

An evaluation of the STEPS personal development programme



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for the East End Community
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I would also like to thank Mark Pierce and Tania McAllister for their support through the project.

The contents and conclusions of this report are, however, the sole responsibility of the author.

Suzanne Davies
July 2008

Background

Job Centre Plus approached East End Community Development Alliance in 2006 with regard to delivering the Pacific Institute's STEPS to Excellence for Personal Success programme. Funding was provided by Job Centre Plus for participant packs and training for The Alliance staff to deliver the programme.

The Alliance delivered 9 STEPS programmes between April 2007 and May 2008. 64 people participated in the programmes, which were held in a range of community venues. The programme is 20 hours long and delivered over 5 sessions.

The programme was open to all members of the community in the east end of Newcastle. The programme was not specifically targeted at certain groups within the community, i.e. unemployed, benefit recipients, people with disabilities. Participants were recruited through posters / flyers in community venues, presentations to community groups, informal networks and word of mouth.

Participation in the course was free and voluntary. Childcare, transport and lunch was provided for participants to ensure that it was accessible to all.

Aims

The purpose of the evaluation is:

- To identify the impact of the STEPS programme on participants who attended the course during 2007/08.
- To examine the relevance of the programme and its impact on employability indicators.
- To use the results to inform development of the programme delivery.

Method

Information regarding the STEPS programme, the impact on participants and links to employability was gathered using the following methods:

- Review of STEPS programme course materials.
- Discussion with The Alliance staff on the aims and delivery mechanisms.
- Desk research to identify employability indicators.
- Analysis of participant evaluation forms
- Semi structured interviews with 8 participants.
- Literature review of on-line evaluations of STEPS programmes.

The scope of the evaluation has been restricted due to the limitations of information collated on participants, the Pacific Institutes' standard evaluation form for the course and the sample size for the evaluation forms and interview group. Quantitative information available on the participants was limited to gender, age and employment

status. No qualitative baselines were established for participants, so progression across the participant group could not be adequately mapped. 64 people have participated in the STEPS programme since delivery commenced, however analysis of the evaluation forms was limited as only 28 forms could be located.

Context

STEPS Programme

The Pacific Institute is a private educational institution, engaged in personal, organisational and cultural development. The Steps to Excellence for Personal Success (STEPS) is a developmental programme for adults with a reputation as a powerful tool for individual and community regeneration.

The STEPS programme is a personal development course which aims to raise self confidence and self esteem. Key themes addressed within the course include the importance of positive thinking, examining self confidence and self esteem, communicating effectively and goal setting. The programme aims to provide participants with simple tools to build a positive identity and make improvements in their lives.

The course is delivered in a group setting by a trained facilitator using learning materials developed by the Pacific Institute. There is a clear and defined course structure, utilising a range of learning styles. The course involves the group watching a short excerpt from a DVD, which introduces personal development concepts and improvement techniques. This is then reinforced through facilitator led discussion, personal reflection time and workbook activities. Each participant receives their own personal manual, which includes reflective exercises and provides a record of their learning and development. A CD enables participants to listen and revisit the concepts and techniques in their own time.

STEPS has been used in a range of settings and The Pacific Institute states that the programme has been effective in:

- helping long-term unemployed people develop the motivation and self-belief to complete other training and find jobs
- equipping parents with better parenting skills
- enabling those being made redundant to develop a new future for themselves
- use in prisons to reduce recidivism, and aid re-assimilation in the community'

The Pacific Institute website 2008

Employability

One of the aims of the evaluation was to examine the relevance of the STEPS programme and its impact on employability indicators. Improving employability is a key aim of many regional and national strategies and funding programmes. There is however, no singular definition of employability. A review of literature suggests that employability is about work and the ability to be employed; i.e.

- the ability to gain initial employment through gaining 'key skills', careers advice and an understanding about the world of work.

- the ability to maintain employment and make ‘transitions’ between jobs and roles in a workplace, and
- the ability to obtain new employment if required by being willing and able to manage employment transitions between and within organisations.
- the quality of work or employment.

The final point emphasises that people may be able to obtain work but it may be below their level of skill, or in low paid, undesirable or unsustainable jobs.

A range of factors can affect employability, these include:

- Low confidence and self esteem
- Poor life skills
- Poor literacy and numeracy skills
- Focus on incapacity
- Lack of skills and qualifications
- Difficulty accessing training
- Benefits trap
- Lack of support services
- Stigma and discrimination
- No or little experience of employment
- Employer perceptions

Improving employability needs to address the factors above but it should also take a holistic approach to individuals. The factors above focus on what an individual cannot do rather than what they can do. Employability should also be about building on an individual’s skills, interests, knowledge and experience.

Results

The following sections detail the analysis of the Evaluation Forms completed by 28 participants and of the semi structured interviews with 8 participants.

Evaluation Forms

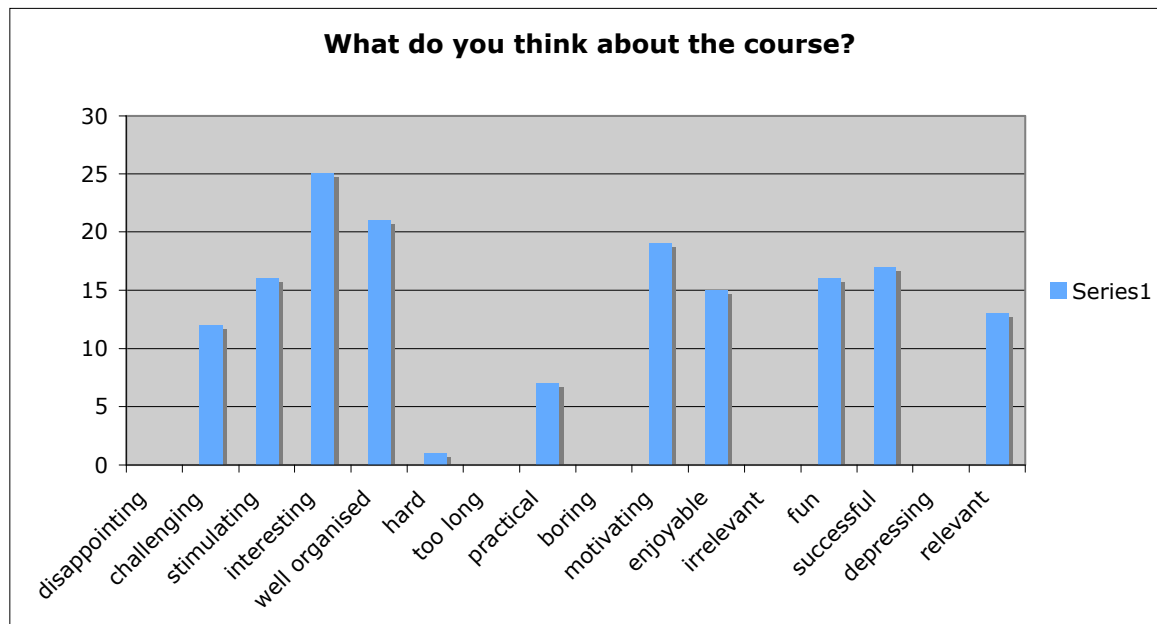
Evaluation forms were completed by participants during the final session of the programme. 64 people participated in the STEPS programme since delivery commenced, however only 28 evaluation forms were available. This equates to 44% of the total participants. The following graphs and commentary detail responses to each of question on the form.

