

Successful work experience on study programmes: West Herts College

URN: 130720

Region: East of England

Remit: Further education and skills

Provider background

[West Herts College](#) is a large general further education college with three campuses in Watford, Hemel Hempstead and Kings Langley. Students are from a wide geographical area, predominately Hertfordshire and North London and a high proportion live in significantly deprived areas. The student population is diverse, with approximately 30% belonging to a minority ethnic group. Approximately 16% of students have disclosed either a disability or learning difficulty.

Brief description

This good practice example shows how West Herts College provides high quality and responsive work experience for students aged between 16 and 19 on study programmes.

The good practice in detail

To meet the requirements of the 16 to 19 study programme and to ensure that all students aged 16 to 19 have a good experience of work-related learning, leaders and managers at West Herts College completely revamped how work experience is offered across the college. This involved:

- a whole-college approach through a revised strategic plan developed to support the study programme, from September 2013
- a change in mindset and culture, focusing relentlessly on students' destinations through their college career
- identifying the skills students need to develop to achieve their intended destinations – the 'line of sight to work'
- badging work experience as 'GAP experiences' and linking it to skills development and employers' requirements

- allocating new staff with a central coordinating role and opening a new and attractive 'GAP lounge'
- a changed emphasis for tutorials, with students focused on skills and targets, underpinned by responsive information, advice and guidance.

A whole-college strategic approach

Through the revised strategic plan, college leaders and managers have made their expectations absolutely clear and placed study programmes at the heart of their thinking.

Guiding principles of the curriculum are that it should:

- take account of local and regional growth strategies
- reflect the skills needs of local and regional employers
- align with professional standards across vocational and occupational sector areas
- enable the development of the wider skills and attributes students need to maximise their career opportunities and earning potential.

Teaching, learning and assessment principles are to:

- provide environments and facilities that enable students to achieve their individual aspirations and potential
- provide a workforce that is relevant and equipped with the skills and knowledge to support students to be successful in their learning, qualification outcomes and future destinations
- maintain an accurate awareness of local, regional and national labour market intelligence and skills requirements to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment remain relevant to work.

The study programme strategy sits comfortably alongside the college key measures of success:

- All full-time students will access work experience opportunities.
- Ninety per cent of students will recommend work experience opportunities as an important part of their education and training.
- At least 85% of students will progress to positive and relevant destinations.

A whole-college approach to work experience has therefore been adopted, linking clearly to study programmes, curriculum development and teaching, learning and assessment.

Focusing on students' destinations

From the moment a potential student contacts the college, the focus is on their 'end' destination and goals. This means advising them on what they need to do over the longer term, rather than what would suit right now. It has also meant staff focusing more specifically on the ensuring that students gain the skills and attributes needed to progress in the workplace, along with the right qualifications.

Information, advice and guidance are now woven into students' programmes of study and are an integral part of discussions between staff and students throughout the term and year. This enables staff to work more effectively with individual students, to plan with them what skills they need to develop and review the progress they are making.

The principle on entry to the college is to offer a place within a subject area. Placement on a particular level of vocational qualification and the design of the other elements of the study programme, such as English and mathematics, are agreed following discussions with students, a review of prior attainment and the outcomes of initial assessments including English.

Alongside students' main qualification, each level of the study programme is further differentiated to pinpoint students' needs and help them progress and become work-ready.

- Level 1 students have additional time to develop personal, study and employability skills.
- Level 2 students have additional time to focus on assessment and, for those aspiring to level 3, additional time to develop bespoke study skills.
- Level 3 students who aspire to higher education have additional time to develop higher-level learning skills; business students have additional time to undertake employer-determined skills such as information technology (IT) qualifications; and engineering students have additional time to develop skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills, such as robotics or coding.

The 'preparing for work' theme continues within subjects, which are matched to the types of jobs students can aim for. It includes information about salaries and job openings. For example, in the hairdressing and beauty therapy department, job opportunities are [displayed along one wall by level](#).

Each student has to complete a minimum of 30 hours' work experience during their study programme. This can be adjusted to stretch individual students. For example, a health and care student on a level 1 programme is undertaking additional GAP experiences and level 2 units.

Identifying the skills students need to develop

Staff have developed a set of **core competencies** and standards for the study programme.

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Taking responsibility
- Reflective thinking
- Problem solving
- Independent inquiry
- Employability
- English, mathematics and IT.

Each core competency can then be broken down into standards and targets.

Taking Responsibility	Indicative standards	Example targets
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Has high levels of attendance and punctuality ■ Meets deadlines for the completion of tasks and is able to prioritise to achieve all tasks. ■ Demonstrates high standards of personal, professional and ethical behaviour. ■ Generates realistic ideas to improve own performance. ■ Actively participates in activities and in all learning situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Be reliable and punctual by arriving on time every day and maintaining 100% attendance during the length of your GAP experience. ■ Improve your time management by making a daily list of tasks and 'things to do' with the timescale to achieve. Put the list in order of priority and tick off what you achieve. Measurement of success will be in how many deadlines you meet. This target will also help you improve your own performance.

Each study programme has an allotted two hours per week, which is designated target setting, progress and attainment (TPA) time and is led by teachers. TPA is dedicated to the information, advice and guidance students need to agree targets for their GAP work experience, explicitly linked to their planned destinations and mapped against the college-wide competencies above. This strengthens the tutorial role as it links more holistically to the skills students need to develop to be successful in their qualification aims in English and mathematics and in the workplace.

