

## Student Work Experience

Recently, staff at Dasman Model School have noticed a lot of new faces working in public areas around the school for example the various reception desks, security, the library, the reprographics room and even some classrooms. On closer inspection these faces turn out to be vocational students carrying out their work experience tasks. What is work experience and why are students missing classes to spend time in reception or in reprographics?

The simple answer to these questions is to quote Confucious, *"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."*

For vocational students, the most important feature of their course is not to memorise lots of 'unnecessary' facts and figures, but "can they do the job?" For a long time it was felt that the best way to prepare for a life-time of work was to spend seemingly a life-time in the classroom being told what to do. This may prepare you for some aspects of work but not many. Carefully designed work experience, or as some call it, internship, gives students the chance to try out, first hand, what a real job is like, to see if it is the sort of job they would like and whether or not they have the skills and competencies to carry it out successfully.

Work experience is an integral part of the curriculum in the vocational section; it builds on the **"ABC of employability - Attitude, Behaviour and Communication** - to develop the skills that employers are looking for."<sup>1</sup>

Here at Dasman Model School the curriculum for young adult students with learning difficulties is increasingly focused on preparation for working life and a productive role in Kuwaiti society. This preparation requires access to varied, realistic and practical opportunities in which knowledge and skills can be developed and consolidated in a variety of situations. Engaging with the wider Kuwaiti community offers opportunities for students to transfer skills to new contexts or to increase their confidence and expectations. For the more able students it is a chance to be involved in their own learning.

Some of the benefits of work experience for the student include:

- A chance to develop social and personal skills and provide opportunities to stretch students beyond their normal experience
  - Work-related learning can provide opportunities for creativity and enjoyment.
  - Students are motivated by work-related learning activities. They enjoy being given the autonomy to tackle problems, take responsibility for their own actions, engage in real issues and evaluate the outcomes of their decisions, practicing skills developed in the classroom in different contexts
  - Promotion of learners' basic skills in communication and numeracy.
  - Students have the opportunities to develop and practice their team working and problem solving skills.
  - It allows them to try different types of work and to compare their differences.
  - It develops maturity and self-confidence.
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Work experience has long been an integral part of the curriculum for vocational students, but is now also seen as an extremely useful element of mainstream education. According to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in the UK:

*“Career, work-related learning and enterprise education are all essential to the preparation of young people for transition to adulthood. They provide the connection between learning and earning, equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to enter and thrive in the working world.”<sup>2</sup>*

Our role is to equip young people and adults with the skills to obtain employment and build confidence so that they can improve life chances for themselves.

Kuwait, like other gulf states has ambitious targets for getting its population into the workforce and work experience can help in a small way.

It should also be remembered that work experience is a two way engagement. Firstly It gives employers a chance to see what the students can do, rather than focusing on the negative ‘can’t do’ associated with a lack of success in the academic curriculum.

Secondly, it gives the employers a chance to invest in the training of potential new recruits to their companies and to see what emerging talent is available.

This year at Dasman Model School we have successfully placed 11 (28%) of our vocational students in external work placements ranging from government ministries such as the Public Authority for Housing Welfare to Education establishments including Box Hill College of Higher Education and private companies such as Burgan Bank. Arranging these placements isn’t easy of course. This is a relatively new idea in Kuwait and employers aren’t exactly knocking on our door for students. A lot of ‘leg work’, telephone calls, persuasion and follow-up are needed in order to secure suitable placements for our students.

So is all this hard work worthwhile? Yes we think so and feedback from the students and employers is also favourable. Employers have remarked on how capable our students are, how positive their attitude to work is and what a pleasure it is to have them working alongside employees of the organization. For example, one student who at school has difficulty in focusing on tasks in the classroom, is easily distracted, does not complete work and has difficulty holding and manipulating a pencil has been working successfully in a reputable and well patronized Beauty Salon performing manicures, shampooing and blow drying hair. This work requires focus, attention to detail and manual dexterity in holding several implements and products at the same time. In this environment, she radiates confidence, demonstrates effective social interaction and displays a high degree of self-reliance. And the employer has been highly satisfied with her performance. In fact all the employers have been pleased with their placements

*Ms Amy Kutchner, counselor, American University of Kuwait said “I just wanted to say what a pleasure it was having the Dasman ladies working with us for the past two weeks. We really enjoyed having them around the office!”*

*“These girls were enthusiastic, polite, good at filing and very conscientious” Ms Wendy Bilboe, Academic Director, Box Hill College Kuwait*

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Properly planned and organized, work experience is a winning formula. Firstly, It is an invaluable way of building on and developing vocational students' skills and knowledge in realistic work situations and develops their maturity and confidence. Secondly, it provides a bridge between their school courses and the employers. It not only benefits vocational students for whom it is directly relevant, but also mainstream students who can try a taste of real work. And finally the employer benefits from this two-way process, helping to shape the skills of potential employees at the same time assessing the potential of future recruits.