

Case study

Partnering the curriculum with the world of work

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Five years ago we made a conscious decision at King Richard School to invest approximately £25k Excellence in Cities (EiC) funding to establishing a vocational curriculum across a range of subject areas in the Key Stage 4 programme.

The whole process was implemented in line with recommendations from the *GNVQ handbook* (QCA, 2000). We established a 'vocational steering group', which was more a discussion forum than a management group of staff who supported each other to evolve common whole-school development strategies. The members of the group were representatives of the school's leadership team and the heads of departments that were offering the vocational subjects.

There were monthly meetings with fixed agendas that included discussion of timelines, updating of employer links and assessment protocols. In line with advice from the *GNVQ handbook*, the group canvassed support from the more obvious, high-profile local employers, never asking for finance, but instead seeking access to their expertise in the form of their facilities, ranging from local theatres to high-tech laboratories, or their workforce, from brewers to actors.

We now deliver a broad range of vocational qualifications, from the more straightforward applied GCSEs through to BTECs (from the Business and Technical Education Council) and even national vocational qualifications (NVQs). The common characteristic of all of these courses is our determination to seek support from true vocational experts – the employers themselves.

Changing approach

As the vocational curriculum became embedded as the central premise of our Key Stage 4 programme, it became apparent that our existing two-week work experience block bore very little

relationship to our state-of-the-art vocational experience.

Previously, students selected placements from an existing file of employers, applied for placements during a fixed period of the year determined by external agencies and awaited interviews. Students did not always get their first or second choices nor were placements related to an area of study.

Given our catchment area and school context, our students have little access to higher education (HE) job experiences. A lot of employment in the area is focused on the construction sector, which, initially in our development, was not one of our areas of curriculum investment. Also, too many students were disappointed with their 'work experience' and too many busy employers were disappointed with the lack of preparation by our students – although how you prepare for two weeks of hairdressing unless you are on an NVQ course baffles me! It was almost universal that the placement bore no relationship to the students' curriculum plan, and as a result was merely a 'bolt on'.

So four years ago, we made the decision to abandon the 10-day 'Trident' placement – for more details, see: www.thetridenttrust.org.uk This process merely involved notifying Project Trident of our decision not to place students. We did have a service-level agreement for this and, even now, are attempting to recoup our funding and use this to fund liaison with other appropriate agencies.

Relating to world of work

Our vocational commitment has also embedded the notion of work-related learning into the curriculum – how to apply knowledge to the world of work.

It has become apparent to all of us at King Richard School that work-related learning is enhanced by a work-based experience. This was stage two of our subject-employer relationship – the simple request to allow a student to experience a two-day workshadowing placement within a company. This process was very small scale, and very ad hoc. There was only one student per placement, and very casual booking arrangements along the line of: 'If you would like to see more of the work of

company X, there is a two-day shadowing opportunity – anyone interested should see their teacher'. The take up varied from up to 45 students signing up to shadow employers in Osbornes Construction to six students working with Pall International, producers of aerospace filtration systems.

It really was that small scale, but it allowed us to determine the most suitable students for placements and so enhance our relationship with our partner employers. With limited extra guidance, our students focused their placement time on an aspect of their vocational specialism.

It was possible for students to interview the employer's staff regarding careers, pay and progression routes. They could leave with a more accurate picture of a company and make a more informed choice of future careers, in addition to enhancing portfolios. The latter was possible because vocational leaders briefed students prior to placements on a specific application of their course, for example, comparing sterile techniques in Pall filtration laboratories to King Richard School labs. Portfolio work like this was possible for most of the placements.

As we were making these tentative steps into the world of work-based curriculum application, we were also investing in shared NVQ delivery with Highbury College, a local further

School context

King Richard School is an 11-16 mixed, state comprehensive serving the large Paulsgrove estate on the outskirts of Portsmouth. A total of 30% of pupils receive free school meals; the percentage of pupils identified as having special needs, including statements, is 44.4%. The Paulsgrove estate is recognised as an area of social deprivation, with less than 10% of adults having had access to higher education. Adult unemployment is higher than the Portsmouth average and owner occupation is below the average for all of the Portsmouth area. Three years ago the estate was the scene of the nationally reported 'anti-paedophile' riots.

