

The Varndean Internship Programme

Sourcing internships and work placements in key professions for Widening Participation students



The project was set up to find work placements and internships for Varndean College's students in key sectors where it is notoriously difficult to find such opportunities, for example, law, finance, etc. It brought local, national and international employers (including Amex) into the Brighton college to help Uni Connect-eligible learners develop their employment skills and team-working abilities through assessment centre activities, and to make contacts in the commercial world for future placements.

METHODOLOGY

More than 90 students took part in the Varndean Internship Programme (VIP). The event had a conference format, with an icebreaker followed by group work, and assessment centre activities for which each employer had devised their own exercises.

To evaluate the event, feedback was collected from students and employers, who were asked to rate the following statements after both the morning and afternoon sessions:

- I understand what working in a team means.
- I understand what role I play in a team.
- I found the activity enjoyable.
- I found the activity too challenging.
- I understand what employers are looking
- I can recognise what skills I have to offer.

IMPACT

The success and impact of the project were easily seen in the sheer number of students who applied to take part, as they were unable to find external placements through family and friends.

Some 90 students benefited from attending the event by developing their employability skills, organising their digital branding and

PROJECT SUMMARY

Context

Each year up to 70,000 internships take place in the UK, offering mostly graduates the chance to gain work experience. Many internships, however, fail to offer meaningful learning opportunities, have poor working conditions and are inaccessible to young people without the connections and know-how to get one, according to a study by the Institute of Public Policy Research. Significant living costs associated with unpaid work – nearly 12% of student internships offer no payment or expenses – also prohibits students from disadvantaged backgrounds from gaining the necessary skills to access jobs in key professions.

Partners

Varndean College

Duration

1st September 2022 to 28th June 2023

Funding source

Uni Connect

reviewing their social media accounts for employment, as well as linking up with potential work-experience and employer contacts.

All students attending the programme reported feeling more confident about their abilities and future options, and feedback from the sessions revealed that:

- Some 85% had a clear understanding of what working in a team means.
- 68% said they knew what their role in the team was.
- In terms of the event's activities, 70% found them enjoyable while 18% said they found them too challenging.
- Some 60% of learners said that after the event they understood more clearly what employers are looking for.
- 70% strongly agreed/agreed that they could recognise the skills they had to offer.
- The project also enabled two students to access an accountancy and a medicine placement by funding their travel costs. Without this funding, many students have been unable to take up a placement.

Student and employer feedback on the project included:

"I loved the students' energy. I was impressed by how much thought they put into the assessment centre decisions and how brave they were at presenting their ideas." [Employer](#)

"Being asked questions was a great opportunity for self-reflection that I didn't expect when I signed up." [Student](#)

"For the majority of students, technology is not at the forefront of their minds. They wanted to encourage imagination and play over a tech toy! It was quite liberating to hear." [Employer](#)

"The students' perspective on what's important in business – for example, sustainability... social media presence and brand – were at the forefront of their minds and a good reminder for me of how important these things are in the world today." [Employer](#)

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Varndean Internship Programme has been so significant and enables students to meet employers. It is now going to be rolled out each year and will be ring-fenced for Widening Participation students but it aims to include all Year 1 students going forward.

Varndean College is now working on a new improved model for next year, adding workshops to its conference format.

Placements in an area of interest can often result in students developing a new vision of how their lives can change through further study. They are also able to build contacts through their work experience to help with further placements.

A networking lunch to help students build confidence in talking to a range of employers may be included in the future. These communication skills are often taken for granted but many Widening Participation students may not have developed these skills or had the opportunity to network and break down social barriers.

