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The Apprentice – you’re hired!

Local authorities have a lot to gain by sponsoring an undergraduate through their trading standards qualifications. But that’s not the only way to benefit from linking up with a university, says John Whisson.

I read the article ‘The Apprentice’ by Davina Walkin (TS Today, June 2008) with great interest. Oxfordshire would appear to be one of the first authorities to sponsor a trainee under the new qualification process.

In the past, within the DTS system, there were a number of local authorities that regularly sponsored undergraduates through the qualification. Many would sponsor a university student and get all of the benefits, as described by Davina: having a competitive application and interview process; picking someone who could be educated at university, yet receive professional guidance; and grooming them in the ways of their sponsoring authority. They usually gained their full qualification far more quickly than the un-sponsored student.

Here at Teesside, we had such sponsored students on every year of the degree. Some authorities preferred to recruit second-year students, who at least had some basic consumer knowledge, which could be put to good use within the department.

The Apprentice was a symbiotic arrangement, in that there were benefits for all parties. The university ended up with a more competent officer, who was qualified more quickly. The trainee had a sponsorship to ease the financial pressures of study and on-the-job training, and the university had a dedicated student who was motivated to succeed.

Sadly, financial pressures in local authorities and, in fairness, trepidation about the new qualification process, have seen the number of trainee places dwindle over the past couple of years.

Our last sponsored student left in May and we have no others coming through, which I believe is a shame and a lost opportunity.

Although the DCATS is a new system and may have received mixed reviews by the membership, it is nevertheless the system we have in place. If we wish to alter or amend it, that is a different issue.

What we need to do now is to make it work as effectively as possible. Link it in to existing courses to give local authorities potential employees with maximum DCATS points, in terms of knowledge, so that they can also work on their portfolios, while studying at university.

The university sector requires students to complete a final-year project or dissertation. The subject matter can usually be agreed with the authority to give the student a ‘live’ area, which may have constituted a problem for the local authority, to look at.

In this regard, our students have

Service Delivery Module groupings

At the last Awarding Body meeting, held in July, it was agreed to merge Group A and B of the Service Delivery Modules (SDMs). This was seen as another decision to make the Trading Standards Qualifications Framework (TSQF) inclusive to all. 

With immediate effect, candidates may choose from any of the SDMs to go towards completing their Diploma in Consumer Affairs and Trading Standards qualification.

The Awarding Body would like to advise candidates who are new to the service that when making the decision as to which of the SDMs to initially study for, they should consult their current employer and always keep in mind their future career aspirations.

The groupings will be reviewed again in two years to ascertain the impact on the framework.
successfully worked with local authorities in a partnership regarding their dissertations, on a number of trading standards initiatives and local and regional issues in the past. From my perspective, as a course tutor, the student is far more motivated on these projects and usually produces much better work.

We will consider project ideas from trading standards departments, without the local authority needing to have the student as a trainee, and I am sure colleagues at other institutions would be as accessible to this idea. Employees are in short supply, so why not use a university’s free resources? SOLAM members should note that businesses have used our students to good effect in this area.

Most of us in the university sector are working hand in glove with local authorities and businesses. We can link together more closely to assist in so many areas.

My final appeal would be not to forget the trainee post, or to lose it, but use it to the best advantage.

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