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Getting to good: How new 14 –16 school partnerships helped to move Bicton College on and up

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Brief description

Bicton College struggled for many years to be better than satisfactory for overall effectiveness. This example shows some of the new approaches it adopted in its work with younger students and the changes to the 14 – 16 curriculum that have helped raise its game. Successful links with schools, employers and the local community have helped to adapt the curriculum to reflect modern day rural life and help more people progress to land-based careers.

It was judged good at its latest inspection.

Overview – the provider's message

‘Once we had decided not to merge with another college, the governors and senior management team took a detailed look at our current partners and how we could serve them better. We also took a strategic decision to broaden our curriculum while keeping land-based provision at our core. We knew that we needed new strategic partnerships from across the county and it made perfect sense to incorporate local schools at the centre of many of our new school partnerships for 14 to 16-year-olds. By running courses at ‘hubs’ near the schools, we have cut down on travel costs and set up learning environments that offer these younger school students an opportunity to learn a vocational qualification and develop their confidence and self-esteem by working in very different settings closer to their school.



The new approach to partnership working with schools has brought benefits all round. Schools have been able to develop wider and more easily accessible opportunities for their young people and the college has been able to develop its staff and offer them opportunities to work with different students in a wider range of environments. To have the engagement of all of the stakeholders in this project at the planning stage through to the delivery has been a pleasure to experience. The greatly improved local provision for 14 to 16-year-old students has helped to raise their aspirations and now many more of them want to stay on and attend college after 16.'

David Henley, Principal

The good practice in detail

In September 2012, the first cohort of Bicton College's 14 to 16 students started land-based provision at the following five sites across the county of Devon:

1. Tiverton Hub
2. North Devon Hub
3. North Devon PLS Hub
4. Chulmleigh Hub
5. South Dartmoor Hub

‘Most of the school students on these courses do not enjoy the classroom environment. By working outdoors, changing the landscape of their own school for the better, they gain empowerment and ownership of the campus as well as working with local landowners and the community.’

Katie Lakeman, lead schools outreach tutor

Bicton's [inspection report](#) praised the governors and college leaders for their approach in revising the curriculum and developing different and local learning environments for 14 to 16-year-old students.

'Governors, leaders and managers have shaped good provision through links with schools, employers and the community in Devon and beyond, which meets the needs of these partners well, changing and improving lives.'

Working with schools to create new opportunities for 14 to 16-year-old-students

In the past, many of these students travelled a long way to the college for their courses and the decision to offer land-based provision at or near partner schools was a significant and important step. The schools were keen to get involved and quickly agreed with the college that the following three important criteria for the provision needed to be in place from the very start:

- the students would work towards a qualification at the most appropriate level and the course would lead to clear progression routes
- travel times and costs would need to be reasonable
- the provision would need to be slotted onto each school's timetable.

College staff and leaders carefully costed each project to ensure that it would be sustainable. Checking health and safety was also a priority for each site. As the hubs opened, the college allocated experienced vocational tutors who were used to working with school students to deliver the specific land-based programmes.

So what's actually going on at these sites?

The Tiverton Hub

At Tiverton High School, college and school students have access to good facilities in the



school grounds. They develop their skills in horticulture, construction and countryside management to design the area into an outside learning area for the rest of the school. The students also benefit from partnerships with a local farm, which is owned and run by an associate lecturer of the college. The hub tutor liaises with the farm to identify the most appropriate opportunities to enhance the students' personal development and extend the curriculum by including lessons at the farm. Activities to date have included

fencing, lambing and calving duties.

'This is a fantastic opportunity for the partnership between Bicton College and our school to continue to work together. The students are empowered through the practical'.

Simon Tong, Assistant Headteacher

The North Devon Hub

In North Devon, Ilfracombe and Braunton Schools have established a hub with Bicton College that uses three sites in their area.

- Students learn horticulture skills at the vocational outdoor learning environment (VOLE) at Braunton Academy, which includes a polytunnel,



tool shed, workshop area and gardens.

- Countryside skills are taught at a local privately owned area of land which has two large lakes and woodland area.
- Agriculture is taught at a local Devon County tenant farm that has various livestock and general farming opportunities for the students to use. The farmer was introduced to the college by the Devon County Council Principal Land Agent who was keen to make links with education as part of his remit to develop the next generation of farmers.

Jeremy Yabsley, Chairman of Devon County Council Farms Estate is very keen to promote Devon's strong agricultural heritage. The Farms Estate provides opportunities that rarely exist otherwise for people to get their feet on the first rung of a farming career and to develop their business ideas.

'I'm really pleased then that we are also able to help and shape potential young farmers of the future with practical experience on one of our farms.'

The North Devon PLS hub

The college works with Devon's Personalised Learning Service (PLS) to help to train a small cohort of students who have been removed from their previous school for various reasons and have often become disengaged from learning. The partnership has introduced a programme which is designed to ensure that students can start at the PLS throughout the year and can pick up their programme easily if they have periods of non-attendance.

The Chumleigh Hub

Chumleigh Community College already has a well-established college farm on site but it was keen to establish links with Bicton to strengthen its Key Stage 4 provision and to ensure post-16 progression. Bicton tutors work with school staff to teach a study programme.

'Bicton has shown our students the real progression opportunities available in land-based provision when they leave the school at 16. We are extremely pleased how the tutor has slotted in with our staff to give the student a really purposeful curriculum at school.'



John Pratt, Deputy Headteacher

South Dartmoor Hub

South Dartmoor Community College has started an intermediate level vocational programme in Countryside and the Environment in partnership with Bicton. The school site lends itself to this course well having an extensive woodland and wildlife area as well as being next door to a teacher's smallholding that allows other practical opportunities such as fencing and dry

stone walling. The group is also tutored and gets experience working in a realistic environment at the local River Dart Countryside Park where Bicton also has a partnership agreement.

'Since our students have started on the course, teachers at the school have noticed a real change in their behaviour in other lessons – a change for the better!

Phil Randall, Deputy Headteacher

Staff expertise

Bicton chooses carefully when it comes to who teaches and tutors these young students. Firstly, it needs staff who are experienced teachers and who have high standards of vocational skills themselves. They need to be role models for younger students and demonstrate that they can do the job. They also need to have good communication skills and be very good organisers. They have to be able to be flexible and to make sure all the partners are kept in the picture and that work is carefully planned. They are key to the success of this work.

What are the benefits of this provision?

- The young students really enjoy the chance these partnerships give them to develop their practical skills and to see if a career in the land-based industries is for them.
- Schools report that the provision is helping to raise the profile of a land-based career in their school and to ensure that the college is seen as a natural progression choice.
- Success rates are high and the college estimates that an even higher proportion of these youngsters will progress onto college courses over the next two years.
- Headteachers and careers guidance staff gain a greater understanding of what the college has to offer their students both pre- and post-16.

Provider background



Bicton College was established in 1947 as the Devon Farm Institute and is the only specialist land-based college in Devon. It is located in East Devon, close to the World Heritage coastline, within a Site of Special Scientific Interest and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Devon is mainly rural with low wages, many self-employed people and small or very small businesses. There are pockets of significant deprivation, and a growing proportion of the population has difficulty

accessing affordable housing. It is one of the largest food producing and exporting counties in England.

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](#).

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