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Leading learning and skills

The Learner Voice

Learning for Work:
Employability
and adults
with learning
difficulties and/or
disabilities

Learner presentations
from nine regional
conferences (held
January – April 2008)

Yola Jacobsen, NIACE

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Of interest to those supporting and involved in the transition of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities from education and training to employment

Further information

For further information, please contact the appropriate Learning and Skills Council office. Contact details for each office can be found on the LSC's third sector website:
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Introduction

1 Learners' presentations were scheduled at the start of each conference, providing a powerful way of focusing the audience's attention on the importance of the learner experience, and how this informs the development of vocational provision to support learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in transition to employment.

2 Learners talked about their experiences of work and training, using the title 'Learners talking about work: what do learners need? A challenge to think about' as their starting point.

3 Learners were contacted through a range of networks:

- NIACE project work
- regional providers
- Yorkshire and The Humber regional learners' panel
- regional LSC, NIACE and National Mental Health Development Unit networks.

4 The presentations highlighted the wide range of ability, experience and needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities within the FE system.





East of England

Daniel Harding

5 Daniel Harding is on an employment training course at Huntingdonshire Regional College. The college has secured 22 work placements throughout the Cambridgeshire region. At the time of his presentation, Daniel was in his first year of the course and talked about his experience of getting a work placement. He explained the various stages he went through and described the support he received from the college. At the end of his presentation Daniel talked about three of his friends who are also on work experience placement. His presentation, in his own words, is reproduced below:

In the beginning

What work can I do?

A difficult question when I had no qualifications.

I need some good workplace experience.

I need help and good ideas.

My college job coaches talked with me.

They discussed ideas with my Grandma.

I was given a list of available placements.

I chose a few posts that I felt I might like.

On to paperwork

This is the company's form I used.

I needed help to read and understand all the pages.

I talked with my Grandma.

How do I answer?

The application is proving difficult to fill in.

It was hard to put in answers.

My job coaches and others gave me ideas.

It took a long time.

Preparing for interview

I needed good clothes.

I practised with my job coach.

Thinking of answers was hard.

I walked to my interview as the weather was good.

I will be using the bus independently.

The interview

The personnel manager interviewed me.

She used my application and my personal profile, my job coaches prepared with me.

We agreed there could be work for me on the counters or dry goods area.

The outcome

I got the work placement.

I will go by bus.

This will help me get my NPTC qualification in work skills.

By the course end I aim to use this to get a job.

My work plan

I will need to complete a Waitrose induction.

I have been measured for my uniform.

I shall be working on stock replacement.

I will be learning about the shop-floor aisles.

Ashley Horne

6 Ashley is studying at Cambridge Regional College. He talked about his work experience at a local farm. His favourite jobs were potting plants and helping others. Ashley had also worked in a café, helping in the kitchen. Ashley explained that the staff at the café were good people to work with.

East Midlands

Donna Bishop

7 Donna Bishop is a support assistant for Valuing People. She explained that when she left school she started working at a day centre. But she found that seeing the same people and doing the same things every week was not satisfying:

We did not like being treated like children. We did work at the day centre but only got paid £1 and I was bored.

8 Donna was also a student at Leicester College, where she found out about self-advocacy from Mencap. She started speaking up for herself and making contacts with people:

I am now speaking up for people with learning difficulties and I do training. I went to a meeting and for the first time people are listening to me.

It is important because I understand what it is like to be a person with learning difficulties and I have ideas. I work eight hours a week and help organise for Valuing People.

I meet new people all the time. I learn new things and new skills everyday and I am more confident.





London

Learners from Merton College

9 Learners on the Ready Steady Work course at Merton College spoke to the London conference about their experiences. Their course is part of Merton College's employability demonstration pilot, which focuses on individual ability, starting with the question 'What do learners want?' The impact of the course is evident in learners' comments, with several saying that the course helped them realise what opportunities were available:

I never thought I had skills that could get me a real job but now I realise I can.

I never knew I had so many choices about what I could do or that I was good at so many things.

I never realised I had skills that employers really wanted.

10 Individual learners spoke about the specific skills they had acquired:

Michael Powell

I am enjoying my cooking course as well as the Ready Steady Work project.

I want to work because I love cooking, creating different food and pleasing people.

I want to get a cooking job.

Vincent Liu

I am good at caring for children, IT, football and football coaching.

