

“Why degree of success for John is such a great honour”

“John” was referred to Apex Scotland in October 2000 by Jobcentre Plus for advice on how to handle disclosing his criminal past to an employer. He went on to become our first ever client to gain an Honours Degree.

He had been involved in petty offending when he was younger and was worried about a more serious charge that was pending at the time. In his late twenties, married with a young baby and unemployed for four years, he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life and lacked direction. Although he had previously done some voluntary work in the conservation field, he was concerned that a criminal record would be a major obstacle to employment for him to overcome.

His views on education were mixed. He said: “Before I came to Apex, I just thought going to school and education in general was a means to an end rather than a process. School was just something you had to get through. I didn’t realise the importance of it. I’d always thought going to college or university was beyond me. I had a criminal record and I hadn’t worked for a while. I made excuses for myself rather than going for something I wanted or taking a chance”.

It is an attitude typical of many of the 4877 clients who came through our doors last year to address their employability needs and move on in their lives. Most have far more potential than they realise and our job is simply to unlock it.

That is why we developed a programme called “Think Again” in January 2001, in partnership with Napier University and with the help of funding from the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

The first 10-week course of its kind, it is designed to encourage those who take part to overcome their perceived barriers to continuing education, to access further education and to increase their employment prospects. It includes taster courses in, for example, web design, art, photography and creative writing, as well as addressing employability issues.

In John’s words: “Being on the course gave me the chance to experience first hand what college and university life would be like. I started to stop doubting myself and developed skills in doing presentations and public speaking which helped my own confidence a lot. I got the chance to go through an interview, disclosing my past with a “real” employer, who gave me honest and constructive feedback which helped me a lot. The whole thing started me thinking that I really could do it”.

“The programme was really valuable for me. It gave me the chance to get a handle on the opportunities that were out there for me. I realised that, just because I’d made some mistakes in my past, I wasn’t a “bad guy”. I realised that there were other people, even on the course, who had bigger obstacles to overcome than me and they were willing to give it a try. So what was stopping me? I stopped shutting doors on myself. I got a lot of support from the people delivering Think Again and that, along with support from my family, has helped me to get to where I am today. I know that,

if I needed it, support from Apex, Napier and others involved would still be here today and in the future”.

Shortly after John finished the course, he successfully applied to college and in 2003, passed his HND in Countryside Management with Distinction. He then went on to start a degree course in Environmental Protection and graduated this summer with a BSc Honours Degree. He is confident about securing full-time employment.

Napier University secured funding for the five courses that have taken place to date from SHEFC, from the Esmee Fairbairn and Craignish Trusts and a substantial private donation.

The fifth course took place between April and July this year, with five of the original ten participants completing it. Two then moved on to training courses, one went on to a community based adult literacy project, one secured employment within the construction industry and another entered a drug rehabilitation centre.

The sixth course will start in Autumn 2005.

The course has become recognised as a model of good practice at Napier University, as part of its strategy to widen access to further and higher education for those who have been disadvantaged in the past. It is also an excellent example of a meaningful partnership between a higher education institution and a voluntary sector organisation, who both bring different skills and expertise to the programme to the benefit of those who take part.

Bernadette Monaghan
Published in The Scotsman
August 2005