

## **Work preparedness – a programme to enhance employability**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

School leavers in developing countries find it difficult to find work and to enter the labour market. With a visual disability it is even more difficult, especially when they lack personal, social and employment skills.

Work readiness or workplace preparedness does not start when the work-seeker knocks on the door of an employer. Ideally it should be the end of a process of preparation that starts in the home and community, while schools and tertiary training institutions reinforce and expand the experience and the understanding of the world of work. In this way potential work seekers get the opportunity to develop the necessary personal, social and work related skills.

Karen E Wolffe confirms the importance of the interrelationship between home, school and work in this regard when she says,

*“Individuals learn best when they understand the relationship between what they do at home or school and what they want to do in future”.*

Unfortunately our world is not ideal. The reality is that children with visual disabilities often do not develop the necessary skills at home, do not receive career education at school, and do not get practical experience while busy with further and tertiary training. The unfortunate result is that

*“Many visually impaired students reach their late teen years naïve about the world of work. Through no fault of their own, numerous youngsters who are academically trained have little or no work experience and thus little practical*

*understanding of the labour market, jobs, and how to progress through jobs to capture one's career goals.” (Dean W Tuttle)*

If this is the experience in developed countries, it is even more the case in a developing country such as South Africa. The reality that such a large percentage of people with a visual disability is unemployed, forced us at the Optima College, where I used to work, to take a critical look at the training that was offered. We seriously sought solutions to address the needs of the blind and partially sighted students we served. Eventually after a fairly long process of thinking and planning, we implemented a new approach and training programme, which I would like to discuss with you.

I want to do it for two reasons:

- (1) You may have had a similar experience and this discussion could lead to a meaningful networking opportunity that could be of mutual benefit. We still have so much to learn about this and related matters.
- (2) You may find yourself in a similar situation and this could stimulate your thoughts, while you develop your own unique programme and service.

For context purposes, first a little background.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

The South African National Council for the Blind is engaged in training and development programmes to enable and empower blind and partially sighted children, youth and adults to take their rightful place in society. One of the programmes is residential training offered to adult visually impaired persons at the Optima College in Pretoria, South Africa.

The College has been in existence for 21 years and over the years has provided training to large numbers of students, despite the fact that it is a small institution which can accommodate only 30-40 students at a time in its training and residential facilities.

Until the introduction of the new approach, training was offered in two distinct departments – the one, a rehabilitation programme (or independence training) and the other, a vocational training programme.

In the past many students received training at Optima College and other similar institutions. However, many of them have struggled to find employment despite their training. An estimated 97% of people with visual disabilities in South Africa are unemployed. The question that haunted us was:

*Why do they still struggle to find employment?*

Training staff members are knowledgeable and effective; students were receiving good and quality training, were doing well in their courses and yet . . .

With this question uppermost in our minds, I visited the Sonneheerdt Institution in the Netherlands during 2002. During 2003 I visited three colleges in England – the Royal National College at Hereford and the RNIB Colleges at Laughborough and Redhill - to study their programmes and approaches. My understanding increased and I learned much because the colleagues shared their rich experience with me.

After these visits we knew we wanted to apply the same training principles, but had to face the reality of our own situation - limited human, financial and other resources. We could not just replicate the Netherlands and United Kingdom experience and models. We had to find a unique South African model that would achieve the same outcomes, but within parameters such as:

- South Africa is a developing country with limited resources and great needs.
- The South African National Council for the Blind has limited financial resources.
- The Optima College receives no Government funding and has to survive on the fundraising efforts of the mother body.
- Nearly all the students are unemployed and live on a small disability grant and therefore can contribute very little towards the costs of the training they receive.

Two staff members from Sonneheerdt facilitated a planning workshop that was held early in 2004, which helped us to get a clearer vision on the way forward.

As a pilot project a new approach to the training of blind and partially sighted persons was implemented - *an individualised and integrated* training model.

### **3. CHANGE PROCESS**

To change a tradition and introduce a new approach is an involved process. We had to do following:

- 3.1 The idea of the new approach had to be communicated clearly - verbally and in writing - to the governing structure, senior management, middle management, staff members, the blindness community and other stakeholders. All stakeholders had to be informed and support the concept.
- 3.2 The two departments (independence training and vocational training) had to be restructured into one. All staff members with their unique skills and abilities had to be available for all the students, irrespective of where they served previously.

- 3.3 The job descriptions of the middle managers had to be changed in order to better utilise their strengths and to ensure that all stakeholders are committed to the new training approach and programme.
- 3.4 The admission procedure had to be changed to ensure that we had a clear profile of each student. The training needs of students had to be determined before the training programme started.
- 3.5 The curriculum had to be re-designed to ensure that it provided in the training needs of the students.

#### **4. NEW TRAINING APPROACH AND IMPLEMENTATION**

The following is partly history and partly my own untested views. During 2005 the South African National Council for the Blind had gone through a restructuring process and services were scaled down.

We learned much during the pilot phase and the intention was to refine and improve the training programme during the second year. However, due to the restructuring process priorities changed, the integrated programme was terminated and the intended changes could therefore not be implemented. Optima College now offers vocational training only.

However, I firmly believe that the following is still relevant and noteworthy:

##### **4.1 Points of departure**

- 4.1.1 Optima College regarded itself as “*a bridge to new beginnings*”. As a bridge is used to move from one point to another - usually over a difficult area like a cliff or river - so Optima created the opportunity for students to move over the “cliff” of their challenges, to develop and learn how to handle those challenges.

Optima wanted to enable and empower students, but did not want to duplicate what other institutions, such as universities, already offered. It wanted to stand in the gap in the interest of blind and partially sighted persons in South and Southern Africa. The training programme it offered was therefore aimed at preparing people to address a need, like personal development, employment or further training.

