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Marion Brown

Principal Sports Officer, Fingal County Council.

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Students and Work Experience Programmes

Marion Brown

Principal Sports Officer, Fingal County Council.

Abstract

Students are often reluctant to become involved in work experience programmes, preferring instead to devote their time to further study or, to work in (often) non- related paid employment. Many students may think that having a degree is a tremendous asset and, is the only requirement needed to successfully secure employment in their chosen field. This article will discuss the advantages of work experience and provide a concrete example of one programme attended by third year students as part of the Special Populations module of Sports Management and Coaching Course. ITB, in a unique partnership with Fingal County Council Sports Office, has developed a practical work experience programme that can provide students with an insight into particular working environments and help build relevant useful skills that cannot be taught in the classroom. This initiative allows students to gain experience working with people with disabilities. Working under the direction of Fingal County Council's Sports Conditioning Officer the students were involved in a ten week programme, learning how to plan and deliver a range of activities aimed to assist the participants to develop fine and gross motor skills.

1. The term “work experience”

There are a number of definitions for the term “work experience”. Crebert et al. (2004) sums it up as “any experience that a person gains while working in a specific field or occupation”, but the expression is widely used to mean a type of volunteer work that is commonly intended for young people, often students, to get a feel for professional working environments” .

Many students participate in third level education with a view to graduating with a degree which can fill their Curriculum Vitae. However, practical work experience as part of a student’s studies may have a positive effect on their employability. Dahlgren et al. (2006), states that the transition from the world of higher education into the world of work is complex contending that there are few studies, which examine the requirements of employers and the value of work experience. However, a recent poll, taken by studentgems.com in 2010 of 1,561 managing directors, across the UK, states that 61 per cent of employers are more likely to recruit an applicant who has some type of relevant work experience.

2. The benefits to be gained from work experience

There is no doubt that there are many benefits to be gained from work experience, for the student, the employer and perhaps for the educational Institution. In a study by Crebert et al. (2004) a selected group of third level graduates from the fields of Microelectronic Engineering; Criminology & Criminal Justice and Leisure Studies were asked about their views and experience of the impact work placement made to the development of their generic skills. The graduates' response showed that they greatly benefited from their work experience. They gained many skills which they transferred to their subsequent employment.

For the student, it can provide the opportunity to sample different types of employment and to learn first-hand what happens in a typical day on the job. This may assist the student to make more informed choices. Relevant work experience can also assist the student to make the transition from education to work and to learn the skills required by prospective employers. It

can help to enhance the participating student's self-confidence, maturity and their interpersonal skills. Practical working experience may help build useful skills that cannot be taught in the classroom as well as, making contacts and perhaps building relationships that the student would not otherwise encounter. In addition the knowledge gained from this could enhance a CV or job application and particularly during the interview process, help the student to display a sound understanding of the role they are applying for.

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council carried out a study in 2009, which found that many graduates were technically proficient but not work ready (ACSF, 2009). It reported that a large number (approx.70%) of the graduates interviewed wished they had taken up more work experience opportunities.

There is also anecdotal evidence that employers often look more favourably on candidates who have gained a basic understanding of their business sector and know what it's like to be in a work environment. This is certainly the case in Fingal Sports Office, relevant work experience and volunteering in a sporting environment will make the candidate stand out more favourably than those holding similar qualifications but having no working experience noted on the CV.

The employer by offering and accepting students on work experience programmes may benefit by increasing the profile of career opportunities within their organisation(s) and, perhaps, in some cases, changing unwarranted stereotyped views, of either the job or the company, within the student population. Employers may also use student work experience as a means of raising their organisation's profile in the community. In addition it can provide a valuable means of creating a positive image of the company amongst the students and perhaps, teachers, parents and existing employees.

The Institution encouraging work experience programmes may gain from the linkages with various organisations, as is the case with Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and Fingal County Council, where a strong partnership between the two organisations is developing. In addition there may be other positive factors including improved student reviews and feedback, as graduates manage to secure suitable employment.

3. ITB and Fingal County Council

In November 2013 ITB and Fingal County Council worked in partnership to provide a ten week work experience programme, which would add value to the students studying the Special Populations Module of Sports Management and Coaching Course. Fingal Sports Office is based within the Community Culture and Sports Division of Fingal County Council. Using sport as a means of community development, it coordinates and delivers a number of varied programmes aimed at reaching out to the entire community. The Sports Office Vision for Sport in Fingal is: "Fingal – the most active, innovative, dynamic sporting community in Ireland". The Mission is to support sport in Fingal by: "Increasing opportunities to participate in sport; delivering excellent innovative programmes; providing training, leading and raising the profile of sport in the County".

4. The aims of the programme

To further this vision Fingal County Council employed a Sports Conditioning Officer, the only Local Authority in Ireland to do so. The programme was designed by Harm Jager, who holds a Degree in Sports Science and a Diploma in Sports Conditioning, in addition to being

an international coach. The Sports Conditioning programme was initially developed to cater for children and young people be they able bodied or disabled, sporty or not sporty.

The main aims of the programme are:

- a) To train children to become proficient in the movement skills necessary to participate in sports and physical activity *for life*.
- b) To build self-esteem and confidence in young people to encourage them to participate in positive pastimes.
- c) To provide leaders, carers and teachers with the skills and confidence to deliver a Sport Conditioning programme.

