

Bringing it all back home: An innovative approach to the provision of tailored education and training for young people

The experience of the Adult Better Learning and Education (ABLE) 18-21 programme

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The aim of this article is to give a brief overview of the context to the Adult Better Learning and Education (ABLE) 18-21 programme and the objectives which the programme aimed to fulfil in light of the challenges facing early school leavers. The article will also document the triumphs and challenges experienced by the participants when returning to formal education.

Origins of programme

The Adult Better Learning and Education (ABLE) 18-21 programme was developed in 2010 to improve young people's opportunities to access further education and employment. The programme involved the delivery of a Leaving Certificate Equivalent (FETAC Level 4) course, full time over the course of 24 weeks, which would facilitate progression onto local Post Leaving Cert (PLC) and further education courses. The ABLE programme was delivered through a multi-agency approach that allowed for collaboration in delivery across a number of different sectors including youth work, social welfare and local employment services utilising the shared resources and expertise of the agencies involved.

Participant profile

The target group for the initiative were those who were aged 18 to 21 who didn't have a Leaving Certificate or formal educational qualifications, but sought a 'gateway' programme to access education and employment options. Participants were chosen for the programme through a series of initial individual information and guidance meetings followed by group literacy, numeracy and motivation assessments. This was to ensure that the programme could

respond to the needs and ability profile of the group as well as ensuring the programme was suitable for their career and education goals. A vital factor in the initial screening process was the identification of progression routes into further education and employment beyond the ABLE programme, and the potential of participants to benefit from all aspects of the programme.

A total of 95 enquiries were made about the ABLE programme (comprising of personal contact, telephone contact, referral from external agencies etc) with 65 students offered places and 61 arriving for the start of the course. The gender breakdown ratio was consistent across all three groups with 42 males and 19 females engaging in total on the programme.

In developing a programme around the shared characteristics of the target group, a number of trends and beliefs emerged which informed the design of the ABLE programme and were essential in designing an alternative to existing provision:

- A widespread belief that education was “not for them” and that Youthreach and Community Training Centre (CTC) programmes were an extension of the formal education sector and a desire for greater freedom in their learning path
- A perception that Youthreach and CTC programmes were catering primarily for those aged 16-18 and therefore not targeted on their situation and circumstances
- Previous expulsion from Youthreach and CTC training centres
- A desire to obtain a full FETAC award in an intensive and sustained programme which would enable them to avail of the full range of Post Leaving Cert (PLC) programmes throughout the city
- A methodology which offered an alternative to the traditional classroom model which also allowed them freedom in their learning

Programme ethos

The ABLE programme was developed to provide a departure from existing programmes and was based on a number of core considerations in structure, recruitment, pedagogy and practice which informed the development and delivery mechanisms of the programme.

These included:

- An acknowledgement of the importance of guidance through a dedicated guidance worker throughout the programme. This took the form of classroom based exploration of the world of work to Individual Learning and Progression Plans in collaboration with the students in supporting them beyond the Programme.

Pre-programme	Programme	Post-programme
Initial guidance	One-to one performance review and appraisal on term by term basis	Links maintained with guidance worker following programme to ensure continuity post programme
Initial needs assessment	Exploration of areas of potential progression and information provision	Invites to TAP education supports (grant workshops, application to hardship fund and travel and book supports if required)
Organisation of required learning supports (if necessary)	Organisation of workplace visits and work placement in areas of interest Application for progression programmes and interview preparation	

- The curriculum was built around students' interests in terms of content and delivery and allowed students tailor their own experience through a broad range of 18 electives which were made available to ensure the course is of the greatest relevance to them
- The acknowledgement of core principles of multiple intelligences, reflective practice, group based learning outside the traditional banking model of formal education and the power of education to empower and inspire are central to all aspects of the programme

