

Case study. Working with employers to prepare learners with learning difficulties for work.

James Stonard,
Carshalton College of Further and Higher Education



Summary

This case study describes a programme designed to prepare students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities for employment.

It has been delivered to 12 students with moderate learning disabilities. The programme was delivered in 2 elements:

- in- house classroom learning based on accredited preparing for employment units
- a work placement providing a realistic working environment with supported on the job training

The case study demonstrates the importance of employer engagement.

Key lessons learned

Successful work placements leading into paid employment depend on:

- Forming successful partnerships with local employers
- Identifying from the start, suitable and appropriate employer(s) to suit the individual student's skill set
- Identifying suitable placements, with realistic progression and job prospects
- Instilling confidence in the young people with encouragement throughout
- Tracking, monitoring and recording performance including target setting and employer feedback
- Maintaining regular contact and providing effective communication supporting both employer and student throughout the placement
- Implementing and maintaining on-going support to help sustain employment

Introduction

Carshalton College is a medium-sized General Further Education College located on one main campus within the London Borough of Sutton. In 2011/12 there were in excess of 5000 students on roll and a total income of £15.3 million, including Funding body income of £12.4 million.

In December 2011 the College received approval from the Secretary of State to enter into a Federation with Kingston College. A Kingston and Sutton Educational Partnership Board (KSEP) has been formed to manage Corporate Services and Quality and Student Services. Carshalton College still retains its own governing body. The Federation has brought new opportunities for growth and development at Carshalton College.

The College attracts students primarily from the boroughs of Sutton, Merton and Croydon. Approximately 45% of the student cohort are from minority ethnic heritage backgrounds. Students enrol at the College from over 100 educational establishments each year.

The College's curriculum is strongly vocational, covering nine subject sector skills areas from pre-entry to foundation degree level. It is also one of the largest providers of work-based learning programmes in South London with more than 550- Apprentices and Advanced Apprentices in Electrical Installation, Motor Vehicle, Childcare, Health and Social Care, Business and Accounting, Hospitality and Catering and Hairdressing.

What we wanted to achieve

The college was concerned about the number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities coming to the end of their college life unable to make the successful transition from education into employment. These students were interested in further vocational study, preferably through a modern apprenticeship, but students working below Level 2 literacy and numeracy are unable to access this provision.

Information gathered through contacting previous students identified only 1 leaver out of 33 who had found part time paid work, some were attending further training elsewhere, 2 were engaged with employment services, but most were disengaged and were not receiving services at all. Leavers from previous years were also contacted, which again identified a large percentage in similar circumstances. Through making contact with these ex-students it was apparent that in many cases parents, carers and the individuals themselves had not progressed due to the lack of information advice and guidance.

The college was aware of the pilot programmes of Supported Internships and decided to replicate this model.

We designed the 'Model apprenticeship programme' to accommodate students with moderate learning difficulties. Classroom delivery was supported with two learning support assistants for varying levels of ability and for differentiation. It was intended that students would achieve an Entry Level 3 certificate in employability.

Implementation

Planning our approach

Carshalton College initially identified a group of 12 students consisting of nine students who had completed all other courses and three ex-students who had left college 2 years ago. These three were disengaged, unemployed, but very keen to further their employment prospects

This group of students had participated in either work experience or voluntary work previously and as part of their college course. They therefore had some idea of the type of work they were interested in but each one had a different skill set and some had more experience than others. Initial and baseline assessments were carried out to enable us to provide Individual learning plans as well as a plan of action.

A key factor was to identify and select suitable employers that would provide realistic and achievable outcomes for our students as well as being supportive and accommodating to the needs of the students.

Employers were initially identified from those we had worked with before as positive partnership work had already taken place. These employers had provided previous placements and had an understanding of the needs of our students. This enabled us to market the model apprenticeship programme with greater confidence and efficiency.

We also targeted new employers. Some placements were arranged on the basis that they would provide exploratory work experience for students to learn new skills acting as a progression route, to placements with the potential to offer paid work. In each case a clear understanding and working agreement between us the provider and the employer was established so that there was clarity and a clear understanding of the expected outcome.

External supported employment services were contacted and introduced to enhance the services to both student and employer. This provided additional and on-going support required for those students moving into paid employment. It also acted as support for employers in the emergence of issues arising to help them sustain the employment.

The planning and delivery was undertaken by College staff, including the tutor, teacher, 2 learning support assistants, and 2 job trainers. The employer would organise and co-ordinate small team working, on-site supervisors, and work buddies.

Roles and responsibilities:

The personal tutor was responsible for tutoring the group as well as for setting up placements and initiating employer engagement.

