Peer Support Network for Work-Based Learners

The work-based learning subgroup of the NLP met on 31st March 2007 in Manchester. The subgroup was set up to respond to an issue raised by our work-based panel members that they lack the sense of community of college-based learners and can feel isolated from other learners. We undertook to explore options and solutions that would allow learners to network with one another. The purpose of the subgroup was to inform a commission to Becta to undertake a feasibility study to look at options for the establishment of a network/s.

The issues we want to address through a network

Work-based learners are more isolated than other learners in the FE system. They have limited interaction with colleges, student services or the NUS. This problem is amplified within work environments which do not share common procedures for addressing issues, and where learners have little time to chase things up. As a result of this situation, work-based learners face a number of significant challenges related to their studies:

- Feeling unsupported when you face course issues or personal issues
- Not being able to turn to peers when you are struggling with your work
- Not having other learners to share and build ideas with
- Low levels of confidence due to lack of support or encouragement
- Spending hours looking for the right information because there is no one to point you in the right direction
- Not being aware of how the quality of your course compares to other courses
- High drop out rates on some courses

A peer support network would help work-based learners to overcome these challenges. Such a network could benefit all learners doing NVQs and Apprenticeships, whatever ages they are. It might be especially beneficial for those who have been longer out of learning and need extra support.
**Possible e-solutions**

BECTA gave a presentation to the subgroup outlining two possible technological routes for the development of a peer support network. The first route was ‘communities of practice’ and the second route was ‘Web 2.0 technologies.’

In response to this presentation, the subgroup raised the following comments:

- The ‘communities of practice’ route seems broad for our purposes, because certain functional aspects of this model are not relevant to our objectives for a peer support network. For instance, we do not need a directory of membership, shared work space or document storage facility.
- There may well be sufficient technology in ‘Web 2.0’ to allow us to do what we want to do. There is free social networking software that would enable us to create a ‘community within a community’. However, it was noted that people tend to use these social communities for enjoyment not for work.
- The Open University online forum for learners is a potentially interesting example for us to look at.

**Vision**

If our peer support network was successful, in 2 years time we would expect to see:

- All work-based learners being aware of the network.
- Higher take-up of WBL opportunities as a result of the network being used as a source of advice and guidance about WBL courses.
- Reduced drop out rate among work-based learners.
- A stronger collective voice for work-based learners that is taken seriously. Ideally, the network would lead to other developments afterwards, e.g. a ‘National Union of Learners’ for WBL.
- Improved standards across the WBL sector as a result of tutors and others (e.g. QIA) using the network for quality improvement purposes.

**Success measures**

There are a number of key indicators that we could use to assess the success of the network:
• Work-based learners being aware of the network and using it as a source of support
• Work-based learners reporting that they feel that they are part of a wider community
• How much the network is being visited by people other than learners, such as providers and employers (this will indicate that the network is having an impact).
• Improvements in teaching and learning that work-based learners can notice over a period of time

Stakeholder engagement
Work-based learners would be the ultimate beneficiaries of the network, but a range of partners also have something to gain from the initiative, including providers, employers and government agencies. The subgroup made the following points in relation to these different stakeholders:

• The DfES would drive the project and bring the relevant stakeholders together to achieve broad buy-in (this should happen before the feasibility study).
• The LSC may provide assistance with the funding for maintenance. We would expect the learners to contribute to this network financially.
• It is critical that the network is developed in close collaboration with learners and providers.
• Providers would raise awareness of the network among learners, and they could help to manage the network. In particular, the Association of Learning Providers (ALP) may want to take a lead role. The positioning of the network is important for the provider audience, because they could be resistant if they felt learners were criticising them.
• We would also want to work with Sector Skills Councils, employers and trade unions.

Next steps to take this forward
• DfES to bring together key partners and gauge the levels support
• Becta/ DfES to develop the thinking about the key beneficiaries and their roles/ responsibilities
• DfES to formally commission Becta to undertake the feasibility study
• DfES to put together a steering group of relevant partners
• The outcomes of the feasibility study to be communicated to the minister later this year

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