- A realisation that an adult education model (continuous assessment and group based activities etc.) is better equipped to respond to their needs in light of the experience locally of young people returning to education
- Students were encouraged and supported in becoming self-advocates. The Young People and Society module focused on the issues and challenges facing young people and encouraged them to be active in the community (volunteering), the workforce (work experience and work placement opportunities) and in civil society (registering to vote etc;) which would broaden their view of community and society outside the experience of the programme
- An acknowledgement of the importance of putting newly acquired skills into practice to reinforce learning and the encouragement of teamwork skills amongst students in group based activities as necessary skills for the workplace
- Many participants presented with negative or mixed views of education based on prior engagement in formal education. Students were encouraged to develop skills in critical thinking as a means through which they could develop a better understanding of what constitutes learning and by consequence, their understanding of self
- The availability of a range of supports such as a dedicated coordinator, individual tuition support, ongoing guidance support and counselling services. The availability of counselling services throughout the programme was extremely valuable for a number of students who experienced moments of crisis during the programme.
- Tutors were chosen based on their commitment to a participant led learning model based on the acknowledged principles of adult education.
- A belief that the programme should be based on a voluntary ethos by which all students who embarked on the programme did so by their own volition. A decision was made at an early stage that the equation between education/training and income generation should be broken. This was based on a belief that the most sustainable and cost effective way to deliver an education experience is through direct programme activity as opposed to providing training allowance incentives

- All programme rules and codes of conduct were devised by the group, for the group
- The participants were invited to form a social committee reflecting the importance of a social factor in adult education. To facilitate the growth of this dimension, a Facebook group was formed which facilitated informal discussions amongst participants

Triumphs and challenges

In working with a group with such a variety of needs and expectations, a number of observations can be made which will be examined in greater detail. While the stated aim of the ABLE programme was to offer accredited certification to progress onto further education, the most valuable work took place in addressing more fundamental issues for the participants.

The greatest initial obstacle for the participants was in readjusting to the learning environment which, for many, involved unlearning past perceptions of what education meant to them before learning could take place. Many students harboured negative experiences of formal education (lack of relevance, disciplinary issues, difficulty with course material etc.) and an important stage was to examine what education meant to them and how it related to how they viewed themselves. This provided a rich source of learning where students had initiated a desire to learn, grow and in so doing opened up new opportunities to commit to the programme and to building a sense of common purpose amongst course participants. The delivery of the programme within local youth services was important in providing a welcoming and understanding space for the participants and ensured that they felt at ease in a place with which they could identify.

The transition to a full-time programme was a big challenge for the majority of the participants. Those who struggled most with attendance, also typically struggled most with their motivation in classes when they were actually present, and were quite difficult to engage. In addition to participating in the programme, priorities in participants' personal and social lives needed to be adjusted which required changing behaviours to respond to the challenges participating demanded.

A significant stage in the learning cycle occurs when participation must develop from attendance to producing work as attendance alone cannot solely bring a sense of achievement. As the initial enthusiasm waned, and attendance and engagement were affected, tutors needed to plan a number of activities as the composition of the

class would be uncertain in advance. This also required the tutors to be intuitive. Consequently, tutors had to be aware of the energy and the dynamic of the group to ensure the students engaged and participated in the activities which in many instances had been adapted to reflect the composition of the group.

Throughout the Young People and Society module, students were invited to examine the world around them through analysing the local, national and international environments and the most important issues which affect them as young people. The participants were enthusiastic in being able to give their opinions, which they felt they rarely had the opportunity to voice. It also led to rich discussions about issues of power, discrimination and beliefs about society and the status quo in the world around us. These had been learned inherited in many instances through family, friends and communities without questioning and an important task for the educator was to challenge and encourage students to be able stand up for their beliefs, irrespective of whether we as educators agree with them.

In charting the development of the group, the overwhelming preference was to work individually, despite many strong friendships being formed over the duration of the programme. Assignments were particularly challenging when work was required on a group based format as contributions varied due to attendance and interest in the task. The skills of negotiation, delegation, persuasion and leadership were required to maintain the effectiveness of the group and this presented many difficulties. This led to a variety of responses such as feeling overwhelmed and in some cases to the emergence of conflict in the group. This requires further consideration if the participants are to be successful in the workplace after the programme has ended.

In the period of initial outreach and profiling of potential participants, the expectation that there would be financial incentives for programme participation was evident. Such expectations can lead to problems in making choices guidance as by offering financial incentives, decisions based on financial betterment can transfer to potentially poor career decisions which are especially vital when returning learners are mapping out their educational and career goals. While some of the participants were eligible to apply for a Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and did have a financial incentive for in taking part, it was interesting to note though that although financial gain was attractive in incentivising students to take part, it could not maintain their interest throughout the course with no correlation between those completing and receipt of a BTEA payment.

