
Supporting People with Disabilities towards Employment: DCU Ability Project

Introduction

This paper describes the DCU Ability project, in which people with disabilities are supported to access training and personal development courses in the area of work and employment. Based at Dublin City University (DCU) in the Republic of Ireland, the project is co-financed by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.

Here we introduce the importance of employment followed by a brief background, project development, programme details, employer engagement, challenges, the future and a brief conclusion.

The importance of employment

Employment, and specifically unemployment, is an issue for everyone in society with unemployment seen as a main driver of social exclusion (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). For people with disabilities, it can be a greater concern, as opportunities for employment can be limited especially if the disability is also associated with poor economic status (Madaus, Grigal and Hughes 2014). Unemployment will have a strong impact on people's ability to be included in society but also crucially, it will influence their economic status.

People with disabilities are more likely than the general population to be poor and to depend on social welfare payments for their income (Watson, Lawless and Maître 2017, p.9).

The main cause of this dependency is the fact that people with disabilities find it difficult to get employment and have difficulty remaining in work. The numbers of people with intellectual disability in particular in paid employment is very low, and there is an expectation that they are not in a position to contribute to society through paid work (Richards and Flynn, 2020). However, people with intellectual disabilities identify being employed as a valued social role (Wolfersberger, 2000) and understanding the choices available was an essential element of success (Heslop and Abbott, 2009).

In the Republic of Ireland, similarly to many other European countries, recent strategies, reports and publications have highlighted the importance of employment for people with disabilities. The Irish Government has a strategy to support people with disabilities to move into employment, with six key priorities: build skills, capacity and independence; provide bridges and supports into work; make work pay; promote job retention and re-entry to work; provide co-ordinated and seamless support, and engage employers (Government of Ireland, 2015). This strategy was followed by the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017), which detailed practical actions that could help create opportunities in areas such as education and employment. Further to this, a 2018 report profiled the barriers to social inclusion, identifying those with disability as an at-risk group for exclusion. This involves being excluded from the workforce and the impact this has, both socially and economically (McGuinness et al., 2018).

A study by Scanlon and Doyle (2018) investigated a supported model of transition from school to employment for young people with intellectual disabilities. Of particular interest in the findings was the lack of understanding that young people and their families had about what choices they had and how to access information. Richards and Flynn (2000), in a paper exploring the barriers to supporting employment, highlighted the role of support staff. They also discuss the impact when there are difficulties with accessing information about work or when staff have limited expectations of people actually getting employment. Therefore, for people with intellectual disabilities, the barriers to gaining employment can be significant and can be linked to the difficulties they may experience in accessing education at all levels. There is a link between access to education and employment. Educational institutions are seen as having an essential role in providing a skilled workforce, as well as increasing access to education for all citizens.

American authors Hart, Grigal and Weir have written extensively on the importance of education for those with intellectual disabilities, and highlight many of the benefits of education, stating

Benefits can be measured by growth in academic and personal skill-building, employment, self-advocacy, and self-confidence (Hart, Grigal and Weir 2010, p. 134).

These views were reflected in a 2012 Republic of Ireland Policy document, **New Directions**, which identified access to further education as central

to making sure that people can advance their learning throughout their lives. Vocational training and employment opportunities are a key element of the spectrum of opportunities for adults with disabilities (Kinsella 2012, p. 114).

The DCU Ability project is working to address both the areas of education and employment. The focus is on advancing social inclusion by supporting young people with disabilities to become career-ready. This involves building skills, capacity and independence, providing bridges and supports into work while engaging employers and supporting them to provide meaningful work experiences. Here the project is explained from development to implementation, and the challenges experienced by the team.

DCU Ability

The DCU Ability project is one of 27 projects co-financed by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020. The fund is administered and managed through Pobal, who work on behalf of the Government in the Republic of Ireland to support social inclusion and development. The Faculty of Science and Health, the Office of Civic Engagement and the Disability and Learning Support Service in Dublin City University worked with a service provider for people with intellectual disabilities, to develop the initial proposal for the project. The core aim was promoting the employability of young people with disabilities while offering opportunities to engage in a university-based project. A further aim was to harness the University facilities and expertise, to create a sustainable model of best practice. Having access to a number of campuses would enhance opportunities for learners to gain valuable work experience as well as sample student life.

