



## Innovative Approaches To Developing Accredited Employability Skills

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### Abstract

*'Amongst core characteristics employers look for are motivation and flexibility. These include willingness to work and learn, and appearance, behaviour, confidence, and positive gestures and mannerisms.'* Bunt K, McAndre F, Kuechel A (2005) [1]

*Supporting Employability and Personal Effectiveness (SEPE) is a new BTEC qualification being offered by Edexcel and Superact. The SEPE award is designed to help those who may find accessing traditional routes to employability challenging, to build confidence and gain a meaningful qualification that has currency world wide.*

*The purpose of SEPE is to equip learners with employability skills and the self-confidence to use them. These are the skills needed to obtain work and build the foundations of long term labour market participation. While there will always be some job-specific skills that an employer is looking for, most employers also want to see a set of generic skills associated with teamwork, communication, and self-motivation in potential employees.*

*The qualification is based on 50 hours learning, normally spread over a period of three months on a sessional basis. Working with Exeter University, the qualification was developed in UK prisons using highly skilled musicians. It became clear that an arts based approach to SEPE could be highly successful in reaching out to those who have shunned more traditional forms of learning.*

*Funded through an EU Leonardo Di Vinci Transfer of Innovation project, the SEPE award is currently being trialled in prisons across five countries; Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Turkey.*

*Superact is a Community Interest Company that uses the creative process to improve the health and well-being of communities and in doing so maximises the life chances of individuals.*

### 1. The need for employability skills

With unemployment increasing across Europe, there is a renewed emphasis on helping those seeking work. A key component of this is the development of an individual's softer employability skills and the self-confidence to use them. These are the skills needed to obtain work and build the foundations of long term labour market participation.

The need for such skills is even more marked among certain groups of the population; such as ex-offenders. The prison population in Europe is just under half a million and recidivism is high, 58% within two years in the case of the UK. It costs around £40,000 per year in the UK to keep an adult in prison and £100,000 in a young offender institution. Lack of work is a key determinant of re-offending, 82% of persistent re-offenders have employability problems linked to their re-offending.

In response to these, and other, employability issues Edexcel (a Pearson Company, and the largest awarding body in the UK examination) has launched a new qualification, Supporting Employability and Personal Effectiveness (SEPE). Edexcel took the original idea of SEPE, as developed by The University of Exeter using a Delphi technique with a variety of teachers, trainer and arts deliverers: and adapted it for accreditation. The award was structured to help those who may find accessing



traditional routes to employability challenging; build confidence; and gain a meaningful and accredited qualification that has currency world-wide.

Superact is a UK based Community Interest Company that uses the creative process to improve the health and well-being of communities and to maximise the life chances of individuals. We have embraced SEPE and are currently trialling it across prisons in five European countries, using professional artists to develop innovative and exciting ways to inspire learners. In doing so we concur with Erwin et al:

*'It is not a question of being a teacher or a performer, because great teaching is a performing art and a great performer is always teaching.'* [2]

## 2. Rationale of the award

SEPE is a BTEC qualification, the premise of which is:

*'BTEC qualifications are suitable for a wide range of learners. They offer an alternative to more traditional qualifications, combining the best mix of academic and vocational methods of learning. They are respected and understood by employers and Higher Education alike. BTECs develop and enhance skills that learners already have and encourage them to think about relating their learning to real-life situations.'* [3]

It is also hoped that by taking this qualification students will develop a passion for learning through the unique holistic delivery of this course. The Edexcel rationale for this qualification neatly sums up the reason for the development of the award:

*'These qualifications are designed to help learners to gain and retain a job, and then to advance in the workplace, through development of the soft skills that employers are looking for: adaptability, a 'can do' attitude and objectivity about strengths and weaknesses.'* (Pearson, 2010) [4]

The SEPE qualification breaks these ambiguous headings into smaller achievable targets. Learning Outcomes for each unit, set out in the specification, make it clear what skills the learners are expected to develop. It is hoped that breaking up the lofty headings it will be easier to engage learners in improving their employability skills and also enable artist deliverers to relate them to their own unique talents. These Learning Outcomes are:

- Be able to use effective communication skills.
- Be able to make a positive contribution within a team.
- Be able to demonstrate employability skills in a group project.
- Know how to reflect on personal effectiveness skills and qualities for employability developed in the context of a group project.

## 3. Learners

The idea of the award is that it can be delivered to any group who would benefit. During its development by the University of Exeter, it was used successfully with socially excluded groups such as: young at risk; ex offenders; offenders; pupil referral units; under 16's in FE; adult learners with disabilities; and long-term unemployed.

Edexcel make very succinct criteria for potential learners on this course:

*'They are appropriate for a diverse range of learners including: 14-19 year-old learners; adults returning to study; those seeking to develop greater independence; those who have not yet achieved accredited qualifications; those with specific learning needs.'* (Pearson, 2010) [5]

Perhaps the most telling criteria for deciding upon potential learners are the hopes and plans learners may have for progressing beyond the completion of this award. It is felt that potential candidates should show a willingness to learn and whilst self-confidence in an educational sense maybe difficult to quantify at the early stage of the award, an inclination to try new things will be essential in any potential learner. And the credit based approach to BTEC qualifications provides opportunities for progressing in the achievement of further formal qualifications. BTEC First Certificates are a well-worn platform for progressing onto other BTECs, GCSEs, A-Levels, Diploma Courses, or the world of work.



