

THIRD AGE LEARNING INITIATIVE

Evaluation Report to London West LSC

A report prepared by

LIFEWORLD

on behalf of **THIRD AGE FOUNDATION**

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INTRODUCTION

LIFEWORLD LTD was commissioned to undertake the evaluation of Third Age Foundation's (TAF) 'Third Age Learning Initiative'. Funded by London West LSC the project ran over the 24 June 2002 – 29 March 2003 period. The project had four main aims:

- The delivery of tailored ICT training
- A skill portal and newsletter
- The delivery of learning events
- Action research

This evaluation concentrates on the main aim of the programme 'delivering tailored ICT training'. The other aspects of delivery have been completed to the satisfaction of London West LSC and an in-depth longitudinal evaluation is unnecessary to assess the impacts of these other aspects of delivery. That noted, recommendations that emerge from this evaluation resonate with the wider project aims.

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 on helping older people through ICT and lifeskills training enter the earning 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 learnt from the delivery of the learning outcomes and outputs related to the bid and for London West LSC to enhance its learning provision in the West London sub-region.



PROGRAMME OF WORK

The following general activities/outcomes for the tailored training were originally proposed by TAF

to London West LSC as part of the formal bidding round:

- Widening participation in learning for Third Agers
- Increased confidence of over 40s in entering learning and labour markets
- Enhancing employment opportunities for older people
- Raising the learning achievements of Third Agers in West London
- Formation of West London steering group on skills and learning for older people
- Increased understanding by employers of skills and experience of Third Agers
- Stronger links between TAF and other mainstream providers of learning
- Strengthening of voluntary sector to deliver learning provision in West London

Having secured funding, these proposed activities/outcomes were refined in dialogue with London West LSC as part of the project development process. As noted earlier, this evaluation is on the core element of training delivery, and a number of key outputs were agreed as part of the final programme. Below is a table of the 'actual' against 'profile' outputs of the programme as detailed in the final delivery plan:



Output	Profile	Actual
60 Third Agers trained up to levels 1, 2 and 3 in ICT	60	78
60 over 40s worked with on life skills and employment training	60	78
20 people from BME communities targeted with life skills and learning enhancement	20	29

The 'actual' breakdown of training by beneficiary according to the programme was as follows:

Course	Student numbers
CLAIT	23
IBT II	19
IBT II EVE	7
CL EVE	12
ICTBS	10
IBT III	7

The breakdown of these beneficiaries according to gender, ethnic/nationality, age and disability is provided below:

Male %	Female %
38	62

Ethnicity	Student numbers
Black (African Caribbean)	14
Asian	15
White	36
Other	13

Disabled	Not disabled
17	61

50 and above	Below
46	32

Given the tables above a number of observations can be made:

- The London West LSC programme has overachieved in terms of the overall number of students benefiting from training. There has been tremendous success in recruiting participants with a 30 percent increase in recruitment over the period.
- Compared to a regional average of a around a third the number of Black and minority ethnic students has been high (just under 40 percent).
- The male to female ratio was slightly imbalanced with the course attracting a higher number of female students compared to ICT training standards generally. However, the involvement of men was considerably higher than learning programmes targeting people over the age of 40 in general.
- TAF has been successful in recruiting and working with people with a disability, a key target group for the LSC. This reflects one of the characteristics of many learners over the age of 40 in West London.
- Nearly 60 percent of students participating in the programme were over the age of 50.

Importantly, the majority of these students were of employment age and were actively seeking employment.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

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

A selection of participants were interviewed in the last week of their course (w/c 24 March 2003). Fourteen face-to-face interviews were conducted to assess their views on both how they benefited from the programme and how it could be improved. The students were drawn from the six training courses funded by London West LSC at TAF. Management staff were also interviewed to assess how the LSC funded programme had developed. Whilst the number of students interviewed was relatively small the views were statistically representative of the LSC funded students. Importantly, the comments were encouraged in confidence; that is, comments were non-attributable. The following themes were covered in the face-to-face interviews with students:

- 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

As mentioned earlier, it is instructive to concentrate on the first of these two areas for this evaluation. The students made the following comments covering these areas during the face-to-face interviews:

Benefits of programme for student

'Heard about them from the job centre as I have been looking for a job. They are very sensitive...and the course is very good.'

