Enhancement of Learning Support

Developing an Online Profiling Tool South East Regional Network Summary Report

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In partnership with

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Introduction and background

The South East region undertook to develop and pilot an Online Profiling Tool (Professional Development Profile or PDP) for LSAs as part of Phase 2 of the national project "The Enhancement of Learning Support" led by Natspec and the Association of Colleges (AOC) on behalf of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) from September 2010 to March 2011. The South East Region project was lead by two colleges:

- Abingdon and Witney College

- Treloar College

In addition the project involved Pearson Publishing, who were responsible for building the online profile and managing data and reports.

The South East Region was one of nine regional partnerships, involving eighteen colleges. The key aim of this national project was to draw on practitioner expertise and experience to develop resources and materials that have practical relevance and add value.

Terminology

This report uses the term Learning Support Assistant (LSA) adopted by the Enhancement of Learning Support project:

Learning support assistants have direct and regular contact with the learner (or group of learners). Their role is to facilitate learners' access to identified support, within the learning process. LSAs are not on a teaching or training contract; rather they work under the direction of the person(s) leading the learning.

In practice providers use a wide variety of titles for staff supporting learning, which include: learning support assistant; teaching assistant; learning support worker; learning support practitioners; learning facilitators; educational support worker and enablers and others.

The term "learning support practitioner" (LSP) is used in the National Occupational Standards (NOS) developed by Lifelong Learning UK for this group of staff. However the project revealed that LSP was not a term that was understood or widely used by those working in the sector.

The purpose of the online profiling tool is to enable learning support assistants to self evaluate their skills, knowledge and understanding against the national occupational standards and a range of other measures. The development was based on recommendations from the initial research which identified a similar tool that had been developed for Teaching Assistants in schools. The benefit of this approach was that it enabled organisations to pin point individual training needs which often revealed that individuals may have small and specific areas for development, many of which can effectively be "topped up". The aim was to create a similar tool for LSAs in the learning and skills sector.

Approach and methodology

The profiling tool was specifically designed to help organisations to develop LSAs supporting students with learning difficulties and or disabilities. The intention was that it would be an online self-evaluation tool, set against the relevant National Occupational Standards and Application Guides. It was anticipated that such a tool would provide considerable assistance to individual LSAs, those who lead and manage them, and to institutions as a whole.

The project commenced in September 2010 and the planned approach was to develop a draft profiling tool and then use the first of two regional events to gather initial feedback from practitioners and recruit colleges to undertake a pilot of the tool with their own staff. The first event was scheduled for November 2010, a very short timescale in which to develop and create an online draft tool.

Development of the draft profile

The initial task was to create a question set which would form the basis of the profile tool and which was referenced to the relevant National Occupational Standards (NOS). Initial research was undertaken to establish which the relevant NOS were, and each of the NOS statement criteria was translated into corresponding questions. In addition, question sets covering the professional development priorities of each individual were also created, as were a range of open questions about development priorities. Questions were then moderated and edited by the project team and staff at Pearson Publishing. The challenge was to cover all of the NOS criteria whilst keeping the survey to a manageable length for respondents. A final set of questions was produced that covered each of the knowledge areas within the NOS. To support respondents in understanding the context the knowledge areas were grouped into themes to create a structure for interpreting the questions. The main themes identified were:

About You	Transition and Progression
Teaching and Learning	Safeguarding and Risk Taking
Support for Learning	Equality and Diversity
Assessment and Review	Literacy, Numeracy and ICT

Promoting Independence   Working Relationships

Organisational Policy and Practice Professional Development

To further support respondents in understanding the question the project team drafted additional explanatory information for every question. This information is made available by using a link adjacent to each question. So for example the explanatory text for the question

> *"I understand the learning programmes, learning needs, and learning objectives for the learners I work with"*

reads as follows:

> *"You understand the aims, objectives, content and approaches of each learner's learning programme. You understand the learners' individual learning needs. You work with learners and colleagues to establish individual learning objectives for the learners"*

The profile was constructed in such a way as to allow users to respond to each question in two ways;

Are you confident   Yes/No?

Do you want to develop Yes/No?

