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Supporting employment for learners with SEND in the arts sector

(FE) ETF Employer Spokes Events: Employer Spokes foster partnerships between FE providers and employers that evidence best practice in meaningful employment for people with SEND.

Introduction

This case study focuses on exploring different career opportunities in sectors which may be harder to engage in. Arts sectors are not always representative of the communities they serve and can be difficult to access for career opportunities. This project focused on how Luminate Group, an ETF Employer Spoke, worked with theatres and young people in increasing awareness of the arts sector as a rich and fulfilling career path for young learners with SEND.

The arts can often be seen as elitist, expensive and exclusive. Luminate partnered with Leeds Heritage Theatres to explore how the sector could be more inclusive. As part of their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), Leeds Heritage Theatre conducted staff, audience and participant surveys which show that across their 3 venues, people from the global majority and those with disabilities are currently underrepresented within their organisations.

Grand Futures Leeds Arts Network brings together arts, heritage and education organisations. The network focuses on developing a more holistic approach to creative skills training and partnership projects to increase opportunities available across Leeds. The network aims to:

- Increase young people's awareness of creative and cultural organisations in Leeds, and jobs available in the sector including:
 - Creative skills
 - Creative job roles
 - Non-performance jobs within the creative sector (priority for network)
- Increase paid and voluntary training opportunities for young people to support the diversification of the workforce.
- Create a more agile approach to work experience, placements and volunteering.
- Explore and articulate the impact of Grand Futures Leeds Arts Network to raise profile and support lobbying.

Voluntarily chaired by Leeds Heritage Theatres, the network's current membership includes Leeds Heritage Theatres, Artforms, Geraldine Connor Foundation, Leeds City College, Leeds City Council, Leeds Playhouse, Leeds Museums and Galleries, Northern Ballet, Opera North, Phoenix Dance Theatre, The Tetley Yorkshire Dance.

Implementation

A driving aim of the network has always been to increase opportunities in the arts to support the diversification of the workforce. With this aim in mind, Leeds Heritage Theatres has begun to deliver specific projects for learners with SEND, in partnership with local education providers such as the Adapted Cultural Exchange programme. Using expertise from these local specialist schools, Leeds Heritage Theatres has also made changes to their recruitment process to make it more inclusive – this has resulted in an increase in the number of people with additional needs (especially autism) being recruited and retained.

In the past 6 months they have actively sought to work with SEND settings to adapt their provision to best suit the needs of these learners. For example, the adaptation of the Cultural Exchange programme allows students to meet professionals and learn about the day-to-day operation of the sector before taking in practical challenges in small groups. Rather than offering a condensed 1-week block, (which is offered to students from mainstreams school) we worked with local SEND Schools to make adaptations including running the project for 1 day a week over 6 weeks.

Sharing practical tools such as examples of social stories, visual diaries and time-keeping tools was also invaluable. This approach resulted in a high-quality learning experience with a wider range of industry partners, whilst still ensuring that each session had continuity and familiarity for learners.

To reflect learning styles, the shortened day ran 10am-2pm and was led by industry professionals at each venue. Sessions included a tour, exploration of job roles at that setting and a practical exercise ranging from a dance workshop to conservation tasks.

Outcomes

The programme has been running for 6 months and through this time attendance and feedback from students with SEND and other stakeholders, including school staff and our staff, has been captured.

The outcomes include:

- An increased understanding of the opportunities within the Arts Industry.
- Increased confidence of staff within our partners working with students with SEND.
- A complete review of the employment processes within the Theatre Group to ensure they are inclusive in their practice – and three people with Autism are now employed by the Theatre Group.
- Changes in practice in all Grand Future partners within the network who are incorporating this work into their standard offer.



Impact and Next Steps

The impact of the Adapted Cultural Exchange Projects has:

- Increased access to the arts for young people with SEND.
- Ensured more young people with SEND are aware of the industry, roles available, skills needed and feel its accessible for them.
- SEND provision to be a standard part of our offer.
- Developed a work experience offer for SEND learners.
- Given SEND settings representation on the CICI network.

Ultimately developed the workforce to ensure those with disabilities and SEN are represented in the industry as participants, audience and workforce, theatre-makers and creatives of the future. Moving forward, although we know that there is still work to do, we want to raise awareness of the project and its impact to other theatre/arts companies. Through programmes including the 'Inclusive Employment in the Theatre industry' project, we are linking up with other theatre groups to spread the word of the work we are doing, sharing our learning and driving inclusive practice in the theatre industry at a national level.

In the future we want to complete an audit of the offer available for SEND and widen its remit e.g. holiday provision, drama or careers days, joint work experience offers

Key Learning

What didn't work so well:

- Our buildings are old and often impractical to meet some of the needs of our SEND learners – this needs to be reflected in planning for the future.
- The nature of our work means things can change at short notice which did cause issues with planning – this cohort of young people need consistency.