AWE Programme: Key Learnings Document

DECEMBER 2021

Introduction

The AWE programme was a collaborative partnership between a range of organisations providing training and business support to disadvantaged women in the UK and in France. Near the end of the programme, the partners organised a Final Conference which took place online over four days with attendance open to all which looked at key aspects of the activity which had taken place.

One of the sessions at this event focused on the key learnings from partners on topics ranging from training delivery, the impact of COVID-19, diversity and multi-cultural delivery of support and this document collates these learnings, in order to make them available to others through the AWE Legacy Toolkit. It accompanies a separate document which specifically focuses on the communications activities of the programme which is also available through the AWE Legacy Toolkit.

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1. Working with Disadvantaged Women: Key Learnings

1.1 Specific needs of disadvantaged women

All partners found that being able to offer training in women-focused spaces was seen as a very positive offer from AWE. Feedback from participants also suggests that the women-focused space was an important part of the experience for them and enabled them to make better personal connections. We also learned that running the training in spaces that feel approachable to the women, close to good transport links, is key.

We found that it was important for women to be the ones to identify their own barriers, rather than for us to name these or make assumptions. We found that women were reluctant to be open about the challenges they are facing, especially on the initial application form. This is entirely understandable as women are used to experiencing discrimination on these grounds.

Our participants wanted to be taken seriously despite their challenges and they wanted clear communication and to feel supported. Some partners addressed this by making it clear on the application form that barriers would be taken into account in the assessment process, and by offering a phone conversation to discuss these instead. They also offered a lot of 1:1 support alongside the scheduled programmes, so that any woman who was finding it difficult had help to stay on track. Some women needed more one to one support than others, and we found some needed more support with using the technology once we moved to online delivery due to the impact of Covid.

Particularly with more vulnerable groups, we found that it is important to include within the training content, examples and role models or female examples with whom women can identify. For this reason, we created case studies which featured on the AWE website and were promoted in our communications activity including social media.

1.2 Learning preferences of the target audience

In any training, the group is very important. The group takes on its full strength when the women meet again for several modules and its power is less when they only meet once, when the modules are run independently. We found that those clients who participated in training that was adapted into an overall programme, perhaps run over several weeks, meeting the same cohort each time, worked more effectively that clients who attended single sessions on specific topics, and then may join at a later date to learn a different topic. In the latter scenario, group dynamics changed in each session and hence they did not enjoy the 'group' benefits enjoyed by clients in the former scenario.

Women say they felt far more open and relaxed in single-gender groups. Many of the women face similar issues, which improves bonding amongst the group. This improves the women's social capital and social learning as they learn from each other, and many women stay in touch after programmes. We have provided Facebook groups for interactions as well, but these tend not to be used greatly. The personal connections are reported by the women as being stronger.

We noticed that our clients who had new businesses that were already up and running were a lot more comfortable with the forms than those at pre-start stage.

Our bootcamps showed that there is a real need for support, particularly around the issue of entrepreneurial posture. This is an essential subject that is very rarely addressed and yet is often at the heart of the obstacles to the development of the company. Whether in training, for mentors or in bootcamp, the time given to sharing experiences, human exchanges, expressing difficulties, etc. is as important as the content provided.

1.3 Reaching our target audience

The diversity of our client profiles was important. Partners have worked hard to achieve this by reaching out to organisations who have contact with women who don't usually get in touch what might be perceived as "official support services". This worked best when the team were able to physically travel to the programme location and talk to people.

At the start of the programme, some partners visited organisations in the local area who were addressing the issues faced by disadvantaged women such as alcohol and drug recovery units, play associations and places where volunteers were primarily female.

We think that the chance to meet team members before even applying for the programme helped to break down barriers. Even though this was not possible after March 2020 (due to Covid), some of our later applicants to the online programmes stated that they had first heard about AWE through one of the visits.

When we were delivering face to face training, we opted for easy to find, city centre venues that were accessible by public transport and felt friendly on arrival. For the face-to-face Bootcamp, one partner chose a venue that offered good food and a beautiful location, so the women felt valued and well looked after.

Messaging must be relevant to and resonate with the target audience in both the imagery and words used. Also, design and language used in the promotion of training needed to be relevant to the local audience which it was targeting. Word of mouth communication was key to the success of the programme – via established networks, collaborative partnerships

and regular contact with the participants throughout. This did however change during COVID-19.

The sharing of participants stories through case studies and testimonials helped to express the human side of what was on offer. It was important to recognise that the target audience was not one homogenous group, which meant that they required tailored messaging to have the best impact and different channels used to reach them. Newsletters were a key communications tool, together with using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn.

1.4 Seasonality in the availability of our client-base

During the initial phases of the project, we needed to bring cohorts together to test our training materials and this happened to coincide with summer. We found that clients were understandably otherwise engaged as many of them had child caring responsibilities whilst their children were on holiday from school. This resulted in the need for the extension of the test and training period beyond summer to ensure sufficient input from our clients.