Question 1 – What do you think about the course?

The graph below shows what participants thought about the course. Participants were asked to circle words that they felt applied to them, with the option of including their own free text.

The response show that 89% found the course interesting, 75% thought it was well organised and a further 68% found it motivating. Only one person found the course hard and nobody found it too long, boring, irrelevant or depressing.

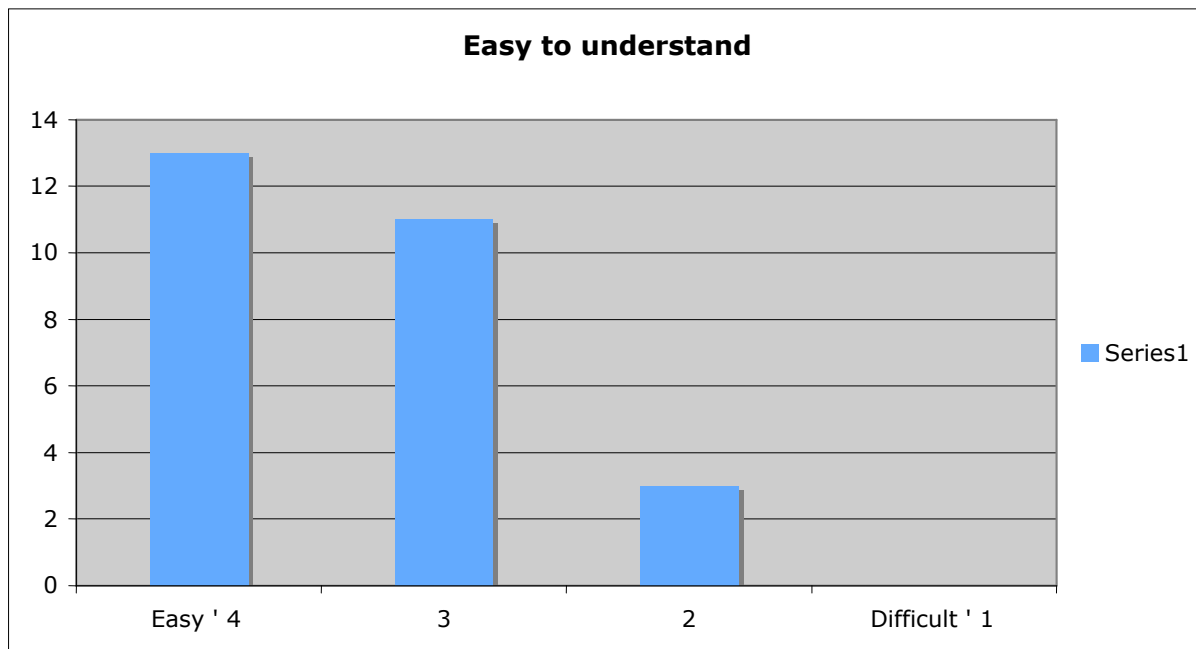
Free text responses were limited but all positive and included the following: superb, life changing, informative, well presented, enlightening, encouraging.



Question 2 – How easy was it to understand?

Participants were asked to rate how easy the course was to understand by marking a continuum where 4 equalled easy and 1 hard.

The graph overleaf shows that the majority of the participants found the course easy or quite easy to understand and only two participants found it quite hard.



Question 3 – Self Reflection statements

In question 3, participants were asked to reflect on the following six statements:

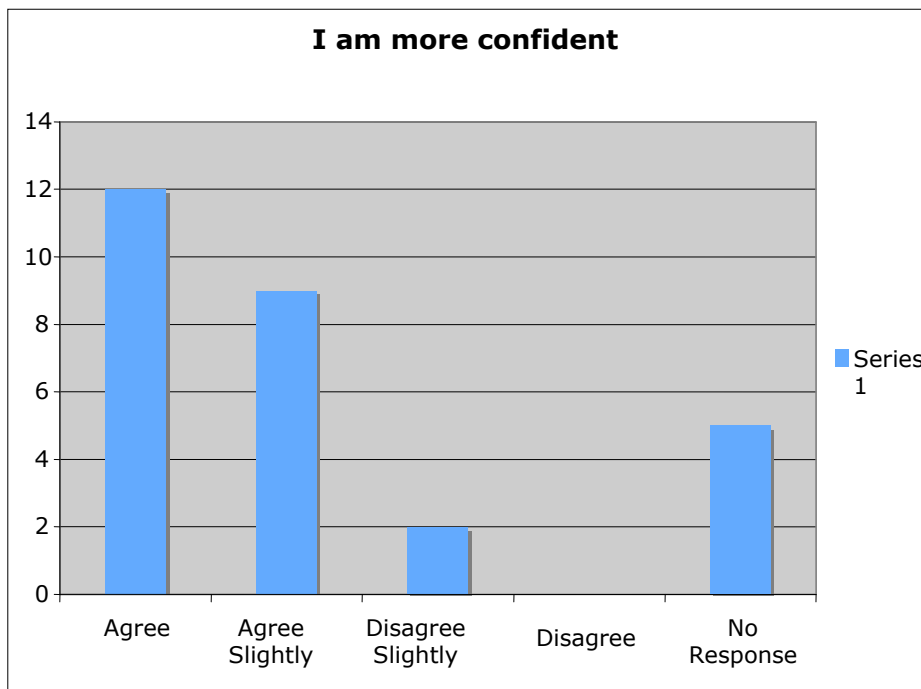
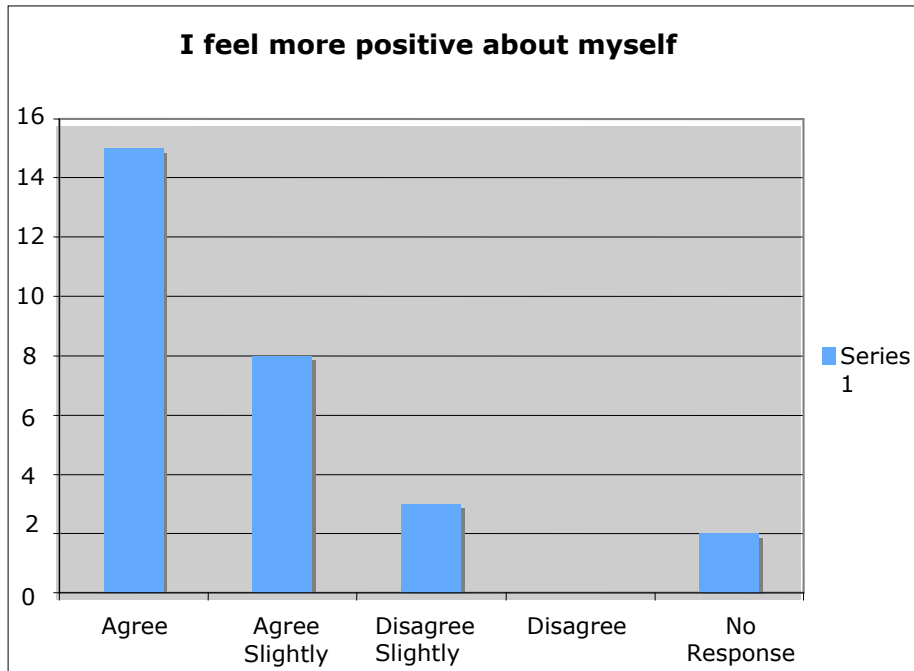
- I feel more positive about myself.
- I am more confident.
- I feel more in control.
- I plan to use the ideas from the course.
- I see how to get on better with others.
- I am going to set goals for myself.

