

28 April 2008

Apprenticeship pilot lets dairy industry find cream of the crop

Attracting young people into any industry is a competitive business to say the least. For the dairy industry, doing battle with fashionable sectors like media or IT for the best talent coming out of schools and colleges can feel like David taking on Goliath.

The Young Apprenticeship in Food Manufacture is one good example of a scheme which has been put in place to tackle this issue. Open to school pupils aged 14 to 16, it provides a chance for young people to experience working in all sectors of the food and drink industry while still at school. Awarded by Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, the scheme incorporates industry-recognised vocational qualifications. Its aim is to encourage more young people to choose a career in food and drink manufacturing by raising awareness of the opportunities on offer.

James Yuill, a 15-year-old pupil at Sir William Stanier Community School in Crewe, Cheshire, was one of the first students in the country to enrol on the scheme. He started the course in September 2006, and is due to graduate this summer. His course is run by Reaseheath College in Nantwich, the network champion for dairy training in the National Skills Academy for Food and Drink Manufacture, which was just one of three colleges in the UK chosen to trial the scheme. Over the past two years, throughout term time, James has spent one day a week either studying practical dairy courses at college or working at award-winning cheese manufacturer Joseph Heler.

“I heard about the Young Apprenticeship while I was doing a catering course at school,” said James. “I got interested in food through watching chefs like Gordon Ramsay on TV and I’ve always thought doing something like that for a career would be brilliant. But I’d never really thought about how foods get processed or made in the first place. The Young Apprenticeship sounded really interesting, so I thought I would give it a go.”

For the first year of the course, James spent one day a week at Reaseheath learning about the business aspects of the dairy industry and spending time in the college's workshops. The remaining four days were spent at school studying for his GCSEs. In the second year, he was given the opportunity to test his new-found knowledge 'on-the-job' as he spent time working on every aspect of cheese making at Joseph Heler's operations centre at nearby Hatherton.

"I spent my first six months at Joseph Heler in the lab helping to test milk for antibiotics, purity and measuring the levels of water," said James. "After that I was in the dairy proper, doing everything from ploughing the curd in the mills to putting it in moulds and then packing it up for storage so it could mature. I had a supervisor at every stage who would show me what to do, explain what was happening and make sure I followed the rules on health, safety and hygiene. About once every two months, my tutor from Reaseheath would come to visit me and assess how I was getting on.

"Working at Joseph Heler was fantastic. It was difficult at first because it was different to anything I'd ever done before, but as I learned more, I found I was getting the hang of things quicker and enjoying myself. I got on really well with everyone there, and they have said that when I'm 16 there might be a job for me working on a Saturday."

Mark Edwards, production manager at the Joseph Heler-owned Parks Dairy where James worked, said everyone at the company was highly impressed. "James was excellent," said Mr Edwards. "He was very enthusiastic, got on really well with everyone, and was prepared to use his own initiative to ask questions. We've just taken on another apprentice from Reaseheath who is showing similar qualities, so the college is obviously doing something right.

"I think the Young Apprenticeship scheme is important because it gives kids a chance to experience real working life and helps them make a decision about what they want to do," continued Mr Edwards. "It is also a big help to the dairy industry and others like us that struggle to find new recruits. The industry is thriving, but young people are put off by the long, unsociable hours. We need schemes in place which offer positive experiences of working in the industry and which also train people effectively in the skills we need. The Young Apprenticeship scheme does both."

Jack Matthews, chief executive of Improve, agrees that attracting more young people is a priority for the food and drink industry. "It is the biggest manufacturing industry in the UK," he said. "The dairy industry alone employs more than 26,000 people, and yet the workforce is ageing and there is a shortage of younger workers to replace those approaching retirement age. Engaging with school pupils and giving them experience in the workplace helps create a genuine enthusiasm for the sector, and provides the students with skills that will be invaluable when they join the world of work."

Reaseheath hopes to have 11 pupils graduate from the Young Apprenticeship scheme this year, with another eight completing the first year of the course. Funding has already been secured to offer up to 15 places to new starters from this September. Food Lecturer Debbie Heritage-Brill, who oversees Young Apprenticeships at Reaseheath, said: "This programme allows young people to gain a real insight into the opportunities on offer in the dairy industry and food manufacture in general, and to experience college life. It is fantastic preparation for the world of work, which most students don't get until they are older."

Successfully completing the course means apprentices leave with qualifications in manual handling, health and safety at work and a HACCP food hygiene certificate. These would allow them to progress directly on to a full apprenticeship should they so wish. From September 2009, the Young Apprenticeship in Food Manufacture will become part of the new Diploma in Manufacturing and Product Design due to be launched in schools, giving pupils the option of specialising in a particular sector of food manufacture as part of the broader industry-linked learning offered by the diploma.

James has been happy to combine vocational training and work experience with his academic studies back at school. "I'm doing History and Geography GCSEs this summer," he said, "and I'd like to carry those subjects on at college next year, along with catering. I'd still like to be a chef one day, but I think it is important to have the background knowledge I've gained from the Young Apprenticeship. I'd love to work with food one way or another, and now I've got the experience of working in dairy, I'd definitely consider it as an option."

Picture caption: James Yuill, who will be one of the first youngsters to graduate from the pilot Young Apprenticeship in food and drink manufacture this summer after two years studying and working in dairy and cheese production.

Ends

Note to editors

Improve is one of 25 sector skills councils established by the government to take the lead in driving up skills in the workplace in order to promote higher productivity and stronger competitiveness for UK businesses in the global market. Funded primarily by the government, sector skills councils are also supported by employers in their sectors, whose needs they represent when stimulating change among the providers of education and skills. Sector skills councils work closely with employers to promote greater commitment to improving skills in their workforces, and with schools, colleges, universities, and private training organisations to improve the provision of basic skills training and to make vocational and occupational training more relevant to the modern commercial climate.

The National Skills Academy for Food and Drink Manufacturing is the new standard bearer for the delivery of skills for the sector. It's anticipated that the £4.4million academy will deliver skills to more than 28,000 learners in the four years to September 2011, helping to boost productivity and tackle skills shortages within the food and drink manufacturing sector. The development of the NSA has been led by top employers including Warburtons, Nestle and RHM, and co-ordinated by Improve, the sector skills council. The NSA for food and drink manufacturing is only the fourth in a planned network of NSAs for all industries, initiated by the government to address the need for a world-class workforce

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