

# Support into Employment

## Derwen College

Derwen College, near Oswestry, in Shropshire, is a national specialist further education college for young people aged from 16 to 25. We currently have 143 residential and day students with a wide variety of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including autism, communication difficulties and challenging behaviours.

Our strapline is 'a place of possibility' – the mission is to enable students to achieve goals and aspirations for the future. For the majority, the ambition is employability and development of skills to live a more independent life.

Students are based at the college's main site in Gobowen, near Oswestry, and at three smaller satellite sites at Walford, Ludlow and Telford. Learners follow vocational pathways in Hospitality and Food, Horticulture, Retail & Enterprise and Performing Arts. Those not yet ready for vocational pathways, can follow a Learning for Life pathway which builds confidence and teambuilding skills as a foundation to work-based learning.

There are very few traditional classrooms at Derwen. Students learn vocational skills in work environments with teaching support staff. The Gobowen College campus boasts a customer 'Marketplace' which includes the Walled Garden Café, Orangery Restaurant, Garden Centre & Gift Shop, Vintage Advantage Charity Shop and training hotel Hotel 751.

As students progress in their skills and confidence, our Work Experience team support them to work at weekly work placements outside of College. Students learn work skills, as well as travel training, to help them get to work safely.

In 2020, the College used our expertise in work experience to add to further our programme of support into employment. We launched an additional Supported Internships scheme, designed specifically to direct a small group of former students into work. This bespoke programme, was created for specific students and tailored to support them into their chosen career choices.

2021 saw the completion of our first two internship programmes. For 2021-22 we have two further interns who are working towards careers in Horticulture and Floristry.

## **Evidence of going above and beyond**

To support our interns to reach their goals, it is imperative that they are receiving personalised learning and work experience whilst also accessing the travel training and independence skills needed to get to future employment and enjoy a fulfilling life.

Students K and O, both aged 20, are current Supported Interns. K wants to combine her horticulture and artistic skills in future employment with a florist. Student O would like to work in a Garden Centre.

The College launched a campaign to find suitable work placements for the students, to offer them the very best training towards their career ambitions.

The purpose of an internship is to progress into paid employment, ideally with the employer offering the internship, or by transferring skills to a new employer.

Both O and K were involved in approaching businesses, demonstrating skills, and meeting employers face to face – important skills for any young person seeking employment.

We also launched a media campaign in newspapers, local radio and on social media which explained to employers the importance of internships, and helped them to understand how an intern could fit into their business.

Our campaign gleaned exciting results. We were approached by two independent Shropshire florists offering weekly placements to K. We were also contacted by national garden centre chain Dobbies who met with O, and offered a weekly placement.

Both now have full five-day week timetables with relevant work placements which they attend with the support of job coaches with appropriate support. They also complete work skills as part of their internship undertaking employability skills, work portfolios and functional skills.

We are very proud that K recently passed her driving test and is now able to drive to work placements independently.

## **Innovation**

Derwen College has long recognised that work placements are the best possible preparation for future employment. Work experience is a far cry from the one-week of often meaningless work experience that schools and some colleges achieve.

Work placements for our interns take place over many sessions a week, every week. Interns get to know and develop their role in an organisation. It must be work relevant to their future aspirations.

It is also vital that the work placement team support employers in the process. Job coaches attend work experience sessions with the intern, gradually withdrawing support where appropriate.

By working side by side with employers, we feel we have changed attitudes and apprehensions toward employing people with SEND.

For example, an employer who works with 'K', says:

"K is such a wonderful engaging individual who fits into any role given to her at Agri-cation CIC. Her approach to challenges is very constructive, and she is keen to ask questions to make sure she understands the task at hand so that she can apply her knowledge and skills to get a desirable outcome. I am impressed with her creative abilities and each week she uses this talent to create beautiful recycled items to help develop our sensory garden. She is a joy to work with and I would recommend that people engage in this programme to create opportunity not only for the student, but the employer themselves."

Getting to work is also a vital skill. Students and interns learn to use buses, trains or taxis, or to walk safely to work where that is possible. It is a detailed and focused on each individual's needs.

We are proud that we have graduates who are now capable of travelling independently to work or internships. Some even travelling across London by foot, tube or train.

### **Evidence of Sustainment over two years**

Derwen College is working with local authorities to identify students who would most benefit from an internship to progress them into employment.

We feel that once a business sees for themselves how capable a person with SEND is, and what they can bring to a business, the possibilities are endless. We work hard to build and maintain a sustainable relationship, which would offer further opportunities to future interns.

Our Work Experience team work to forge and maintain relationships with both local and national businesses. We have a strong bond with Premier Inn hotels, which has now seen more than 20 students progress to paid employment with the Whitbread-owned hotel chain.

We were particularly excited to build a new partnership with Dobbies starting with intern O.

We currently work with 27 businesses to provide external work placements for students and supported interns, as well as providing internal work experience in our on-site 'Marketplace'.

Supported Internships that started at Derwen College in September 2020 were successful, despite the challenges of COVID. Interns completed their programmes and have secured both paid hours and voluntary work, and are continuing to build up robust CVs.

Our current interns are achieving wonderful results, progressing towards employment next year.

'K's job coach says:

"Progression for 'K' is the start of a new placement at a florist in Telford in March, and increasing her independent working hours at Agri-cation. She is an incredible young lady who has flourished on the Supported Internship programme and will progress into employment with ease."

Derwen College looks forward to forward to an incredibly bright future for 'K' and 'O', and to supporting our next intake for 2022-23.