Tutors work closely with the GAP coordinators to support students' employability skill development and with the learning resource centre staff, who support students in their study skill development.

Planned and actual GAP hours undertaken by students are recorded on their [online learner profile](#), along with their target grades, progress to date and attendance. This enables tutors to keep track of students' progress to achieve their 30-hour minimum and for managers to review take-up by course and study programme area. As a result, teachers and managers have a clear overview of students' GAP experience hours across the college. Where, for example, actual hours appear to be low, informed discussions can take place to establish the reasons for this and to identify whether any action needs to be taken.

Badging work experience as 'GAP'

Work experience is given high status. Promotional materials for students highlight its value from the outset. It is badged as 'GAP work experiences, adventures in the working world' to give it an identity and ensure that students know what to expect from the start of their programmes. Information is available in student leaflets and on a dedicated page of the [college website](#).

GAP experiences are highlighted in the [parent and carer handbook](#). The 'benefits for employers' leaflet promotes the long-term value of taking on students on work experience and offers a college pledge which includes:

- sorting the detail: making all the arrangements
- flexibility: hosting a single student for one week or several spread over several days
- minimising fuss: emphasising the few additional health and safety issues to consider and that students will be well briefed beforehand
- being available: stating that college staff will be on call to support the employer and the placement students.

College leaders have made available a dedicated resource base, set up to resemble an employment agency, known as the 'GAP lounge'. Students make arrangements or drop in to discuss and find a placement using the college's own website, where, with assistance from a GAP coordinator, they can find work opportunities linked to their destination of work, college or higher education.

The GAP coordinators do the groundwork in assessing the suitability of the placements and in matching students, including dates, times, location, expectations and skills to be developed. Each placement has a 'job sheet' that is approved by the employer – examples include [a catering assistant at the BRIT Awards](#), [assistant to a local MP](#), [a social media developer for a catering company](#), [an assistant for Hilton hotels](#), and [a support worker for the YMCA](#).

The college records students' success in their placements along with employer feedback – for example, in [two case studies](#).

Working with employers

Employers are responding well to the college's work. An increasing number (currently around 300) the vast majority of whom are from the private sector, are working with the college to provide GAP experiences of work.

Departmental heads have a responsibility to manage the growth of the employer base and to engage employers in the curriculum. For example:

Responding to a skills gap

One local employer in the IT sector had a skills gap and was finding it difficult to recruit employees. So, in discussion with the college, managers and staff developed a specific pathway in the second year of the level 3 diploma study programme to enable students to achieve their main qualification and study for a specific vendor IT qualification to respond to this gap.

The company attends open days and contributes to recruitment of students wishing to join the IT courses. They also interview all students towards the end of their course and select six to eight students to join their apprenticeship programme each year. By redesigning the curriculum to provide a wider set of employability skills, and through consultation with the employer, a successful link has been made to provide skilled employees, through a bespoke study programme pathway.

Providers often comment on the difficulties of finding sufficient placements for students, but at West Herts College, leaders and managers regard it as everyone's responsibility to grow the employer base. Some examples of how they are making this a success include:

- college staff are asked to consider whether they have contacts they could provide from friends and family
- all new companies who take on an apprentice are invited to be part of GAP
- moving away from 'block' work experience to designing a more bespoke placement around individual students' interests and availability
- employers being flexible in offering a range of timings over a period of time, for instance on a day that a student is not in college, 'twilight sessions' or at weekends
- increasing numbers of companies contacting the college to offer specific project opportunities, such as software development for third sector organisations or the emergency services using the college and its facilities to stage a major incident; students record the event and student actors use media make-up techniques to simulate incidents with realistic injuries

- the college's reception team, among others, offering GAP experiences to students who may lack confidence in the external workplace and who need to develop the necessary set of skills
- through links with the National Citizen Service Watford, 40 students have worked under supervision in primary schools to deliver the physical education curriculum in readiness for their coaching qualifications
- around 70 students have so far taken part in the National Citizen Service programme to develop leadership, independent living, budgeting and presentation skills
- the student experience manager employs students on enrolment day at start of year and in the learning resource centre, in real work roles.

GAP experiences – are they working?

Students value the opportunity to put what they have learned into practice as well as gaining employability skills. One student said:

'By working with an employer on an IT project, it's given me a sense of purpose and motivation to succeed on my course. I see the relevance.'

Another said:

'If I hadn't had GAP I wouldn't have the part-time job I have now. GAP has given me the skills I need to compete in the job market and has given me confidence.'

Students are clear about what is required from the GAP experience from the outset and have a real buzz about the experience. They value it and see that they are growing in confidence and that doors are opening up to them, such as extended work experience opportunities, part-time work and apprenticeship potential.

What makes this a success?

Although it is early days, there is emerging evidence that the GAP experience is having a positive impact. The way the leaders and managers at the college have approached work experience, through GAP, means that teachers are able to personalise skills development and stretch and challenge students more effectively. More high profile opportunities can be offered to level 3 students, with such opportunities utilised to stretch the more able levels 1 and 2 students.

The good practice case studies that Ofsted publishes highlight specific examples of practice that providers of education, learning and children's services have used to achieve successful outcomes.

For education, the case studies do not recommend a single particular approach to teaching and learning. Ofsted has no preferred lesson structure or teaching style. We showcase and share a wide range of approaches that providers have found work well for them in achieving good outcomes for children, young people and learners.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Complete our survey [here](#).

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