

# Pupils with SEND learn skills for

Special schools project gives young people opportunities to develop their practical skills and gain valuable



Melland High School pupils learned to develop their own digital projects while participating in the Digital Inc. programme

## PROJECT

Digital Inc.

## PURPOSE

To boost the confidence of teenagers with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and prepare them for digital careers such as digital marketing and designing websites

## FUNDING

The Digital Inc. special schools project cost £8,000 per school to deliver and was funded by the Careers & Enterprise Company, Manchester City Council, and Greater Manchester Combined Authority. The supported internship is a partnership between The Manchester College, Digital Advantage and Pure Innovations

## BACKGROUND

Community interest company Digital Advantage runs a learning programme called The PopUp

Digital Agency, which gives young people experience of working in a realistic digital agency environment and the opportunity to learn skills including creative thinking, business modelling, and digital production. Young people develop their own digital project and the programme culminates in a competition judged by a panel of digital experts.

In 2018, Digital Advantage delivered the programme to a group of schools in Manchester, including four special schools. In the final competition, which was judged blind, projects developed by young people with SEND took the first, second and third prize spots.

“This demonstrated to us that young people with SEND, and especially with autism, often have a real aptitude for digital work, not just coding but marketing, design, and so on,” says Andy Lovatt,

Digital Advantage co-director.

In response, Digital Advantage redesigned its PopUp Digital Agency to better meet the needs of young people with SEND, extending it from a five-day programme delivered over one term to a 10-day programme delivered over two terms. The new scheme was named Digital Inc.

## ACTION

In 2019, 80 students took part in the Digital Inc. scheme in eight special schools in Manchester. A “pop-up agency” of experts from local digital companies came to each school and gave students business briefs with a digital element. Students were then supported to come up with ideas, pitch them and bring the project into being, including developing a brand and social media marketing. For example, one school re-

branded their school café and digitised the payment system.

While taking part in the scheme, all students produced content for a website, filmed a video pitch to promote their idea, created a digital logo and developed social media channels. Digital Advantage also provided training for teachers so they could support the young people to develop their projects further. Instead of a competition, the project concluded with a celebration event.

Beck Cromack-Hough uses a wheelchair and was 14 when the Digital Inc. pop-up agency came to his school. “I wasn’t getting challenged,” he says. “I was getting frustrated and struggling with my mental health.” Being involved in Digital Inc. helped him engage with school, he says. “It was like nothing I had seen before,” he explains. “We were still learning core subjects but in a different way.” As well as being involved in digitising the café, the young people visited the Sharp project, home to more than 60 digital entrepreneurs and creative businesses such as web design studios and social media agencies.

“We watched Beck turn from someone who was fed up into someone who feels confident and has a clear idea of what he wants to do,” says Bethan Glenn, high school lead teacher at Lancasterian School, a special school in Manchester.

Following the programme, 14 young people, including Beck, took part in a fully-funded supported internship – a workplace-based study programme for young people with an education, health and care plan – for 20 hours each week between September 2020 and June 2021. The project was financed using post-16 education and special

# digital careers

## work experience in exploring digital career paths

educational needs funding, which comes from the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the local authority.

“The concept of the supported internship has been around for a while,” says Lovatt. “But the existing model didn’t fit with the digital sector, which is mostly very small businesses which lack the resources to give someone with disabilities effective experience in their work environment.” In order to give the young people work experience, Digital Advantage created its own digital agency. Interns explored a range of disciplines such as web development, photography, social media management and graphic design. They worked on real projects including designing a website for the NHS, creating podcasts and making a film for a conference. Young people spent three days a week in the agency and one day a week at The Manchester College. As well as providing the briefs, a network of digital businesses built relationships with the students through a series of talks, visits, mentoring and workplace tours.

Recruitment to the internship scheme launched in March 2020, just as the first lockdown hit. “We had planned an open day but we had to run a Facebook Live event instead,” says Lovatt. As the project started in September the interns were able to come into the office, which had been made Covid-safe with screens and widely-spaced desks but during the second lockdown, starting in December 2020, they had to work from home.

“There were a lot of challenges,” says Lovatt. “Some workplace visits had to fall by the wayside but some agencies did virtual office tours. Another challenge was finding end

destinations for the young people because companies just stopped hiring. We lost some opportunities but we spread the net wider and everyone ended up with a positive destination.”

The young people on the Digital Inc. supported internship finished the programme in June 2021. Beck is planning to begin a media course at The Manchester College in September 2021 and hopes to use his skills to work on creative digital projects. “I am now a lot more aware of how to be professional,” he says. “I have also gained in confidence and found friendships through the scheme as well as developing practical skills. I hope to work in the digital sector and hopefully set up my own agency.”

### OUTCOME

Teachers reported high levels of engagement from the young people who took part, with significant increases in listening, participation, understanding and confidence. A survey carried out by Digital Advantage after the programme found 91 per cent of young people said the scheme had improved their confidence and 90



Beck Cromack-Hough at Digital Inc. on a supported internship after the scheme

per cent reported that it had helped them work better with others. Teachers also reported improvements in behaviour.

The Digital Inc. evaluation also showed an increase in levels of understanding and interest in digital career paths. In all, 84 per cent of young people said the initiative had improved their knowledge of the creative and digital sector while 71 per cent said the scheme had made them more likely to think about an apprenticeship in the sector – up from 43 per cent at the beginning of the scheme.

Of the 14 young people who did supported internships, three progressed to college, 10 got jobs and one young person had their internship extended because of their additional needs.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Digital Advantage is building on its learning from the Digital Inc. project to create the Supported

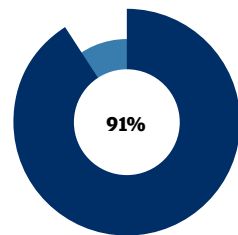
Digital Work Hub, a three-year pilot taking place in Greater Manchester. This will engage young people with autism who are not in education, employment or training as well as those who are about to leave school. “Support will continue once the young people are in employment to ensure employment is maintained and careers progress,” says Lovatt. The organisation intends to use its experience in developing the hub to create resources and training which will allow other organisations to replicate the scheme across the UK.

Since the pandemic hit, Digital Advantage has developed more than 30 hours of video-led, interactive learning covering photography, branding, videography and other subjects. *By Charlotte Goddard*

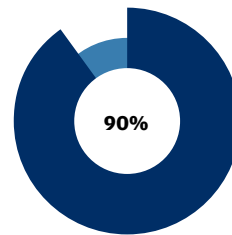
*If you think your project is worthy of inclusion, email supporting data to [derren.hayes@markallengroup.com](mailto:derren.hayes@markallengroup.com)*

## YOUNG PEOPLE REPORT POSITIVE OUTCOMES

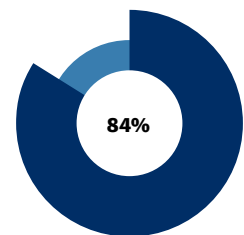
Findings from a survey of young people who took part in the Digital Inc. project



said the scheme improved their confidence



said it helped them work better with others



reported improved knowledge of the creative and digital sector

Source: Digital Advantage