'I'm looking for a career change...it's time for a change. I never had any knowledge of IT and I now have and want to link this into information management in the library sector....The level of tuition is very good.'

'I was depressed and the course has helped me to improve my basic skills and motivate me. I did it because I want to return to the labour market....I have gained confidence in myself...I feel I have actually achieved something!'

'It's been terrific! Now I have basic ICT skills. The personal development part of the course was also very good....Hopefully this will help me get an office job.'

'I've done all three courses....I now have a good level of IT. And I have confidence...when you sit in a council flat all day you can get depressed....Having older people help you has been important.'

'I've benefited enormously because I never knew anything about computers

before....It [the course] has given me support to carry on and look for a job....Also the people here have been great.'

'I couldn't use e-mail and the Internet and now I can. I wanted to communicate with friends and family around the world....I'm doing it for pleasure but maybe I'll do it for work.'

'I have learnt a lot about computers....Meeting different people has been good. It's given me confidence to do things and I now want to do something different at work.'

'I have a qualification....It has given me more confidence as all I had in the past was on-the-job training after 25 years.'

'One of the burdens about being a mother is the kids put you down. I now have confidence in using IT and don't have to ask the kids....Being with people of your own age really does help...you're not made to feel unwanted or even stupid.'

'I hadn't worked for 29 years so lacked confidence. TAF has given me confidence....It has opened my eyes to what I can do.'

'Didn't know anything about computers...and now I do. I have enjoyed it very much and it has given me confidence.'

'Before I could use a computer and do word processing but not e-mail. I needed help with e-mail. It has really been enjoyable to learn something new...I'm doing it for the first time as I didn't pay much attention at school.'

'By becoming familiar with IT I'm hoping to get a job....I am viewing it as a stepping-stone to get back into work.'

Improvements to programme

'I haven't really thought about that....People could give out handouts on

how the IBT fits into or compares to other IT qualifications...that is the only real area of development.'

'Two days a week is not enough. Would be handy to have a drop-in centre at TAF to allow us to practice our skills.'

'We only do two days a week...perhaps three would be good.'

'Unsure about improvements, it's been very good. The tutors have been very good...perhaps it suits me better to work with older people.'

'I have enjoyed it...perhaps could be improved by having more space...the rooms are a little cramped.'

'I like the small classes. Don't think it can be improved...TAF is doing a great job...Sometimes there are other people [from another class] in the classroom which can be a little disruptive.'

'Sometimes people came later on in the course ...it's important that we all start together.'

'Parts of the course were too basic for me. I'd like to have done more on PowerPoint and other office software...The financial management and life mapping were not really relevant for me.'

'This is a little petty but if we could use the projector more rather than gather round a PC this would help in the learning process.'

'Some of the personal development stuff was not helpful...a bit too American! I know if I'm spending too much money!'

'I like being in a team...can't think of how you can improve the course.'

'I don't think you can improve it.'

'It's good but perhaps should ensure that there are not too many people in the classroom.'

'Personal development stuff is not really relevant for me...perhaps it's been useful to other people though.'

Given the students comments above a number of general conclusions can be drawn from the data. In terms of the benefits of the programme there was a clear consensus among the students of how it has helped them. Interestingly, the benefits covered both a general improvement of ICT skills and improved self-confidence. In specific terms there was an acknowledgement of the benefits of gaining a qualification and understanding ICT as a key skill for employment. Furthermore, there was a sense from the interviews that the programme has engaged older people, especially those who had neglected it, to the learning market. This engagement has not only helped develop skills for learning but also improved opportunities for employment. Here the TAF programme has ensured that skills levels of people over the age of 40 have been developed for the current labour market as well as creating further links to targeted training. Finally, the programme has helped address problems of isolation and exclusion often faced by older people through a learning environment.

