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Engaging employers in designing a vocational curriculum: Bridgwater College

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Brief description

Bridgwater College successfully engages with employers from the wider land-based industry when designing and implementing a vocational curriculum. It also focuses on making its farm commercially viable, while developing students' vocational skills to high industry standards.

Overview – the provider's message

'An integral part of our land-based curriculum is delivered within fully commercialised enterprises that promote learning within real-life working scenarios. On the college farm,



students have access to state-of-the-art facilities, encompassing not just the latest technologies, but also to their most innovative applications.

We have outstanding relationships with local employers who readily share their knowledge, skills and advice with all students to help ensure that our 'graduates' are fully equipped to progress into the industry and that they are also in a position to help implement the changes that the industry requires in the future.

We make sure that we keep up with the rapid changes within the agriculture industry so that the industry sets the benchmark for student development. Commercial farm staff now provide practical instruction and as a result of this engagement with employers and specialists, such as the vet or nutritionist or agronomist, our students have frequent exposure to the very latest advances. Within this culture, they quickly develop high aspirations, are well motivated and progress rapidly to become work-ready.'

The good practice in detail

Over several years, the farm was transformed from a separate entity that provided agricultural students with an experience of a working farm to fully integrating the commercial with the curriculum, going beyond simulating the day-to-day activities involved in modern farming. A different approach was required to ensure that learners had an experience that would equip them for their future in farming.

A clear line of sight to work

All agriculture students engage fully in the whole range of day-to-day operations on the farm at all levels.

- A **farm duties rota**, whereby the students start work at 5am, allows students to work alongside farm staff to perform these roles as would be expected of them in any other commercial operation.
- Outside the farm duties model, teaching, learning and assessment are continually underpinned by opportunities to apply theory to practice, whether it be by milking cows, monitoring herd health, carrying out husbandry tasks or engaging in arable operations to produce the feed.

Dual professional vocational teachers and trainers who combine occupational and pedagogical expertise

The college recognised that a significant investment was required if the college farm was to compete in the commercial world and that all staff needed to understand their role in providing a relevant curriculum to learners.

- The staffing model introduced formalised the links between the farm manager and the head of school.
- It emphasised the need for teaching staff to have relevant up-to-date knowledge and experience of current agricultural practices while developing their teaching and assessing skills.
- A member of staff, previously only employed to keep the farm running, was given the opportunity for professional development to fulfil the dual commercial and curriculum role.
- The selection process for new farm staff now includes an assessment of their ability to work with students.

A commitment to the two-way street

The college has re-established its reputation and connections with the agricultural industry and has showed that it can make a positive contribution to employers, manufacturers and suppliers as well as benefit from any partnerships formed. To do this, it had to establish a strong presence at agricultural shows and events, inviting industry representatives to the college and discussing collaborative opportunities. The links between the workplace, the college, practice and theory are reinforced at every opportunity.

One large employer in the south west now plays an integral role in helping learners relate their classroom experience to the practicalities of everyday farming. Other employers bring industry-standard machinery and equipment to the farm giving learners opportunities to experience the use of GPRS to accurately plough fields or use on-board computer technology to accurately drill seeds. On its own, the college would not be able to afford such equipment and students would only have a chance to use them if they were placed on a large modern farm.

- Students experience situations that farmers face, with the added benefit of listening to industry experts providing a detailed commentary as they work through the different processes, emphasising the need to balance costs, efficiency, production and sustainability.
- Teaching staff are able to supplement the input from the experts, to students' additional questioning, by providing explanations as necessary and relating the activities to the wider curriculum.

Employers benefit from the genuine collaboration between industry and the college, giving them regular opportunities to directly influence the curriculum, pass on knowledge and experience and recognising that they are helping to prepare young people who may eventually work for them or other related businesses. In some cases, the work experiences they provide give them an opportunity to identify a potential employee. The future farming group encourages employers to work together for the good of the industry promoting training, research and professional development opportunities.

The importance of balancing conservation with the economics of the industry is emphasised at every opportunity. For example, students were presented with the economic challenges and implications of having to adapt farming to the limited amount of phosphate left for fertilizers, the increasing use of nitrogen-free zones and the need to produce twice as much food from current resources, (two blades of grass for every one currently grown).

Work-related attributes

With an increasing number of new entrant learners coming from non-farming backgrounds, [initial assessments](#) take account of a broad range of prior vocational knowledge and skills.

