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Post-school education and training for students with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

Life-long learning is essential for persons with intellectual disabilities wishing to enter the labour market. This paper describes an integrated curriculum provided by a leading agency in Northern Ireland that provides ‘real work’ training to students aged 16 to 40 years. It has three, inter-linking components: 1) training courses leading to accredited vocational awards; 2) realistic work experience in social enterprises managed by the agency and 3) supported work in mainstream employment with on-the-job training from job coaches. The critical features of the model were validated through interviews with a range of stakeholders including trainees, family carers and disability specialists.

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1. Introduction

Internationally growing numbers of people with intellectual disability aspire to have a job on leaving full-time education (World Health Organisation, 2011). Indeed in low income countries this is an economic necessity. Until recently, many would not have been considered to benefit from vocational training or be able to access any form of employment (Brown, 2010). Latterly the United Kingdom Government (Department of Health, 2009), in common with other European nations has made a major commitment to boost the employment prospects of this group in line with their obligations under the United Nations Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009).

This policy shift is based on accruing research evidence of the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of boosting employment for persons with disabilities (Beyer & Robinson, 2009). As yet though, there is limited experience nationally and internationally as to how training and support services can best be developed to meet the needs of school-leavers with more severe disabling conditions, such as intellectual disability and Autism. Particularly challenging is the feasibility of having a coherent training model that addresses the variety of needs among these trainees while delivering the diversity of learning outcomes that are required in order for them to obtain paid employment. Three specific issues stand out. 1. The extended period of training and support that these trainees require due to their cognitive impairments. Many mainstream employment programmes are time-limited with trainers unfamiliar with the necessary curricula adaptations that would be required for these trainees. 2. The need for close working with family carers and other support services in education, health and social services in order to

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address the wider needs that can be obstacles to employment. 3. Overcoming negative perceptions among employers and co-workers so that more work opportunities are open to these trainees (Dewson et al., 2005).

A promising way forward is to examine the lessons to be learnt from existing models of good practice that have proven effective. This paper uses program theory (Rossi et al., 2004) to describe one such model that the Orchardville Society in Northern Ireland has evolved over 15 years of providing vocational training and employment support to over 1,000 persons with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities; including those with Autism Spectrum Disorders. The Society is a voluntary organisation supported by European Social Fund and matched funding from the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust and the Department of Employment & Learning. It employs 35 staff; serves around 250 trainees per year and has an annual turn-over of around £1.2m(€1.4 m). Around 20% of trainees are placed in some form of employment. The organisation is highly regarded nationally and within Europe and its model has been emulated in various countries.

The aim of this paper is to describe the critical features of model based on a validation study that was undertaken with the main stake-holder groups. Documenting the conceptual model underpinning services can serve several uses. For example it should assist in identifying staffing requirements and determining the operating costs of discrete elements in the model. It is also useful beyond the organisation, in that it can inform the development of similar services nationally and trans-nationally. It should also provide an analytical framework for assessing the quality of service provision in response to the particular needs of the client group with intellectual and other disabilities but possibly also for others with special or additional needs, such as persons with mental health problems (Page et al., 2009).

2. Validating the model

The senior staff of Orchardville prepared an initial visual representation of the model through guided group work and discussion. They also identified the main stake-holders who could comment on the value of the model for the client group and their perceptions of its critical features. The first author then conducted individual or group interviews with over 40 persons including: trainees who were members of the User Forum (N=10); two groupings of parents - those whose young people had recently started at Orchardville (N=12) and those with relatives who had attended for some time (N=6); a group of employer representatives, mostly HR staff, with whom the Society arranges work placements (N=5) and senior officials from health and social services, special schools, a College of Further Education, the government Department of Employment and Learning and voluntary organisations providing similar services (N=9).

The aims of the interviews were to gain their insights into the critical features of a model for the vocational training and employment creation of persons with learning disabilities and their assessment as to the coherency and efficacy of the Orchardville model. The interviewer 'walked' the informants through a diagram of the model developed by staff and took detailed notes on their responses. In general the interviews lasted around 60 minutes. The information gained was analysed thematically. A summary report was prepared and presented to senior staff who then reviewed and redefined aspects of the model which is described in Figure 1.

