**ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH WORK EXPERIENCE**

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**01/03/2019 |**[**Views**](https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/news?categories%5B%5D=28)**| Marianna Philippou, Assistant Headteacher at Walthamstow School for Girls**

Marianna is an Assistant Headteacher and the Careers Leader at Walthamstow School for Girls. Here she reflects on how they engage students with work experience and lessons they have learnt along the way.

Our school is a comprehensive girls' school with 900 students on roll.  We are always oversubscribed, and our intake reflects the local area - we have students from a wide range of backgrounds and with very different abilities and needs.

As an Assistant Headteacher, I manage various responsibilities in addition to a teaching timetable.  As well as working on careers, I also lead on our International Links, Financial Education, Enrichment, and Building Transferable Skills.

This is a challenging time for schools - we want to provide the best possible careers advice but are more restricted than ever in terms of time and money.  The Careers & Enterprise Company have been truly invaluable to us.  The world is changing at a fast pace and we are preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist.  In fact, many of them will be creating their own roles.

This is an incredibly exciting time for them in this respect but can also be very confusing as the options are huge!

**Quality work experience**

Work experience is a great opportunity for students to step out of their comfort zone and an environment that they have got to know well for four years.  Part of the experience is realising the differing levels of responsibility and a different approach to their day.  We also want this to be an opportunity to think about future possibilities - to think about areas they may be interested in or the reverse.

There are lots of barriers when it comes to ensuring every student gets meaningful work experience. Firstly, in terms of our school timetable - the best time for this is after their Year 10 exams and before Year 11 so that it doesn't take time out of an already pressurised Year 11 timetable. This means that students are only 15 years old and some placements require a minimum age of 16.

We ask students and the companies to complete a simple work experience form so that we, as a school, have all the information we need. We ask for this by February when the placements will take place in July.

Many companies also find this really early, but we need to stick to the time frame as much as possible to allow us admin time.  Of course, other barriers include admin time here at the school and the hours needed to really follow up with students and parents/carers.

**New approach**

We have recently developed a new approach to work experience. This approach has really come out of us as a school valuing work experience and wanting to continue to offer this as an opportunity.  But it is also a response to the restrictions we currently face.

We now put the ownership very much on students and parents/carers to secure a place, but we also start the process early.  We launch this process at the end of Year 9 with an assembly and emails to parents.  We then hold a Parent Information Evening at the start of Year 10.

We contact placements from previous years and other volunteers who have worked with us before - and parents/carers and staff - to see if anyone can offer placements.  I then advertise these to students.  This year we have managed to employ an admin support person for one day a week who helps me track where we are at.

The successes of the approach are that the students feel more responsible for finding a placement, which is part of the 'real' experience of the working world.  They have to invest a lot more into it rather than just selecting from a spreadsheet.

Last year we did manage to get all students a placement. But even this approach doesn’t quite ensure that every student gets work experience that works for them as an individual.  Some parents/carers find this quite pressurising and this can be a huge task for some of our students.  We are trying to support our SEND students more this year.

We are very open to that fact that we may need to change our approach and to the fact that there may be a day when we cannot run this anymore... but we're trying our best!

**Outcomes for the students**

The response from the majority of students has been incredibly positive. And where students don’t have a positive placement, we always highlight that any experience is valuable and that there is still lots that can be learnt.

One student last year took this incredibly seriously and it kick-started a very proactive approach to a medical career.  She wanted to go into medicine but was unable to complete a clinical placement due to her age.  She completed work experience at a vets and approached it like a sponge - with energy and positivity.  She then went on to find her own clinical placement in Year 11 and completed this for a week in her holidays,  and then found and completed a surgical placement that summer.

**Lessons learnt**

We are always open to support and ideas, as our current system is not perfect.  Although I think there is huge value in students finding their own placement, I also believe that it would really help us to build our own database of placements that at least some of our students can choose from.

It really is a huge task to manage 180 placements without this.  There are companies who provide this, but the cost is huge for us and often the placements are less aspirational than we would like for many of our students.  I have been talking to a contact who is trying to set this up as a charity so that it can be provided to schools for free.  Fingers crossed!