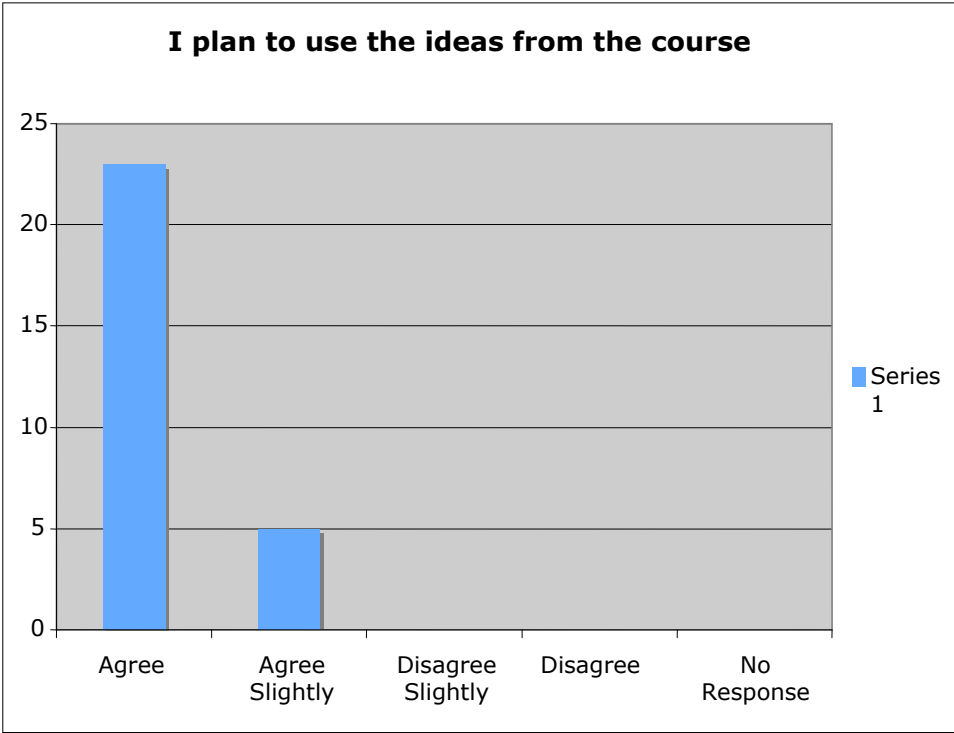
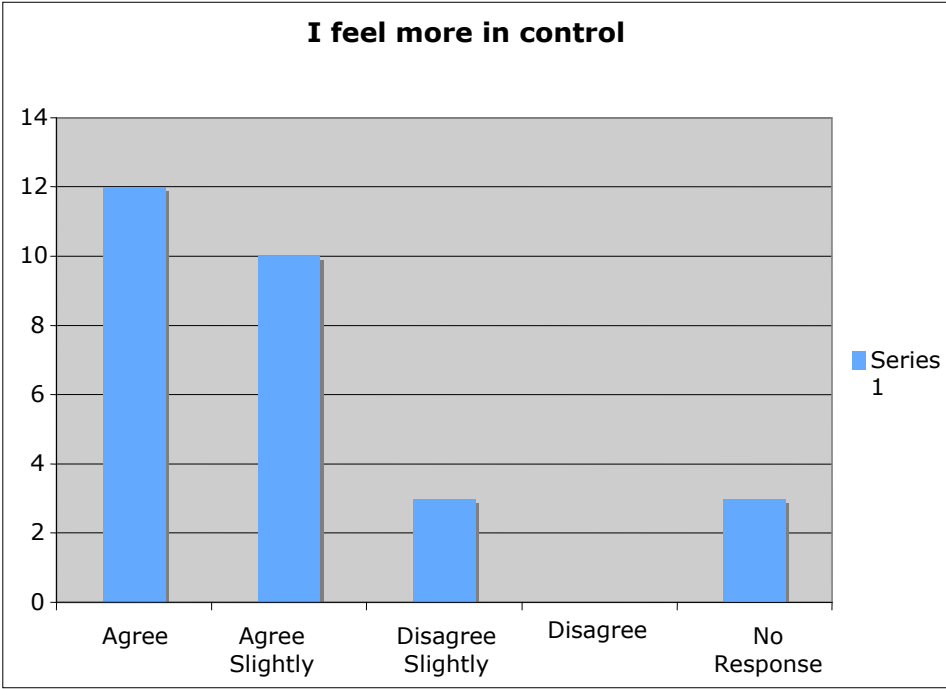
The statements relate to the core aims of the STEPS programme and ask participants to consider how they felt after completing the course. Participants marked each statement on a continuum, where 4 represented agree and 1 disagree. Responses to each of the self reflection statements are shown in the graphs overleaf and show that:

