Working in partnership with Stephenson College in Leicestershire has given UCATT’s Vulnerable Workers Unit (VWU) the opportunity to help to prepare a group of young ‘pre-apprenticeship’ students for the world of work. VWU Project Worker Lol Hunt teamed up with Regional Manager of the Money Advice Service, Susan Cassar, to provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) on employment rights and responsibilities and managing money at an event at the college on 15 June 2011.

Stephenson College in Coalville, Leicestershire trains some 600 apprentices each year and is one of the largest providers of apprenticeships in the country. In the 2010/11 academic year, it piloted a ‘pre-apprenticeship’ construction course aimed primarily at young people not in education, employment or training (‘NEETs’).

The course provides students with the opportunity to gain a Construction Award Alliance (CAA) accredited year one Diploma in woodwork and carpentry. They attend the college three days a week, learning practical joinery skills in the workshop for one day and building up their ‘functional’ skills in ICT, literacy and numeracy during the other two days. As part of a personal development programme, they also build up a portfolio of project work to demonstrate that they are able to plan, organise and evaluate assignments.

Most of the 36 students on the course are school leavers or people changing trades, and most are aged between 16 and 19. As they reach the end of the course, they are applying for full-time apprenticeships with local employers; but they also have the option of enrolling at the college for further year to gain their year two Diploma. A third year of study would lead to a year three Diploma.

Working in partnership
UCATT and Stephenson College have signed a Partnership Agreement setting out how the two organisations will work together to promote and deliver learning opportunities. This covers advice, guidance and access to learning; designing, delivering and participating in programmes of learning; and recognising and celebrating success.

Stephenson College Principal Nigel Leigh explains how working in partnership with UCATT benefits the college: “As a vocational college we recognise that working closely with trade unions is an integral part of learning. We also recognise that bringing together positive contributions from each partner – employers, unions, colleges – means that the resulting whole is greater than the individual parts.”

As part of these joint working arrangements, UCATT’s VWU organised an IAG event for 17 carpentry and woodworking ‘pre-apprenticeship’ students. This covered employment rights and responsibilities, including health and safety and the role of trade unions, and managing money.

Know Your Rights
VWU Project Worker Lol Hunt explains the importance of providing IAG to young workers: “It is vital that they know what their rights are before they start work on a construction site, where they can be very vulnerable. They are inexperienced, they may not have the confidence to refuse to do something dangerous and they are often desperate for a job and ‘keen to please’. They need to know about their rights under employment and health and safety law and how UCATT can support them if things do go wrong.”

Lol set out the rates of pay for apprentices, explaining the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and apprentice rates, and how piece or price work is used in the construction industry. He also advised students to be wary of payment by cheque. “Get paid in cash or bank transfer. If a cheque bounces you will not only not get paid, but you will also be charged by the bank,” he said.

He explained the difference between a ‘worker’ and an ‘employee’ under the law – important because employees have more rights – and the problem of ‘bogus’ or false self-employment in the construction industry: “An employer may tell you are self-employed and you have no right to sick or holiday pay for example. But genuinely self-employed people decide when to start, when to finish, provide their own equipment and decide how to do the job.”

He told students that the biggest causes of death and injury on building sites are falls, falling materials, electricity and accidents involving plant and vehicles. And the legacy of exposure to...
asbestos continues to claim the lives of thousands of building workers every year. “If ever you suspect there is asbestos present, you must stop work straight away,” he warned.

He also outlined how UCATT and its representatives like shop stewards and safety reps work to improve and protect workers’ rights – through its political work lobbying for better legal standards, to negotiating and policing pay and conditions, to representing individual workers in grievances or disciplinary hearings.

Student Jared Kinnard said he had never met a union rep before and found Lol’s presentation really useful. As for UCATT membership: “It sounds really good for the price [£1.68 a week] – It’s a steal!” he said.

Making the most of money

Regional Manager of the Money Advice Service (MAS), Susan Cassar, set out how the students could make the most of their money. She warned them not to take out unnecessary insurance – for mobile phones, for example – which may already be covered under household contents insurance.

She also explained the difference between savings and investments and said: “Watch out for scams and if an offer seems to be too good to be true, it probably is.” She outlined how paying into a pension from an early age saves in the long term and the costs of delaying starting a pension. “If you get offered the chance of starting a pension, I would advise you to do so,” she told them.

She set out how credit ratings work, the importance of checking that credit rating agencies have the correct information – MAS advises everyone to check their own credit rating every six months. And she explained that APR stands for the Annual Percentage Rate of charge and can be used to compare credit and loan offers. With regard to managing debt, her key message was: “Only borrow what you can afford to pay back and choose the right way to borrow.”

Finally, she described how to access free financial advice through the MAS website, which includes a financial health check (www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk), and the face-to-face money advice service it offers.

Working with UCATT’s VWU has helped the MAS to increase access to financial awareness. “We’re really pleased to be working with UCATT,” says Susan. “This event has given us the opportunity to help young people make informed decisions about their finances.”

Equipping young people with skills for the world of work

Carpentry and Joinery Trainer/Assessor and Subject Learning Coach Derek Littler believes UCATT’s input into the course has been invaluable:

“We teach the students about employment rights and their responsibilities as employees as part of the course. But with years of experience as a construction worker and trade union representative, Lol can talk to them about the realities of working on a site, the problems they may face – from under payments, to bullying managers to badly-fitting personal protective equipment – and where they can go to for help,” he says.

And Nigel Leigh agrees. “Working with UCATT allows us to supplement the course we deliver and provide a more rounded experience to prepare young people for work,” he says. “We think that it’s essential that all young people on the course have all the skills they need for employment. That means more than just vocational craft skills. It includes knowledge of health and safety, how to engage with co-workers and employers and how training can become part of their working life. We hope that by working with UCATT and raising awareness of all these issues will increase the students’ employability and fully prepare them for the world of work.”

The students left the event with a wealth of material on the issues covered by the presentation, and about where to find more information and contact details for organisations providing advice and support – including UCATT’s VWU.

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