THE STAFF ROOM

Dispatches from the frontline of FE

FE still needs better links from classroom to career

Completing a qualification, however successfully, is inadequate preparation for students entering the world of work, writes Fredericka McFarlane

FREDERICKA MACFARLANE

Computing lecturer, Birmingham Metropolitan College

We all know the economy and employment landscape are changing rapidly, and that this is hugely relevant to what we teach to our students. Yet a clear disconnect exists between the curriculum and the real-world application of this knowledge.

Despite FE providers' best efforts, the scope of career opportunities is not always fully explored within FE. The line of sight from classroom to career is often unclear. Students will often ask the question: "But how will this help me in the future?"

The general lack of high-quality careers guidance means young people will often opt for a route that may feel obvious, rather than one that could offer exciting and plentiful opportunities.

To put it bluntly, qualifications alone are rarely enough to secure fulfilling careers. We need to do more to point our learners in exciting and ambitious directions.

This is particularly true for those from deprived and challenging backgrounds. In my experience as a tutor at BMet College, we have students, including refugees, who have no family support and no access to the working world. Yet these are the very people who arrived particularly hungry for knowledge and opportunity.

To do this, our learners need practical help and to make contacts within industry. FE colleges are well-placed to facilitate this.

But staff like myself need the space and encouragement from senior leadership teams to invest the extra time to help student access employment. And this is where employer-led projects are crucial.

We have been running the Amazon Web Services (AWS) digital project for the past six years. Working in teams, students are set a real-life challenge, to which they must come up with a technology solution over a 12-week period.

"Working on an industry-set brief is invaluable in terms of skills development"

We have regular meetings (as a class), while the students also set up their own meetings to manage the project, as would be the case in 'the real world'.

Students have been tasked with developing solutions to problems such as mental health, knife crime and social media using technology. These have ranged from websites and mobile phone apps, and creative solutions such as installing booths at railway stations and direct telephone helplines for individuals who may be in crisis.

They are judged on their teamwork, final solution and presentation before judges, both at college level and then at the AWS offices in London. Each team has a ten- to 15-minute slot to present, followed by a further five to ten minutes of 'personal reflection' to the panel of judges.

Students involved in this project have gained work experience opportunities, internships and apprenticeships with AWS and the other employer partners. All our level 3 and level 4 digital technology and media students are invited to participate every year. Over six years, more than 7,500 have been involved.

Working on an industry-set brief is invaluable in terms of skills development. It goes way beyond what we can teach in the classroom and builds confidence in a way that can only come from 'on the ground' experience.

Our SLT has now gone a step further by launching a pioneering 'CyberHub'. In partnership with the CyberHub Trust, sponsored by AWS and advised by the National Crime Agency and the National Cyber Security Centre, the new 'Security Operations Centre' is a real-life, working cyber-security facility.

We have many extremely bright students who are able to carry out potentially negative 'hacking' type activity. Yet this initiative will enable them to hone their skills in a positive way and open up a world of highly lucrative and much in-demand job opportunities.

It is no longer enough for colleges to send students away at the end of their course with just a piece of paper, or qualification.

The ability to talk confidently, good timekeeping and being able to meet a deadline are skills that only come from real-life experience and exposure to employers. Tutors just need the time, space and support to deliver it.

Get in touch!