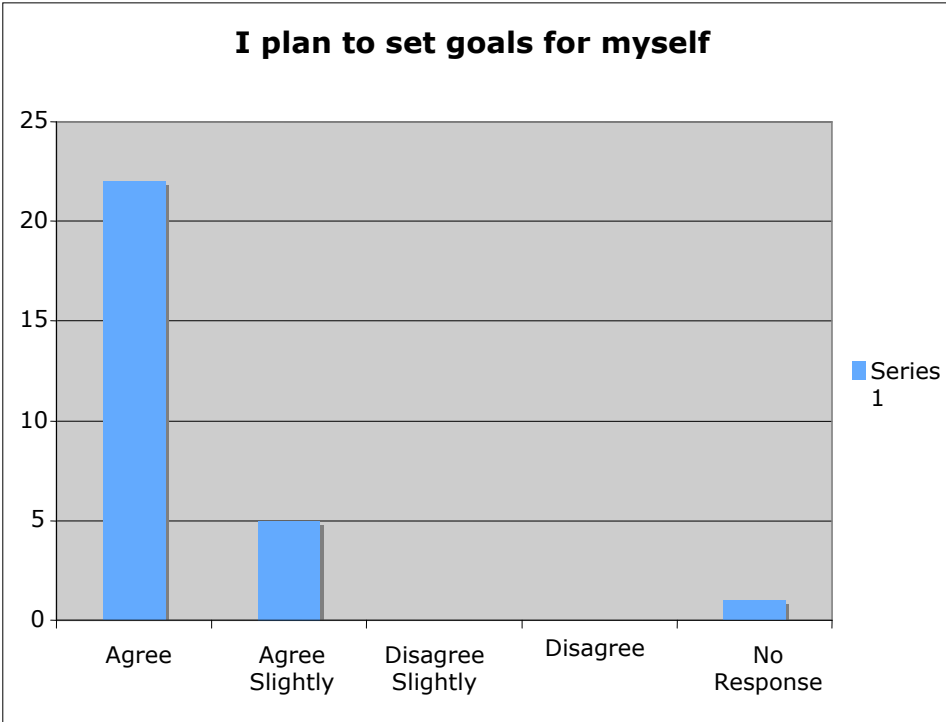
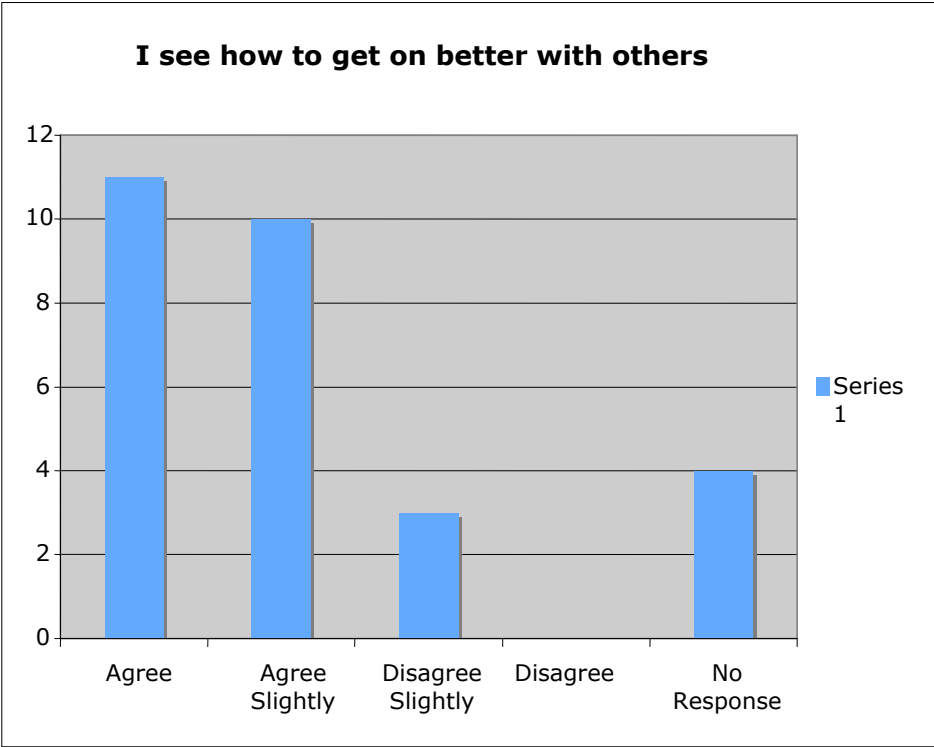
- 54% of participants felt more positive about themselves.
- 43% of participants were more confident and a further 32% had some improvement to their confidence.
- 43% of participants felt more in control.

- All of the participants agreed to some extent that they planned to use ideas from the course.
- 39% of participants could see how to get on better with others.
- The majority of participants planned to set goals for themselves.

The graphs show that a number of participants did not respond to this question.







Question 4 - How could your facilitator have made this course better?

18 free text comments were made by participants to this question. All were positive about the facilitator and felt that they had supported their learning. No suggestions were made as to how the facilitator could have improved the delivery of the course. A representative sample of the comments follows.

“I enjoyed the relaxed informal pace of the sessions and the small size of the group”

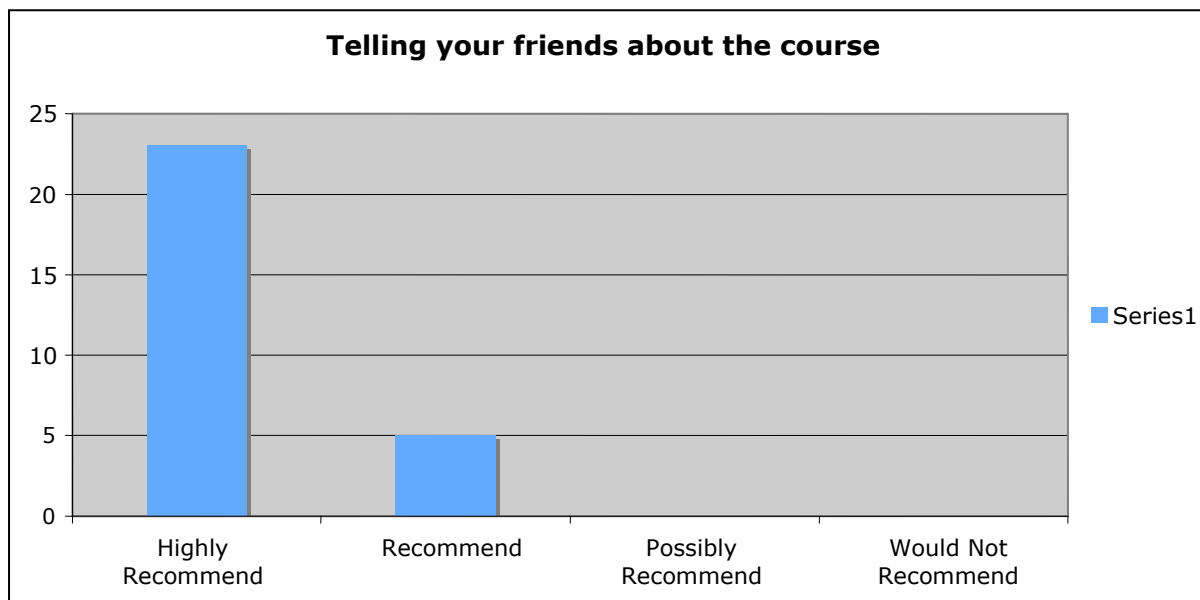
“I think the facilitators have done really well as they have lived the course themselves”

“The facilitators explained everything very well and I don’t think they could have done anything else”

“Nothing, it was very helpful, the facilitator was very easy to talk to and happy to listen”

Question 5 – Telling your friends about the course

All of the participants responded positively to question 5 and would recommend the STEPS programme to others.