A prevalent belief within the group, when attempting to foster critical thinking and social analysis, was the limited expectations they held coming from communities defined as disadvantaged. Through exploring their perceptions of society, there was a belief amongst the students that they were powerless in society and lacked a voice due to where they came from, their age and their lack of academic achievement, which resulted in a perceived lack of opportunities. This could manifest itself in apathy in how they interacted with tutors, other participants and in the material. Often, this attitude was accepted and rationalised by stating that there was no point in progressing and developing through education as there were limited to no opportunities existing, especially in the current economic environment.

These ideas have huge implications for each student's self-esteem, attitude and priorities, not only in their ability to succeed but also in preventing participants from returning to further education in the first place. What became apparent was that despite being encouraged in their pursuit of education and excellence, the self imposed constraints means they will have to struggle to break the mould and challenge their own definition of who they are.

In trying to summarise what motivated the students to participate on the programme can be encapsulated in one concept: self esteem. Many of the students had low levels of self esteem upon enrolment – they feel defined in education by what they have not done (i.e. early school leavers, not holding a Leaving Certificate) as opposed to the many talents they do possess. This is not surprising based on the student's history in the traditional education system and proves damaging as it affected their vision of who they could be and a lack of lacked confidence despite possessing lots of potential and ability.

Through course work, one to one meetings, progress appraisals with the course coordinator and also through completing the course, many students learn to establish a stronger sense of self improvement and a ability to assert themselves in day to day situations and generally confident. It is critical to note that through engaging in education, tutors involved in the programme remarked on a distinct increase in confidence levels, assertiveness and general personal and interpersonal skills among students, many of whom had entered the programme with low levels of self-esteem linked to long-term unemployment. The importance of group outings in making connections with the students is essential to the success of any programme as it helps build relationships and fills in the detail about their lives and realities. It also gives them the opportunity to be themselves and at ease

and a noticeable boost in energy and confidence could be seen when they went back to the class after an outing.

The most striking culmination of students lacking belief in their own abilities and the perception of cultural constraints around them lies in a fear of success on the programme. For many students, the realisation that they can succeed and the evidence of that success as they build up their portfolios can be terrifying. If they continue their studies and achieve a qualification, they will have to change how they perceive themselves. They will have to adjust their personal identity to align with the new opportunities before them, and let go of the early school leaver label that they may have used to protect themselves from their own potential.

The fear that the young people from the ABLE programme face, and many cannot overcome, is simply fear of success. Overcoming this fear and embarking on a new future can be the most difficult piece of work that ABLE students do. This may in part lie in the fact that they are hesitant to complete the most important piece of work as it is not tangible or classroom based, but individual and personal. This transformation is not recorded in end of programme reports or FETAC certification but instead in the renewed sense of opportunity in the eyes of the students who finish the course and are enabled to shape their futures. It is the most rewarding piece of work for you can see done as an educator: a student who no longer believes what is not possible but instead knows what they are capable of themselves – true success. The foremost goal must lie in inspiring the young person to value education and the avenues that this may bring them in their learning and in future career choices.

Conclusion

Sixty-one young people across both the Finglas and Cabra locations participated on the ABLE programme in the 2010/2011 academic year. Of the 61 who started the programme, 36 students completed the programme with 25 students submitting FETAC portfolios. Of those who submitted work, 14 successfully achieved a full FETAC Level 4 General Vocational Studies Award. 42 males and 19 females took part in the programme. All students who participated on the course had some level of success even if not earning full qualifications. Many students who did not complete the programme struggled with attendance or personal issues that prevented them from making the necessary commitment to the programme.

The ABLE 18-21 programme won the National Projects in Progress STAR Award at the AONTAS launch of the 2011 Adult Learner's Festival. The programme won the award amongst strong competition from 86 nominated entries received nationwide. The purpose of the STAR Awards Ceremony is about Showcasing Teamwork and Awarding Recognition and acknowledging the work undertaken by adult learning projects throughout the country and celebrating the positive contribution that these projects make to our society, our economy and our local communities.

The STAR Awards Nominated projects were requested to demonstrate the following criteria:

- **A high level of teamwork and partnership amongst participant groups**
- **A learner centred approach to education provision**
- **Adult education practice and methodologies**

Not only did winning the award serve to raise the profile of ABLE for potential students but crucially gave recognition to the achievements of the participants who took part, giving them pride in their accomplishments.