At present I am working with children at Bumble Bees Nursery and enjoy the interaction and tasks I undertake.

I am looking forward to future work in childcare, maybe in the area of football coaching.

Chris Carberry

I am good at communication skills, IT, literacy/ numeracy and helping others.

At present, I am on internal work experience at Merton College library

I enjoy socialising with colleagues and customers. I learnt new skills on the Ready Steady Work project at Merton College.

Now I would like to explore further work in libraries, and possibly run a library of my own, how about the British Museum?

Asim Choudry

I have good IT skills and enjoy communicating and socialising with others

I have previously worked in retail and enjoyed this experience greatly.

At present I am looking for an office junior job which I would be very good at and grasp every challenge.

At the end of the day I would like to earn my own money rather than depend on others.

Billy Saunders:

Being visually impaired could hinder me getting a job. Surely that's discrimination.

If you think about it, every single person in the whole world has a disability, because we all have things we can and cannot do.

There are many different reasons why I may not get a job, but these reasons should not matter.

I am as capable as everyone else in this room today.

North East



Jane Wilson

11 Jane Wilson is a third-year student at Northern Counties College. She showed a short film about her experiences to conference. Jane's co-present David Barker explained that Jane sees herself as 'the face of the employability project'. He explained that the project is a partnership with the National Employers' Forum on Disability:

Learners need support, real work and jobs where they are valued for the contribution that they make and fully understand their responsibilities to employers.

All learners have dreams and the challenge is how we can make these dreams to come true.

David Barker

12 During her time at college, Jane completed two successful work experience placements at the Department for Work and Pensions and at TDR Ltd, which is a regional partnership offering Apprenticeships. Jane hoped to achieve the Certificate in Life Skills, Certificate in Skills for Working Life and the Certificate in ICT, all at Entry Level, and the NCFE Working Together qualification by the end of the academic year. After this, she describes herself as 'up for a bigger challenge.'

North West

Sami Berdi and Gurpal (Paul) Singh

13 Sami Berdi and Gurpal (Paul) Singh are both in paid employment at the supermarket ASDA after completing a course in skills for independent living at Bolton Community College. Besides the intense work completed in the classroom towards an NVQ at Level 1, they attended work experience placements. The placements are organised by Bolton College's employment placement officer, using her contacts with local companies.

14 In their presentation, Sami and Gurpal highlighted the importance of the support they received from the college. Sami works in the in-store café:

The college has helped me to get skilled, and Linda [the employment placement officer] has supported me to get a job.

I do know I can ring Linda at any time for a query; Linda is happy to help at any time and she is good.

Sami Berdi

15 Support is ongoing, so once the students moved into paid employment, they knew they could still ask the college for advice. When Gurpal was offered a job at ASDA, he was overjoyed to know he had a permanent contract. He was later awarded an ASDA star for progression at work:

I got a 100 per cent performance score when a mystery shopper called into the Asda store.

I got this through excellent customer service. This was on work experience.

I then gained another gold award whilst in paid work for helping a couple who were organising a church party.

I helped them to purchase over 100 bottles of fizzy drinks. They wrote to the store to thank me.

Gurpal Singh

16 After liaison with Jobcentre Plus advisors, Gurpal and Sami both decided to take full-time employment and come off benefits. Sami has recently returned to college to do an NVQ at Level 2.





South East

Barbara Arnfield

17 Barbara Arnfield spoke about her experience as a learner on the Choices programme at Newbury College. The Choices programme is designed to help people who have experienced mental health problems to return to education and/or employment. Here Barbara says in her own words how her life has changed since the Choices programme.

My life had been very difficult after the death of my husband. I started at Newbury College in the autumn on the Choices programme. My time on Choices was coming to an end and I had already started to rebuild my life and regain confidence.

I decided it was time to think about returning to employment. The help and support I received from the Choices team at Newbury College I shall always treasure and be eternally grateful for.

Sue, the course leader, introduced me to Jayne Mills who was setting up a new project called Pathways to Employment. I was very scared and nervous about the future especially after the safety I had felt during my three years on Choices. Jayne made me feel at ease straightaway in trying to find the right job for me. I had tried two placements and although I enjoyed them, did not feel that either was right in the long term.

Jayne came up with the opportunity to join the Marks and Start programme at Marks and Spencer (M&S). Marks and Start is M&S's award-winning employment initiative that provides work experience for people who face barriers in getting a job.