Question 6 – Any other comments

86% of the participants made additional comments on the course. Everyone who commented wrote positively about the course. The comments covered a range of themes. These included giving thanks for the opportunity, commenting on skills of the facilitators, describing the impact of the course and how they planned to use the learning. The comments also included suggestions that a follow up be delivered and that the course be made available to young people. The following are sample comments from participants:

“I would highly recommend this course and have already done. I think everyone should have access to this course. It makes you think differently and helps you to see how you may be holding yourself back. I have changed already and will keep all I've learned in mind and make sure things happen from now on. This is a superb course.”

“STEPS has given me a lot of insight and confidence to believe in my own abilities and has affirmed to me that it is possible for anyone to change if they really want to. And we have choices in everything we do.”

“I've enjoyed coming here. It's got me out of the house. I'm going to go on other course so I can achieve bigger things. Should be more courses like this. Facilitators have been brilliant.”

Interviews

Semi structured interviews were held with eight participants of the STEPS programme. This represented 13% of the total participants. The participants were randomly selected by the STEPS facilitator. Time elapsed from completion of the course ranged from one year to two weeks.

The interview focused on how and whether participants had been able to apply the concepts of STEPS within their own lives and the impact of doing so. The interviews also provided an opportunity to gather information about participants, prior to participating in the programme through self reflection. Quantitative information was also gathered on participants.

The interviews followed the following structure: About You, Before The Course, Starting the Course, About the Course, Benefits of the Course, After the Course, and The Future.

The interview questions consisted of a mixture of 'closed' and 'open ended' questions. Participants were either asked to select from a set of fixed responses using a continuum or the question was open ended and they were asked to respond in their own words. Participants' responses are anonymous.

About the Participants

Demographic information was gathered from the participants to provide an indication as the range of people participating in the STEPS programme.

- **Gender**
Seven women participated in the interviews and one man.
- **Age**
Ages ranged from 16 – 60, with the majority aged 25 – 40.
- **Disability**
None of the participants identified themselves as having a disability.
- **Occupation**
Four were employed (three full time, one part time) and four were unemployed or looking after home / family.
- **Qualifications**
Seven of the participants had GCSE qualifications and five NVQs. None of the participants had higher education qualifications.
- **Marital Status**
Three participants were married or living with a partner, three were single parents, one was single and one separated.
- **Children**
Seven of the participants had children, the majority of whom were school age.

Before The Course

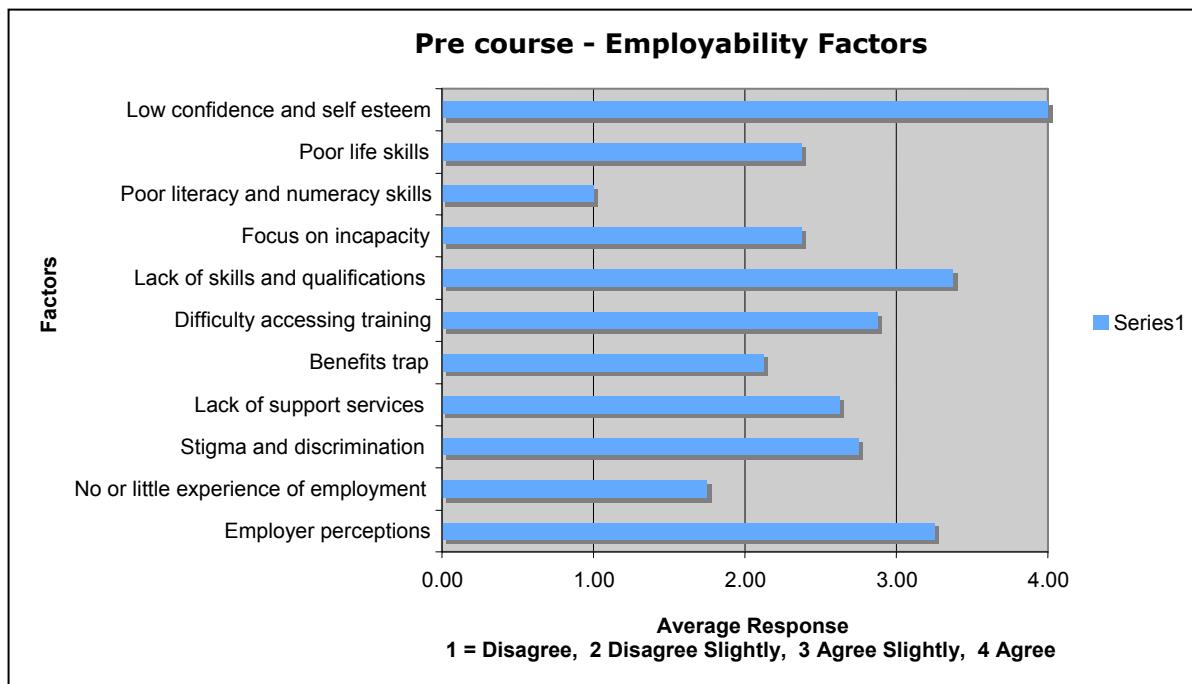
The participants were asked to reflect on their lives prior to attending the STEPS programme. The aim of these questions was to gain an understanding about what the participants thought about themselves and their lives, what hopes and aspirations they had and if they felt affected by certain barriers or issues that are linked to employability.

The participants were asked if they were happy with their quality of life before the course. Only one of the participants was happy, four were not happy with their quality of life and wanted to see change and the remaining three stated they were dissatisfied and felt they had achieved little.

Hopes, aspirations and goals before starting the course were explored with the participants. Only one of the participants had clear goals; to give up smoking and lose weight. One wished to make improvements to her family life but did not know how to achieve it. Three felt they were felt affected by health problems and did not have hopes beyond improved health. Another wanted to do something for herself outside of her role within her family but lacked confidence.

None of the participants had undertaken anything similar to the STEPS programme, prior to starting the course.

The participants were asked to mark on a continuum, where 4 represented agree and 1 disagree, if they felt affected by factors that can affect employability, prior to starting the STEPS programme. The graph below shows the average response to each of the factors.



All of the participants stated that they felt affected by low confidence and self esteem, prior to attending the course. Lack of skills and qualifications and employer perceptions were also significant factors for the majority of the participants. None of the participants felt affected by poor literacy and numeracy skills.

Starting the Course

Most of the participants found out about the course through a third party organisation; these included Sure Start, The Carers' Centre, a Health Visitor, St Martin's Centre and Wor House. The majority of participants took part in the STEPS programme as a result of recommendations from support workers or colleagues. Only two of the eight participated without a recommendation. The frequently mentioned feelings about starting the course were anxiety and nervousness. Additionally most felt hopeful that the course would benefit them in some way though were unclear exactly how.

About the Course

Participants were asked to explain what aspects they found most interesting about the course and why. A key theme ran through all the participant's responses to the question; learning how they thought about themselves and how patterns of thinking reinforced their self image. This was explained as interesting as the participants recognised what they were doing in their own behaviour and how their thought processes reinforced negative self image. This appeared important to the participants as they learnt how to change and adapt their thinking and the benefits of doing this.

