



*Specialists in Linking
Education & Disability*

Lead Scotland Conference Report: LEADing the way to action

**Taking forward achievable actions to help learners
achieve success**



Post-16 Education & Employability:

**Working together to deliver person-centred learning and employment services
for learners with additional support needs**

5th June 2014, King James Hotel, Edinburgh

Aims of our conferences

Lead Scotland enables disabled young people and adults to access inclusive learning opportunities. At a local level, we do this by providing direct support to learners through person-centred learning opportunities and individualised support to help them plan their learning journeys. At a national level, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-school learning opportunities, as well as influencing and informing policy development.

Our annual conferences allow us to bring together a wide range of partners to discuss and debate key issues around supporting learners with additional support needs, and help identify and take forward a range of actions to deliver real change.

“Lead Scotland does excellent work and makes a real difference to people’s lives by providing support to disabled people to access learning opportunities and enter employment.”

Mike Russell, Cabinet Secretary for Education & Lifelong Learning

This year’s conference aimed to provide a platform for:

- encouraging effective partnership working;
- stimulating discussion around the most effective way of supporting learners;
- showcasing and sharing good practice from various sectors;
- developing a series of actions to support Lead and others address the key issues identified.

Policy context

Disabled people account for a significant proportion of Scotland’s population, and make a vital contribution to our economy, culture and public life. Yet, they experience considerable inequalities in relation to education, employment and overall life chances. In comparison with their non-disabled counterparts, disabled people are around twice as likely to be unemployed¹, around 3 times as likely not to hold any qualifications² and twice as likely to live in poverty³.

Removing the barriers to inclusive learning and employment is therefore vital in terms of improving educational attainment and earning potential, reducing reliance on welfare benefits and facilitating access to life-enhancing experiences.

The Scottish Government’s refreshed Employability Framework recognises the effect of recent developments on individuals’ employability and life chances, including:

- the difficult economic conditions
- the ongoing effects of welfare reform
- the reform of public services and recent spending cuts
- measures being introduced through the reform of post-16 education.

Many of these developments disproportionately affect people with additional support needs, making it imperative to work towards improving employment outcomes for a group already facing significant barriers to the labour market.

¹ The Annual Population Survey, March 2013

² Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2, 2012

³ Employers’ Forum on Disability, 2012

Conference contributors

Conference Chair:



Keith Aitken, award-winning journalist, broadcaster and one of Scotland's busiest events facilitators.

Speakers:



David Smith MBE, London 2012 Paralympic Gold Medalist



Michael Russell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education & Lifelong Learning



Aileen Ponton, Chief Executive of the [Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\) Partnership](#)

Workshop facilitators:

- Emma Whitelock, Dawn Robb and Fiona Toner ([Lead Scotland](#): Supported transitions)
- Jon Shaw ([Child Poverty Action Group Scotland](#): Welfare reform, disabled learners and work-related requirements)
- Joan Cairney and Vivienne Stavert ([Borders College](#): Employability and work experience)
- Maura Lynch and Cameron Smith ([Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability](#): Project Search)
- Kirsty Conlon and Mark Wild ([Universities Scotland](#)); Chris Brill and Ashlee Christofferson ([Equality Challenge Unit](#)). Improving transitions to employment for all students.
- Leia Fitzgerald ([Scottish Government](#): Partnership Matters)

Lead Scotland wishes to express our thanks to all those who contributed to the conference, as well as the Lead Scotland staff and volunteer team. We are also grateful to the Scottish Government for their financial contribution towards the conference costs.

What did people think about the conference?

The conference attracted delegates from a range of sectors, including staff working with learners with additional support needs in colleges, universities, community learning, voluntary sector, social work, health and careers services.

We know that delegates appreciated the opportunity to meet with colleagues from relevant partner organisations, and valued the interactive discussions on a range of topics. However, given the importance of supporting learners during their transition to employment, it was felt that employers need to become more engaged in events such as these.

Feedback from conference delegates:

“Great atmosphere. People from a mix of backgrounds attended which made for a good mix in discussions”

“David Smith was one of the most inspirational and captivating speakers I’ve heard for a long time. If only I could have bottled that!”

“Lead should be very pleased with their efforts and I would certainly attend any future similar conferences or focus groups”.

Key themes and suggested actions

“Scotland’s learning sector must be led by the needs of learners. We need to make sure resources match our ambitions, and understand the importance of working in partnership to take forward our shared vision for learners with additional support needs”.

Michael Russell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education & Lifelong Learning

Mr Russell's introduction to conferences afternoon session perhaps sums up some of the key themes of the day in relation to supporting learners with additional support needs:

- ensuring the needs of individual learners are at the heart of all planning, practice and delivery mechanisms;
- adequately resourcing Scotland's varied learning infrastructure;
- the importance of partnership working in effectively meeting the needs of learners with additional support needs.



..... Working in partnership

We know that working in partnership can work well, both in terms of sharing resources and expertise, as well as meeting the needs of the individual more effectively. With the recent policy focus around employability and progression to employment, partnership working will be particularly important in meeting the needs of learners with disabilities or additional support needs who may experience additional barriers throughout their transition to employment.