Project Development

Once funds had been secured, the next step was getting the project team together. An academic-led process with support from the Head of Civic Engagement and staff from the Disability and Learning Support Service in DCU. The recruited team included a project manager, occupational therapist, careers advisor and tutor. Later in the project, a speech and language therapist joined the team. Getting the project manager on board as soon as possible was essential and the task of recruiting the other team members followed. Having the team in place allowed the project move to the more detailed development of course content and plan for student recruitment and delivery. St Michaels' House staff provided essential support and guidance throughout the development stage.

Student recruitment involved contacting local service providers and providing information sessions for interested learners and their supporters. Word of mouth became one of the most common ways of potential learners hearing about the course, and the network of Ability projects also offered a source of information sharing. As more people became aware of the project, applications were received from people attending many different services, with the majority of people attending a service for people with intellectual disabilities. The first group of learners began in March 2019 and the final group of learners commenced in January 2020.

Throughout the project, the project team received support from the strategic partner and also from an Advisory Committee comprised of internal and external people with expertise in education, training and employment.

Programme Details

The course structure, content and format were continually adapted to suit the learners. Over time, a 'train-place-train' model of learning was developed, where learners attend campus-based classes, followed by a period of work experience placement across the university campuses. All of the team are involved in the classroom-based and work experience-placement elements of the course.

The 'train-place-train' course was curtailed due to the onset of Covid-19 restrictions, with work experience elements being cut short, and the remainder of the course being conducted remotely through 'home learning packs'. A remote learning course was then developed for the duration of the Covid-19 restrictions.

The campus-based course involved a comprehensive intake process, with the team working with the potential learner to see if the project would meet their needs. Generally, throughout the project, a learner-centred approach was then taken. Learners were encouraged to give feedback, which was then used to make changes in design and delivery.

The course objectives focused on:

- **Enabling learners to build their knowledge and understanding of work**
- **Make choices about work**
- **Build understanding of learner's strengths and abilities**
- **Identify and practice work-related skills**
- **Undertake a work experience placement**
- **Reflect on work experience placement, and develop tools for future work and progression.**

Typically, learners would attend DCU for three half-days per week over a period of up to 16 weeks. Teaching

activities were led by the course tutor. The speech and language therapist implemented a specialised programme to support the learners to problem-solve appropriate behaviours in social situations. The careers advisor was involved in interview preparation skills, and the occupational therapist was involved in enabling learners to learn about their skills and interests and prepare information about placement supports. Other staff members were involved in teaching health and safety, and manual handling.

Before commencing, the programme learners all have an initial occupational therapy and vocational assessment. They then undertake a 6-month training programme with elements of classroom based activities and work placement. Classroom content includes health and safety at work; CV and interview preparation; communication and interpersonal skills in the workplace; career planning, and resilience and lifestyle balance.

Employer Engagement

Preparing and undertaking a work experience placement was an important part of the campus-based DCU Ability course, as it provided an opportunity for learners to apply the learning from the classroom, and further develop their skills for work in a 'real world' context. Placement matching was led by the careers advisor, in consultation with the team in order to identify placement opportunities that best matched learner's interests. Prior to starting work experience placement, an 'All About Me at Work' document was created, which detailed important information about each learner, their abilities and support needs for work. Individualised supports for placement were created, such as visual instructions, timetables or other prompts.

The DCU Ability team met with campus-based employers who facilitated work experience placements for employer support sessions. In these sessions, employers could review the learner's 'All About me at Work' to learn more about the learners, and the team could address any questions or queries. The DCU Ability team were involved in regular monitoring and review of work experience placements and gathered feedback from employers and learners following placements.

After DCU Ability

DCU Ability aimed to provide learners with a summary of their 'highlights' of their time in DCU, and a copy of their 'All About Me at Work' documents that can be used when searching for future work opportunities. The team also developed a 'Next Steps' resource, that enables learners and their support people to keep working to identify work opportunities within their local community.

Challenges and Conclusions

The DCU Ability project has met a number of challenges along the way. A particular challenge was Covid-19, which resulted in the courses moving online and removing the work experience element. Prior to this, the project had to contend with some operational challenges such as timely recruitment of staff, ensuring the budget was adhered to and providing regular reports to the funders. It was also a challenge to ensure that learners met the eligibility requirements by marketing the project to the correct groups. Some applicants were disappointed, as they did not meet the eligibility requirements of the funder, such as being above the age range. The different abilities of the learners required the team to be both flexible and innovative in their teaching and methods of supporting each student.

The final challenges are complex, as the future of projects such as these will depend on research to prove their worth and on funding to ensure their sustainability.

The DCU Ability team have learnt many lessons along the way. Recommendations for others include taking all the support offered, being creative, and being willing to embrace changing situations. Most of all celebrating every achievement, big and small.

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