

Cross-Border Conferences on Supported Employment for People with a Learning Disability

Two cross-border conferences were held in Dundalk in the Republic of Ireland and Bangor in Northern Ireland, attended by approximately 50 adult learners with general learning disabilities along with service staff. These were funded by the EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund and organised by the A.C.E.T. consortium (Belfast) and Hilltop Services (Dundalk). The conferences focused on supported employment for people with learning disabilities. An external evaluation was undertaken. This found that the conferences had been valuable in giving participants opportunities to socialise and in highlighting key aspects of job finding and training. The possible improvements identified included better follow-up, more focused programmes for the conferences and empowering trainees to plan and organise their own meetings.

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INTRODUCTION

Now that the Belfast Agreement is being fully implemented in Northern Ireland, there are likely to be increased cross-border initiatives. What lessons can be learned from past endeavours, especially in the field of special educational needs and life-long learning? Services for people with intellectual or learning disabilities have developed differently on both sides of the border. In Northern Ireland, statutory organisations with responsibilities for diverse clientele provide these services under two different administrative systems: namely Education and Library Boards and Health and Social Service Trusts. In addition, colleges of further education have developed specific courses for people with learning disabilities on both a part-time and full-time basis. These usually link with accredited training schemes such as National Vocational Qualifications. It is only recently that services have begun to be provided by voluntary and community agencies often funded by statutory agencies but with grants from the European Union and charitable trusts such as the National Lottery.

By contrast, services in the Republic of Ireland are focused specifically on this client group and are largely provided by the one, non-statutory agency (Curry, 1998). These voluntary agencies provide the full range of services to this client group and their families, including schooling, vocational training and sheltered workshops. They are funded mainly through block grants from Government with additional income from E.U. funds and their own fund-raising. However, colleges of further education have rarely been involved in the provision of training courses

and there is no equivalent to the accredited training courses that exist in the British system.

Nonetheless there is marked agreement between the two governments as to the goals they hold for learning disability services. For example, the Department of Health and Social Services in Needs and abilities: A policy for the intellectually disabled (1990) noted it was “the right of every person with an intellectual disability to as fulfilling and normal a life as possible” (p. iii). Likewise the Northern Ireland Department of Health and Social Services Review (1995) stated

The aim of Government policy for people with a learning disability should be inclusion ... which stresses citizenship, inclusion in society, inclusion in decision-making, participation so far as is practicable in mainstream education, employment and leisure. (p. i)

Hence the two systems share common goals although they have evolved different service systems that have differential strengths and weaknesses but in the field of vocational training and supported employment these appear to complement each other. There is therefore a strong case to be made for increasing the contact between the two service systems and for exchanging knowledge and skills in the provision of training courses and supported employment.

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

People with learning disabilities have great difficulty accessing paid employment. For example, in the United Kingdom it is estimated that only 7% of this population are employed (DHSS, 1999) while in the Republic of Ireland, it is estimated at 9% (National Intellectual Database Report, 2001). However it has been shown through various demonstration projects in Europe, North America and Australasia, that given appropriate training and support, sizeable proportions of these individuals are capable of undertaking paid work (Beyer & Kilsby, 1997). Sharing experiences on these new styles of services would be mutually beneficial to service providers in both parts of Ireland.

SOCIAL ISOLATION OF PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Friendships are vital for a personally satisfying quality of life but for most people with learning disabilities on the island of Ireland, their lives are often segregated from wider society. They tend to have fewer friends with fewer opportunities to meet people and become involved in recreation activities. Most of their leisure time is spent on home-based pursuits. Loneliness and low self-esteem often result. Few will have had opportunities to visit the other parts of the island unless their carers are inclined to do so. For them the opportunity to take part in social events such as residential conferences is all the more valuable and appreciated and for many it would be their first opportunity to meet people from the other part of the island.

Nor have they been immune to the ‘troubles’. Many are avid watchers of television and will have heard reports of violence along with the views of politicians and community leaders. Some will have been caught up in local incidents. Although no studies appear to have explored the impact of the troubles on this particular client group, they too probably share the same prejudices and

misapprehensions of their non-disabled peers. However, they have even less opportunity to participate in cross-community events due to their social isolation which in turn is further compounded by the isolation of service provision in the two parts of the island as noted above. Thus, there is a need to proactively plan for these citizens to have access to the same opportunities for cross-border contacts as their non-disabled peers.

