

Employability Learning Network

Case Study

'Think Again'



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What does the project do?

The Think Again programme is a joint project between Edinburgh Napier University and Apex Scotland, which has run over several years with funding from The Big Lottery Fund's Better Off programme.

The project runs in Leith and attracts people from all over Greater Edinburgh, focusing on people with a history of offending who are also recovering from addictions. The course focuses on people who are committed to make a positive change in their life and equips them for work or college. It includes self-development, creative writing, art and photojournalism, healthy lifestyles, new leisure activities and a range of certificated courses such as first aid, as well as interview skills, and visits to college. At various points, courses have been twelve, ten or six weeks long.



As well as Apex Scotland and Edinburgh Napier University, the project has involved Jewel and Esk Valley College for college access advice and tours, local employers for mock interviews, professional photographers and journalists for creative projects, and people with similar backgrounds to the clients to show how it is possible to turn their lives around.

How do they use peer support and mentoring?

Peer support within the course – The course takes place in an intensive group setting and draws on the participants' willingness to try new things and support each others' growth. This engenders a degree of peer support within the group. Often when the course has run, the participants' support of each other has been more powerful than the staff's role. One group gelled so well that by the end of the first week they were planning a group camping trip!

Role models – The varied course programme also draws on people who have had an experience of offending and/or addictions and have become successful in their work. These people visit and give talks. One course had a former participant deliver the personal development aspects, which she had qualified to lead during her time with a local voluntary organisation.

How is their approach particularly valuable?

- Because the participants have to show commitment to moving forward to be accepted on the course, there is a common sense of purpose and momentum.
- The mix of leisure and creative activities gives participants more opportunities to encourage each other to try new things and see value in each others' efforts.
- Certificated courses and practical job search support and essay writing increases participants' confidence that they are practically equipped to succeed.
- Many of the participants have been on required programmes and value the staff's respect for them and the focus on participants' own interests and talents.



What are the lessons from their experience?

It is important to choose the **right mix of participants**:

- Longer courses (10-12 weeks) allow more time for participants to develop and to support each other.
- Single-gender groups have been particularly successful in providing a comfortable, open environment for developing trust and companionship.
- There is some evidence that an age range of no more than 15 years is helpful.
- Groups of 10-12 with scope to shrink to 6 people provide the best dynamic.
- However, the biggest factor for successful peer support is a common **commitment to moving forward** and participating in all activities on the course.

Creative activities such as artwork (featured in the case study), photography and creative writing give participants the chance to communicate in a different way. When peers praise these creative forms of self-expression, it creates a deeper sense of self-esteem than personal development courses can on their own.

Contact with the wider world – Getting to meet a range of supportive and interested people who are not traditional service providers (for instance, photojournalists and local employers) gives participants additional confidence to progress and believe they will be supported.

Nudging people who have bad days – People with offending backgrounds may have low confidence and may have other problems such as prior addictions that can surface. When this happens, they will need encouragement to stay with the group.



Are there any special considerations for their client group?

- **Increasing the value of peer connections** – If the participants consider themselves to already be more socially connected, they may not value their peers' support so strongly and may need more team activities to develop bonds.
- **Addressing cynicism** – Where people have had a broader range of disappointments, they may be cynical and that can slow the group's overall bonding. Collaborating with other support structures around the client can help.
- **Understanding disclosures** – Because people with a criminal background will always have a not entirely clear response to Disclosure checks, it is important to be clear about how Disclosures are likely to limit access to certain jobs and when they do not need to.
- **Maintaining momentum** – While participants become confident individuals well equipped for work or college during the course, they may also need ongoing opportunities while waiting for college courses to start. Longer courses also develop them more intensively for college or work.



What are the project's or service's plans for the future?

The Think Again programme has come to the end of its funding from the Big Lottery Funding so Apex and Napier are looking for new options to take forward. Developing more ongoing opportunities for participants to stay involved, such as contributing to a newsletter, is another aim.

Thanks

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