5. Specialised training module - Sports Conditioning

Sports Conditioning is a specialised training module, designed to give participants of all abilities the fundamental movement skills and confidence to enable them to actively participate in sports and physical activity. The Sports Conditioning Programme is proving that sport really is for all regardless of ability. Gateman (2005) contends that it is important to introduce the concept of fundamental movement skills in order to provide the participant with the skills for lifelong sport and physical activity.

As Moody et al (2013) explains, fundamental movement skills can be categorised into three groups, Loco-motor skills (walking, running, hopping) Manipulative skills (these involve controlling objects with the hand, foot or implement e.g. throw and catch) Stability skills (body balancing statically or dynamically). Such skill acquisition makes it easier for the participant to engage in sports and physical activities thus helping to increase confidence and self esteem to even the weakest, “non sporty” participants. Therefore this is an ideal programme for the ITB students to implement.

This ten week programme involving four students was delivered in Daughters of Charity St.Vincent’s Centre, Navan Road, Dublin 7. The primary objective of this programme is to help the participants with varying degrees of disability to develop and maintain basic fine and gross motor skills. The students, after initial training in the basics of Sports Conditioning were responsible for planning and implementing coaching sessions for twenty Service Users with different degrees of physical and intellectual disabilities aged between 13 – 60 years old to develop and improve motor skills. The students were also tasked with liaising with ten Service Workers to provide them with a number of suggestions of activities suitable for the participants. Students were supervised by Fingal County Council, Sports Conditioning Officer, Owen McGrath. Feedback and evaluations was carried out at different stages during the programme.

Working with twenty Service Users certainly created many challenges for the four students who elected to work on this programme. The students had little or no experience of working with this special population group. The students had to work collectively as they were tasked with planning and implementing each of the ten sessions for the twenty participants. This work included researching a particular range of exercises each week to ensure that the participants would be capable of successfully participating. They had to ensure that the sessions were interesting and varied by providing a range of different exercises and games in order to capture the imagination of the Service Users. They had to break down each component of the activity into small achievable goals and teach / demonstrate to the participants.

They had to produce a detailed session plan for discussion with the Sports Conditioning Officer in advance of programme delivery each week. “The session plans had to be very detailed and specific as each of the twenty Service Users had very different intellectual and physical needs”, explained Owen McGrath who stated that he was very impressed by the standard of the plans produced by the students.

6. Engaging with the Service Users

Engaging with the Service Users has helped the students build self-confidence, particularly when working with this special population. They did see the fruit of their labours during the sessions as the participants’ ability and confidence increased substantially as a result of their work. In addition, the students were starting to build relationships with the participants; this resulted in Siobhán, one of the Service Workers commenting: “we are grateful to students, who worked hard at ensuring that the Service Users were allowed to develop at their own level. The programme help improved their motor skills but more importantly they looked forward to the students coming in every Friday”.

The students gained many skills during this short work experience programme. They experienced first-hand what it would be like to work with people with varying degrees of disability. They also learned how to research and develop a progressive session plan. Standing up in front of twenty participants and a number of Service Workers to talk them through the plan, teach and demonstrate the exercises and activities was quite a daunting task for them at first, but by the end of the sessions it could be noted how much their confidence in delivery and speaking to the group had increased immeasurably. “The students grew significantly into their role and by the 4th week they were planning, organising and implementing the entire session based on the individual needs of each Service User” stated Owen McGrath.

Another distinctive element of the programme involved the students liaising with the Service Workers. This involved the students having to research and present to the ten key Service Workers a range of exercises, games and activities that would be suited to the Service Users progressive skill development in a fun-learning environment. The students were also involved in open discussion with question and answer sessions with the Service Workers. This gave the service workers the confidence and skills they needed to further develop the participants (and future Service Users) in fundamental movement skills on a daily basis. This creates an excellent legacy to the programme.

This programme has provided many benefits, to the students, who gained practical knowledge of a genuine work situation. Crebert et al. (2004) states that graduates believe their workplace learning helps them build their skill base, learn from their own mistakes, and, perhaps, most importantly develop relationships and learn how to interact efficiently with colleagues. They conclude that work placement plays a vital role in the preparation of graduates for employment.

7. Feedback from the ITB students

The feedback from the ITB students has been very positive, with one student, Kevin, who had very little experience of working with disability groups commenting “to be given this unique opportunity to work with (this) special population and their Service Workers was quite a challenge” he felt he had grown into the role, it “became a very enjoyable and worthwhile

experience”. Another student Stephen commented that the work experience programme provided an “enjoyable challenge because every week is different and it is definitely something I would consider as a career opportunity in a sporting capacity”.

The Daughters of Charity St.Vincent’s Centre, Service Users and Workers gained from the programme delivery and training. This programme has also resulted in community gain, initially by assisting the Service Users to develop their fundamental movement skills. The Service Worker training element has resulted in the programme being sustainable and the legacy going on far beyond the programme. In addition the Service Workers can use these newfound skills by introducing the exercises and fun games in the home and community environment (with family, children and grandchildren). This may help children to become more active. One Service Worker, Keith, explained that he worked with a local sports club and would be introducing some of the Sports Conditioning activities in that setting as well.

8. Conclusion

This programme aimed at giving students an opportunity to gain relevant work experience has numerous benefits. Fingal County Council is delighted to work in partnership with ITB. We look forward to developing a range of programmes and collaborations that will ultimately lead to positive community development for the citizens of Fingal.

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