- Students are assessed at entry for competence in a number of disciplines, such as practical livestock husbandry or mechanisation, as well as health and safety.
- Staff adapt the farm duty work rotas while [individualised targets](#) are set and reviewed throughout the year.

- Second-year students are put into supervisory roles during the farm duties and they often thrive on the responsibility given in a real-work context. They are supported throughout the year to reflect on their development as team leaders.
- Students' development of work-related attributes is further enhanced through the delivery models whereby they work alongside farm staff and farm suppliers/ancillary businesses. This gives them access to real-life farm data and information which they use to develop problem-solving skills, while their exposure to decision-making processes helps them to develop critical thinking skills and understand why the farm operates as it does.

One group of level 3 learners worked with representatives from a company that supplies farm equipment, feed, seed as well as providing a range of services including soil analysis and veterinary services to take soil samples from one field and then discussed the implications of outcomes from analysis. Learners were expected to devise a fertilizer plan that would most benefit the soil and maximise the yield. They also discussed the impact of other factors such as compacted soil, environmental considerations and how to reduce costs. The employer representatives reinforced the need to have a theoretical understanding of the practical situations they would face in the agriculture and livestock industries asked students highly relevant questions.

Practical problem-solving and critical reflection

The management of the dairy herd, for example, focuses on practical problem-solving along with the development of occupational expertise that is collaborative and contextualised.

- New students take responsibilities in the dairy that they would face on any dairy farm and are expected to reach the required occupational standards quickly.
- Higher level, more-experienced students take on responsibility for supervising other students, thus gaining experience in managing staff, meeting deadlines and achieving commercial targets.



- Students quickly understand how different feed-formulas affect the volume and quality of milk production and the time it takes for a cow to be ready to produce another calf and reduces the number of cows not producing calves.
- Sophisticated software allows learners to monitor milk production, costs and other activity, showing how changes in farming practice improves productivity and efficiency.
- Feed suppliers, equipment manufacturers and the milk buyers all play a direct role in influencing the curriculum, reinforcing industry standards and ensuring that staff and learners keep up-to-date with industry developments and requirements.

Escalators to higher-level vocational learning

Bridgwater College established a very strong employer-led advisory board known as the [Future Farming Group](#). A priority for the group is to ensure that young people entering farming have the right leadership, managerial and technical skills to meet the demanding current and future needs of farming.



All members of the group agreed to set up a Future Farmers Academy, making a financial and practical commitment to ensure success. The purpose was to create a mechanism that would fast-track young people into appropriate management positions using the college as the potential talent pool.

- Over a six-month period, selected students cover three core elements involving an industry placement, with access to all aspects of the business, including the management and decision-making processes.
- Fortnightly visits to other farm businesses help them gain a full understanding of how differing businesses work together and influence each other.
- And finally, students undertake initial leadership and management qualifications while receiving close guidance and supervision from management experts within the college.

Students complete a project based on their experience and use social media to let other students know what is involved.

Provider background

[Bridgwater College](#) is located in the heart of Somerset and has an excellent reputation, both regionally and nationally, as a highly successful provider of education and training. In September 2004, the land-based Cannington College, which included small centres at Paignton and Yeovil, merged with the local tertiary Bridgwater College. The college now caters for more than 18,000 full and part-time students from over 35 different countries and employs more than 1,300 staff.

In recent years, over £12 million has been invested in improving the facilities and residential accommodation. The resources are now considered to be among the most exceptional in the



country, providing state-of-the-art surroundings, including the Animal Management Centre, Equestrian Centre, Activity Centre, Rodway Farm, the Walled Gardens and the Golf Course.

Background

It's about work... the summary report of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL) highlighted characteristics and features of outstanding vocational teaching, learning and assessment. These are in line with the criteria for judging the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in Ofsted's *Common Inspection Framework for FE and skills 2012*, but also focus on the additional, distinctive processes of design and delivery which characterise excellent vocational provision.

The case studies in this set were compiled in response to the CAVTL report which highlighted the importance of ensuring a 'clear line of sight to work' on vocational programmes.

The Education Training Foundation has been asked to take forward the recommendations from the Commission's report.

Other examples in this set

Barking and Dagenham (employability): www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140003

Barking and Dagenham (motorsport): www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140004

Exeter College: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130259

Foxes Academy: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140006

Hull College: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130258

Leeds City College: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140007

People and Business Development Ltd: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140009

University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust:
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140008

Wendy Shorter Interiors: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140010

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. Get in touch [here](#).

To view other good practice examples, go to:
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