The Scottish Government's [Partnership Matters](#) guidance was published in 2005 to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the agencies involved in supporting learners with additional support needs, as well providing guidance on effective partnerships. The guidance was originally aimed at those supporting learners in colleges, but was extended to include universities in 2009. The Government are currently working on refreshing the guidance, which will be published in spring 2015.

Delegates were given the opportunity to discuss the Partnership Matters guidance, and make suggestions for improvement or clarification.

Delegates told us that.....

The guidance was useful in terms of clarifying agency responsibility and encouraging them to work together, however there was some concern that not all agencies are aware of the guidance, or have limited experience of partnership working in this area. There was also some concern around the fact that the guidance is not legislated for or resourced, which can often make it difficult to gain buy-in.

Recommendations for improvement:

- an improved communications plan to increase awareness and buy-in of the guidance to relevant agencies;
- an executive summary and easy-read version of the guidance to aid understanding. It was noted that Lead Scotland has produced student-friendly versions of the guidance, which many staff have also found useful: [Supporting You at College](#) and [Supporting You at University](#)
- strengthened statutory basis for the guidance, including the possibility of legislation and ring-fenced funding;
- further guidance on the following would be useful: information on other learning frameworks, school and adult learning, learners with complex support needs, and clarification on the roles of Skills Development Scotland and Jobcentre Plus in transitions planning;
- a Scotland-wide training and induction programme on the guidance as part of a national rollout.



..... Transitions

“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty”.

Maya Angelou (quote from Lead Scotland workshop on supported transitions)

Learners often make a number of transitions throughout the various stages of their learning, employment and personal development journeys. For learners with additional support needs, these transitions can be particularly complex as a result of additional support requirements which are often met by different agencies. Effective partnership working and comprehensive information, advice and guidance for such learners is therefore vital.

In relation to younger learners, delegates told us that.....

- young people often experience a difficult transition between children's and adult services, and partnership working between agencies can often be poor;
- many have limited information about the range of post-school options and support available to them, or may be pigeonholed into certain destinations;
- post-school opportunities and resources can vary significantly between different parts of the country, effectively resulting in a postcode lottery

- transition planning in many areas is not taking place within required timescales, and/or is often ineffective (e.g. no or limited involvement from other agencies, poor information-sharing, limited access to keyworkers, poor understanding of young persons' needs and support available to them).

“Post-16 transitions are often treated as a leaving school ‘event’ rather than an on-going process lasting several years... As a result support for subsequent transitions is often lacking”.

Principles of Good Transitions 2, Scottish Transitions Forum 2014



In relation to older learners, delegates told us that:

- as the current policy and funding focus is primarily on younger learners, older learners with additional support needs are likely to be further disadvantaged;
- many learners find work placements and employability courses more meaningful than learning programmes;
- some older learners can find formal learning environments difficult, and some may not be comfortable using computers or other modern technology;
- benefits cuts may have an impact on some learners' learning and employment journey.

Recommendations for improvement:

Learning providers should ..

- work more closely and effectively with employers to support young people in career planning and during their transition to employment;
- provide more diverse and flexible learning opportunities to make young people more employable;
- work with various support organisations who can provide specialist support for learners with specific impairments, e.g. SCLD's [Project Search](#), the National Autistic Society's [Moving Forward](#) project, the RNIB's [Employment and Learning Centre](#), etc.

Employers should ..

- work more closely with learning providers to identify and plan how to meet the needs of job-seekers and employees with additional support needs;

- share good practice with each other regarding additional support needs, including Disability Awareness Champion employers.

Local authorities and schools should ..

- monitor and improve transition planning processes (including ensuring adequate levels of support staff and staff training, effective information-sharing, and improved partnership working);
- share good practice with each other regarding effective transitions planning and local partnership forums;
- utilise and expand existing transition support mechanisms, including School Liaison teams, Key Workers, and Transitions Forums.

All agencies should ..

- review/develop partnership and information-sharing arrangements to ensure learners needs are met effectively and transitions planning is learner-centred;
- improve community engagement activities as a means of utilising the full range of support available to learners in their local area;
- promote a positive image of learners with additional support needs and aim to change attitudes about what is possible;
- improve and expand the information, advice and guidance they offer to young people regarding transition from school.

“Providers need to work together rather than feathering their own nest”.

Conference delegate.



.....Recognising non-formal learning experiences

Many learners may have limited experience of formal learning, and may therefore require more intensive guidance and support to make a successful transition to further learning or employment.

Delegates told us that:

- recognition of prior learning (RPL) toolkits can work well and are useful for learners trying to access formal learning or improve their employability skills;
- learners value the ability to transfer credit for previous learning, but it was felt that this is not fully utilised;
- [My Skills, My Future](#) was identified as a useful resource for supporting individuals to identify the skills they have gained from other experiences outwith formal qualifications;
- employers need to be more engaged in develop their understanding of non-formal learning and associated toolkits.

