



Case study: T Level Science industry placement at Thames Water

Case Study – Thames Water – unexpected benefits

Motivation for offering a placement

When Leigh Maxfield decided to offer T Level Science students placements at Thames Water, he was clear about the motivation to do so. The company specialises in providing clean tap water and wastewater management for a significant proportion of the UK's population and Leigh, in his role as Employment and Skills Partner, is mindful of looming skills shortages.

Leigh points out that water management is not necessarily the career that your average science student would have in their sights, but in reality, the different roles available have a varied and interesting work pattern. So, T Level placements offer a great opportunity to expose students to the diverse range of roles within the industry.

"We have got a skill shortage and we know that we've also got an aging workforce that is going to retire, and we're going to lose all that knowledge. So, we need to get more young people excited about the water industry and for them to know what the range of roles is."

Setting up the placement

Without an existing relationship with a local school or college, Leigh had to start from scratch. To get the ball rolling, he searched online to find local T Level Science providers and followed up with college visits. Nurturing local talent is an important part of Leigh's work, so the visits gave him the opportunity to connect with young people who might be open to recruitment opportunities in the future.

"I went onto the T Level website and you can put your postcode in and so we mapped all our sites to their local colleges, because again another motivation here is keeping local talent local and so we wanted to make sure that where our site was, that's what college we're working with."

And then I went into the college and organised a talk at the college about the kind of possibilities and about Thames Water and then students applied for the placement. So, we made it as close to applying for a job or as apprenticeship as we could, and they applied with CVs. They had an interview and then they were offered the role. And so that was the kind of key steps they went through."

Placement students went through the company's normal onboarding process before starting their placements, so they were kitted out with all the appropriate PPE - high vis trousers and jackets for summer and winter, goggles, gloves and a hard hat and a laptop for reporting. Any new starter would be taken on board in the same way, but T Level students were also assigned a mentor from the company's apprenticeship programme. This seems to have worked particularly well and Leigh was enthusiastic about the benefits



"We have apprentices on site and so as part of their development, if they're in their third year of their apprenticeship, we offered mentor training for them. So, then they took that T level student under their wing. They're closer to them in age, which I think helps. And they've got lots of knowledge about Thames Water, but also, they developed a skill as well. The kind of bigger supervision is done by the apprenticeship supervisor... But the day-to-day mentorship is done by an apprentice, so they also feel that they learned something, and it adds to their apprenticeship program and the T level student has got somebody they can go to and it all kind of works."

During placements

Students on placements carried out a wide range of activities during their working day, engaging in in various tasks, including sampling, pro-active maintenance, bench tests, and data analysis – depending on what the team was doing. The aim was to really integrate the placement students into the team, and this gave a varied workload with ample opportunity for skills development. And as well as gaining new technical skills and a solid understanding of Health and Safety there was emphasis on other areas as well, giving placement students the opportunity to develop the communication and time-management skills that underpin success in any industry. For Leigh, the impact of this kind of skills development was significant:

"They obviously gain lots of technical skills about what does what. They'll learn how we look at data in the world of work and how we carry out bench tests and they'll gain a massive knowledge of health and safety, but I think it's all the soft skills and knowledge that really helps them, like time management, self-motivation to get up and go out when it's raining or snowing or hailing or all in one day and how to speak to their senior... conduct themselves in meetings, all of those soft skills, I think is really the thing that we measure the most... I think the students were a lot more confident in themselves they came to us with lots of self-doubt... but they were really good. So, I think working with the team, they've seen their potential - which is amazing to see.. seeing them grow."

Impact on the organisation

For Thames Water, the benefits of hosting a placement student have extended beyond the possibility of future recruitment to shortage areas. The placement facilitated closer ties with the local community and brought fresh perspectives on customer behaviour and the effectiveness of company messaging. The mentoring set-up really enriched the company's apprenticeship programme – so there were many benefits:

"I think it informed some good debate about how we do things and especially in the recruitment process and how we communicate with candidates. I think they really helped that and also the health and safety process was that we couldn't have anybody under 18 on our sites, so now we're allowed under 18s on Thames Water sites, which is good."



They brought a lot of new knowledge and into the business and extra energy... The local knowledge, I was not expecting and there's the job satisfaction that the team got from seeing the student grow and I think they really liked that and also enhancing the apprenticeship program as well

Looking ahead, the student's journey doesn't end with the placement; they remain part of the company's alumni network, with opportunities for future internships and employment. Leigh expresses confidence in the students' potentials to return as graduates. So, while placement hosting ticks a box for corporate social responsibility (CSR), Leigh advises employers to approach placements as genuine opportunities for talent development:

"Don't think of it as your CSR activity...if you're struggling to recruit...then this is a way of plugging that gap."