Pearson Publishing has extensive experience of producing and using online profiling tools in the education sector. Indeed they produced a similar tool for use by teaching assistants in schools on which the South East profiling tool is based. The school based model has been successfully used by well over 150,000 teaching assistants in over 7000 schools across more than 100 local authorities. The experience of Pearson Publishing, in developing a range of profiling tools, has clearly demonstrated that this two way response grid is the most effective in generating reliable and useful data for individuals and schools.

Development of draft reports

The intended output for each person completing the profile is an individual report. The report format was designed so that it would provide a detailed summary of the responses given to each question. In addition the report provided a summative report, mapped against the NOS. To achieve this each question was coded to a particular NOS criteria, in some instances one question covered more than one NOS and each NOS statement would therefore have multiple questions which related to it. To create the structure which accurately reflected the respondents' skills and understanding with respect to each NOS, the mapped questions were weighted to reflect their relevance and importance. The final individual report summarises the outcomes in two formats. It provides a straightforward report of question set and answers and in addition it maps the responses to the NOS criteria.

As well as receiving an Individual Report for each LSA, the management of each cohort of LSAs is provided with a Group Report. The Group Report provides a summative overview of all of the individual LSA responses to enable managers to establish an overall pattern of the capacity and capability of their staff team and to identify development priorities.

Finally a facility that will allow a comparison of reports over time was also created, to support managers to track and monitor trends in overall staff group responses. If this tool is used over a period of years this facility will enable managers to measure and evidence the impact and effectiveness of interventions and training.

In addition the development team also drafted detailed guidance on how to undertake the pilot process and gather the evaluation data.

The profile development process

A regional event was held in November 2010 to give delegates the opportunity to understand the structure and purpose of the profiling tool. It also gave them the opportunity to actually work with the draft tool online to understand its potential and to decide whether as an organisation they would be interested in piloting it. A key purpose of the first regional event was to recruit a sample of 20 colleges to pilot the tool in order to secure comprehensive evaluative data on which to base any revisions. Prior to the pilot, the tool and guidance were revised in response to initial feedback gathered at the November event. Clear guidelines on evaluation were then provided to the pilot organisations. The second regional event was scheduled for February 2011 to allow participating organisations sufficient time to pilot the profiling tool and complete an evaluation.

Once pilot organisations were identified each was given access to the draft online tool and to ensure data security each staff member completing the tool was allocated their own unique username and password. Having completed the online profiling tool they were given the opportunity to complete an online questionnaire, which provided detailed feedback on the tool; its structure, relevance and ease of use.

Between the first and second events feedback from the pilots was collated and summarised by the project team. A considerable amount of time was spent throughout the piloting period making and maintaining contact in order to keep pilots on course to achieve within the tight time constraints.

At the second regional event organisations were given the opportunity to have discussions and further feedback was gathered. The project team summarised the key messages from the pilot and delegates were given the opportunity to discuss these in more detail. This allowed the project team to identify the refinements needed. Following this final revision were made to both the profiling tool and the supporting guidance.

Pilot of the draft profiling tool

Once the initial template and draft question set were complete it was piloted in a range of colleges who provided detailed feedback. The organisations who completed the pilot are listed below:

Table 1: Pilot Colleges

Pilot Colleges
Abingdon and Witney College
Amersham & Wycombe College
Ayelsbury
Chichester
Homefield College
MacIntyre Abingdon College
MidKent College
NESCOT
Queen Mary's College
Reading College
Sparsholt College
St John's school and College
Sussex Coast College Hastings
Sussex Downs College
Taunton's College
The John Townsend Trust
Totton College
Treloar College

The initial aim was to pilot in 20 organisations with a minimum of 10 learning support assistants undertaking the profile in each organisation to create a total sample of 200. Following the first event 21 organisations expressed an interest and signed up to undertake the pilot. However during the course of the pilot a number of these had to withdraw due to operational pressures, staffing issues or impending inspection. In the event the profile was piloted by 261 LSAs in the 18 organisations listed above

giving a very strong data set on which to make final revisions and evaluate the effectiveness of the tool.

Regional events

To involve a broader set of development partners and to recruit organisations to pilot the draft tool two regional events were held.

- 24th November 2010 at Eynsham Hall, Oxfordshire.

- 11th February 2011 at Treloar College, Alton, Hampshire.

