

EQUAL Evaluation Report

A report prepared by

LIFEWORLD LTD

on behalf of **THIRD AGE FOUNDATION**

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1. INTRODUCTION

LIFEWORLD LTD has been commissioned to undertake the evaluation of Third Age Foundation's (TAF) EQUAL project. Funded by the European Social Fund this project ran over the July 02 – July 04 period and centred on the delivery of ICT training and employability support for disadvantaged older people.

TAF has substantial experience of working with disadvantaged learners over the age of 40. In West London they are the main Third Age voluntary sector organisation developing and delivering learning and training programmes exclusively to older learners. They have taken the lead in helping older people through ICT and lifeskills training enter the learning and labour markets. They also have developed expertise in supporting the 'portfolio worker' aimed at ensuring older workers survive in West London's economy.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been employed for this evaluation. The aim of this evaluation is to ensure that lessons are learned from the delivery of outcomes and outputs related to the project and fed back into both current delivery and the dissemination aims of Action 3. This evaluation also serves as a review to enhance learning provision in the West London sub-region for EQUAL project partners.

2. PROGRAMME OF WORK

The aim of the EQUAL project was to provide targeted ICT training to disadvantaged people over the age of 40. Fifteen students were originally recruited onto this project (the focus of this evaluation); an additional 10 beneficiaries have now been recruited and funded for training). The ICT training covered, *inter alia*, ICTBS, New CLAIT, CLAIT Plus, and IBT III. The EQUAL project also provided one-to-one help with job-seeking, life and employability skills.

The breakdown of project beneficiaries according to gender, ethnicity, disability, and age is provided below:

Male %	Female %
28	72

Ethnicity	% students
Black British (African)	5
Black British (Other)	12
Mixed (White and Black African)	2
White British	52
White (Irish)	7
White (Other)	22

Disabled %	Not disabled %
12	88

50 and above %	Below 50 %
48	52

Given the data above a number of general observations can be made about TAF's EQUAL project:

- The first 15 student participants achieved a 100 percent completion rate. Given the success in recruitment and retention an additional 10 students have been funded by EQUAL.
- The male to female ratio was imbalanced with the course attracting a higher number of female students compared to ICT training courses generally. However, given the age profile of participants, the involvement of men over the age of 40 reflects industry averages.
- The vast majority of participants were White (81 percent). The figure for Black and minority ethnic students was 19 percent which is above the sub-regional average (10 percent).
- TAF has been successful in recruiting and working with people with a disability (12 percent), a key target group for EQUAL. This reflects one of the characteristics of many learners over the age of 40 in West London.
- Nearly half of the beneficiaries participating in the project were over the age of 50. Importantly, the majority of these people were of employment age and were actively seeking employment.

3. STUDENT FEEDBACK

To support the observations from the quantitative assessment of the project it is important to gauge the views of participants that had undertaken the programme of learning.

Ten face-to-face interviews were conducted with beneficiaries to assess views on the benefits of the EQUAL project and how it could be improved. The number of students interviewed was large and the views are therefore statistically representative. Importantly, the comments were encouraged in confidence - that is, comments were non-attributable. The following themes were covered in the face-to-face interviews:

- How students benefited from the programme
- Possible areas of improvement/development in the programme
- Current learning/employment status of students

- Future learning/employment status of students
- Additional support required

Given the aims of EQUAL it is instructive to concentrate on the first two areas for this evaluation. It is important to note that the comments have not been corrected for errors in grammar.

3.1 Benefits of programme

The vast majority of students (80 percent) said they had benefited from the training provided by TAF. In terms of skills the benefits can be divided into two main categories. The first, understandably, centred on improving ICT skills. Some typical responses from the interviewees were as follows:

‘...it [course] benefited by computer skills. Technology skills are a bit like a foreign language and now I have the confidence.’

‘I have done some training in IT but now I have stepped up to a higher level and know more.’

The second area of skill benefit focused on employability. As noted by two of the people interviewed:

‘I hadn’t gone for an interview in years and the first one I did went really bad – needless to say I didn’t get the job! But when I came to TAF they taught me how to prepare for an interview...I am far more confident now.’

‘I suppose I felt when I was made redundant that I couldn’t get a job because of my age...but with TAF’s help with my CV I am confident I’ll get something [employment] soon.’

A third area of benefit was the social and structured side to undertaking training. Five of the people interviewed said this was a major benefit from the EQUAL project. A typical response on this subject from the interviewees was as follows:

‘It was really good to socialise...after you’re made redundant it’s important to have some structure in the week and going to the Job Centre is not enough....By doing the training here I was able to discipline myself to look for a job.’

Leaving aside the positive benefits highlighted above, it is important to note that two of the participants said they had not benefited from the programme. One of these participants made the following comment:

‘I had to drop out of the course because of an illness in the family and wasn’t able to re-join and do anything else.’

A second person made the following point:

'I was computer literate before and so didn't really advance my skills...I did enjoy the social aspect of the course though.'

3.2 Improvements to programme

Notwithstanding the last two comments there was a consensus on the positive benefits of undertaking the course of training. Nevertheless, given the aims of EQUAL - to identify and develop methods of support for disadvantaged people, for instance - it was important to identify improvements to the project. Only half of the participants interviewed identified areas of improvement. The first area centred on the fact that there were different levels of student in the class:

'It's difficult to say [if there are any improvements]...but there were different levels of student in the class. This meant that some of the students were held back by the other students.'

In a similar vein, a second area of improvement highlighted by a couple of the interviewees centred on the profile of the students:

'I think it was difficult to work with people who had very different expectations. We had two really old women in the class who found it so difficult...they left because they could not follow everyone....I wonder whether there would have to be some age brackets for the classes.'

