

Finalist's case study

University of Aberdeen Social Responsibility Project SEARCH

Section 1 About the project

Summary

Project SEARCH is a one year Internship programme which helps young people with additional support needs to go on to employment. It is based on an international model which originated in the USA and provides preparation for employment to young people with disabilities through a mix of education and work experience placements.

Project partners

Project SEARCH Aberdeen is a collaboration between the University of Aberdeen, Inspire (Partnership Through Life) and North East Scotland College, funded by Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council, and operated under a licence from the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities (SCLD).

Section 2 The results

The problem

Only 13.1% of the adult population with a learning disability in Scotland is in employment (Learning Disability Scotland Statistics, 2013). In 2013, over 23,000 enterprises were registered in Aberdeen City & Shire employing over 235,000 people. Over 58% of the income generation of the area is provided by the energy exploration and production industries, alongside a booming hospitality, retail and construction industry. Project SEARCH provides local employers with a new and sustainable talent pool from which to recruit, which is particularly important in view of the current 2% local unemployment rate and the ongoing frustrations of high turnover rates.

The approach

12 Interns are recruited to the project each year and are supported to undertake 3 internships (work placements) over a one year academic period of study. All partner organisations work together to identify internship opportunities within the University based on the students' experience, interests and skills assessments. The Interns are supported to attain vocational qualifications (City & Guilds Level 1 Employability and Personal Development) and upon the conclusion of the programme, receive support to source and sustain paid employment.

Our goals

Our primary goal is to ensure that our Interns secure sustainable paid employment upon graduation from the programme.



Profile

- HEI
- 14,000 students (includes full and part time students)
- 3,600 staff
- Urban

Finalist's case study

Obstacles and solutions

Requirement to maintain a sustainable source of employment for the Interns upon graduation	Two "Meet the Interns" events will be held during Session 2014/15 with a view to encouraging local businesses to strike up mentoring relationships with Interns and hopefully recruit them upon graduation. It is also anticipated that these sessions will assist in identifying acute areas of skills shortages within the local area which can be incorporated within the curriculum wherever possible.
Ensuring that as many prospective Interns as possible across Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire areas who would benefit most from participating in the project are made aware of it	Marketing materials are disseminated widely via Young Grampian's Got Talent shows, Info Hub (a centre funded by Aberdeen City Council which provides information on events and services in Aberdeen with an emphasis on inclusion) and local partnerships such as the Aberdeen Guarantees Group (which includes all providers of services to 14 to 25 year olds in the city).
In Aberdeen City, there is a lack of dedicated employability support to individuals with learning disabilities to sustain employment, often a vital service to ensure that success is not short-lived.	Project SEARCH has successfully demonstrated the need for a job development service, and through the strength of the project's partnership with the local authorities, has been in a position to look to collaboratively solve this problem.
Sustainability of funding	As a partnership approach, Project SEARCH has been an example of the benefits of braided funding to maximise the resources available in the local area. This has made the project more cost effective and economically viable than other previous employment focused initiatives.

Performance and results

The benefits of Project SEARCH can be summarised as follows :

- Contribution to diversity in the workplace
- Building links between partners (University, Inspire, College, Councils, SCLD)
- Personal development for Interns, including giving them a purpose, life skills and increasing independence
- Success in preparing Interns for and placing them in employment
- Engagement of colleagues across the University in supporting the Interns
- Increased expectations of young people with learning disabilities in the workplace specifically and in society in general

Eleven out of 12 Interns from the first cohort on the project are currently in employment within the Aberdeen area, with 3 being employed on a full time permanent basis within the University.

Project SEARCH Aberdeen also benefits the North East of Scotland local economy as upon graduation, the Interns are ready to enter the local job market and come out of the benefits system. In many cases, Interns are able to fill positions which are traditionally difficult to recruit and retain staff in e.g. repetitive manufacturing

Finalist's case study

or grounds/retail/catering work. Therefore, local employers benefit from a sustainable pool of talent from which to recruit.

The partnership approach has resulted in a change of culture across several of the partners. The partners involved have learned about the importance of providing internships that meet the needs of local employers and provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate how their unique talents and gifts can meet business needs in an organisation. One of the Interns on the first cohort of the programme was recognised by an area within the University as having an exceptional ability to critique data, accompanied by a highly developed attention to detail. Upon graduation, he was employed in a role which enabled him to make a meaningful contribution to the work of the department and which particularly focused upon these key skills.

Five Interns were nominated to receive a Student Achievement Award through the North East Scotland College, of which two were successful. These Awards are intended to recognise students who have overcome adversity and/or who have shown outstanding innovation in their approach to their studies and work.

The project has received local and national recognition by being recognised in the following awards :

- December 2013 - part of the successful Project SEARCH Scotland SURF Award
- June 2014 – winner of 'The Ones to Watch 2014 award at the Project SEARCH European Conference, which recognised the Aberdeen programme as being the foremost up and coming new Project SEARCH site within Europe during Session 2013/14
- September 2014 – winner of the 'Raising Achievement' award at the annual Aberdeen City Council Children and Young People's Services Awards

Section 3 The future

Lessons learned

1. The importance of initiatives such as Project SEARCH to enhance the awareness and understanding of the needs of those with learning disabilities, particularly in relation to acceptance of the challenges and barriers which these individuals face in an increasingly competitive employment market.
2. The importance of sharing learning and best practice with individuals and organisations (private, public and voluntary) at a local, national and international level to raise awareness of Project SEARCH and maximise the potential of the programme and the outcomes for the Interns themselves.
3. The importance of developing, maintaining and continuously enhancing the partnership approach to delivering a successful Project SEARCH programme that meets the needs of the host business, the Interns and employers within the local area.

Sharing our project

The Interns have showcased their progress and work within and across the University on a number of occasions e.g. Roadshow Information sessions, the International Women's Day Conference 2014 and at Freshers' Fairs.

The project is overseen by a Strategic Steering Group that meets quarterly and involves a wide range of partners, thereby ensuring that (i) other areas of the region are involved in the development and implementation of the programme and (ii) best practice is shared with other service providers. An annual Open Day event is held to provide information to prospective Interns and their families and to provide them with an

Finalist's case study

insight into the ethos and content of the Project SEARCH programme. To enhance these events, Interns during Session 2014/15 will make a series of Video Diaries to record their progress and provide information to their successors.

A number of local, national and international organisations have expressed an interest in establishing a programme and the Project SEARCH Aberdeen team has offered mentoring guidance, assistance and support to these potential new sites via (i) the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities team (ii) by hosting visits from potential Project SEARCH sites in Scotland and from the Netherlands and (ii) by hosting 5 workshops at the Project SEARCH European Conference in June 2014.

What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

As one of the largest employers in our region, it is very important for the University to actively seek out and encourage initiatives like Project SEARCH which support and are of benefit to our local community. Our nomination as a Green Gown award finalist has been a fitting tribute to the hard work and dedication of everyone who has been involved in establishing and taking this inspirational project forward.

Further information

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