Participation and satisfaction with the events is summarised in Table 2:

Table 2: Regional Event Participation and Satisfaction

SE Region Events	Delegates	Organisations	Good or Better
First Event	47	29	95%
Second Event	48	24	90%

First regional event

The event was organised by Abingdon and Witney College and took place at Eynsham Hall on the 24th November 2010. The event was well attended by 47 delegates from 29 organisations. Delegates were given the opportunity to hear a presentation from Pearson Publishing on the development of the profiling tool and to work in small groups using the draft tool online. In addition JISC TechDis also presented on the impact accessible and readily available technology can make to learners with disabilities and the role LSAs can play in supporting their access to it.

Second regional event

The second regional event was organised by Treloar College and took place at the college on the 11th February 2011. The day focused on providing delegates with an opportunity to discuss the detailed feedback from the pilots and to have further input into the final format of the profile. The event was attended by 48 delegates from 24 organisations.

Pilot evaluations and feedback

From the pilot feedback a number of key issues were identified and addressed:

1) A number of respondents reported that they felt some of the questions did not relate to their job. This was interesting, particularly given that all of the statements are directly linked to the NOS and are therefore potentially part of the role of the LSA. It was surprising that a number of the respondents were not initially aware

of the existence of the NOS and the application guides and/or familiar with the content. These questions typically related to being involved in planning or assessment. Consideration was given as to whether we should add a response option "not part of my role". Ultimately it was decided that this tool is designed to assess skills and confidence in relation to the NOS and therefore it should include all areas of the knowledge. Furthermore including additional questions would have made the data too complex to manage. Furthermore, even though the area may not be currently relevant it may be in the future and it was decided to leave the full range of questions available.

2) The feedback highlighted the need to manage the implementation effectively and to provide management support both to completing the profiling tool and sharing results. In particular the reports had most impact where they were not just handed out but where they were seen as being part of a wider review, appraisal or performance management process. This enabled respondents to see a clear link between completing the profile and the actions taken by the organisation in response to the resulting information to support their training and development needs. It was also found to be important that the content and implications of the documents were carefully explained to avoid confusion and concern, and make best use of them in terms of subsequent development activities.

3) A number of interface issues were raised and addressed with the draft profile. In particular the draft format did not prompt respondents to answer all questions before moving on to the next section, and this resulted in them needing to return to questions that they had left out before they could submit and complete their profile. They found this irritating because they felt they had finished. This was amended and respondents are now provided with a prompt, which requires them to complete all questions in each section before moving on.

4) Some respondents commented that the profile gathered information across all of the NOS criteria, generating a lot of data, which although useful, makes it more difficult to identify clear priorities. To address this it was suggested that a free text question enabling respondents to identify priorities should be added to the question set. This was incorporated into each section.

5) A number of the pilot organisation raised concerns that the draft question set did not ask participants to identify any disabilities in the "About You" section. Additional questions were included to cover these issues.

6) Some concerns were raised about the interface of the online tool, in particular the colour contrast between the questions and the background. A facility within the survey was added for respondents to change the contrast and colour options to support accessibility.

Findings and outputs

There are three main outputs from the project

- An online Profiling Tool

- Guidance

- A project report (this document)

The main outputs of the project were the development of the online profiling tool for LSAs and associated guidance, which allows LSAs to self evaluate their skills, knowledge and understanding against the National Occupational Standards (NOS) and a range of broader skill sets.

The final product is now titled;

The Professional Development Profile (PDP)

The Professional Development Profile is available to all LSAs in the Learning and Skills sector and is available on the ELS pages of the Excellence Gateway which gives full details of how to access and use the PDP.

It usually takes respondents 30 – 60 minutes to complete the PDP, depending on their familiarity with web-based questionnaires.

