Evaluation of the Learning and Skills Council’s Disability Equality Duty Support Programme

Executive Summary

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Of interest to LSC employers and providers
Further information
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Executive Summary

1 **The Learning and Skills Council’s (LSC) Disability Equality Duty support programme** was a national programme designed to support LSC-funded learning providers in the implementation of the Disability Equality Duty (DED). The programme was led by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) and other partners, and was delivered between November 2006 and September 2007. The programme was targeted primarily at senior managers, heads of adult and community learning (ACL) and practitioners responsible for implementing equality legislation. It sought to support providers in implementing their disability equality schemes (DES) and in promoting disability equality in their organisations.

2 The support programme, which reached providers in nine geographical regions across England, offered three strands of activity, supported by management and core teams. The strands of activity were: a series of regional workshops, action working project activity in each LSC region, and online support and information through a virtual learning environment (VLE).

3 As an integral part of programme activities, successes and weaknesses were evaluated as a means of informing future interventions, identifying key lessons learnt and ensuring progress towards disability equality for all participants. By analysing feedback, the **impact of the programme** is considered in terms of supporting providers in developing and implementing DES.

4 Research findings are considered in relation to three key areas: **reach**, **satisfaction** and **impact**. These findings provide insight into provider experience, and also pave the way for recommendations for future support programmes to promote equality in the sector. Findings under these three areas are summarised below.
Reach

5 The programme was successful in reaching and engaging both with its target audience of senior managers and those with responsibility for implementing equality legislation in further education (FE) colleges and ACL providers, and also with a range of other providers in the sector.

6 The most effective means of communication was through the use of flyers, but providers also learned about the programme from regional LSC staff and by accessing the information through the LSN website.

7 Analysis of the usage of the VLE showed that, while participants visited the VLE regularly, and while high numbers were recorded for viewing, the numbers posting materials and messages were far lower.

8 It is crucial to attract the right people with the relevant job roles and responsibilities in an organisation to the workshops to ensure maximum impact and reach.
Satisfaction
9 The majority of providers were satisfied with the delivery and content of the programme.
10 Providers talked about the usefulness and relevance of the programme in supporting them to implement their DES.
11 Matching the needs of all providers was identified as a weakness by some providers, particularly ACL providers, who considered that the shape and some of the content of the workshops favoured the needs of FE college providers over their own.
12 Some providers wanted more support on specific aspects of implementing their schemes, for example in developing impact assessments and equality audits.
13 Comments were made on how to improve the VLE, as well as on the need for more specific training to ensure the best use of the site as an interactive tool.
Impact

14 The vast majority of respondents thought the programme had helped them to move forward in their own practice.

15 The programme was most effective in raising awareness and in maintaining momentum on disability equality in the FE sector.

16 The programme had the most impact in providing reassurance and support, information about the DED and opportunities for networking and sharing good practice.

17 Providers commented on the value of networking and of building relationships with other providers, LSC regional staff and local and regional organisations.

18 The survey data shows that, after the programme was delivered, there was a significant decrease in numbers classifying themselves as ‘just starting out’, coupled with a significant increase in those who now rated their organisation as ‘making good progress’.

19 The majority of action working providers felt they had benefited from completing their projects, and several providers considered that the work they had achieved had had a significant impact on changing organisational practices.

20 The issue was raised of having a more differentiated approach in order to address the needs of providers who are at different stages on the journey to disability equality, as well as the needs of different types of providers.

21 Some providers did not think that the programme had made a significant difference, since they considered that they were well advanced with their schemes and already had good frameworks in place.

22 Some providers commented on the limitations that hampered their progress in implementing and taking plans forward. These include funding and staffing difficulties.

23 An increase in the involvement and disclosure of disabled staff was referred to on numerous occasions. It was also felt that the programme had contributed towards empowering disabled people and, in particular, strengthening the voice of disabled learners.
Discussion of findings in relation to reach, satisfaction and impact led to the identification of four main themes that reoccur across data sources. These themes are: capacity building, the need to respond more closely to the situations of individual providers, future interventions, and specific contexts.

Capacity building

Findings show the importance of networking as a valued part of the programme, with providers discussing it as a type of underlying foundation that contributes to the exchange of ideas.

Action working projects were valued for the impact they had on the way people reflect on practice, as well as for the opportunity they provided to receive input from experienced project leaders and LSC staff. The projects were also useful in providing examples of good practice for the sector.

The potential value of the VLE was also commented on as playing an important role in capacity building. However, in general it was felt that, because of a lack of training and insufficient time to promote the site before its launch, it had not been used to its optimal level.

The need to respond more closely to the situations of individual providers or types of provider

ACL providers, because they do not have their own dedicated DES, and also those further along the road to disability equality felt that their needs were not fully met and hence they were unable to benefit sufficiently from the programme.

Future interventions needed to support providers in implementing equality and diversity in their organisations

Participants expressed a need for increased opportunities to network immediately following workshop events.

It was also suggested, that peer support networks could be developed, to ensure that all participants benefited from networking in a systematic way.

Participants identified the need for continued input from ambassadors. It was felt that ambassadors would be able to apply an in-depth level of knowledge effectively to support individual providers.
32 LSC staff, particularly partnership team staff, noted that they needed their own briefings, in parallel with providers, so that they can be confident in offering support to providers in their region.

33 Work-based learning (WBL) providers, although not required to produce a DES, expressed the need to encourage more employer involvement in the current national single equality scheme (SES) programme.

**Specific contexts**

34 Context was identified as crucial to the needs of those responsible for delivering in the learning and skills sector. Although the support programme attempted, through its varied activities, to address issues surrounding what works best in specific contexts, this needs to be developed for future programmes.
Recommendations

35 An analysis of data and subsequent findings leads to the following recommendations.

- A review event would be useful as a follow-up activity to the programme, to share achievements and reflect on progress made.

- Local peer support networks should be created after the programme, to build on and share experience.

- There should be workshops on other equality duties, and there is a need for increased learner involvement.

- There is a need for increased employer involvement in the SES programme, to build on WBL provider involvement.

- Support needs to be tailored, in order to match the needs of all providers in the sector – particularly ACL providers – and there should also be some differentiation in terms of distance travelled and experience.

- More support is required for organisations on specific aspects of implementing their schemes – for example, in developing impact assessments and equality audits. There should also be support on how they might incorporate disability action plans into other equality and diversity plans.

- More training is needed to support improvements for disabled staff in organisations. At a conference in March 2008, the Commission for Disabled Staff in Lifelong Learning launched its final report, *From compliance to culture change*, in which it presented its findings on the employment of disabled staff working in the lifelong learning sector. The report is available at: www.niace.org.uk/projects/commissionfordisabledstaff/docs/Compliance-culture-summary-report.pdf.

- Use should be made of action working projects as a means of building capacity and developing examples of good practice.

- Disabled people should be involved in all aspects of intervention and support to reinforce the reasons why promoting disability equality is important.
- LSC regional staff, particularly partnership teams, should have their own briefings, so that they can build up their knowledge and support providers more effectively.