I was put at ease straightaway by the staff that I was introduced to when I arrived. I was given a buddy to work alongside who guided me in M&S work and its customer care style.

Although shy and wary, I never felt it a problem to ask my buddy for support and she was always happy to chat or help at any time. I felt relaxed and also met many new colleagues who were just

as happy to help. All too quickly my placement came to an end, so I was pleased when asked to stay on for a couple more weeks.

I was then faced with what to do next in my life, so it was brilliant to be asked back to help out as a paid Christmas temp. In October I completed my two induction days and felt part of the team very quickly. I slowly gained confidence and found everyone very friendly and supportive.

Before I knew it, January had arrived and my temporary contract was due to end. It was then that I was offered a full-time position in the menswear department.

I couldn't believe my luck. I had at last found the right way to start living my life again. Last month I completed two years working for M&S on a full contract.

During the last few months I have at times found life a little difficult. M&S has continued to be understanding and supported me in many ways. My colleagues and friends have been wonderful especially Christine and Karen. The help and support they have given me has gone well beyond their call of duty and has been very much appreciated.

Finally I would like to say a big thank you to Sue at Newbury College, Jayne at Pathways to Employment and to Marks and Spencer who were all part of my building structure into opening up my world and regaining my life and confidence.

South West

Learners from Bridgwater College

18 Chris Tate, Steve Bett, James Nas, Erika Gass, Richard Ross, David Bett, Kim Ransted and Freddie Wolfman from a Bridgwater College project talked about their experiences. Each day after their lessons, they work on a voluntary basis running a recycling scheme.

When we go to the office door, we knock and wait. When we go in we say, "Please may we have your recycling box?" We visit over 90 offices each week.

We empty the boxes we collect into our own special trolley. Our college campus is very large; we need to move many boxes. We teach new students how to do the job.

Some of the paper we collect we use to make envelopes for Christmas cards in our enterprise lessons. We sell these in our college shop.

19 In college, the students learn about the world of work, including:

- good time-keeping
- following instructions
- following routines
- positive attitude
- working in a team.

20 When the students are ready, they go on work placement, initially with the college. Later, they go for interview and get an external placement where they can use and build on the work skills they have learnt in college. Some learners have joined the Somerset work preparation services scheme and will have help to learn at work. Others hope to go on to study vocational programmes in catering or IT at Level 1.

21 This group of learners was clear about what was needed to help them progress and had compiled a list:

- help with travel to work
- help to solve problems at work

- someone to listen to us and our employers, to help us to understand each other
- help when things change at work such as new staff, work rotas, or tasks
- to be able to return to college part time to learn new skills for different jobs.





West Midlands

Kevin Hancock

22 Kevin Hancock joined Mencap's Route to Work project to get help with finding a job. Although Kevin had worked previously, he wanted to improve his confidence and wanted help with:

- completing a CV and application forms
- using the Jobcentre
- understanding job information
- sorting out references
- interview skills
- making telephone calls.

23 Kevin started his Entry Level 3 qualification, Personal Progression through Practical Life and Work Skills. He decided that he wanted to work in a supermarket and applied for a job at Tesco. At his interview Kevin was supported by his job trainer:

It gave me practice going for an interview even though I didn't get the job. It was not enough hours for me.

24 Kevin then had a successful interview at the supermarket Iceland and his job trainer helped him set up a four-week placement. Kevin's job trainer worked with him while he learnt new skills for the job. Kevin worked at Iceland for four hours a week but wanted more hours, so his job trainer approached Sainsbury's, where he started another work placement in the bakery. Kevin worked there for 18 hours a week:

I liked the bakery; it was a nice place to work. The staff looked after me and Mencap staff helped me settle into the job.

25 As part of his course, Kevin learnt to travel to his place of work by bus. He either uses the bus or cycles from home. Mencap helped him get a bus pass in order to do this regularly.

26 Eventually, after attending an interview on his own, Kevin was offered a job at Sainsbury's for 32 hours a week as a car park customer services assistant:

I was very pleased and phoned my Dad up to tell him. I phoned Marri from Mencap and Simon from Remploy.