2. Multi-cultural Delivery: Key Learnings

2.1 Cultural Differences – France and UK

We found that in using translation software such as DeepL.com or Google Translate, that the meaning of phases in either language could be lost and that certain terms didn't mean the the same things in French and in English, and that content appropriate for one audience was not for another. Through co-creation between French and English partners and learning about cultural differences we have improved in our ability to deliver multi-cultural provision throughout the duration of the project, by better understanding each other's cultures.

Another learning challenge was the variations between the partners' views of what constituted suitable training materials for our client group. The initial resources shared ranged from quite low level, personally focussed material (rather than business specific) to very high level. Therefore, most of the content for the programme has been created completely from scratch.

During the development of the online training modules, the time taken to create the modules in both English and French was underestimated. The translation from English to French has been more difficult than anticipated. For example, video voiceovers in both languages have had to be created, and the software translation tools we have used still required substantial in-person editing by our AWE staff.

2.2 Translation issues

On the initial development of training material for AWE, we spent some time finding the best software for translation of content from English to French and vice versa. We found that the training materials and content did not lend itself very well to being translated via a mechanical translator such as DeepL or Google Translate. We concluded that the only way to ensure a reliable translation was to use translation specialists. However, for the purpose of translation of emails and other correspondence between Partner organisations, the use of DeepL.com was very suitable for this task.

In some of the module content created, the creating partner utilised a video, but because videos were either in English or French it has meant they could not be used in the content for the other country. We have worked around this by either finding a similar film in the appropriate language or have used the same film and embedded subtitles.

2.3 Diversity

A diversity of backgrounds creates interesting conversations around culture. For example, when discussing definitions of self-confidence, there have been interesting conversations around how traits and behaviours that make women seem self-confident can have different perceptions in different cultures, and how this can be dealt with to the advantage of the female entrepreneur.

The diversity of profiles, specifically the gender-identity of participants was important. We worked hard to achieve this by reaching out to organisations who have contact with women who don't usually get in touch with us.

3. The Impact of Covid-19: Key Learnings

3.1 How COVID-19 changed our practices

With the onset of Covid19 and the subsequent lockdowns in the UK and in France, it became clear that meetings and training, which had until that point happened in a face-to-face environment, were no longer possible. Therefore, all training for women switched to an online classroom (using Zoom or Teams) as well as for our Partner progress and External Committee meetings. Also, face to face individual discussions with women also switched to telephone/Skype and Zoom. A similar approach was used for mentor training, and we also moved to accepting digital signature via email of training undertaken by clients during this period.

The move to online did make it possible to include some people who might not otherwise have been able to attend. However, it did also mean that we were competing with the many other things that go on in the home which made it difficult to create the nurturing, focused space we would have liked.

Women still seem more inclined towards virtual training (i.e. Zoom) over in person sessions. For participants, online training cuts travel time, removes need for childcare etc, which was appreciated for these busy women coping with all the various impacts of Covid.

Testing of our training modules was also impacted by the pandemic. With the switch of all delivery partners to an online classroom, partners had to adapt the content in the way they considered best for their clients. For example, a face-to-face session which would last half a day normally could be adapted so that it could be run in a Zoom environment over perhaps 2 hours.

The ability to get women working together in groups via Zoom was more difficult in an online classroom. Partners have been innovative in how they have adapted the content. For this reason, the testing of the content was not completely consistent across all partner organisations. However, since the key elements of the content are still included in the material, we felt that there has been sufficient face to face testing of content prior to the lockdowns in UK and France to be confident that this is something women find helpful, whichever way it is delivered.

We learned that flexibility is key. More specifically, being able to adapt to blended or fully virtual learning. Mentoring training also gave us the opportunity to explore online course development and it proved to be a success for us.

It was important not to make the online session too long and to include regular breaks to maintain interest by the participants – using breakout rooms, the chat function, showing videos and a mix of individual exercises and group tasks all helped.

Digital inclusion became an issue. We needed time to bring everyone up to speed, for example by having a tech intro before the session so women knew how to use Zoom, and even how to use their laptop. Many women joined us on mobile devices, and that affected what it is possible to deliver. Community organisations such as Borrow Don't Buy in Plymouth offered laptops for people to use, and we signposted women to services like this wherever possible.

Some partners also provided participatns with notepads, pens and a small treat such as a hot chocolate to make them feel more welcome even when the training provision was online.

3.2 Communication during COVID-19

With the onset of Covid19, we were not able to advertise our programme using posters and leaflets at partner locations, or locations where women tended to congregate. Therefore, we switched to 100% digital and social marketing for the programmes to counter this. However, this approach did present issues since digital communication to disadvantaged women is difficult, since many of them do not have access to the internet or the IT infrastructure and therefore we found that being able to reach them is truly hampered by this 'digital divide'.

Also, utilising our partner network would normally enable us to extend our reach to our target audience, we found that again, due to them also 'doing digital' with their comms during Covid, this also meant they did not reach women who were are far away for geographical or social reasons.

3.3 Returning to Face-to-Face Training

When we returned to face to face delivery in October 2021, we selected venues that had plenty of space, including outdoors space, and requested that all attendees completed a Lateral Flow Test before attending. Participants were asked to indicate their Covid comfort on a scale from one to ten. This was to acknowledge the wide range of perspectives and anxiety levels, and so that we were aware of women's specific concerns.

