and staff were highly ambitious in their initial plans for the event and it took some time to develop a shared understanding and vision about exactly what messages they wanted to convey, how that would best be achieved and what outcomes they wanted from the event. This was a critical part of the partnership development, enabling partners to explore in some depth how they wanted to develop their approaches to employment.

A series of highly focused cluster meetings developed and refined the programme, resulting in a really effective combination of presentations, flashmob dance and drama that kept delegates engaged, entertained and inspired. The programme achieved a balance that avoided 'preaching' to employers and other delegates, through delivering an inspirational range of activity that carried a serious and hard hitting message. The performance of students and employers taking part and the incisive questions posed by audience members (students and others) challenged expectations and illustrated the wealth of skills and talent on offer within the group of young people with SEND.

* **Key learning points:**

- Use this event as a 'model' – start early! Agree a **common aim and clear objectives** for the event, and keep activities simple, focused on delivering the objectives and very well thought through.
- Involve parents as delegates for subsequent events – so that the students can be 'role models' to raise aspirations and help to address fears that parents may have for their children's futures. This should include parents of primary school age children to help instill confidence in pathways to adulthood at an early stage.

→ **Getting employers on board:** Employer involvement was pivotal to the success of the event, both as contributors to showcase effective practice in employing young people with SEND, and as an audience to persuade more employers to get involved. Partners were quite realistic in understanding that to put the huge amount of time and resources that would be necessary to engage numbers of completely 'disengaged' employers to attend the event would not be a good use of the development project.

Rather than using a 'cold calling' approach, partners maximised the potential of their own contacts and networks to involve employers who could speak about their experiences of employing young people with SEND, and, as importantly to encourage other employers who may be considering and/or unsure about doing so. Employers taking part and attending included National Grid, BT, Sainsbury's, Microlink, Care Pair, Savi's, Evenbreak and Local Authorities.

The messages and film resulting from the event provide starting points and catalysts to continue the work, involving a greater number of employers and spreading the word to those that may not have considered employing young people with SEND.

Involving large and small employers was particularly helpful in highlighting that whilst size matters in terms of the different needs of employers of different sizes, it is not a barrier to offering work experience and employment to young people with SEND when the right kind of support is offered by relevant organisations including supported employment, colleges and schools.

* **Key learning points:**

- Take up the opportunity of working with the 'supply chain' companies of large employers such as National Grid, to reach a greater number of employers through targeted similar events.
- Promote the work through other business networks, including Chambers of Commerce, so that a greater number of employers attend subsequent events.
- Encourage students to follow up job and work experience leads immediately – don't leave it!

Creating impact

The impact of the event was significant and immediate on a number of levels. First and foremost, at least one student taking part began serious discussions with an employer about the possibility of an Apprenticeship, representing a significant leap in aspiration from his previous ambition. In addition, verbal feedback from event participants was extremely positive and indicates that it had the impact the cluster had hoped for:

"It was one of the most enjoyable conferences I have ever been to"

“It was an excellent event and we took away several points and contacts to take forward”

“It was great to hear from the larger companies, and the smaller ones, as well as from the students”

“The learners were inspirational – they posed some really insightful questions”

Employers and employment agencies highlighted the reasons why employing young people with SEND is not only a “good business decision” because they have great skills and abilities but also because they tend to take less time off sick and stay in jobs longer, as well as being “good Public Relations for my business because my customers see that the company is inclusive”. National Grid emphasised how the work has enabled their staff to get ‘disability confidence’, breaking down barriers between able bodied and disabled people.

The event did not shy away from hard business and other difficult issues. Employers, and particularly smaller employers, emphasised that there was no room for special treatment because someone has a disability – lateness, poor motivation and other issues needed to be dealt with in the same way as with any other employee. In doing so, we would ensure that young people with SEND were treated on an equal basis. Similarly, employers were asked some searching questions by students about just how accessible employment is in their company.

The question of equality in training was also raised by a student who felt it was discriminatory for them not to be able to take an Apprenticeship because they are unable to meet the Level 2 requirements for English and maths because of their disability.

A full analysis of evaluation forms is available from the cluster contacts. A brief summary reveals that nearly all delegates found the event effective or highly effective in terms of information gathering, raising their ‘disability confidence’ and gaining an understanding of the abilities of students with SEND. About 80% felt that the event was effective for networking, with some commenting that having more employers at the event would have enhanced the effectiveness of this aspect of the event.

A number of delegates made very helpful comments about the changes that their organisations would need to make so that they could offer work opportunities, including improving “culture and confidence around disability”, “understanding the skills students have” and developing a greater range of appropriate experiences and qualifications. A large number of responses were given to the question of what delegates would take away from the event to support their organisations in making change, demonstrating that it had really stimulated thought and action. These ranged from “there is a massive talent pool out there...not only is there a moral and legal case for employment but a massive financial one too”, to “to employ, or give employment experiences to students”, “recruitment and retaining talent in business” and “how organisations can break down the barriers to include students with disabilities in the workforce”.

Taking forward a legacy

Partners were very clear at the outset that the showcase event should not become an end in itself. The process of developing and delivering the event has created a very strong partnership identity, apparent in the joint publicity and marketing for the event.

Cluster partners are determined to keep the momentum going, drawing on the learning from developing and delivering this event and committing to continuing its partnership and regular meetings so that a range of legacy actions can be taken forward, for example:

- Maintaining and using the **Employ Ability** ‘brand’ (including a website) to promote a range of employer facing partnership work, including exploring the potential for further student showcase events and presentations for a range of different audiences including groups of ‘supply chain’ companies and Chambers of Commerce as well as mixed audiences of employers, students and parents/carers.
- Working with National Grid to extend the Employ Ability model that began with Round Oak School and is now being extended to the other cluster members. This model involves a year’s internship ‘school’, delivered on site at National Grid. Also working with National Grid on the idea of employees becoming

‘ambassadors’, encouraging other companies to get involved in employing young people with SEND.

- Partners jointly accessing Job Coaching training from the British Association of Supported Employment to create a pool of Job Coaches, as well as developing joint funding proposals to take forward various aspects of the Employ Ability work.
- Incorporating the work to prepare and deliver various aspects of showcase events into curriculum and qualifications, for example, BTEC awards.
- Tackling key issues raised in the event including the lack of access to Apprenticeships for young people who are unable to meet the Level 2 requirements.
- Tracking students through their pathway to employment to assess impact and troubleshoot issues.

A legacy plan has been drawn up identifying these and other actions that will help to sustain and develop further the Employ Ability work.

What are the intended impacts and how are they being assessed?

Some of the immediate and short term impacts of the showcase event are summarised earlier. However, the cluster is committed to lasting and developing impact to guarantee the legacy, including:

- **For young people:** clearer and more effective pathways into working life and adulthood. It is expected that a greater number of young people will make a successful transition into post 16 training and into employment and careers.
- **For employers:** a better understanding of the abilities of young people with SEND and benefits of employing them, as well as more effective access to services and support for recruitment and training.
- **For parents:** confidence in pathways that can help their child move into work and become independent
- **For partners:** improved partnerships that make best use of resources and share expertise
- **At strategic level:** contribution to strategic planning, improved co-ordination, reduction in duplication

Impact will be assessed through a variety of means including student progress and destination tracking and analysis (further education, employment, volunteering etc.), employer feedback, parent/carer feedback and partnership development plans.

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