“Learning about thinking; to stop and think before acting. I've changed the way I think, I now think about the affect of my actions.”

“It helped a lot, it gave examples that I could relate to. I didn't realise the effect of my actions, now I stop and think. I've calmed down and it's helped with my confidence.”

None of the participants thought any element of the course was uninteresting or irrelevant. The only negative comments received were a lack of clarity about the relevance of tasks and a difficulty to understand what the DVD presentations meant. Both these issues were clarified by the facilitator using real life examples.

All of the participants felt that the course was delivered in a comfortable and non-judgemental environment. For some this was because they knew people in their group, for others it was because other participants were open and shared their experiences. From the comments, it is clear that the facilitator was instrumental in creating a safe and comfortable environment for the delivery of the course.

It was apparent that for all of the participants, the input of the facilitator was critical to their learning. All spoke exceptionally highly of The Alliance's primary facilitator for the STEPS programme. References were made to the facilitator's approachability, clarity in explaining the ideas of the course and ability to make it relevant for the participants by using real life examples. All felt they were able to relate to the local facilitator.

"If people were struggling with the DVD, the facilitator reinforced what was being put across. It was important to have a local facilitator who used analogies people were familiar with. She put it across in an accessible way."

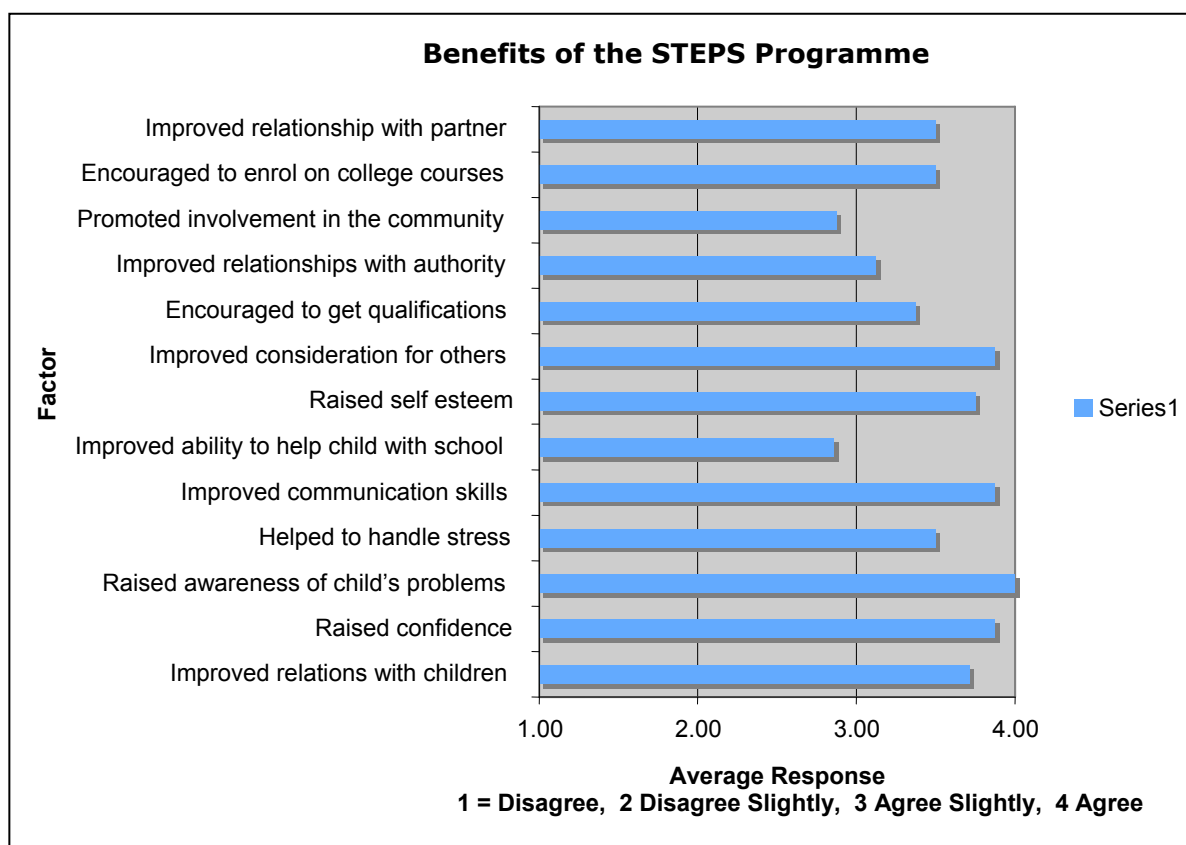
"The facilitator was really good at delivering the course. Felt like she'd been through similar things. I felt I wasn't on my own, she made it easy to talk."

The location and timing of the STEPS programme was satisfactory for all.

Benefits of the Course

A series of questions were asked to identify how the participants had benefited from attending the STEPS programme. Review of other STEPS evaluations suggested key areas where the STEPS programme could contribute to improving people's lives. Participants were asked if they thought that the STEPS programme had been important in improving family life, relationships, communication, self belief and personal development.

The participants were asked to mark on a continuum, where 4 represented agree and 1 disagree, if they thought the STEPS programme had been important in regard to each of the statements. The graph below shows the average response to each of the statements. Participants only responded to the questions that were relevant to them, i.e. partner children.



Responses from the participant's shows that they thought the STEPS programme had been important in improving their self image and self belief through raising their confidence and self esteem. Improvements in these areas are key to impact in the other areas.

The STEPS programme also appears to contribute to improving communication and consideration for others. The participants also reported it was important in their personal development through encouraging participation in learning and training opportunities.

The graph show that the participants with children thought that the STEPS programme had helped them improve their relationships with their children and have a greater awareness of their children's problems.

Areas where the STEPS programme appears to have had less of an impact are improving ability to help children with school and promoting involvement in the community. However the sample size is too small to note if this is of any significance.

The participants were asked how they thought the STEPS programme had helped to make improvements in their lives. A clear theme ran through the responses; developing a 'can do' attitude. The participants reported that they previously believed they were unable to do things, or try new activities. The course had helped

them to change their attitude giving them the self belief to try new activities / interest along with greater belief in their skills, knowledge and experience.

“It has helped a lot. I've cooked a dinner for my kids, I believed I couldn't cook but I've tried and now I can. I'd never cooked a Sunday dinner before.”

“It made me think I am capable of doing things when I previously thought I couldn't.”

“It's helped me re-evaluate why I do things. Its given me a 'can do, will do' attitude.”

“At work I've recognised my abilities to do things. Its helped change my attitude. I trust people more and I've got a 'can do' attitude.”

After the Course

Participants were asked to describe how they had used what they had learnt since finishing the course. Most reflected that they were actively using positive self talk and positive thinking in their everyday lives.

