

SOUTH COTSWOLD PARTNERSHIP

Pathways to progress

In a major step forward in their delivery of 14–19 education, seven schools, an FE college and an HE institute¹ in Gloucestershire have forged a partnership to broaden and deepen their vocational offer to young people. Working closely together, the partners have shown how to address some of the hurdles to the effective delivery of work-based learning in a rural area.

Although now focused on preparing for the new Diplomas, the partnership was formed back in 2003 before the Diplomas were on the agenda. 'We were well ahead of the game', says Chris Germaine, the Coordinator for the South Cotswold Partnership, based at Cirencester Deer Park School, 'so much so that we were visited by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and cited as a model of good practice which hadn't received special funding.'

The emphasis has been on 14–16 year-olds, with an initial bias towards young people whose learning strengths lay away from the traditional curriculum. 'I had been charged with developing an alternative curriculum for this age group,' says Chris, 'and enhancing their vocational options was a clear signpost to greater motivation.' Now through the 'partnership days' agreed by all participants, students can attend vocational courses either at one of the institutions or enjoy a placement with a local employer.



Collectively, the partners offer vocational pathways in beauty, business skills, early years care, construction and motor vehicle studies, based on a two year, one-day-a-week course. The emphasis is on 'pathways'; each route is designed so that students can progress to higher level study post-16, having gained an NVQ level 1 or equivalent qualification. Some pathways are delivered in-house by schools, while others, for example beauty, are offered through the college. Those doing motor vehicle studies are taught offsite at the Royal Agricultural College at Cirencester by staff from the schools.

Work experience has been more of a challenge. 'While we're not spoilt for choice in a rural area,' comments Chris, 'where possible we've generally been able to meet the interests of students. Even if we can't give them exactly what they want, they've gained a lot through their placements in terms of motivation and skills. And many young people have yet to decide which vocational route they want to follow, but just want a more general vocational experience.'

Chris can point to many success stories from the programme. 'One student who had issues in school has really blossomed through two placements in nurseries where the staff and children really took to him. He's now doing a level 2 course in child care at college. For many young people, the experience has taken them out of their comfort zones, given them the chance to meet new people and gain a raft of new experiences. As a result they've blossomed as individuals.'

Initially, to organise work placements, the partnership made use of Trident, who in the first year ran its Employability Programme. This gave students the confidence to 'sell' themselves to prospective employers by helping them with



interviews, with telephone technique and through CVs. By the second year of the programme, the schools were able to build their own contacts and find placements on their own initiative.

One potential issue, which the partnership was able to solve from the start, was over timetable coordination between the participating institutions. Early on it was agreed that each would commit a day to Years 10 and 11. But there has remained the problem of arranging transport, which Chris says 'has yet to be cracked, and not just in terms of arranging minibuses, etc, but getting students from a scattered area to one location on time'.

The partnership is now considering whether two half-day sessions may be a better approach, with a more concentrated experience for young people in line with the world of work. 'In afternoon sessions, I've seen such a high level of motivation among our motor vehicle learners that they're task rather than time driven, and quite prepared to stay till 5.00pm to finish the job.'

One of the keys to the success of the programme has been the willingness of all partners to make equivalent contributions of staff and resources, whether by supplying minibuses, contributing to teaching costs or supplying teaching assistants, all of which has given the partnership its strength and durability and ensured that all have control of the curriculum.

Driving the strategic direction of the partnership are the heads of each of the institutions who meet six times a year. They are supported by an operational group, composed of Deputies and Assistant Heads, with sub-groups focused on specific areas such as information, advice and guidance. And from next year, they're also to be a governor's group as evidence of a robust high-level commitment to the venture.

As the partnership has developed, so its impact has now widened to include all students who would benefit from adding a vocational strand to their GCSEs. 'By the time pupils reach year 10', notes Chris, 'we intend to offer a vocational programme for all abilities, and place a greater applied or practical emphasis on all subjects.'



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¹ Cirencester Deer Park School, Cirencester Kingshill School, Cirencester College, Sir William Romney's School, Farmor's School, The Cotswold School and The Royal Agricultural College.