- 4.1.2 Although an institution like this has to have a structured training programme, the emphasis was not on what courses a person successfully completed, but on

*What can he/she do after the successful completion of a course?*

In other words, the guiding questions were,

*Has transfer of useful skills taken place?*

*Has the student been better equipped for life?*

## 4.2 New approach to training

The essential elements of the approach and procedure were:

### *Individualised:*

- On the day of admission each student met with a panel of staff members on a one-to-one basis. Each staff member assessed one particular aspect by making use of a very simple but structured questionnaire;
- After assessment the team met to provide their inputs which enabled us to reach agreement on the training needs of each student;
- Based on this information, a training programme was put together for each student and discussed with him/her;
- After agreement about the programme had been reached with the student, a formal contract between the student and the College was signed;
- Training commenced and a process of continuous assessment and evaluation was followed.

### *Integrated:*

- The full picture of each student's independent living and vocational needs were identified and where possible, integrated into one integrated training programme.
- Practically it meant that, when a student enrolled for a vocational course, but still lacked certain independent living skills, the applicable aspects would be integrated into the training programme. The same would happen when a (newly blinded) student enrolled for independence training, but expressed a need for vocational training. In that case he/she would gradually be exposed to e.g. computer training, and as soon as he/she was ready, officially continued with the vocational course.

## 4.3 Training outcomes

Each individual student could choose one of the following training outcomes, according to is/her personal training needs:

- \* *Improved employability* – aimed at students who wanted to enter employment or make a career change, and to enhance their work preparedness;
- \* *Personal development* – aimed at students who did not necessarily have a vocational training need, but only a need to develop some areas of their personal or social lives;
- \* *Improved readiness for further studies* – aimed at students who wanted to enter tertiary training programmes at other training institutions, and to enhance their transition from school to tertiary training.

#### **4.4 Practical arrangements**

- 4.4.1 A modular approach was followed. During the interview, students indicated what core training they would like to receive. The bulk of the time on the timetable would then be allocated to the core training, while the rest of the time would be divided between other courses.
- 4.4.2 Students could enrol for different periods of time, based on their availability, training needs and the modules that they registered for.
- 4.4.3 Because of the individualised approach, students were taken from where they were to where they wanted to be. Practically it meant that although student numbers per class were low, there would be a diverse group of students in each class, being on different levels of development and progress.
- 4.4.4 Continuous assessment to monitor progress was done during the course with final assessment at the end of every module.
- 4.4.5 Training staff met regularly to discuss student's progress and to consider training strategies.
- 4.4.6 An open door policy was followed and regular meetings with individual students were held to discuss their progress.
- 4.4.7 Regular management meetings were held to evaluate the training process and make adaptations as and when necessary. A flexible approach was followed.
- 4.4.8 Only the modules which the student successfully completed were reflected on a student's certificate at the end of the course.
- 4.4.9 Accreditation by a recognised tertiary institution (university or college) was sought, since such an institution is better known in the business world than a small institution where people with a visual disability receive training. The aim was to obtain national recognition and to create a win-win situation which could be of mutual benefit to such an institution and Optima College.

During the time available, four groups of students were exposed to the new training approach.

#### **5. LESSONS LEARNED**

- 5.1 Such a training approach can only be successful if understood and embraced by all the staff members.

Staff members who were inexperienced or rigid and set in their ways, found it difficult to cope with the dynamics of such an approach.

A person who is flexible and prepared to experiment and try out different methods and approaches, is an invaluable asset.

- 5.2 Staff members found it difficult to cope with students who are on different levels of development in the same class, even when the student numbers were small.

Staff members need to develop specific skills in group dynamics and support, in order to cope with a diverse group of students in one class.

- 5.3 South Africa's geography and the long distances that students often have to travel with limited funds, had to be considered when the admission procedures were determined.

The ideal is to meet the prospective students some time before the course starts and to select them in possible homogeneous groups. Unfortunately most of them could not travel to the College more than once and we had to resort to the above procedure.

- 5.4 Students found it financially difficult to go to Optima for one or two modules, go home and then return for another at a later stage.

Part of the solution is the decentralisation of training to facilities nearer to where students live. This, however, is part of a longer term strategy.

- 5.5 Students who were employed found it difficult to attend training and be away from work for a long period of time.

An alternative model to provide training over shorter focused periods, or even after hours, has to be available to address their specific training needs.

- 5.6 When there is a great demand for training, and only limited numbers of students can be accommodated, the temptation is to offer short courses in order to help more people.

Unfortunately short training courses are not effective, despite the fact that students pass the exams well. False expectations that cannot be met are created, because much time is needed to reinforce and improve skills. The unfortunate result is that the outcome of "improved employability" is not easily reached with short courses.

- 5.7 As part of the training programme students have to be exposed to the world of work through a system of internships.

Students need to gain firsthand experience of the work situation, otherwise they may have no understanding of the demands of the employment situation and therefore have unrealistic expectations.

The difficulty is to find companies that are prepared to take students in on such internships.

- 5.8 A separate module that focuses on work preparedness and bridging the gap between school and tertiary training or work, is critical for a student's eventual successful employment.
- 5.9 Although it may not be regarded as part of the training programme, no training programme will be complete without a placement service. Blind and partially sighted persons need support in preparing for work, and to finding and keeping work.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

I have provided you with a brief outline of what I regard as a successful approach to the training of people with visual disabilities in a developing country, whether they are newly blinded, unemployed or in need of a career change. However, I am aware that the situation in each country is unique and would therefore need adaptation.

If you would like to share your thoughts on the matter, please contact Optima College ([Madalein@sancb.org.za](mailto:Madalein@sancb.org.za)) or me at the above e-mail address.

Thank you.