27 Kevin gained his qualification and Sainsbury's and Mencap have stayed in regular contact to discuss his progress. He has been supported at work by other staff members at Sainsbury's. The personnel and training manager at Sainsbury's said:

The support that Mencap has given is excellent. We know if there are any issues the staff are only a phone call away. The job has given Kevin more confidence. He is more chatty with everybody. Kevin seems to enjoy the interaction with the customers and always keeps himself busy.

Darren Stanley

28 Darren Stanley was recommended Mencap's pathways employment services at a point in his career when he wanted better-paid work that was nearer to where he lived. Darren was supported by a Mencap job trainer with any tasks he found difficult in his work. He was also helped with benefit advice.

29 Darren wanted to look for a new job and applied for a post as a part-time groundsman. His job trainer spoke to the employer and it was agreed that Darren would be employed, with Mencap support:

The job trainer supported me with my new tasks. The support was reduced as I could do all the jobs. Finally I could work without any support.

I now work for Hatton Parish Council and have a job as a groundsman for 10 hours a week.

Mencap continues to support me with any problems I have. I can call the office for advice.

Mencap can check I have the right pay and benefits. If I need to learn new things at work and need some support, Mencap will come and help me. They will come out and visit me at home if I have any problems at work.

Yorkshire and The Humber

William Hazon

30 William Hazon is a member of the Yorkshire and The Humber regional learners' panel. He talked about his work with the RAF, and studying to improve his IT skills and update his accountancy qualifications. William explained that his interest in learning is both vocational and for pure enjoyment.

31 William spoke about the barriers he has faced in trying to demonstrate his skills and experience in relation to job opportunities. He experienced negative attitudes as a person with a physical disability from an early age. Career advisors at school responded negatively to his ambition to become an accountant, and suggested that typing or horse riding were the only opportunities open to him. At one job interview, he was not asked about his capabilities for the job but questioned as to whether he would be able to use the toilet facilities. His father's determination for William to achieve his potential was an important influence.

32 William had three key points to make about the development of employability courses and the supported employment model:

Let the learners' board look at the proposed agenda. They have all been in learning and in-work training and all come across obstacles.

For those finding jobs, try and allocate jobs that people are capable of doing. Use the capabilities that they have got.

Those in education, make sure that a disabled person can mention their difficulties and ensure with examination boards that time can be extended.

Roy Bell

33 Roy Bell had multiple barriers to gaining employment. His life had been on a seemingly unstoppable downward spiral for over 20 years. Roy had experienced severe mental health problems, the breakdown of his marriage and estrangement from his family. Addiction problems and several prison terms added to his difficulties.

34 The turning point for Roy was the death of a friend due to a heroin overdose. It became clear to Roy that it could easily have been him. This was the moment that Roy decided to change his life.

35 He began by volunteering at The Market Place in Kirkgate Chambers in Leeds. The Market Place offers support and guidance to young people aged 14–19 on drug and alcohol problems, eating disorders, housing, physical or sexual abuse and bullying. Roy wanted to help people with similar problems to himself when he was younger. Obviously he could speak from experience and really connect with the people he was supporting and this made his work all the more valuable. His voluntary work was backed with study, and he achieved a Certificate in Counselling Skills from Swarthmore College in Leeds, which boosted his confidence.

36 Roy decided he wanted to turn his skills and experience into a career, and turned to the STEP project for advice and guidance on applying for work. Here, Roy could practise applying for jobs to raise his confidence and competence. When a vacancy came up at The Market Place, Roy's application was successful and he is now an information and support worker there.

37 Roy has started a degree course in addition to working at The Market Place. He has become a regular speaker at training events, where his understanding and experience of the barriers to employment and the support mechanisms that were crucial in his recovery have greatly enhanced awareness and appreciation of the issues.

38 In his presentation, Roy explained that he had been out of work for 20 years:

I was told that I wouldn't work. You can't see a mental illness, therefore it is hard to understand. I started on a counselling course but didn't disclose as I felt unable to.

The first day I was on the course I was very nervous facing all the people and the professionals. Then I said I was a recovering drug addict.

In September I started a degree course. I have applied to the Disabled Student Association to get a package of support and a learning mentor. Without that I wouldn't be able to achieve my degree and become a youth worker.

39 Roy also talked about the powerful effect of labelling:

I talked to my brother and mentioned the diagnosis: schizophrenia. He thought that I heard voices and questioned me working with vulnerable people.

40 Roy's talk highlighted powerfully the importance of looking at the person and not the illness. The best person to advise about the nature of a support package is the person themselves.



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