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education (FE) provider. A lot of you will no doubt have students on such stalwart courses as motor vehicles, construction and hairdressing NVQs. Many students thrive on the hands-on applied courses. However, it was at this point that we became aware that these options were best catered for in our old 'Trident' programme – the one we had withdrawn from. While it was possible to canvas support for such placements from parents (it really is worth a letter to all parents asking for student placement opportunities in the companies where they are employed), the yield was low and the effort was high – we achieved seven placements out of the 45 we needed for the students on our NVQ programmes. It was then that we decided to seek the support of our local Education Business Partnership (EBP).

Using the experts

Portsmouth is very fortunate to have an EBP that is pro-active in its support for schools that wish to enhance the learning experience of their students. It is worthwhile all schools seeking out their local EBP and regularly liaising with them regarding employer links. The help they can provide can range from support for employer/career days in school, teacher placements within companies, work-related student resources, employer mentors and student placements, among other things.

We had worked closely with our local Education Business Partnership on a number of occasions for whole-day activities linked to work preparation activities such as interviewing techniques, CV development and so on and now asked for their support in placing NVQ students for one day per week with appropriate employers. This costs us £35 per student and for that we receive:

- a placement in the NVQ area studied
- a full health and safety check
- employer liability checks
- a clear paperwork trail for the students, parent and employer.

While I do not wish to denigrate our jobshadowing exercises, our involvement with Portsmouth EBP has illustrated how professional support can ensure that students gain maximum benefit from work-based learning and so make more successful career choices post 16. The success of the NVQ work placements prompted us to increase our involvement with the EBP to develop our work-based programme further.

Widening the employer base

As the school increasingly sought out employers to contribute directly to delivery of our curriculum, we quickly realised that we needed to broaden our employer base.

There is a limit to the success of 'cold calling' employers. Again, Portsmouth is fortunate in having an active Chamber of Commerce that recognises the role of schools as providers of an appropriately qualified workforce. The Chamber wishes its members to be informed of current developments in education and genuinely believes in the benefits of Portsmouth as a place to live and work. When King Richard School joined the Chamber two years ago, the benefits were immediate.

While a lot of teachers may wince at the notion of 'networking', it was apparent that if we were to seek employers' support for enhancing our students' experience either in the classroom or the workplace, such links would be vital. Our Chamber allowed us to present ourselves and our requirements in a more formal setting by organising 'briefings' over breakfast or lunch at an appropriate venue. These involved up to 15 local businesses at any given briefing.

This was daunting, as we were not talking to teachers but to employers who needed a crisp, clear message. We needed to be very specific in our requests and make it very clear what the benefits of working with King Richard School would be for them. Such presentations yielded us a number of placements, and a number of employers prepared to relate their experiences to our students.

Our involvement with the Chamber of Commerce has also given us access to an extensive database of local employers that can be searched by staff in a subject-specific manner.

Preparing employers

Most of our vocational courses are modular and so easy to summarise as a series of core concepts. When these concepts are then given to employers, it allows them to relate their own expertise to a specific curriculum area. We never say to employers 'come and tell us what you do'. Instead, we ask employers to tell us about specific aspects of their work. For example:

- How does a brewery maintain a sterile environment (GNVQ Unit 3)?

- How does a hotel deliver customer service training (Leisure/Tourism Applied GCSE)?
- How does a local supermarket make use of databases to link with suppliers (GNVQ ICT)?

By sharing our course descriptors with employers we make the latter's task more straightforward, which means they are more willing to become involved.

It is at this point that a conventional GCSE becomes more difficult to incorporate into a vocational context. GCSEs are not applied and are often not modular. Within King Richard School, the GCSE subjects have struggled to entice employers to develop meaningful relationships that benefit both student and employer. This is currently being reviewed following a gap analysis of the WRL framework audit. Our vocational coordinator is hoping to focus support on those identified as needing it.

What next?

Achieving an ongoing positive work-based learning experience for our students is dependent on a continuing relationship between the school, Education Business Partnership and employers. Pupils are now prepared to actively seek placements and demand from staff access to employers who they feel are appropriate to their possible future career. This is not solely limited to vocational options, but includes independently generated pathways.

We now work closely with both the EBP and the Chamber and are in the process of appointing a 'work-based administration officer' to deal with student and departmental requests and to coordinate support visits. Our vocational coordinator, following a curriculum audit, now liaises with departments regarding work-based learning provision. The students themselves know that if they wish to experience 'work' in any sector, we can hopefully accommodate their needs with a quality employer.

Work-related learning is enhanced by work-based learning. The two are not separate, nor limited to a select cohort of students at either end of the ability spectrum. If schools are committed to providing quality provision, then they need to be aware that achieving this in practice requires the support of appropriate experts.

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