

EAN CASE STUDY: WORK-BASED LEARNING AT THE ASTLEY COOPER SCHOOL

WHY WAS THERE A NEED FOR THE SCHOOL TO DEVELOP A NEW TYPE OF COURSE?

The school noticed that many of our students were leaving to go to college but on courses that didn't seem appropriate for their interests or skills level. We were getting increasingly frustrated that ex-pupils were dropping out of their college courses often for reasons which we felt could have been resolved if the student had the extra support a school provides. We adopted the model of a work-based learning approach from Haywood Academy in Stoke, which we felt would be perfect for many of our students, particularly given our proximity to the Mayland Business Park, which employs over 20,000 people.

Deputy Headteacher, Matt Stevens, says, *'When I started meeting local business leaders I was surprised to hear that they found it difficult to attract young people, and when they did, some of the apprentices didn't have the basic skills required in the workplace to be successful'.*

It is a common complaint of businesses that school leavers are applying for jobs, but with little or no experience. Businesses want to see that a school leaver has a positive attitude to learning and the maturity and commitment to keep a job. The course aims to address this by giving students long term, meaningful work experience where they have the opportunity to settle in and grow into a role, whilst working with them in school on the transferable skills they will use in their future career and throughout their lives.

Jennifer Casserly, SWR, says, *'We are very proud to be a part of the programme as it is a great way to introduce business and working life to young people, giving students guidance and experience that they wouldn't get at college or sixth form'.*

WHAT TYPE OF STUDENTS WERE IDENTIFIED FOR THE WORK-BASED LEARNING PROGRAMME?

The course is mainly aimed at Level 2 students; those who aren't quite academic enough to go on to do A-levels. The course targets those students who want to go on to do an apprenticeship but need a bit of support into the workplace. We want to bridge the gap between school life and employment.

One of this year's work-based learning students, Nathan Hansford, who is doing his placement at SWR says, *'I always knew that I did not want to spend two more years in school after GCSEs. Throughout secondary school, I hated being behind a desk 6 hours a day so I decided to take a chance on this new course. I wanted to do something practical so for me it was one of the best decisions I have ever made'.* He added, *'I know that I am not or was not the only person who thought the same as me, that's why I encourage anyone who is finishing year 11 at the end of this year who does not want to stay on in school or go to college to give this course a chance'.*

All students who complete the course should have a CV with plenty of relevant experience, the confidence and knowledge to apply for jobs and apprenticeships, 3 BTEC qualifications, and a clearer idea of what employers expect of them and how a business works. This should help them make informed choices about their future careers and ensure they are applying for the right jobs and the right apprenticeships.

HOW DID YOU CREATE THEIR TIMETABLE/SCHEME OF WORK?

The school has designed the course so students spend the first four weeks in school developing the basic skills required by businesses. We invite partner businesses to deliver part of this intensive training in a more business style workshop. It gives us a great opportunity to observe the students' strengths and weaknesses, allowing us to match each student with an appropriate company a bit like an extended Assessment Centre.

Students then have a mini interview with the prospective company which gives the company a chance to meet the student and also gives students a bit of a confidence boost when they are 'offered' a placement.

From October the student goes to their work experience placement 3 days a week and studies in school 2 days a week for the remainder of the year. In school they study BTECs in Work Skills, Personal and Social Development and Planning and Participating in Work Experience, as well as English and Maths.

HOW HAS THE PROGRAMME BEEN PROMOTED TO PARENTS?

The course has been promoted to parents through the web site and the local paper. We held a work-based learning information evening for which we identified target students in year 11 and year 10 and sent personalised invitations home to the parents. We were amazed that students from neighbouring schools showed up to the evening.

We also promoted the course as part of our sixth form evening. With the new style apprenticeships opening up, this course is gaining traction as businesses, parents and students all recognise the substantial benefits it offers. As one parent recently commented, *'What a wonderful opportunity. Why wasn't this available when I was in school? It would have helped so many of us to decide the correct route into the work environment'*.

HOW HAVE YOU BEEN ABLE TO BRING EMPLOYERS ON BOARD?