4. Soft Skills v Technical Modules: Key Learnings

Giving women the opportunity, space, and 'permission' to talk about issues like self-care and how to balance their business with their barriers is invaluable. We received feedback about how so many courses are too business focussed and don't look enough at how to help women fit their business into their lives around their other commitments (be that caring responsibility or limiting medical conditions) and that AWE is different as it includes this.

The face-to-face delivery combined both soft skills and technical information to create a balanced overall programme. There was a greater focus on softer skills at the start of the programme, moving through into more technical content in the middle and latter part, finally landing with reflection and planning.

When we moved online, some of our delivery partners separated the types of content, and the delivery style so that most of the soft skills were in "Sofa Sessions". These enabled women to focus on themselves, their purpose and their idea. The "Nuts and Bolts" sessions were where women came for the more technical content when they were ready to take the plunge. Roughly 50% of Sofa Sessions participants went on to do Nuts and Bolts. Hence, the splitting of content in this way was proved to be a successful approach.

5. Mentor Programme Development: Key Learnings

When we spoke to many professional businesspeople about potentially becoming a mentor for the AWE programme, many of them already were mentors and therefore did not need training in how to be a mentor. Many of them were also time poor and did not feel they could give up a whole morning or day for training. We therefore took the approach that for those people who had already good experience of mentoring, we would train and evaluate them through a one-hour Skype or telephone call. Those who did require more in-depth training were invited to a training session with other potential mentors. Hence, we implemented a two-level approach to mentor training depending on the mentor experience of the person.

We also set up a LinkedIn Group which we have encouraged potential mentors to join where they can get more information about being a mentor and talk with other interested parties. This approach worked very well to generate interest.

Language was a key issue from a cultural perspective – in the UK we are comfortable and familiar with the terms mentor and mentee in a business context. However, in France they use the French words "marraine" (Grand Mother) and "filleule" (Grand Daughter) to talk about our mentors and mentees which has a warmer and more human appeal.

In France they found that an approach to train the mentors in two half-day sessions taking place two weeks apart worked well as it gave the mentors/mentees an opportunity to tackle any specific questions in separate, individual meetings during that time. This combination of individual and collective training sessions worked well to address any issues and give the pairs time to discuss their progress and achievements.

The training support was valued by both mentors and mentees as it gave them the opportunity to better understand their roles in the process and what the expectations were on each side of the relationship. This was particularly important for the mentees as for some they had entered into the relationship without having really thought through what was required from them. By making sure at the outset that both parties understood their responsibilities, it helped to create more positive pairings.

Both parties appreciated the opportunity to meet in a group setting, even when online, as it broke down some of the initial barriers of meeting as well as providing reassurance of being part of a structured programme.

Several support formats for mentor-mentee pairs have been tested, and it appears that, in addition to the training of the mentors, which has its own legitimacy, the training of the

mentees provides a common base for the pair and contributes to the durability of the pairings.

Issues negatively impacting on the mentoring programme included lack of availability, pregnancy and maternity leave, difficulty establishing the focus for the mentee's needs and COVID-19 affecting the ability to meet in person or find time to meet online due to other commitments as a result of the lockdown (e.g. home-schooling, caring responsibilities). For the mentors, the timing was particularly significant to prevent any clashes with events taking place within their own business.

Location was not an obstacle, unless face-to-face meetings were preferred, as telephone, Skype and video meetings provided the same opportunities to talk. The regularity of the meetings between the mentor and mentee were generally monthly but some met more often – it was important that the pairs avoided long periods where they didn't meet to keep the momentum of the relationship going. Most of the pairings lasted around 9 months.

From the programme partner point of view, it was important to recognise the amount of time that it takes to set up the mentoring partnerships including finding the participants, training and follow up. For this reason, it was suggested that the mentors commit to a period of say 3 years to reduce the time spent on this, but this may be difficult for some to commit to.

Many of the potential mentors we had previously talked to/ trained to become mentors asked to delay signing up to the programme until their businesses got back to normal (i.e. post Covid), when they felt they would be in a better position to devote the time to becoming a good mentor. We therefore maintained a pipeline of contacts with details of when we could contact them again to determine their interest in signing up to become a mentor.

6. Summary of Key Learnings

There were a number of key learnings which were identified throughout the lifetime of the programme which have been detailed above but to summarise, the most significant are as follows:

- The programme confirmed the need for support for disadvantaged women in the area of business start-up provision.

- Disadvantaged women cannot be treated as a homogenous group as each have individual needs in terms of training requirements and support in other areas as well as varying levels of need.

- Training and communications activity needed to be adapted in relation to the channels and mediums used during COVID-19 which brought both positive and negative effects on the delivery of the programme.

- Flexibility was a key factor, particularly for the training provision, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Cultural, translation and diversity issues needed to be considered in all aspects of the programme delivery.

- The training provision needed to include a mix of activity formats to successfully engage the participants.