3. The Orchardville Model

All the stakeholders confirmed that the model is rooted in the social model of disability with the aim of removing barriers and creating opportunities for trainees. Moreover the principles of supported employment are embedded in its operations (see www.supportedemployment.net). It is person-centred in its approach; identifying and responding to the particular needs of each trainee. Attendance at Orchardville is not confined to set periods of time but can be adjusted to meet the training needs of individuals. The organisation works in partnership with a range of agencies and has established systems of regularly consulting with trainees and family carers. All informants agreed that the organisational values were rights-based and reflected modern thinking (World Health Organisation, 2011).

The main features of the model were endorsed by all or nearly all the persons interviewed (see Figure 1). Further details are available on the website (www.orchardville.com) or from the authors.

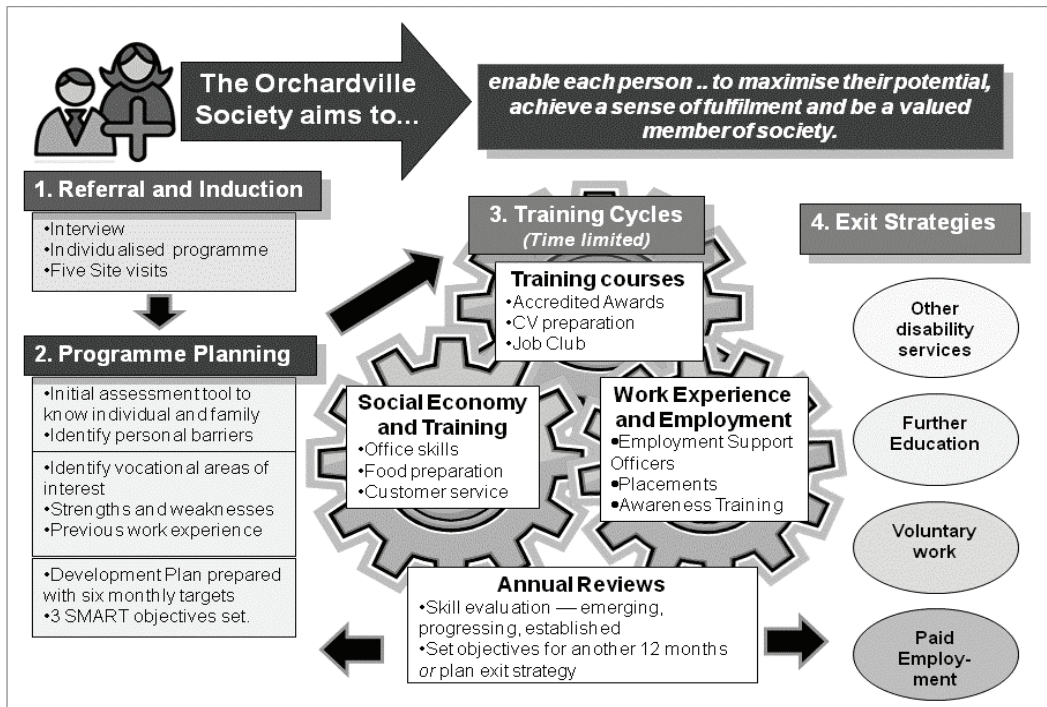


Figure 1: The Orchardville Model of Vocational Training and Employment

3.1. Referral and Induction

The organisation interviews all applicants and family carers. The main priority is to assess motivation to obtain employment. An individualised induction programme is prepared for those wishing to pursue their application and this includes visits to all five job locations provided by the Society. This provides opportunities for each party – the applicant and Orchardville staff - to assess the match between the service and the applicant’s aspirations. If there is uncertainty about the match, the induction period can be extended. The organisation aims to avoid trainees leaving the programme early but equally wants to give all applicants a fair chance. Informants strongly endorsed this feature of the service.

3.2. Programme Planning

The second strand involves the creation of an individual training plan for each trainee. This is built around a detailed assessment tool that the organisation has created to integrate information obtained from trainees, family members but primarily from staff ratings and observations. The initial plan is developed over a period of weeks in which the trainee samples different jobs and training courses. This helps to identify vocational preferences and potential barriers to gaining employment. The resulting plan specifies the selected learning targets for the coming six months and identifies three specific objectives. The plan forms an agreement between the organisation and the trainee and identifies the responsibilities of both parties.

3.3. Training Cycles

Uniquely the organisation offers three sets of training opportunities. Trainees can spend varying periods of time within each cycle either within the same week or over a period of time.

