

Nottingham's Pathfinders Project Is Way Forward For Young Careers, Says IOG

An innovative student apprenticeship programme focusing on groundsmanship and general horticultural skills has been so successful that it has been signposted by the Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) as a strategic role model for the development of young people in the grounds care industry.

Students 'graduated' from the initial 2004/5 Pathfinders programme – a joint project between Nottingham City Council and the IOG - with an IOG National Practical Certificate, City & Guilds Level 1 qualification, three National Proficiency Test Certificates (NPTC) and full-time employment opportunities.

Three students subsequently progressed onto an NVQ/IOG Level 2 Award via full-time employment with the council, and two were employed in the private sector.

"We're achieving something that is very exciting," exclaims Nottingham City Council's Schools Development Officer and Pathfinders training co-ordinator John Simpson. "Not only are we offering youngsters a realistic, progressive and achievable path into meaningful careers, but we're also effectively raising the bar in terms of training standards across the whole of the grounds care and horticulture sector.

"Where else, for example, can you find 16-year-olds who have attained NPTC Pesticide Licences?"

Attracting more young people into the grounds care industry is a focus area of the IOG's Challenging Perceptions strategy (visit www.iog.org for details) and, says IOG chief executive, Geoff Webb, "it is clear that Pathfinders is making great progress in this respect thanks to the combined efforts, in this case, of the end user, training bodies, Government and the IOG. There's no reason why the principles of Pathfinders shouldn't be adopted throughout the country".

The development of Pathfinders was prompted by a shortage of appropriate skills in the Nottingham area, and is effectively an extension of Government initiatives to extend young persons work experience. The programme initially saw students attend once per week from 9 am to 3 pm for 40 weeks at the council's Street Scene Training Centre in Nottingham's Woodthorpe Park, a Green Flag premier park. Students are drawn from 16 local comprehensive schools.

The programme, says John Simpson, is founded on a “personalised approach based on manageable numbers” and is based around students taking full ownership of the programme and the use of detailed assessment matrixes. These are judged by natural performance, multiple choice question papers and, for the NPTC segment, external NPTC verifiers. Individual progress can therefore be accurately tracked in real-time.

The programme embraces a wide range of grounds care and horticultural skills, as well as the necessary IOG/NVQ/City & Guilds modules; use of mowers, applying plant food, mixing compost, tree planting, turfing, weed control, rotovating and lawn rehabilitation, for example.

During the initial course, John Simpson says students also became involved in the construction of a new tennis court, worked on fine turf (golf course) and spent time in glasshouses and a tropical house, as well as undertook carpet bedding routines (indeed, some students represented the council in the Britain in Bloom awards).

Because the programme also involves ‘skills for life’ key skills such as literacy, numeracy, communication, IT and problem solving, John Simpson emphasises that Pathfinders is certainly not regarded as an ‘easy’ educational avenue for academically-challenged individuals.

The programme’s no-nonsense two-week induction is, he says, the critical period for the initial nine-student intake and often “a real eye opener”. He continues: “These are youngsters that may not ever have seen a spade or mower, and the induction is all about discovering why they want to be here and identifying those who are really willing to learn.”

Street Scene Training Centre’s self-contained facilities at Woodthorpe Park reflect the renewed interest and support for skills development in the region, with the council’s endorsement of the programme complemented by Government grant aid via the Learning and Skills Council.

Indeed, such has been the success of Pathfinders that it is now being expanded into a two-year course – and the potential for skills development with the programme in both the public and private sectors has prompted the Training Centre to generate its own course directory.

This includes IOG Level 2 Sports & Amenity Turf Maintenance Awards as well as NPTC training, and even Saturday morning classes for the general public to learn about composting, garden design and organic gardening, for example.

“Nothing like this has ever been done before; the possibilities really are endless,” concludes John Simpson.