



Foundation Learning Support

Provider case study

West Cheshire College Leap2Work

Introduction

West Cheshire College is a medium-sized, vocational college with sites in Chester and Ellesmere Port.

Leap2Work (learning, employment, achievement and progression) is an initiative they began in October 2008, aimed at supporting young people with disabilities into supported work experience and, ultimately, paid employment. When the initiative ends in December 2010 the supported employment programme will become part of the College's Foundation Learning provision and mainstream curriculum delivery.

Aims

Like many other colleges, West Cheshire College had struggled for years to enable students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to access employment in the local area on an equal basis.

They had seen many students progress through Entry level and Level 1, develop skills and progress internally then disappear, only to reappear in a different curriculum area. They did not want watch the pattern repeat itself year after year, so, working with the local authority, they developed the concept of Leap2Work.

This initiative offered a way of delivering the curriculum and accrediting learning in a real working environment. Underpinning knowledge would be taught in College, while other learning and assessment happened with the employer.

Approaches

Working in partnership with Cheshire West and Chester's adult supported employment service and using the Learning and Skills Council's *Learning for living and work* (2006) as a blueprint for delivery, Leap2Work set up an initiative using the 'supported employment model', 'place, train and fade' and job coaching. Students are placed in appropriate work placements then a job coach helps train them and builds natural support within the workplace until they are no longer needed. The team consisted of a project leader, three supported employment officers, an administrator and a growing team of job coaches. It was supported by strategic partnership activity led by the College and the local authority.

The starting point was a Person Centred Vocational Profile carried out by College-based supported employment officers who found workplaces that suited the preferences and skills set of each individual. They offered support to the employer as well as the individual on placement.

Job coaches, who were learning support assistants from the College, ensured the students understood their job requirements and could identify skills requiring further development either on the job or in College. For example, a student working in a sandwich shop might return to the catering department for some skills development but another student might need to develop their personal and social skills.

Curriculum delivery was practical and active, not classroom based. The College used units of BTEC qualifications from the Foundation Learning qualifications catalogue to accredit learning. They used BTEC Work Skills short courses to accredit essential skills linked to health and safety, interview skills and team building. A rolling programme of workshops throughout the year provided flexibility for the learners.

Impact

The Person Centred Vocational Profile helped the learners think about the skills they needed and how to develop them. The 'place and train' model gave more context to their learning and increased the importance of employment for the individuals involved and, sometimes, their family members. Learners could see their progress against targets through real work experience. They used electronic portfolios and collected evidence using MP3 players, photographs and video recordings with job coaches overseeing and supporting this process.

Local authority staff and College staff had different skills and experiences from working with different client groups, and learned from each other.

The initiative changed College thinking about mainstream curriculum delivery and interactive assessment. They learned more about how to motivate learners – being in the workplace increased their motivation and their success.

Partly as a result of the current economic climate, however, they have found it difficult to place as many students in paid employment as they had hoped.

Lessons learned

- Don't be afraid to try things differently: innovation can be empowering.
- Work in partnership with and learn from others.
- Make sure you have the support of senior managers.
- Don't underestimate your students – appreciate that they can change their behaviour.
- Think about individuals and not cohorts of students.

Next steps

The College is already piloting similar approaches with a full-time Entry-level group to facilitate sustainability in the longer term.

Staff are adapting what they do as result of the initiative and will soon decide which qualifications to offer from the Foundation Learning qualifications catalogue.

All students at Levels 1 and 2 will now take part in a self-assessment exercise and team-building as part of induction. This will be accredited, which should be very motivating.

The College is also investigating extending the job coach role to all full-time Entry level and Level 1 learners plus any learners who could benefit from the support of a job coach.

Contact

Julie McGinn

Area Manager
Learning Services

West Cheshire College
Eaton Road
Chester CH4 7ER

Email: J.McGinn@west-cheshire.ac.uk
Telephone: 01244 670508