THE TWO CONFERENCES

The conferences were planned with two student groups in mind. The first group were students in the supported employment programme organised by Hill Top Services, Dundalk (15 persons in all, of whom 14 attended one or both conferences). The second group consisted of students taking the Work and Life Skills Course at the Belfast Institute of Higher and Further Education who were also linked with services in South and East Belfast (36 students). Work experience is an integral part of this course.

The Planning Committee

The project funding allowed for the formation of a planning committee which met on seven occasions. There was a core membership of five staff (four from Belfast and one from Dundalk) with student representation varying so that a range of people could have experience of the meetings and visits to services. In all, seven students from Dundalk and six from Belfast attended at least one committee meeting with a further two staff from Dundalk attending a meeting in Belfast.

The committee had responsibility for planning all aspects of the conference. The views of students were actively sought in planning the programme. Student members of the committee also took responsibility for particular tasks at the conference such as typing forms, registering delegates, meeting speakers, opening the conference, leading groups and speaking. Staff members took responsibility for booking hotels, inviting speakers, informing family carers, arranging transport and visits. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the responsibility for the planning of the conferences fell on staff. Many of the student delegates had no experience of attending conferences, let alone organising one. Hence it was a valuable learning experience for them.

Conference Themes

The first conference, held in Dundalk, focussed on student perspectives on employment for people with learning disabilities. These were introduced by a keynote speaker from the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment and followed up in a series of seven workshops of which participants could select two to attend. The topics covered were

- Working with a job coach
- Employment opportunities
- Getting on in the workplace
- Managing money
- Rights in employment

The programme also included visits to two work sites in Dundalk and one day was devoted to cultural visits to Newgrange, Dublin and Dundalk. The Dundalk conference was attended by a total of 72 staff and students, with 44 people from Northern Ireland staying in the hotel.

The second conference was held in Bangor, Co Down and was attended by a total of 67 participants with 20 persons (three staff and 17 students) travelling by train from Dundalk to attend this event. This one was more focussed, with the emphasis being on vocational profiling and matching jobs to people's talents and preferences. There was a speaker from the Irish Union of Supported Employment and two workshops.

Employment visits were arranged to the City Hospital, Royal Mail and First Trust Bank, all locations in which northern students were placed on work experience as well as ones that provided a range of work opportunities. Conference participants used public transport on these visits. During both conferences, the students had to complete a Health and Safety checklist about the hotel facilities, make a report on work site visits and complete a conference evaluation form. These were later used as evidence of competence for accredited awards. As both conferences took place in hotels, participants had use of all the leisure facilities such as swimming pools and health suites. These were availed of by many of the students.

Evaluation of the Conferences

An external evaluation of the conferences was undertaken (by Roy McConkey) in which interviews were conducted with nearly 30 students from the services in Dundalk and Belfast who had attended the conferences, along with three staff who had been involved in planning the conferences and two managers of services involved in the project. Meetings were also held with the planning committee on three occasions. The findings will be reported in two sections, what people liked and what could be improved.

WHAT PEOPLE LIKED ABOUT THE CONFERENCES

Nearly everyone thought the following were good points about the conferences.

Opportunities for socialisation

The conferences were valued for the opportunity they provided for students to socialise with each other and with staff. The students enjoyed themselves, making full use of the recreational facilities in the hotel. They made new friends as they mixed freely with one another and staff reported that the students' self-confidence grew. The staff also saw students in a new light as these comments illustrate:

You get to see another side of the students than what you see of them in the day centre. You socialise together, share recreational activities like swimming and sauna. Lots of barriers come down. There's more inclusion all round. Belfast staff.

It was an eye-opener for us. The students were far more capable than you think. They were so independent. They dressed up for dinner and were well behaved, even those who took a drink. Dundalk staff.

A 'normal' experience

The conferences were a 'normal' experience with many different learning opportunities gained through staying in a hotel. Students learnt to cope, as did the hotel staff and other guests! The hotel facilities were very good. For many students it was one of the few times they had stayed in a hotel.

The students learnt about employment

Students learnt more about getting a job through visits, giving personal accounts of their own job experiences and group discussions. This was reinforced by the worksheets which students completed on the group discussions and the visits they made.

