

Core skills appraisal project: Assessing and preparing adults to return to learning

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Abstract

With the introduction in 2003 of the Scottish Social Services Council's (SSSC) requirement to register, approximately 3000 residential child care (RCC) staff were faced with the prospect of returning to formal education. While residential child care workers welcomed the opportunity to improve the status of their field within the social services sector, many people had joined the sector at a time when no qualifications were required.

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Introduction

With the introduction in 2003 of the Scottish Social Services Council's (SSSC) requirement to register, approximately 3000 residential child care (RCC) staff were faced with the prospect of returning to formal education. While residential child care workers welcomed the opportunity to improve the status of their field within the social services sector, many people had joined the sector at a time when no qualifications were required. In fact, the sector was traditionally staffed by a largely unqualified workforce. In 2004 only 18% of residential child care staff had the necessary qualifications for registration (Hunter, Hosie, Davidson and Kendrick, 2004, p. 23). The introduction of a qualification caused concern, especially for those people who had not taken part in any further education since leaving school. Registration requirements meant that many staff were now faced with completing an Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Social Care and a Scottish Vocational Qualification in Health and Social Care at Level 3 (SVQ3).

As residential child care staff began to work towards the HNC, it became evident that a high number were having difficulty; some dropped out and others struggled to complete assignments. This had an adverse effect on other workers who had not yet undertaken the course, especially for those who had concerns about their own ability. Very often this was as a result of having done poorly in school or, for a variety of reasons, not having been given an opportunity to take a full part in education in the past. Some workers became unwilling to apply for the HNC. This began to have an impact on employers, with increasing amounts of time spent on dealing with employees' concerns.

It became clear that something had to be done to ensure those applying for the HNC would have the best possible chance to successfully complete the course, regardless of previous educational experience. This paper outlines one initiative which was undertaken by SIRCC to address this issue and reports on some of the preliminary figures emerging from its evaluation.

The core skills appraisal project

To identify the best way forward, SIRCC consulted with students, employers, adult learning specialists, SQA, and colleagues in further and higher education institutions. It was concluded that it would be necessary to assess candidates' core written communication skills to identify specific learner support needs before applying for the HNC. As a result of the consultation with stakeholders, SIRCC set up the Core Skills Appraisal Project (CSAP) in July 2004 to address some of the issues surrounding adults returning to further education.

Objectives of the CSAP

The CSAP aimed to encourage residential child care staff into formal learning by creating and maintaining a system of assessment for all who did not meet the formal entrance criteria for the HNC. It also aimed to support employers to develop a plan for the registration of their workforce, by providing them with an accurate assessment of their staff's capacity for success, or the resources needed for this to be achieved.

Implementation of the CSAP

In order to achieve these objectives, the CSAP evaluated the core skills of individuals in written communication, and provided recommendations and resources to those who required further preparation prior to beginning the HNC. The core skills team comprised experienced and fully qualified adult learning practitioners.

Appraisal Preparation

The core skills team promoted the service regularly so that the residential child care sector was informed fully of the benefits of the system. From 2004 to 2007, 1,978 individuals applied to the CSAP. Just over 66% (1321) of the candidates did not have the entry-level requirements and undertook the core skills appraisal. The entry-level requirements were evidence of core skills functioning at SCQF Level 6 or above. Between July 2004 and December 2007 the CSAP successfully recruited more than half of all expected HNC applicants involved in residential child care throughout the country.

The appraisal process

The appraisal comprises an assessment of punctuation, spelling, grammar, listening skills, syntax, reading comprehension, analysis and evaluation. There are two components:

- (1) A computer-based diagnostic tool - *Target Skills* (Cambridge Training and Development, 2001) - appraising punctuation, spelling, grammar, listening skills

and syntax. Where computers are not available, a paper-based assessment is used as a substitute.

(2) A written piece of work appraising understanding, analysis and evaluation of a specific piece of text.

CSAP staff can travel throughout Scotland and carry out the appraisals using laptops. This flexible approach means that appraisals can take place in environments well known to the candidate such as local colleges or even at a candidate's place of work. The project worker is on standby throughout the appraisal to help answer any queries from candidates and to help facilitate the session. The CSAP completed 1075 appraisals between July 2004 and December 2007. Four hundred and nineteen of those appraised have successfully completed the appraisal without any learner support required. It is important to note, however, that 656 of those appraised required learning support.

After the appraisal

After the appraisal process, CSAP staff send out a letter to each candidate with recommendations for further learning support where necessary. Candidates are also given the opportunity to phone in for further feedback. This feedback can be given either verbally or in written form. Letters are copied to unit managers and/or training managers.