A third area of improvement identified by an interviewee centred on the training resources provided by TAF:

'We had to crowd around a computer when we were being shown something. It would have been good if there was a projector.'

Finally, a couple of people mentioned the personal development side of the programme. As one of the students interviewed said:

'We could have had more support with the employment side. We were given a CV to look at but I would have benefited from more face-to-face support on my own CV....Also I wonder whether we could have some form of work placement organised for us...I think this is going to be the most important way to get a job as it will let us get our foot in the door.'

In light of the comments made about a number of general conclusions can be drawn from the data. Firstly, there was a consensus on how the EQUAL project had helped the beneficiaries in terms of ICT and employability skills.

Critically, the data point to the importance of building self-confidence – through, for instance, social interaction – for this target group. Moreover, the evaluation highlights the benefits of learning to a target group that may have neglected it – 80 percent of the people interviewed were thinking about further learning.

Suggested improvements to the EQUAL support were understandably mixed – subsequent conclusions are therefore indicative. There was clearly some feeling about how the mixed levels of beneficiaries had a negative impact on learning. That noted, students are assessed before commencing classes which may reflect problems in students' own self-assessment. Although volunteering and in-house work experience is encouraged by TAF, there was some of the interviewees identified an opportunity to develop the employability aspect of the programme, especially in terms of making direct links to employers. And, of course, there was some mention of a need to improve resources, such as the need for a projector and the problems of class sizes.

Importantly, the majority of people interviewed aimed to continue with learning and training, especially at TAF. Indeed, whilst many of the students were participating in the learning programme to enhance their employability there was a sense that the TAF programme had provided an opportunity to highlight the benefits of lifelong learning.

Understandably, then, the future areas of help identified by the interviewees were mixed. Although only four of the interviewees responded to this question, the main areas for additional support were on establishing links to the employment market through job brokerage and work placement, and the need for greater information about other training provision in the sub-region.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The points raised within this evaluation are suggestive. And given the constraints of resources in undertaking this evaluation many areas, such as the teaching techniques, have been neglected. Nevertheless, the evidence gathered suggests that the EQUAL project has had some success in delivering key learning and training targets. But there are a number of areas of improvement, which need to be considered for the future. These are divided into recommendations for two main stakeholders – learners over the age of 40 and EQUAL/TAF.

4.1 Learners over the age of 40

- Target beneficiaries should not undervalue the subsidised learning provided by the EQUAL programme and delivered by TAF.
- Training in ICT skills must be complemented by non-technical training, such as basic and life skills and personal development.

- ICT training should be used as a basis to develop 'soft' and 'hard' skills among learners as well as enhancing employability more generally.
- Learners should seek links with other local up-skilling and training programmes and consider how to integrate informal learning with progression routes.
- Learners over the age of 40 must recognise that undertaking training ICT will not suffice for many employers and volunteering opportunities should be considered to develop an experience portfolio.
- Older learners should seek to understand changes in the labour market and look at opportunities that can use their transferable skills rather than experience.

4.2 EQUAL & TAF

- A generic blanket approach to employability is unlikely to succeed and training delivery needs to maintain sensitivity to individual circumstances.
- TAF should work with other EQUAL partners to identify mainstream funds to support students who have completed the training and are seeking to continue further studies at TAF as part of a learning progression route.
- Best practice on how to facilitate recruitment and retention from all sections of the population must be disseminated by TAF to other training providers involved in EQUAL.
- Greater focus on employability both during and after the programme of learning needs to be ensured by the project team.
- TAF and EQUAL should explore the benefits of segmenting the learner market on the basis of individual ability, and review self-assessment techniques employed by students.
- Links between EQUAL programme activities and TAF initiatives would benefit course participants especially in terms of securing employment in the long-term.
- Emerging legislation covering age discrimination must be highlighted to employers, and EQUAL should look to improve the image of older workers through greater dialogue with employers and statutory bodies.
- The lessons from this project should be disseminated through both a generic EQUAL programme strategy and a specific initiative highlighting issues for older people.

It is worth noting that a number of these recommendations have already been addressed. For example, TAF have further invested in training materials and technical equipment to ensure the maximisation of technical opportunities. There are now two projectors. Moreover, to improve further aspects of enhancing the employability of participants in-depth one-to-one sessions are now held with students. Critically, students have been provided with additional one-to-one classes if necessary although this opportunity has not been fully maximised. Here, then, a key point to note is the difficulties with working with students suffering multiple deprivation.

Notwithstanding on-going improvements to delivery at TAF it is important to recognise that the EQUAL support has been successful in the delivery of outputs and testing of methods to engage with older people. In fact, some of the techniques developed in this project could be expanded and rolled out across the EQUAL programme area. The success of this training programme has also served to demonstrate both the ability of TAF to successfully recruit and deliver targeted learning to people over the age of 40, and the need and potential for similar skills development courses. Therefore, EQUAL project partners should jointly explore the possibility of maintaining the existing momentum and extend this programme to benefit current and future learners in West London.

TAF has shown how ICT can be used to increase demand for learning both as a means of up-skilling and a delivery method. People over the age of 40 are characterised by their reluctance to take-up formal learning and training for employment. But the current growth in demand for learning from these people may not be met; that is, older people are often considered by training providers as another 'target group', leading to inappropriate learning methods and environment, which may prevent long-term participation in lifelong learning.

Therefore, the EQUAL project partners should consider the areas of potential improvements indicated in this evaluation report with a view to their implementation in subsequent delivery. Importantly, some of the beneficiaries trained through the current programme are looking to continue their training and learning experiences, which should be facilitated through EQUAL or programme partner activities in West London.

LIFEWORLD LTD

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