

Industry Immersion Work Experience program for neurodiverse young people



Partnership: Whittlesea Tech School (WTS), HWLLEN, 6 schools / 7 host employers / 11 students

Schools: Plenty River College, Mernda Hills Christian College, Epping Secondary College, Thomastown Secondary College, St Monica's College, Edgars Creek Secondary College.

Host employers: Yarra Plenty Regional Library, Crusader Caravans/ Intell Engineering, Mill Park Leisure, Leeda Projects, PC Australia, GT Garage Thomastown, Whittlesea Tech School.

Context

In response to recommendations from the Inclusive Education Forum #2 with a focus on Neurodiversity, HWLLEN and Whittlesea Tech School facilitated our first collaborative and co-designed work experience program specifically for neurodiverse students in the Whittlesea LGA. This program brought together Industry immersion days and the Whittlesea Tech School's Design Thinking processes to enhance the work experience program. Running over 1 week in Term 4, the program provided 5 days of supported engagement designed specifically for neurodiverse students.

Program goals

- to provide students with a work placement experience that incorporated the process of Design Thinking applied to a real issue or opportunity at their employer workplace
- to develop key employability skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, initiative and enterprise, communication, teamwork, planning and organising.

Activities

This program was co-designed with Whittlesea Tech School, representatives from 6 schools and 7 local businesses and 11 students. Pre-planning and co-design workshops were held between July and October with representatives from schools, HWLLEN and Whittlesea Tech School to scope the program and identify relevant host employers for student participants. A work experience induction for students, school staff, parents and employers was held at Whittlesea Tech School just prior to the program taking place from 20th – 24th October.

Students were set challenges to work on throughout the week in addition to their set tasks within the workplace. WTS introduced students to the Design Thinking framework and provided detailed steps for guiding them through the stages of empathy, ideation, prototyping, present and pitching their ideas to employers. Through the design process challenge, students were required to articulate core capabilities relating to employability skills including collaboration/teamwork, creative thinking, communication, attention to detail, empathy and active listening, resilience, flexibility, agility, motivation, self-awareness, planning and time management, initiative, problem solving, analytical and critical thinking.

Outcomes

- All 11 students successfully completed the work experience program demonstrating a clear understanding of the core capabilities and how they applied to this work experience.
- Co-design of program with school staff referring students to the program provided vital guidance for development of content and delivery of pre and post work placement sessions and assisted with the alignment of students with host employers.
- High employer engagement resulted from the inclusion of a targeted challenge which provided a welcome focus for engaging students with employers and staff.
- High level of challenge for students – students were pushed out of their comfort zone to engage with business representatives and present findings as a “pitch” for the final session.
- Rich real-world work was engaged in by students for intensive capability development.
- Inviting parent/carer/family members to induction and presentation sessions provided reassurance and affirmation of program content and outcomes.

Feedback

- Students identified that through this program they learnt about the design process and developed a range of personal and social capabilities.
- Many students identified that the program had influenced their career goals by showing options for work

- A large majority of students said they would recommend this program to peers.
- Employers reported that the most valuable part of the experience for students was building employability skills and gaining experience in the workforce and reported high levels of engagement.

Comments

“Student X approached his project with independence and self-direction, requiring minimal supervision from workplace staff. He communicated confidently with colleagues at all levels. Student X brought positive energy and enthusiasm to the office, creating an exciting atmosphere for those around him—his presence would be welcome should he wish to return.”

Employer

“I would recommend it [the program] to anyone for the experience and being able to actually talk to many people and experience so much”

Student

“Thanks for sharing. It’s always so rewarding to see students benefit from a program that’s been thoughtfully put together. Your dedication clearly made a meaningful impact — and it’s great that the hard work was recognized and appreciated by all.”

Teacher

“It’s a good way to gain confidence and experience”

Student