3.3.1. Training courses

The organisation provides a suite of classroom-based training courses relating to personal development (e.g. travelling by public transport) as well as vocational outcomes (e.g. use of computers). All courses lead to a nationally accredited award (assessed mostly on portfolios) which trainees can list on their CV. In addition the organisation will arrange for trainees to take suitable courses provided at a local College of Further Education. Most training courses are organised for one whole day for varying number of weeks and they are tutored by staff from the organisation.

3.3.2. Social Economy and Training

The organisation manages three social businesses – two cafes and a business centre - which operate as a service to the public; generating income to offset some training costs but crucially providing real-work experience to trainees in an environment that can be more supportive to their learning needs than mainstream businesses. Staffs working in the social enterprises have a dual function of managing the business while acting as trainers. Trainees rotate around the three settings and experience a range of jobs within each setting in line with their individual training plans.

3.3.3. Work experience and employment

The organisation follows the supported employment model and has staff with the dedicated role of finding part-time work experience placements in mainstream businesses in line with the trainee's employment aspirations and training needs. They are also responsible for job profiling, job matching and providing in situ training on a 'one-to-one' basis. This support will continue over repeat visits until the trainee competent and confident in the job. Once trained the employment support staff maintain regular contact with employers and co-workers. Placements are changed to widen trainee's experiences. Some placements result in paid employment for the trainee.

3.3.4. Annual Reviews

In addition to the ongoing reviews within each training cycle, a more formal annual review is held of each trainee's progress. Revisions to the training plan will be agreed and modifications made to the content and time spent in each of the training cycles. However for those trainees whose motivation or progress has waned, plans will be made for them to exit from the service.

3.4. Exit strategies

A particular consideration throughout all the training is on obtaining paid work for the trainee; usually on a part-time basis. This is the preferred exit strategy for trainees and is primarily facilitated by the employment support staff. The organisation will maintain contact to provide any further support that is required. When paid work is not available and no further training is deemed necessary, trainees will be guided towards other options such as voluntary work, further education or training courses or placements in other services settings.

4. Critical features of the Model

The stake-holders interview helped to identify certain critical features of the model. These were:

- The focus on trainees with more severe disabilities (or those "further from the labour market" as one informant put it). They cannot easily fit into employment preparation programmes aimed at other groups.
- Having one agency providing a range of services is preferable to have different agencies delivering discrete functions. This aspect was especially valued by parents.
- Nationally accredited training courses are offered that confirm trainee's competences to prospective employers.

- The Social economy enterprises provided realistic training opportunities but in a less pressured environment than mainstream settings.
- A large pool of mainstream placements has been built up over the years which widens the training opportunities that can be provided in mainstream settings. The organisation enjoys a good reputation with employers

Two areas of improvement were noted to the functioning of the model. First, increasing the number of training places that are available. In part this was in response to the growing numbers of school-leavers but also because teenagers with more severe disabilities also deserve the opportunity to access vocational training. An increase could be achieved by having greater through-put of trainees but this is dependent on more of them being able to secure and sustain employment. The second improvement related to more alternative placements for persons who are unable or unwilling to enter employment. This reinforces the need for this model of service to be located within an overarching range of service provision for school-leavers with special needs (Hudson, 2006).

5. Discussion

This model can be commended to service planners in other countries as it is well suited to the needs of the client population and is in line with their aspirations and those of their family carers. However it is likely to be one that is more easily implemented by non-governmental agencies as they can work flexibly across sectors such as health, education and employment as well generating income from social enterprises or grants. In addition the approach adopted to the evaluation can also be commended to other organisations as a means of assisting them to define and refine their model of service. The participative and iterative approach used with the senior management group was particularly effective in challenging their practice using the stake-holder's views.

Further research is underway to define other processes inherent in the Model. The various staff roles are very different from those commonly found in social care services. Their job descriptions and person specifications need to be re-examined alongside mentoring and training procedures. Future studies might also examine the leadership and managerial functions that this model of service requires as these are likely to be crucial in sustaining and evolving the model in response to changing circumstances. Delineating the service model also makes possible a methodology for determining service costs so that comparisons can be made for elements within the model and with other types of services made available to this trainee group. Moreover, this would provide a means for assessing the cost-benefits that accrue from the Model (Sayce, 2011).

Although many challenges remain, the aspirations towards making employment a reality for more people with intellectual disabilities can become a reality through the critical evaluation of innovative and creative service models.

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