

Youth programme puts learners at the centre of the community – and its future

In Central Otago, a youth programme has a 100 percent success rate for educational outcomes, successfully re-engaging ākongā in their learning and setting a pathway for local career opportunities.

The Central Otago Youth Employment Programme (COYEP), administered under the auspices of Otago Polytechnic and Te Pūkenga, has eliminated the number of local youths who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

Programme manager Jenna Faulkner says, “We don’t have any NEET students now in Central Otago – none whatsoever. All NCEA Level 1 students have either gone on to an apprenticeship, long-term work or they’re back in school doing NCEA Level 2 and 3.”

A Ministry of Education regional survey in 2017 identified 54 NEET pupils and local Ministry management set out to tackle this significantly high and challenging statistic.

The COYEP pilot programme began at Cromwell College and Dunstan High School in Alexandra in 2018 with Year 11 students.

The course provides an NCEA Level 1 combination of on-the-job experience with workplace orientated skills through Otago Polytechnic (48 NCEA Level 1 and 2 credits), a first aid course (4 credits), and normal school subjects (28 credits).

Each week, rangatahi switch between a day of theory-based lessons, a scheduled day with an employer, and three days in their timetabled school classes. The days are flexible depending on the individual school timetable requirements.

“With this model students are able to not only gain the academic skills required, and maintain relationships with their peers, but they’re also able to get invaluable training in a hands-on context,” says Cromwell College assistant principal Sarah Hill.

Unconditional support

Students go through a rigorous application and selection process that requires family support and a commitment to keeping attendance above 85 percent. Then their interests are matched with relevant employers for their day of on-the-job training.

“We have a waitlist so students understand they cannot afford to miss time at school or work – however, this has not been an issue. Once a learner becomes engaged in what they’re doing and feels unconditional support from a team of people in their community, everything seems to fall into place,” says Sarah.

Now in its fifth year, COYEP involves 10 students in Year 11 from each of the four schools in its area: Cromwell College, Dunstan High School, Wakatipu High School in Queenstown, and Mt Aspiring College in Wānaka.

“It’s been incredible,” says Jenna. “Last year all the students in my group at Cromwell and Dunstan passed NCEA Level 1.”

“It really is the idea of having a village to raise a child. With this model it is possible for employers, whānau and schools to come together for the benefit of the learner. Having the student at the heart of the learning is key.”

Sarah Hill



“We had six out of the 20 get their Level 2 also, 60 percent went on apprenticeships, and 40 percent came back into Level 2 school subjects. Nobody fell through the cracks. All four schools have achieved similar success and the students progressed forward.”

Work experience

In addition, with the support of the Withiel Fund Charitable Trust and its trustee Martin Scott, 20 Year 10 students at Cromwell College and Dunstan High School are also participating in work experience as part of the programme.

Hayley, 15, from Dunstan High School, says she feels so much happier at school since starting COYEP this year and gaining an understanding of the building trade with Tom Cooney Construction.

“I am glad my week is split up between school and work experience. I am happy and motivated to learn. COYEP allows me to work and come to school to gain enough credits to pass my NCEA Level 1. I really see building as my future career path,” says Hayley.

Tom Cooney has supported COYEP since its inception and wishes such a programme existed when he was at school.

He says he was not academically inclined and needed something like COYEP to help him determine his future.

“This gives the students an early idea of a career they might enjoy. I had to wait a couple of years after secondary school before I discovered building,” he says.

“I think COYEP is awesome and a good opportunity for the young people in our community. We’ve got one young man from COYEP working full-time with us now in the second year of his apprenticeship and Hayley is doing work experience on Fridays.”

Amelia, 15, from Dunstan High School, is on work experience at GWD Toyota Alexandra.

“Since starting COYEP I feel more motivated and focused to complete my schoolwork. COYEP has given me the opportunity to go out and gain work experience in an industry I see a future career path in and is setting me up well for the future,” says Amelia.

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Community focus

One of Sarah’s responsibilities is exploring a range of different pathways for learning.

“COYEP has a community focus and is an example of 21st century learning. You’ve got staff, students, and community all coming together with the support of whānau and family. We’ve got the best of both worlds and are creating connections with our community,” she says.

A long-term benefit could be that the region retains its young people, as with a localised curriculum the education is overlaid with the context of relevant trades and industries.

“For us here in Cromwell, that’s things like viticulture, horticulture, the trades, hospitality, snow sports, and agricultural industries. These can become the context for learning in English, science, maths and other subjects.

“The COYEP programme is ahead of its game and this type of learning is where education will move to everywhere in New Zealand in the future, I believe. We’ve been lucky to pilot this and we’re happy to share our learning with other schools,” says Sarah.

Feedback from employers is also crucial to how the curriculum is shaped, she says, such as the importance of being able to construct formal emails, to answer phones professionally and to measure in millimetres rather than centimetres in the trades’ world.

Student achievement, engagement and attendance rates all benefit from this programme.

“It really is the idea of having a village to raise a child. With this model it is possible for employers, whānau and schools to come together for the benefit of the learner. Having the student at the heart of the learning is key,” says Sarah.

“This sits perfectly inside the curriculum refresh document Mātaiaho with a focus on inclusive education and localised curriculum.”

