



Work Skills Adult Education Course

Down Syndrome Ireland

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Introduction

Down Syndrome Ireland run a national adult education programme. In 2018, a course was developed to support adults who wished to take up meaningful employment. Down Syndrome Ireland partnered with Accenture and used their Skills to Succeed Academy as the basic structure for a Work Skills course curriculum that teaches students about both job searching and the expectations and responsibilities of employment. The course that was created is a two-year part time course that goes beyond a typical work skills preparation course. Drawing on our experience with both students and adults with Down syndrome who had entered employment enabled us to design accessible resources and learning outcomes that would equip adults with the skills to enter the workforce and overcome challenges associated with communication and social expectations.



Objectives

The objective of the Work Skills course was to actively support adults with Down Syndrome who wish to enter the workforce. We wanted to draw from our experience and knowledge of the barriers people with Down syndrome face when working to create a course that would equip the students to manage those challenges more effectively. It was vital that previously overlooked topics such as social and interpersonal skills were explicitly taught and that basic concepts like what it means to be employed and to be paid a salary were included on the course. We want the course to prepare students in a practical way to be successful in employment.

Materials and Methods

The course is designed to meet the needs of adult learners with Down syndrome. It is delivered one day a week over a two-year period. The course is delivered by a qualified teacher who receives further training from Down Syndrome Ireland. There are typically twelve students in a class and the teacher and students are supported by two teaching assistants giving a ratio of 1:4.

The course content was based on the Skills to Succeed Academy developed by Accenture but expanded to greater meet the needs and learning styles of the students.

The course is divided into four broad modules:

- 1 YOU AND YOUR CAREER
- 2 GETTING A JOB
- 3 INTERPERSONAL SKILLS
- 4 SUCCESS IN WORK

The modules are designed to support the student on the typical job searching journey, starting with the students' own life experience and how that is connected to their employability. The course assumes no prior knowledge or experience of the world of work.

A key feature of this course is the inclusion of a module that focuses on Interpersonal Skills which can be the most challenging element of a professional working environment. The module explicitly teaches students skills such as small talk, appropriate conversation topics and the difference between colleagues and friends and draws on the experience of adults with Down syndrome who are already in employment.

The delivery of the course applies the principles of Universal Design for Learning so that all students can access the learning outcomes. The teacher actively differentiates the teaching material so that all levels of literacy and experience are catered for.

A bespoke assessment tool was designed for the course and uses a guided conversation around visual stimuli to assess the students' knowledge and understanding of the world of work. The assessment is administered at the start and at the end of the course.

Results

The first round of the course began in September 2018. Ninety students enrolled on the course and it was taught in eight different branches of Down Syndrome Ireland. All students completed year one and progressed to year two of the course. The students were due to complete their course in June 2020. The plan was that they would have completed their final assessment and progressed to employment or taken up a work placement in the months that followed. These plans were severely interrupted by the global pandemic. On site lessons stopped in March and the final assessment has yet to be completed. Course content was adapted so it could be delivered online but is not as successful as in person teaching.

However, the initial assessment revealed gaps in knowledge around money and working.

49% of students had a very limited understanding of money.

8% understood that money had to be put in their bank account before they could take money out.

1% knew that your employer pays you for your work by putting money in your bank account.

Students also found making choices challenging.

8% could not sort pictures of people working into jobs they would like to do and jobs they would not like.

Students also found identifying people who work difficult.

24% could not sort people by those wearing work clothing.

A third of this cohort sorted by gender with only the males identified as working.

However, even without formal completion of the course, small success stories were evident. Prior to the pandemic eight students had taken on part time jobs while continuing their Work Skills course and two students had dropped out of their course so they could take up full time paid employment.



Conclusions

The initial assessment highlighted gaps in the general knowledge of adults with Down syndrome. The majority of students did not know that people were paid for work or understood that working was how most people accessed money.

Earlier intervention and education around work and the expectations of employment is needed.

The findings from the initial assessment influenced the course content. A unit on gender and the workplace was expanded along with greater emphasis on teaching about money. However, a separate course that focuses on numeracy would better meet the needs of the students in this area.

It would be preferable to be able to present a list of results and a table of comparisons based on the assessments completed by the students but that was not possible for the first round of the course. What we have learned is that there is a great demand for a course like this in Ireland and that even though it was a pilot course, ninety students committed to studying for two years with the view to accessing employment.



References

The Skills to Succeed Academy developed by Accenture:
<https://s2sacademy.ie/>

More information about the Down Syndrome Ireland adult education programme can be found here:
<https://downsyndrome.ie/what-we-do/ability-programme/>

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