

# Progression pathways for learners experiencing mental health problems

## Case study: Swarthmore Education Centre

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### Context/background

Swarthmore Education Centre is an independent voluntary organization with charitable status. We have been offering adult education to the local community for over 100 years. Swarthmore currently has approximately 2000 learners, all of whom attend on a part time basis. We offer a wide variety of courses in the Arts, Computing, Basic Skills, Health and Wellbeing and counselling. Most of our learners are adults however we do have a small programmes that enable us to work with young people. We have about 100 members of staff most of whom are tutors who work on a part time basis as most of the courses run for 2hours per week and many, especially in the arts, are of a specialized nature e.g. pottery, stained glass, jewellery.

We are a centre for the local community, and as a result have a wide variety of people who attend, many of whom have what may be seen as barriers to learning and successful and happy lives. We have found that a large number of people who attend Swarthmore do indeed have mental health problems. Some may be 'diagnosed' and referred from mental health agencies but in addition we realize many people may not wish to tell us about their mental health problems until they feel safe to do so.

The Progression Pathways project fitted in well with the work we have been doing at Swarthmore more recently. Swarthmore have been working collaboratively with the National Health Service and Primary Care Trust since 2009 and took part in a National Institute for Adult Continuing Education and Skills Funding Agency joint regional pilot project in 2009/10 to improve the uptake in learning for people who have suffered from mental distress. From this we have continued to work together to help improve our service, this included creating a DVD with students talking about their experiences.

### What did you plan to do?

This project was two fold. We wanted to:

- a) Consult people with mental health issues about the implication and use of unitised provision within creative subjects.
- b) Offer Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training to staff and tutors with the proviso that they then become 'Mental Health Guides' within the organization.

Further Detail:-

- a) The consultation took place through actively taking part in creative activities and working through part of a unit of accreditation. Through these workshops participants were able to consider if accreditation as part of a creative course is achievable and accessible for

people with mental health issues. Part of the workshop was to gain feedback from learners on their thoughts about unitised provision, how to improve support and how to improve marketing.

- b)** Enabling staff to engage in MHFA training was in itself of fantastic benefit to the individuals and their own personal development but I also proposed staff members became 'guides' and in some way support the whole organization with regards to mental health. This may include building a bank of resources as well as giving their own time to help others by sharing knowledge gained.

### **How did you measure/observe impact?**

In many ways the impact will be felt and seen over the coming year once the training and feedback received is translated into actions. However through evaluation we were able to gain some measure of impact.

- a)** Creative Workshops

Part of the workshop programme was to have discussion with learners on various topics including the use of unitised provision and ideas on how to further support people who have experience of mental health issues. The feedback given by learners was verbal and written. The written feedback in all the workbooks was of great interest and use. The views and ideas given will be considered and taken forward where possible. Learners greatly enjoyed the workshops and felt it was an excellent way to get learner views.

- b)** MHFE Training

Through email feedback and verbal feedback at the end of the MHFA course all the staff found the training useful and intended to contribute to the collection of resources for support within the centre. Again the impact of this needs to be reviewed in the future. The intention is that a bank of resources is built to support people who work and learn at Swarthmore. Although some who attended have specified what they intend to do, we will need to follow this up and ensure there is a process in place to collect and carry out these tasks.

### **What impact could you see?**

#### **OUTPUTS**

- a)** Workshops

We ran 5 workshops over 3 Saturdays, 11 people attended the workshops.

11 workbooks were completed showing pictures of artwork created and detailed feedback given on discussion points.

- b)** Training

15 staff members completed a 2 day MHFA course.

Some ideas given as to resources that can be used to build a support bank.

#### **OUTCOMES**

In general the outcomes of this project will be seen in the coming year rather than immediately however :-

- a)** More learners are aware of unitized provision available within Swarthmore and in the wider FE sector.

- Suggestions and feedback given by learners have informed tutors involved in workshops of ways of working with people with mental health issues effectively.
  - Suggestions given by learners will be considered and taken forward to improve service in the future. This would include better marketing and improved support.
- b) Training**
- Raised awareness of mental health issues within a wide range of staff members.
  - In the coming months a bank of resources will start to be built for access by staff and other people who come to Swarthmore.
  - Further discussion will take place with staff members who took part in the learning regarding their status as Mental Health Guides.

### **Key learning points**

- I was pleased that people attended all the workshops even though they were advertised for a short space of time. The numbers may be seen as low (average 3 people attended each workshop) however, this may have led to the safe environment which resulted in great discussions on topics highlighted and fantastic feedback.
- Timescale was challenging, I would say, make sure you have time to do what you would like to do. Being realistic is the best option.
- I have realized that development takes time and each of these small projects is a step towards a final goal, not the goal itself. There is always work to do afterwards!