In terms of improvements in the programme the vast majority of interviewees' comments focus on the facilities and timing of the courses. Whilst it is reasonable to suggest that the students often found it difficult to come up with specific areas of improvement a typical feeling among the interviewees was that there was insufficient space or that classrooms were occasionally overcrowded. Moreover, there was some feeling that a drop-in centre would improve the learning and training offer provided by TAF and London West LSC, although currently students had access to facilities on Mondays. In addition, there were mixed feelings on the relevance of the personal development aspects of the programme; for example, a number of students felt that it was not relevant to their personal circumstances. That said, these comments were often qualified with the point that in general terms the personal development aspect of the programme, including the action plan, has benefited other students.

Leaving aside the direct comments outlined above, from the evaluation data comments were

also gained about the current and future learning and employment aims of the students. From the evaluation the majority of students 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 general feeling that the TAF programme had provided an opportunity to highlight the benefits of lifelong learning. Mindful of this, an underlying theme from these data was the relevance students gave to learning and training for enhancing employability.

Finally, in terms of seeking additional help, few students provided any precise details on future areas of support. Notwithstanding the fact that only three of the interviewees mentioned possible areas of help, these comments centred on the need to make links to the employment market through job brokerage. That noted, the lack of detailed information on future support needs on the part of interviewees could be attributed to the integrated approach of the TAF programme and services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The points raised within this evaluation are not exhaustive. The evidence gathered for this evaluation suggests that the programme has been successful although there are a number of areas and additional support, which need to be considered for future training of people over the age of 40. For the purposes of explication these are divided into recommendations for two main stakeholders – learners over the age of 40 and TAF/LSC.

Learners over the age of 40

- There needs to be a recognition that ICT skills training needs to be complemented by non-technical training, such as basic skills and personal development.

- Learners should make links with other local up-skilling and training programmes funded by the LSC and consider how to integrate informal learning with progression routes.
- Students should maximise TAF's specialist support both during and after the attendance of training programmes.
- The subsidised learning provided by TAF and funded by the LSC should not be undervalued.
- 'Soft skills' development should be undertaken, especially in relation to the integrated approach offered by TAF, to encourage a wider learning experience.
- Students should collaborate among themselves to create physical and virtual communities to facilitate change in the learning and labour markets.
- Technology, such as ICT, should be used both as a basis to develop 'soft' and 'hard' skills among learners as well as enhancing employability more generally.

TAF & London West LSC

- TAF should explore with London West LSC the availability of 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.
- London West LSC and TAF to develop best practice on how to approach recruitment and retention from all sections of the population, but especially BME and disabled older people.
- Greater focus on employability both during and after the programme of



learning needs to be ensured.

- Closer links between TAF learning programmes and other sector-based training would benefit course participants especially in terms of securing employment.
- London West LSC should review mainstream funding for workforce development and see how learning for people over the age of 40 can be encouraged in the labour market.
- Campaign to improve the image of older people with, *inter alia*, ICT qualifications should be developed which targets local employers and other statutory bodies.
- Greater use of job seeking specialists should be made as part of on-going advice and guidance to students.

The results of this London West LSC funded programme have been excellent and potentially both the methods developed and delivery models can be expanded and rolled out across the sub-region. Above all, the evaluation has shown that TAF and the project specifically, has exceeded its objectives.

There are enormous changes taking place in the way people learn and in the provision of learning. 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. And yet currently 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.

The success of this training programme has served to demonstrate both the ability of TAF to successfully recruit and deliver targeted learning to people over the age of 40 and also the need and potential for similar skills development courses. As recommended above, London West LSC and TAF should jointly explore the possibility of maintaining the existing momentum and extend this programme to benefit current and future learners in West London.

Mindful of this, London West LSC should consider the areas of potential improvements indicated in this evaluation report with a view to their implementation in subsequent delivery. Critically, many of the students trained through the current programme are looking to continue their training and learning experiences – this opportunity should be maximised by TAF and London West LSC.

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