Sharing Innovative Approaches to Delivering 16-19 Study Programmes

Banbury and Bicester College
“At the heart of our model for Study Programmes is the development of employability skills through the learning company concept.”

Rose Turner, Principal

About the college

Banbury and Bicester College is part of Activate Learning¹, a group which combines secondary, further and higher education along with workforce training, commercial business and social enterprise.

The Activate Learning group was formed in September 2013, following the merger of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College, and Reading College in 2010. The group comprises Banbury and Bicester College, City of Oxford College, Reading College and Activate Enterprise. Activate Learning has a chief executive officer; each college has a principal and Activate Enterprise a director. In 2012/13 the three colleges recruited around 14,500 learners, two thirds of whom were adults on part-time courses. Most learners, currently, are on foundation and intermediate programmes and the group have around 1,800 apprentices in five subject areas.

Oxfordshire and Berkshire are affluent counties with rates of unemployment below national averages. However, across both counties, there are areas of educational and social deprivation and the profile of learners attending the colleges reflects this. GCSE attainment in local secondary schools is broadly at, or just below, national averages, and many learners come to study and train at the colleges with attainment below national averages. The proportion of the population of Oxfordshire and Berkshire from minority ethnic backgrounds varies from around 25% in Reading to below 5% in Banbury and Bicester. However, the proportion of learners from minority ethnic backgrounds in the colleges matches or exceeds these local proportions.

The group’s vision is to transform lives through learning and to offer transformational learning experiences.

The following are the foundations of our approach - and have become known as the “Activate Learning Way”:

- An understanding of the human brain and its potential (expandability)
- The importance of motivation – ensuring students see the purpose of their learning, are empowered to take autonomy and have the opportunity to put what they learn into practice
- Understanding that emotions can enable or sabotage all learning

¹ http://www.ocvc.ac.uk/colleges
These foundations are shaping the way that we provide our Study Programmes and ensuring that every student maximises their learning to achieve their educational and career goals.

The Ofsted Inspection Report\(^2\) (2014) for the Activate Learning colleges gave them an overall rating of good, with a number of areas rated outstanding. The percentage of lessons rated good or outstanding during the inspection was 89%, well above the 69% average for the sector, as recorded by Ofsted last year.

**Study Programmes: enterprise and employability**

Over the last year we have been developing a curriculum which embeds the principles of enterprise and employability. This is both to ensure that our young people have the skills needed to succeed in today’s workplace, but also to improve motivation by showing impact and relevance.

Our journey began with a new curriculum model (4one1), based around a six week “pulse”. Following four weeks of teaching and learning, students are engaged in a fifth week of ‘stretch’ and a sixth week where they apply what they have learnt in real-world scenarios.

Through this model students are able to complete additional qualifications to improve their employability, take part in cross-curricula activities with commercial features and tackle issues and problems typically found within their industry. They are also given opportunities to engage with local businesses through partnership projects.

This focus on enterprise and employability has led to the emergence of learning companies, a model pioneered by members of Activate Learning and other members of the Gazelle Group of Colleges\(^3\).

**Learning companies**

Students enrolling to many areas within Banbury and Bicester College will now also apply to become an employee of a learning company.

The following elements are central to the concept:

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- Students learn in a real-world, professional environment which gives them access to customers
- Students develop work-relevant skills and valuable experience which makes them more employable
- The companies are intrinsically linked to the design of the curriculum and wherever possible students are assessed in the learning company
- Learning companies provide the environment in which to practice behaviours, attitudes and mind-sets essential for employment, and to receive feedback which enhances future performance

At Banbury and Bicester College our first learning company has been in hospitality – a curriculum area judged outstanding in our recent Ofsted inspection.

The company mirrors the professional environment in almost every way. Students are put into brigades (approximately 12 students) consisting of a mix of levels from Level 1 to Level 3. Each brigade is expected to work in all learning company outlets, including:

- The College refectory
- The College café
- The College training restaurant
- Bloxham Mill – an external business park catering outlet

This variety, provided on rotation, gives students access to a broad range of commercial environments each with distinct skills requirements.

The company's work at Bloxham Mill is managed by a former student, providing an immediate insight into progression opportunities. In addition all students are expected to undertake work experience with Banbury Catering and Events (a private company that is owned and run by a former student). If this work experience is part of their Study Programme hours then it is unpaid, however any evening or weekend work is paid.

English and maths is delivered to all students without a grade C at GSCE and is automatically part of their Study Programme.

The learning company approach has enabled us to deliver the Activate Way of learning. Students have the opportunity to practice their learning in real environments with real customers. They are empowered to make decisions and given responsibility – something which traditional work experience often cannot deliver.

Our learning company model is being extended in the next 12 months to cover:

- Early Years (in partnership with Hobby Horse Children's Centre)
- Engineering (Composites Learning Company)
- Hairdressing (in partnership with Francesco Hairdressing Group)
- Graphics and Media (in partnership with business in the Colin Sanders Innovation Centre – local business centre)

A whole group approach

Learning companies are being developed across the whole of Activate Learning. The principal of City of Oxford College has lead responsibility for enterprise across the group. Executive leadership of this initiative ensures that enterprise is a key aspect of a Study Programme. A framework to help staff move from ‘good ideas’ to an ‘Activate Learning Company’ has been developed and is currently being piloted in a number of curriculum areas.

Using learning companies means that the whole approach to the design of a Study Programme changes. The first consideration in the programme design is the company, its opening hours and days of operation. Everything else must fit within the company operating hours including English, maths and tutorials. The next consideration is the staff team dynamic, which may be significantly different – employing a mixture of teachers, outlet managers and assessors. Professional teachers need teaching, learning and assessment skills as a given plus the ability to design a learning company curriculum.

The focus our Study Programmes have on employability through real work environments has enhanced student motivation and attainment.