The teachers were responsible for the teaching and learning that related to accreditation. In addition, they were also responsible for the direction and implementation of any learning support staff during class based activity. The Learning support staff supported students as directed by the teachers.

A 'Job Trainer' provided 'on the job' support within the working environment, during the initial stages which included interview, induction, and placement. This included the assessment and recording of student progress against individual learning plan and set targets.

Employers provided a realistic working environment which included an induction, on-going supervision and feedback on each student's progress. Employers were responsible for health and safety whilst at work.

The Supported Employment Service was responsible for the on-going support to both students and the employer supporting sustainable employment.

Considerations for the end of the activity.

Where placements were time limited and paid employment was not offered, the student would be supported in finding an alternative placement and or training to promote chances of seeking alternative employment via job search and application. This would be supported by the college staff.

When students complete a college course, a continued service should be planned via college referral to supported employment service.

The college has also offered a second year for those requiring an extension in order to continue building on from year 1.

What we did

We delivered the Entry 3 Certificate in Employability on one day per week which covered various units with regard to pre-employment training and skills. In addition, each student undertook a work placement of 3 days a week.

We ensured employers understood the purpose of the programme and targeted employers to identify potential job opportunities. We discussed ring fencing posts rather than interviewing potential candidates, to allow the student to work toward and demonstrate their ability to carry out the job before the employer

made any firm commitment to offering the job. This was a diversion to their usual recruitment process. In the case where only part of a job was achievable we would look at identifying job carving opportunities.

Once the placement had been discussed and agreed with a start date in place, the Job Trainer would then take over. We developed and trained our own Job Trainers usually from Learning Assistants as they were experienced in understanding the needs of the students. They then provided all the support to the students whilst on placement. This would include travel training for the travel route to and from the placement, supporting students during their initial interview and during induction as well as training them to develop the skills they required to do the job. All support was provided on an individual needs basis. In agreement with the employer we would withdraw our support once the student had built up a work routine, become familiar with completing activities and established healthy working relationships with staff and work colleagues.

Job Trainers would then monitor, track, and record individual progress through regular weekly observations through employer and student feedback. Additional support by the Job Trainer was always available via email or telephone.

One employer said they were sceptical in the beginning taking someone on with a learning disability. The manager said

'This has been a learning curve for me. Initially we thought it would not evolve into anything more than just work experience however Wesley has proven us wrong. He has worked hard, demonstrated he can carry out his duties effectively, gets along well as part of a team and has given excellent attendance. I will view taking someone on with a learning disability differently in the future. Wesley has proven to me that someone with a learning disability can perform and work equally as well as any other staff member with the right support. Wesley is a member of staff I can rely on. We are really pleased to have him as part of our team and we congratulate him for his all his hard work and determination!'

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

All the students who completed the course (10) achieved their employability qualification at Entry level 3. Out of the 12 students, 2 dropped out midway through the programme due to personal circumstances, however 2 students achieved full time paid employment and 1 achieved on-going voluntary work. 1 student has decided to leave college and engage with an external employment service, another has enrolled onto a course at a local college to undertake further training based on the work experience undertaken on this programme. Five students will be enrolling onto the 2nd year of this programme in September to extend their learning and enhance their skills and experience gained this year. The employers of these 5 all agreed that within a second year they would all get to a stage of being genuinely employable. Some will continue with the same placement where there are good job prospects, others will have new placements and are looking for a different kind of employer.

What we learned

- The initial contact with an employer to discuss the course expectation and expected outcome is crucial. Ideally and where possible, we continue to identify employers who have vacancies and discuss the idea of ring fencing those jobs where the student develops the skills through on the job training and if suitable to be offered that position.
- Where aspects of the job may not be achievable we should always consider trying to job carve.
- Employers quite often put time limitations on work placements which do not always offer enough time for a person to fully learn the job. In these cases, paid positions might not be available and so the training alone is invaluable to the student. We therefore do not dismiss employers only willing to offer limited work placements.
- Partnership working with external employment services has been beneficial providing on-going support services acting as a safety net for when the students leave college.

- Not every employer was able to offer paid employment even though the student was considered employable by them. In these cases where future job opportunities may arise, we keep in contact with employers.
- The Job Trainers are as important in the workplace as are Learning Assistants in the classroom.
- Some students found that their life style commitments limited their ability to take on paid employment and they found a positive outcome through voluntary work.

What we are taking forward

The programme works! We will continue to expand it as a transition from education into employment. We want to explore alternative and additional partnership work with outside employment services to provide other services to improve the outcome. Working with the job centre, we aim to raise the profile and highlight the benefits that this approach brings to both employers and students.