We had a discussion about jobs and how different people got jobs. People talked about the jobs they did. Dundalk student.

The visits were very good. It was interesting seeing different jobs. Belfast student.
Two conferences

Having two conferences meant that friendships made at the first event could be renewed and the topics introduced in the first conference could be followed up. This was especially appreciated by the students as they had so enjoyed the first event.

At the second conference there was more student talk and feedback. It was more natural. Their previous experience of a conference helped. Belfast staff.

North-South links were valued

Most of the family carers had no reservations about their son or daughter going to the conferences. However, a few students and one staff member did confess to having some reservations. The experience of travelling to the other part of the island removed most of these doubts.

I was a bit scared at first going down south but now can't see why people can't mix. There's absolutely no reason in my eyes that people can't mix. Belfast student.

They were decent people but I was afraid of going to that other country because of the bombs. Dundalk student.

Nevertheless one Dundalk student did say, “

I won't live in Belfast; it is not safe there."

Choice of topics

The topics covered by the conferences were well-chosen in that all the students had the common experiences of job-hunting or employment. Also many now are working. Although this is not directly attributable to the conferences it does mean that the people attending had the potential to work.

Planning Committee

The meetings of the planning committee were good opportunities for people to visit each other's services and for students to familiarise themselves with travelling and meeting new people. However, one staff member did note that the student members needed to be selected with care.

It is down to the ability of the students. Our folk found it difficult to discuss ideas for the conference and to share them with other people when they came back to the centre. Dundalk Staff

Publicity about the conferences

Four articles appeared in the local newspapers around Dundalk after the conferences. This presented a positive image of the capabilities of the students and their potential as workers. Also a member of staff and three students (two from Belfast and one from Dundalk) gave a presentation at the annual conference of the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment.

THE IMPROVEMENTS THAT COULD BE MADE FOR FUTURE EVENTS

Staff and students made a number of suggestions for improvements that could be made for future events of this kind. By far the biggest number of comments centred around the lack of follow-up to the conferences and the desire of the students to have more conferences.

Trainees want to meet again and I'd like to see the groups coming together again.

The friendship and interaction could be lost. Dundalk manager.

The students keep asking to go back ... they would like to go on more residential.

They talk about the people they met. Their horizons were broadened. Dundalk staff.

Hence plans for keeping in contact need to be made from the start so that the conferences are part of developing ongoing contacts.

Conference Programme

Some people felt that there was too much in too short a time, especially for those students unused to conferences. The second conference was better and the workshop options were more focussed and people knew one another from the previous visit.

At the first conference it took a lot of time to overcome the students shyness and get them interacting. Maybe need more team-building time. Dundalk staff.

On the whole the students have few criticisms of the programme although some did comment

More clients should give speeches at the conferences. Dundalk student.

The next conference should have more on jobs- help in looking for a job. Dundalk student.

Choice of Participants

The staff from Dundalk felt that their students were less able at interacting than the Northern students and did not participate as fully in the sessions.

The workshops needed to be geared more to the ability level of our people so that they were meaningful to them. Dundalk managers.

Some suggestions were made for coping with the variation in abilities and past experiences that would be found in any student grouping: e.g. having a preliminary day when participants could meet prior to the conference; more staff available to support less able students; using simpler handouts. Smaller numbers attending might also help although this would have meant selecting among the students which ones could attend. The provision of more group sessions could also help the students' understanding rather than having keynote speeches.

Empowerment of students

Finally, it was striking when talking to the students, that whereas they were very keen to participate in such events in the future, they looked to the staff to organise them. Don't know if there will be any more. The Belfast crowd organise us. Dundalk student.

No idea if there will be any more. There's no more money to pay for them. Belfast student.

Some of the students would be very willing to be involved in organising other conferences but it appears they need to be given the permission and support of staff for this to happen. Equally the staff are conscious that the bulk of the responsibility for organising any future events would fall on them and many felt they did not have the time to devote to this at present.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conferences were very successful in bringing together staff and students from both sides of the border to explore issues relating to job knowledge and job-finding for people with learning disabilities. Various lessons were learned that would assist in the planning of similar events in the future and ideas were generated about how contacts could be maintained.

Staff/student exchange visits to services on both side