#### 4. Delivery of the award

The qualification is based on 50 hours learning, normally spread over a period of two to three months with perhaps 12 sessions. In between the sessions the learners are encouraged to reflect on their experience, prepare themselves to contribute to the next session and therefore to the end product, which in the case of delivery by Superact could be a CD, performance, presentation or exhibition. Indeed, the specification in the SEPE award makes clear that one successful approach to the delivery of the award can be through the arts:

*'For example, a wide range of arts programmes such as drama, music, dance, story telling, filming, 2D and 3D work are appropriate for the delivery ... A well-run arts project would be appropriate both for learners who are interested in the arts and for those who may not know much about the arts, and may be disaffected and de-motivated, but who may find the re-engagement they need through participation in the project.'* (Pearson, 2010) [6]

Many people, young and old, already enjoy the arts whether it is music, visual art, dance, drama, or writing. Others have never had the chance to explore their creativity through the Arts. Evidence has shown that a well-delivered arts project will develop participants': reflective learning; their overall personal skills; their ability to manage relationships; their communication skills; their concentration on tasks; and their enthusiasm, motivation and self-esteem (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008) [7]. Many studies have made similar observations when comparing the impact of the arts on self-esteem and employability. Arts projects have

*'succeeded in altering participants' perception of others, in enabling them to learn the value of allowing others to express their feelings and making them feel more comfortable around people they hadn't met before'* (Wilson, 2009). [8]

Thus simply by engaging in a well run arts project a range of effects over and beyond the focus on the final arts product can occur.

Arts practitioners may at first perceive a difficulty in adapting their approach to working with their project participants to fit around the Learning Outcomes and make them accessible through music. A further challenge of delivering the award is not so much the susceptibility of the learners to the holistic delivery of employability skills, but the ability of the arts practitioner to adjust their skills to enable the collection of enough evidence for the learners to pass the course. The conflict lies in the inability of some practitioners to adjust their desire for a successful musical outcome from their delivery to that of a successful educational one; essentially shifting their focus away from artistic merit to the holistic development of the participants.

As such it is crucial that arts practitioners receive specialised training in developing the tools to recognise the progress of students beyond their artistic maturation. Training activities for the artists should develop these useful observational skills. Our experience so far has shown that those practitioners who are able to manage the demands of an accredited course are those who are able to accept the ethos of their arts project being a vehicle towards the development of employability skills. Those who are successful refute Anderson et al. when they argue that the roles of artist and teacher are at odds with one another (Anderson, 1981 [9]; Day, 1986 [10]; Lloyd, 1989 [11]). However, those who are unable to hold this ethos, because they want to focus entirely on the artistic product, will be unable to fulfil the requirements of the qualification.

Our work within Europe will give us fuller insight into the successes and challenges for both practitioners and learners.

#### 5. Personal Effectiveness and Employability Through the Arts (PEETA) project in Europe

Funded through an EU Leonardo Di Vinci Transfer of Innovation project, the SEPE award is currently being trialled in prisons across five countries. This project (called PEETA) has as its general aim to support improvements in quality and innovation in vocational education and training systems, institutions and practices. Specifically, PEETA seeks to facilitate the development of innovative practices in the field of vocational education and training and their transfer between participating



countries. The project also aims to improve the transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

Project partners in the Netherlands and Italy are currently delivering SEPE in two prisons, with around 15 learners in each. Superact lead a two-day training for the musicians involved, explaining about the BTEC structure, SEPE in detail, Learning Outcomes and the evidence required to demonstrate individual learner attainment. Practical exercises were used to help develop the required assignment briefs and learning plans. As an accredited Edexcel Centre members of the Superact team visit the prisons to help verify delivery, assess learner records and help guide artists to ensure attainment of the award.

Over the summer we shall be reviewing feedback from artists, learners and the prisons in the Netherlands and Italy so that we can refine: our published training manual on the delivery and administration of SEPE; the innovative arts based training package for the artists; and improve our internal quality assurance systems. 2012 will then see SEPE delivered by theatre workshops in Austria and Portugal and traditional dance and costume in Turkey.

We at Superact are keen to evaluate the impact of PEETA and have embedded internal and external evaluation in the project from the outset. We are confident that the evaluation will demonstrate the value of SEPE and our innovative approach to its delivery by the arts, both for the learner and society as a whole. The results of the evaluation will be presented at a project conference next Autumn, but in the meantime the following feedback from Italy illustrates the huge potential for SEPE as delivered by artists:

*'One participant from Nigeria was very angry at the beginning of the course, he didn't want to participate, and would not shake the hands of the delivery team. But now they are eight weeks into the course and his attitude has changed dramatically. He has discovered that he has talent and can communicate through music. He doesn't speak Italian so was threatened by the language barrier. He now holds an important role in the group, as he is in charge of keeping the tempo in the group performance.'*

## 6. In conclusion ....

this is an exciting age to be both an arts practitioner: new courses are being developed to change the face of music education and harness the holistic benefits that it brings as a subject. What we must do as is embrace these changes and use the energy that fresh ideas and approaches bring. In doing so we must also provide the tools necessary for this transition. The arts can be used as a tool to transform the lives of people but those who use it need support in developing methods to transform their working practice into one that is acceptable within the world of formalised education. These are the first tentative steps along a long road towards acceptance; however, it is one that is clearly well worth treading.

## References

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