CSAP core skills course

After the initial appraisals, the core skills team identified that most people needed support in the same areas. In response, the team developed a five-day core skills course in written communication to address these particular needs. The course is now offered to residential child care staff throughout Scotland. The aim of the five-day course is to encourage and support staff into formal learning in order to reach the standards required for registration. The objectives are:

- To help staff develop writing, reading and communication skills
- To reintroduce staff to a formal learning environment and build up confidence for further learning
- To prepare staff to undertake the HNC

The five-day course is learner-centred in its approach and uses a variety of resources including *BBC Skillswise* (BBC, 2007) and *Learning and Teaching Scotland* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2004) material. The course content has been specifically adapted to the needs identified in the appraisal.

Days 1 and 2 of the course 'brush up on the basics' and look at syntax, punctuation, grammar, spelling and reading techniques. Days 3 to 5 deal with comprehension, analysis and evaluation of text. Some candidates need to undertake all five days of the course, whilst others will only need to do specific days. This very specific information is obtained from the appraisal outcomes.

The course has been designed to encourage group work through a series of activities and exercises which promote discussion and interaction amongst the learners. The course has also been developed to encompass different learning styles and the multi-sensory nature of the exercises and activities reflects this. The course tutor deliberately does not use PowerPoint but encourages group work to facilitate participation. The course also incorporates working together, problem-solving and confidence-building, as for many candidates it is their first experience of being back in a 'classroom' environment since their early schooling.

The course uses a 'Social Practices' model (Scottish Government, 2005, p. 13), which is founded on the idea that language and literacy are social practices rather than just technical skills to be learned. It aims to empower learners by contextualising the learning for workers from the residential child care sector, making it meaningful and relevant to their workplace and getting learners to think critically. There is also recognition that many workers bring prior knowledge and skills to the course. At the end of the course, candidates undertake a piece of written work which assesses whether any further learning support is required.

Outcomes from the courses have been encouraging. Between July 2004 and December 2007, 328 people completed this course and of these, 253 (77.1%) have successfully passed re-appraisal. Those who were still identified as needing support were either referred to further courses or offered extra input on a one-to-one basis. The following comments were made by participants on core skills courses at various times between January 2005 and December 2007:

This course has been very useful to myself and has been good for my self-esteem. Also the way it was taught was very good (RCC worker A).

I am much more confident to write now (RCC worker B).

This course has been really worthwhile ... Tutors have been non-judgemental around educational abilities (RCC worker C).

I can analyse what I read now (RCC worker D).

A very worthwhile course, well presented, 'user-friendly'. I am more confident about the prospect of starting the HNC (RCC worker E).

It took the fear away from coming to college ... there were all kind of people in the same boat - returning to learn (RCC worker F).

If it hadn't been for the support I got from the [CSAP] Tutor during my appraisal, I would never have been confident enough to think about coming on a course (RCC worker G).

Partnership Working

The core skills written communication course is offered free of charge to training officers within the residential child care sector who wish to provide this course to their staff. CSAP staff co-train alongside the training officers to support them in their initial delivery of this course. In addition, the core skills team has held training events in Perth, Edinburgh and Glasgow to offer guidance and support to trainers hoping to deliver the course in-house. An electronic trainers' support network is also in the process of being set up and this will provide regular updates of courses by geographical area as well as providing a forum for any queries or concerns. CSAP workers have formal links with the Workers Educational Association which runs a Return to Learn course. As a result of this partnership, the CSAP team can refer people who need more intensive learner support to this course.

Benefits of the CSAP

The CSAP team has been able to accommodate different levels of support. For example, CSAP staff have assessed the learning support needs of unqualified candidates who are required to undertake a management award. In addition, the team has supported and assessed the learning needs of candidates undertaking the SVQ3 award. Employers have a clear, specific picture of the learners' needs and, importantly, advice on how to meet those needs. The following comments reflect the views of residential child care managers from a variety of different units in the field:

1. *This is exactly what we need to help prioritise who is ready to begin their HNCs (RCC manager one).*
2. *We always knew there were problems in the workplace but never knew how to begin to address them (RCC manager two).*
3. *The core skills project is helping us to target resources and plan (RCC manager 3).*

The CSAP has assisted in ensuring that HNC routes are not blocked with students who cannot complete due to academic difficulties. Lecturers report that the work of students who have completed the Core Skills course is of a high standard:

A significant number of them (students) felt they had learned so much in the five days and felt that the tutors were excellent. Many of them said they could not have come on the course without the confidence of doing core skills first (HNC lecturer A).

You certainly make our job easier (HNC lecturer B).

Conclusion

The needs of staff and their employers appear to be met by this project. This supports the Scottish continuing professional development agenda, the demands of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, and is in line with the principles of the National Education and Training Strategy. The application system for the SIRCC HNC is now a nationally centralised process for all SIRCC HNC providers, where applicants without the pre-entry qualifications for the HNC are required to undertake an appraisal as the first stage of the

process. The CSAP has evolved and will continue to evolve based on the needs of the stakeholders and feedback from the sector.

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