Recommendations for improvement:

- sharing examples of good practice should be encouraged and promoted to a wide range of learning providers, employers and other stakeholders;
- further work needs to be taken forward to increase engagement with employers around RPL and the SCQF in general;
- further work with individuals to help them identify and recognise the skills they have gained from non-formal learning experiences.



..... Welfare reform

The impact of ongoing welfare reform developments on some learners and job-seekers can be significant, particularly for those who have a disability or who have been out of work for a long period. Recent changes to key disability benefits such as Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) are making it harder for some students to qualify for benefits, and some claimants may be subject to stricter work-related requirements. The combined impact can therefore have a significant effect on learners and jobseekers' access to learning and employment, as well as individual and household income.

Delegates told us that:

- welfare reform changes have had a significant impact on the mental health of some individuals, in terms of both actual income reduction and uncertainty around changes to benefits and individual requirements;
- as the PIP assessment framework is a significant move away from a broad-based system to a very specific scoring system, it was felt that individuals are often pigeonholed if their needs don't fit into the new framework;
- many claimants are finding the ESA rules much tougher and very confusing (including JCP staff). Some people who may have qualified under Incapacity Benefit, may no longer qualify (e.g. those with learning disabilities or autism);
- ESA work-related requirements can be a barrier for many disabled people as they may be unable to meet the requirements as a result of their impairment;
- there are a lack of supported employment services for individuals with additional support needs.

Recommendations for improvement:

- more information, advice and guidance for disabled learners and job-seekers on welfare benefit eligibility and criteria, including benefit entitlement checks;
- staff training on current and future benefits changes, including alternative sources of funding for those who may have their benefits reduced/removed;
- further collaboration between agencies to influence Scottish Government and Westminster policy on welfare reform to ensure disabled people are not significantly adversely affected.





..... Employer engagement

Throughout the day, it was noted that much more needs to be done to engage employers with the inclusiveness agenda and encouraging them to consider the needs of disabled employees and job-seekers. While some employers can demonstrate excellent practice in this area, it was felt that the majority need to engage more effectively with learning providers, support organisations and individual disabled people.

Delegates told us that:

- many employers appear to be generally uninformed about the needs of disabled employees, and make limited investment in measures to attract and support disabled applicants;
- learning providers need to do more to prepare learners about what will be expected of them in interviews and subsequent employment;
- the role of Skills Development Scotland (SDS) in employer engagement is not working effectively.

Recommendations for improvement:

- further work to support employers understand the benefits of employing disabled people, and how to support and retain them;
- learning providers should further develop links with employers to facilitate work experience opportunities for disabled learners, as well as supporting them to prepare for the transition to employment;
- further work should be taken forward at a national level to engage employers with learning providers and disability support organisations as a means of breaking down barriers and promoting disability equality.



Developing employability skills

With the recent focus on skills and employability, it is essential that learners and job-seekers can access the support they need to access supportive employability support to help them find and keep appropriate employment. Such learners may face additional barriers to entering employment, and will therefore benefit from employability skills being effectively embedded into the curriculum as a means of holistically meeting their learning and employment needs.

Delegates told us that:

- some students require a level of pre-employment support before they can start to develop employability skills;
- many learners cannot access certain courses or careers without work experience. This can be difficult to arrange without personal connections, and there are often additional barriers for learners with additional support needs;
- there was a perception that smaller employers are the most effective in terms of providing tailored support during work experience, however there was a concern that some employers regard work experience as free labour and do not adequately support the learning and development needs of learners;



Recommendations for improvement:

- employability and pre-employment support needs to be effectively tailored to meet the needs of learners with additional support needs;
- individuals and learning providers need to be more proactive in the way in which they engage with employers, and focus on the skills and talents which disabled applicants can bring to employers
- all agencies should aim to empower learners to be aware of their rights and opportunities in relation to work experience.

“The adviser quickly realised I was used to being known as a “disabled student” and made me realise how many desirable skills I had and that I should be looking for a career that first I would enjoy, and second that would be able to put reasonable adjustments in place. Person first, disability second summed up the advice”.

Disabled student (taken from Equality Challenge Unit workshop)

What next?

The conference generated a number of key actions and recommendations which Lead Scotland is keen to take forward in conjunction with partner agencies.

1. Lead Scotland will be hosting a programme of focus groups across Scotland to narrow down the specific actions needed to improve transitions for learners with additional support needs. The outcomes from this event will include a range of resources to support partner agencies involved in transitions planning, as well as facilitating ongoing discussions as a means of sharing good practice and responding to developments in this area.
2. The Scottish Government will continue to revise and improve the current Partnership Matters guidance, and partner agencies are encouraged to contribute to this process. The revised guidance is expected to be published in spring 2015.
3. Lead Scotland will work with learning providers, local authorities, support organisations, employers and government agencies to discuss the most effective ways of taking forward the recommendations in this report.

Further information:

If you require further information about any of the issues raised in this report, please contact Lesley Carcary at lcarcary@lead.org.uk.