 The outputs of the profiling tool for each respondent are:

- **Individual report** - the question responses mapped to the NOS

- **Group report**- a summary of all LSAs in the organisation

- **Comparative report** - a comparison of profile data over time

Summary and evaluation

Value of the tool

The pilot demonstrated that there is a need for a profiling tool and that the organisations and individuals who participated found it valuable. The following quotes illustrate their reasons;

> *"Many thanks for the PDP report – it is wonderful – really informative and very professionally presented. I am very impressed with the quality of information which it has provided and feel it will go a long way to raise the profile of my department with senior managers"*

> *"The finished article is accessible; it is easy to take information from the explanatory text. It was incredibly informative and I found it very impressive".*

"I have been very pleased with what it has identified for us as a department and tried to build a training programme based on the results"

The Importance of leadership and management

One of the key findings that emerged from the development of the tool and the pilot was the importance of good leadership and management in maximising the potential benefits of the tool.

Organisations that got the most out of the profiling tool were those where the management demonstrated their commitment to it by making sure that all potential participants had a good understanding of what the PDP is for and as importantly what it was not for. Those managers who took the time to reassure and encourage their staff that the purpose was developmental and not judgemental were most effective. In particular the key messages for staff completing the profile to understand before they started were that the profile is:

- An opportunity to celebrate what individuals already do well and a chance to say where, were they given more support and training, they feel that they could contribute even more to their learners and the organisation;

- Not a formal assessment that is passed or failed and therefore it should not be regarded as threatening; and

- An online self-review that is not just a means to an end but it is a valuable end in itself – a vital first step in the development process.

Similarly, the whole process within the organisation needs to be managed carefully.

For example:

- Working through the survey is much better done in the organisation in teams or peer groups rather than unsupported at home;

- While each individual should respond for themselves, they should be encouraged to discuss the statements and their responses with one another;

- Respondents should also be made aware of the additional text option and feel free to ask questions of those running the session; and

- There does not need to be a fixed time for finishing.

All of this will help to add to the value of the experience and encourage individuals, often lacking in self-confidence, to give a good account of themselves, their capabilities and realistic areas for improvement.

Other key messages

- The National Occupational Standards and application guides for LSAs are not well known or used across the sector.

- The responses to the pilot for this study confirm the message of the earlier research that the role of LSAs in supporting learning is generally underdeveloped.

- Leadership and Management were key to the effective use of the profiling tool and in particular it worked best in an organisational culture where the status and role of LSAs was promoted and supported.

- LSAs benefited greatly from the networks and opportunity to share effective practice which this development process created and are a sustainable benefit of this project.

- Cross sector working was significantly improved as a result of working on a collaborative project and this as a methodology of building local provider projects has potential beyond the scope of this project.

- Delivery of the outputs was a significant commitment for the lead colleges and other participants, particularly in the current environment. All those who participated contributed a great deal of their time and resources to ensure it was a success but the delivery model which placed so much responsibility on practitioners needs to be considered in future projects.

Recommendations

Recommendations for providers

- Use the Tool to support you to identify and deliver appropriate training and development opportunities for LSAs.

- Use the comparative reporting function to measure and evaluate the impact of training and development on LSA skills and confidence.

- Use the NOS and application guides as a framework for training and development activities.

- Use the profiling tool in conjunction with the Audit Tool as they provide complementary assessments which will enable you to evaluate your learning support offer and prioritise appropriate development activities.

Recommendations for LSIS

- Promote the wider dissemination and use of the NOS as a framework for continuing professional development and training.

- Promote the use of the profiling tool amongst provider organisations, particularly in the appraisal, review and performance management process, possibly through more detailed case studies of its use and impact.

- Promote the essential role of LSAs in teaching, learning and supporting independence.

- Influence the design of management development to better understand and value the important role of LSAs in creating an inclusive culture.

Annex 1 - List of contributors

We would like to acknowledge and thank the following organisations who were involved in piloting the profiling tool.

Pilot Colleges
Abingdon and Witney College
Amersham & Wycombe College
Ayelsbury
Chichester
Homefield College
MacIntyre Abingdon College
MidKent College
NESCOT
Queen Mary's College
Reading College
Sparsholt College
St John's school and College
Sussex Coast College Hastings
Sussex Downs College
Taunton's College
The John Townsend Trust
Totton College
Treloar College

Further feedback was provided by the following organisations through attending the two conferences, in November 2010 and February 2011

- Aspin House

- Berkshire College of Agriculture

- Bracknell & Wokingham College

- Canterbury College

- Highbury College

- National Star College

- Newbury College

- Oxford & Cherwell Valley College

- Southampton City College

- Totton College

- Henley College