Our Careers and Enterprise Advisor at SWR, Jason Lee, has been instrumental in setting this up. Initially he acted as a great sounding board for the school, helping us gauge interest and demand in the local business community. He had input on the proposed curriculum, helping the school identify gaps in what we wanted to offer.

SWR says, 'We became involved in work-based learning as we felt we had good foundations in place to support any student wanting to get into the workplace and learn. As a company we have a real eagerness to get involved with the local community. The principles and activity of the work-based learning programme fit nicely with our company values. Nathan always shows up with a smile, is eager to learn, works hard and really seems to enjoy his time when he's here. As the Managing Director, it really is a pleasure to be able to support a young person's introduction to working life and we see this as a great opportunity to find new young professionals to work within our organisation'.

The school has also joined Hemel Hempstead Business Ambassadors and The Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce in order to grow links with the business community. Generally, businesses have been very positive about the course and its potential. Some of the companies we are working with have been so encouraged by being involved with the programme that they are keen to continue next year and offer more opportunities.

SWR added, 'We are very passionate about giving all young people, no matter their background or qualifications, a fair chance and the opportunity to find their path and not be limited to a traditional style of learning. This programme finally gives students just that'.

The longer-term nature of the work-experience has also allayed company fears that it would be difficult to resource. Many have seen the students grow and develop into their roles well and in some cases the work-based learning students are performing as well as the apprentices.

Companies involved in this year's pilot scheme are also commenting about what a positive thing it is for the business to help a young person and watch them develop each week. It is truly a collaborative partnership between the school and business and is equally rewarding for all parties involved.

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WHAT CHANGES HAVE YOU NOTICED IN THE PARTICIPATING STUDENTS COMPARED TO OTHER STUDENTS?

Nathan whose work experience placement is at SWR has really grown in confidence. He has a positive 'can do' attitude which has been noted by not just his supervisor but many others in the company.

He says, 'For me it's the best decision I ever made. I'm growing in confidence and learning new skills all the time and achieving things I never knew I could'.

Ashley, another work-based learning student based at Osborne Properties says, 'I can really see the difference this course has made. I left school with no idea about what I wanted to do or what jobs were out there and had no experience and no confidence in my abilities. I have been in my work placement for 2 months and love it; I'm meeting new people, learning new skills like Photoshop and InDesign, I feel motivated and really look forward to my days at work. I would really recommend the course as it's given me so many opportunities that I don't think I would have gotten if I had just gone to college'.

Erica Hodges, the Work-Based Learning Coordinator says, 'It has been a real privilege to watch our students, a lot of whom had low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, grow each week and fulfil their potential. The positive changes I have seen in the students since the course started 3 months ago cannot be under-estimated. I am so proud of the way each one has applied themselves in their job roles. The course has given them a great first step into their careers and I hope they all fulfil their potential'.

HOW HAS THE SCHOOL GAINED FROM CREATING THE WORK-BASED LEARNING PROGRAMME?

We hope to double the number of students on work-based learning next year. The school has benefitted enormously so we are looking to grow our business network accordingly. It cannot be underestimated how rewarding being involved in this programme has been for all involved.

It feels like we have a success story, something innovative to really shout about. It is helping change perceptions across Hemel and Hertfordshire. It is helping companies with their community engagement programmes and corporate social responsibility, but also helping the partner businesses feel like they have a stake in a young person's life chances. Everyone who is involved in the course feels incredibly positive towards it; teachers, businesses and parents can see the incredible value it is adding. It feels like we are doing something really important.

But the biggest impact is on the students themselves and their families. It is broadening their horizons, building their confidence and employability skills and providing them with unique opportunities which they may not have otherwise had. We are also finding that many of the parents wished they had this opportunity when they were younger. They are grateful that the school and businesses are working together to help their child transition into work and develop a successful career and this alone makes the entire course worthwhile for the staff at Astley Cooper and Adeyfield schools.

If any companies would like to get involved in the work-based learning programme or find out more, please contact Erica Hodges at e.hodges@astleycooper.herts.sch.uk