Leicester College
Alton Towers Scarefest – Employer engagement and work-based learning

The Foundation Degree in Artistic Make-up and Special Effects is approved and validated by De Montfort University and delivered by the course team at Leicester College. The course was designed specifically to be vocationally relevant, contain a high degree of work-based learning and be focused upon the achievement of sector specific needs.

The overall aim of the Foundation Degree in Artistic Make-up and Special Effects is to prepare students for the rapidly increasing employment opportunities available within the industry by developing their technical, practical, artistic and business management skills and expertise.

In October 2015, Artistic Make-up and Special Effects students undertook an 18-day project at Alton Towers where they provided the make-up service for the Scarefest event. ‘Scarefest’ consists of performances throughout the day in five ‘scare zones’, featuring actors in roles such as zombies, vampires, demons, and ‘infected’. Make-up was required for 70-100 performers each day and in order to meet the demand all students in Years 1 and 2 were invited to participate. All did to varying degrees, and most students completed at least a week of the project.

This was a risk as first year students had only been on the course for two weeks and were unknown in terms of their ability and, more importantly it emerged, their professionalism. However, it was felt that it was a risk worth taking in order to meet the demands of the brief and, hopefully, ignite a relationship with a valuable industry contact.
The students successfully completed the project, although there were some issues that will need to be addressed if the experience is to be repeated. There were concerns that some of the students, notably the first years, were not demonstrating the level of professionalism expected and required of them. Understandably, there was also variability of the standard of the make-up based on the students’ prior experience and length of time on the course. In addition, there were some problems with communication with some key messages not being delivered to the students from the event organisers.

To address these concerns the College and Alton Towers have agreed that each zone will have a team leader (one of the second year students) who will act as a point of contact and liaise with the Alton Towers team leaders to ensure changes, requests etc are communicated to all students effectively. The team leader will also oversee the make-up applied to ensure consistency.

Pete Cliff, Entertainment Creative Manager at Alton Towers acknowledged that there are some development issues moving forwards but accepts that there will be a degree of uncertainty when working with students. However, he believes that it is a worthwhile exercise and a fantastic learning opportunity for students that is worth repeating.

The students all found it to be a valuable experience and reported learning a lot about the nature of the industry and about professionalism. In addition to the practical skills they were using they were developing a range of valuable skills in terms of organising and managing their time, listening and communicating, and forming positive working relationships. They were having to think on their feet and find solutions to problems but claim that because they were engaged in the project for a longer period (up to two weeks) than would be the case with other jobs they do, for example, a fashion shoot, that it helped build their confidence.
It was also a good way for the new students to get to know one another and to work with the more experienced second years.

This was an additional activity for the students and not part of any assessment but the students appreciated the value of the experience of working on such a large scale and felt that it would be an excellent addition to their CVs, and they logged their time spent on the project and an evaluation of what they learned on the college’s Employable You employability software.

When we repeat this activity next year we will incorporate formative assessment for the second year students. This will involve student reflection on and self-assessment of their work and the knowledge and employability skills gained throughout the experience. Feedback from Alton Towers staff and teaching staff will feed into this formative assessment.

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