All of the participants set themselves goals at the end of the course; across the group there are a mixture of short, medium and long term goals. All of the participants had made progress against their personal goals and were happy with their progress.

Goals	Progress
To get a teaching qualification and to exercise and lose weight.	I'm doing a City & Guilds in preparing to teach and I've lost weight by going to the gym and to the allotment. I'm also not procrastinating about dealing with bills, I'm not putting it off anymore. Its also helped with my time management.
To go and do some voluntary work and to pass my driving test.	I've started helping out at the Credit Union and I used to be really nervous about my driving lessons but now I look forward to the lessons. I'm focussing on the positives from the lessons rather than things that went wrong.
To get my children's names off the child protection register, to make house more tidy and clean, to not shout at the kids and control their behaviour.	My house is now tidy and clean, the next goal is to keep it tidy. I'm working towards not shouting and my kids are more behaved and we're having fun together.
To keep up to date at work and on top of paperwork	I've got a diary and I've using it to plan my time. Its improved how I manage my work and my time management. I feel more in control and I'm less stressed.

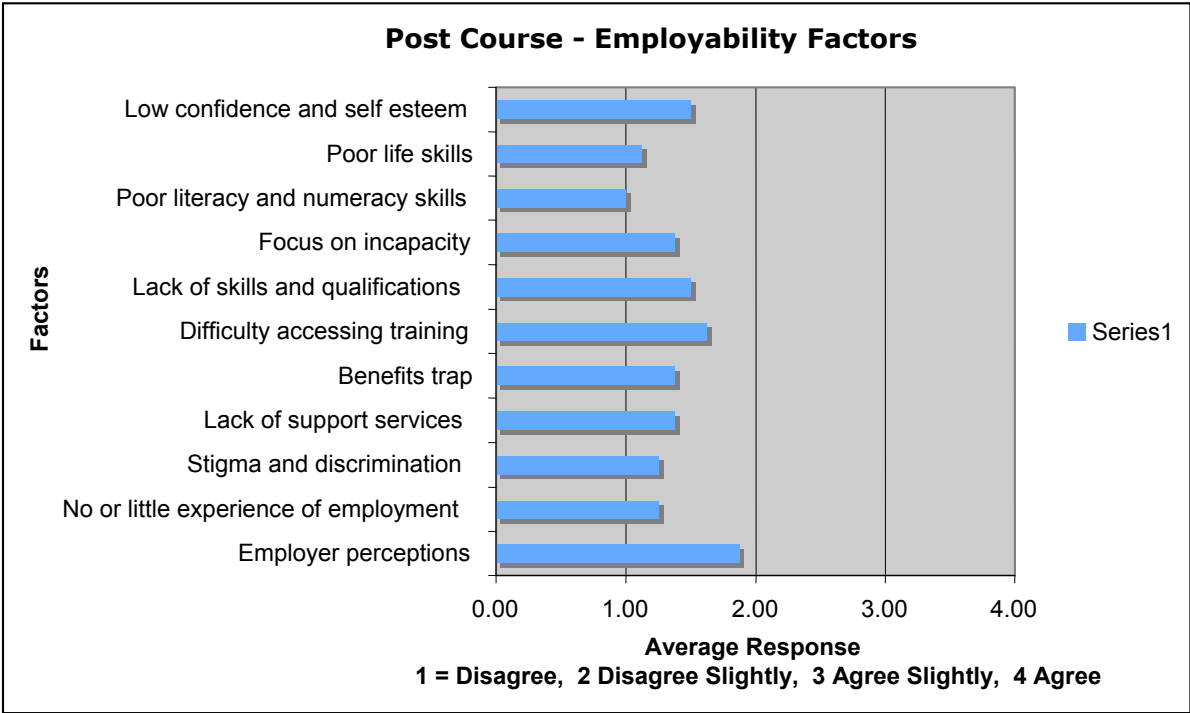
From the interviews it appears that STEPS has helped the participants with their personal goals by enabling the participants to believe in themselves; giving them the self confidence and self belief to start formulating goals and taking action towards them. The successful progression towards the goals is clearly linked to the participant's self belief that they can achieve their goals. The range of goals set by the participant group shows that the STEPS programme is applicable to a wide range of people, with different hopes and aspirations.

“Its helped me to set goals and with positive self talk which has then made me think positive. I used to think 'I can't do it' or 'I can't be bothered' now I think I can do it.”

The course is 5 sessions in total with no further follow up with participants. The Alliance has introduced a Presentation session to award certificates of attendance and acknowledge progression. All the participants were asked if they would have appreciated some further support after the end of the course. Six participants agreed this would have been beneficial, this included participants who had attended the course of part of an existing group. Comments were made that it would be useful to review and reflect with other members of their groups, to reinforce the ideas from the course and to share ideas.

The Future

The participants were asked to mark on a continuum, where 4 represented agree and 1 disagree, if they felt affected by factors that can affect employability, after completing the STEPS programme. The graph below shows the average response to each of the factors.



The graph shows that all of the participants either disagreed or disagreed slightly that they were affected by factors that can affect employability. Employer perceptions was the factor that the participants felt most affected by as this had the highest average response. This factor is out of the control of the participants in regard to employability. Low confidence and self esteem and difficulty accessing training followed as factors the participants were most affected. These factors are under the control of the participants.

Future hopes were explored with the participants. All had long term hopes, relating to different aspects of their lives, which they felt were achievable. Most had identified short term goals to enable them to work towards their hopes for the future.

“I'd like to do a college course and become a teaching assistant and when my daughter's at nursery I'd like to work full time.”

“I really want to pass my driving test so that I can have my own freedom.”

In order to achieve their goals, none of the participants felt they would benefit from any form of support provided by The Alliance.

All of the participants said they would recommend the STEPS programme and a number had already encouraged friends and family to do so. The participants were asked for any final comments about the programme. All eight comments are below:

“Its eye opening. If you don't want to change it goes some way to make you want to change. It definitely helps to identify your negativities and make you deal with them.”

“It's the best course I've ever done; its changed my life completely. I feel like I've gone from nothing to something. I know I'm a successful and capable person and that I can set priorities and goals.”

“It's been really helpful and the difference in myself is extreme. I used to be really argumentative because of issues from my past I felt I didn't deserve happiness. Now I do, I'm really pleased I went on it.”

“It's a brilliant course, the facilitator put it across properly and it was easy to understand. I'd do it again.”

“I'm really glad I did it, its made a real difference to my confidence and I'd recommend it to others. It helps you with whatever you want it to.”

“It was brilliant, I think it benefits lots of people in different ways and there's lots of people asking about it.”

“Can't really put it on paper what the course does for you but I encourage others to do it.”

“Its changed my life so much as is doing so day by day.”

Key Findings*

“The course has opened my mind to a new and exciting future and way of life and I'm sure that it will be of benefit to all people who go through it.”

STEPS Participant

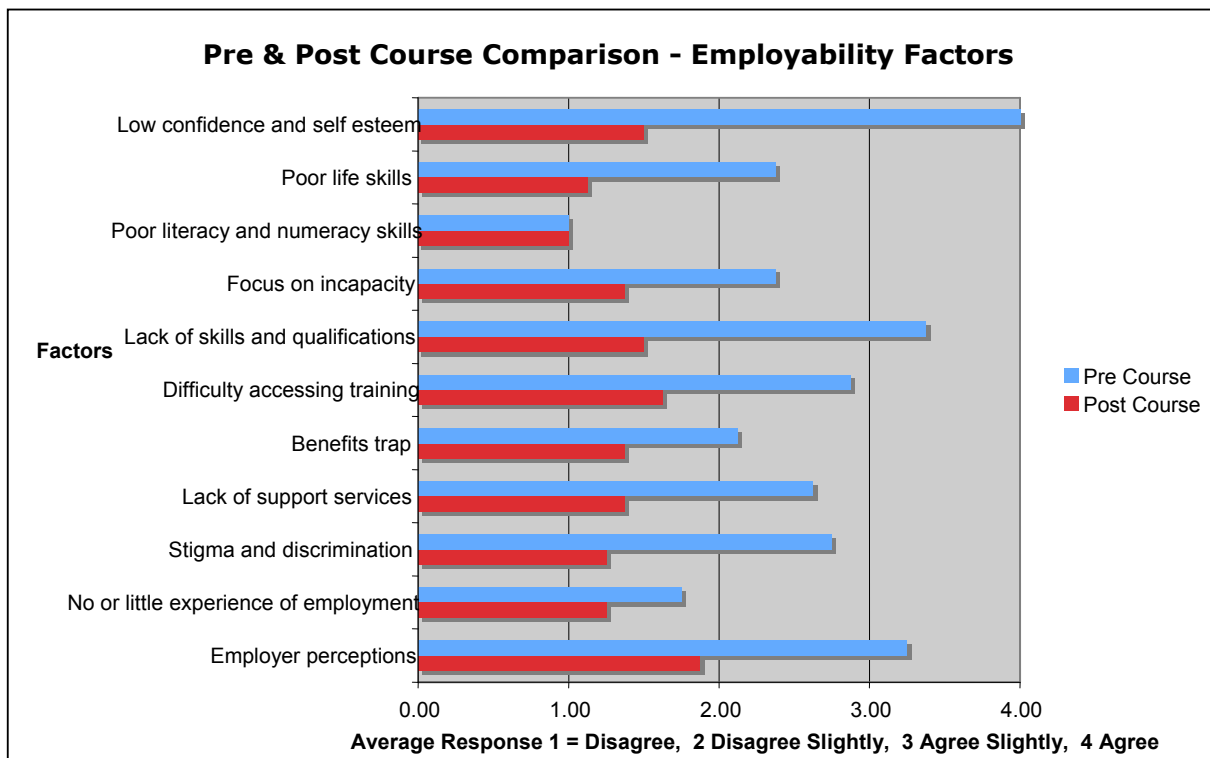
All the participants reported an increase in their levels of self confidence as a result of doing the STEPS course and highlighted this as a particularly positive outcome of the course. The programme has had a positive effect on most participants' ability to make informed choices about their lives.

Interviews with participants determined that the STEPS programme has a potential practical application for people with low confidence and self esteem who wish to improve the quality of their life. The programme provides participants with tools for self improvement which they feel able to use and that have relevance to them.

The programme's primary benefit is in increasing self confidence and self worth; enabling participants to develop a 'can do attitude', formulate goals and take action. It is this that then leads to other personal improvements i.e. gaining qualifications, learning a new skill, following an interest, etc. The participants appeared to gain a sense of control over their lives and futures.

The majority of the participants reported that the course has helped them identify, set and achieve goals. This element of the course was felt to be beneficial and was being actively used by those participants interviewed.

This is very much a first step course, enabling people to consider new opportunities, supporting people to address issues linked to employability. In term of impact on employability factors, the graph below compares pre and post course responses to the affect of employability factors on the interview participants.



The graph indicates that the aims and outcomes of the STEPS programme are relevant to addressing employability factors primarily through raising confidence and aspirations.

The graph shows that for these participants, the course had a significant impact on a range of employability factors. The most significant change was the participant's response to being affected by low confidence and self esteem. All of the participants agreed that they were affected by this, prior to the course. Post course, the average response was between disagree and disagree slightly.

The other two areas where significant change was noted are 'lack of skills and qualifications' and 'stigma and discrimination'. This change may be due to the participant's revising their beliefs about their skills and improved self worth in reducing feelings of stigma and discrimination.

Participant highlighted that they had improved their communication skills, helped them to express feeling and to develop listening skills, which helped to improve relationships, especially in the family. The course also appears to have benefits as a parenting tool, helping parents and grandparents to improve their relationships with children.

Interviews with participants indicated that the programme gives people a sense of progression along with an understanding of how they have formed attitudes and beliefs about themselves and others.

There are limited outputs from the course, beyond numbers attending. Clear outcomes are available but it would be difficult to link the course to hard outputs for employability schemes, i.e. x people move into training or employment.

* The key findings must be taken in context of the scope of the evaluation. The Evaluation Form is not particularly detailed especially about what participants found useful and setting goals and additionally only a proportion of the forms were available. The sample group for the interviews was small and does not necessarily provide a representative sample of all the STEPS programme participants.

Next STEPS and Recommendations

The STEPS programme has potential to deliver outcomes linked to factors affecting employability and this should be explored further. The Alliance may wish to explore further funding linked to employability to support the delivery of STEPS programme. The Alliance may also want to consider implementing the following into future delivery:

- Introductory sessions - to provide participants with more detailed information about the course and an opportunity to have any questions answered before committing to attending.
- Targeted recruitment – to provide a focus for the course and shared experience / knowledge / issues. This could be unemployed people, parents wanting to return to work, young people, women on the Freedom programme.
- Monitoring system - to record quantitative information at the start of the course. This could be by a registration form and cover gender, age, employment status, disability.
- Monitoring system - to record qualitative information at the start of the course. This could be by a self completed questionnaire, linking to the questions asked in the current evaluation form or focused on the employability issues.
- Follow up sessions – to introduce a follow up session a month after the end of the course to provide participants with an opportunity to review, reflect and share with peers from their course. This would also offers the opportunity for signposting to other agencies or following up on previous signposting.
- Evaluation Form – to revise the current evaluation form to include additional questions e.g.
 - What concepts were the most useful
 - A question about setting goals, possibly areas of the persons life in which they have set goals.
 - How do you think the course will assist you in achieving your goals.
- Evaluation Form – introduce an additional evaluation form to follow up with a proportion of participants 2 months after completing the course.

If you require this report in another format please contact East End Community Development Alliance.

This report was funded by the Working Neighbourhoods Fund.

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