

UNLOCKING POTENTIAL



**GEMMA PEEBLES
AND REBECCA
BARBER
DESCRIBE HOW
HARRISON
COLLEGE,
DONCASTER IS
REDEFINING
EDUCATION AND
WORK READINESS
FOR SEND
STUDENTS**

In today's rapidly evolving job market, preparing young people for the workforce has never been more critical. But for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the path from classroom to career is often riddled with obstacles. National statistics tell a stark story – only 5.1% of adults with a learning disability known to social care are in paid employment (Mencap, 2025), compared to 80% of the general population. These barriers are not simply about ability, but also access, confidence and opportunity.

This article outlines how Harrison College in Doncaster has successfully supported students with SEND in securing post-16 work, education and training via its tailored careers education programme.

Understanding the challenge

SEND students face a range of challenges that impact their journey into employment. From difficulties with social communication to a lack of tailored career advice, the system often overlooks the unique needs of this group. Add to this limited exposure to workplace environments and low confidence levels, and it's easy to see why so many young people with SEND remain NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) after leaving school.

A Careers and Enterprise Company (2023) report highlighted that only 45% of schools consistently deliver all Gatsby Benchmarks. Furthermore, schools often lack the resources, training, or partnerships needed to tailor employability programmes to SEND students. As a result, many young people leave education without the skills, confidence, or support networks needed to take their next step.

But what if education did more than just acknowledge these barriers? What if it actively dismantled them?

The Harrison College approach: Where education meets employability

Harrison College has built its entire educational model around skills-based learning, business engagement and

personal empowerment. At the heart of the college's strategy lies the Skills Builder Universal Framework, a research-driven model that breaks down eight essential employability skills (e.g. problem-solving, teamwork, leadership and communication) into manageable, teachable steps. This structured approach allows learners to understand how their skills relate directly to the workplace.

This shift from traditional subject-based teaching to skills-focused education has been a game-changer for many students. One learner reflected that, 'When we started learning through skills, I finally understood it. I could see how what I was doing in class could actually be used in a real job, not just to pass a test. It made everything feel more real – and more important.'

Real students, real stories

Daniel Mannion's story is a powerful example of what can happen when young people with SEND are supported to find their purpose.

After enrolling in a mainstream sixth form in Doncaster, Daniel found himself feeling unsupported and unmotivated. His interest in finance and accountancy was not being nurtured and he knew he needed a change. That change came when he joined Harrison College. With a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and clear personal goals, Daniel was welcomed into an environment designed to build on his strengths.

From day one, he was given an individualised study programme, tailored to his ambitions. He actively asked for opportunities to develop his skills, and the college responded. By January, Daniel secured a supported internship in the finance department at Orb Recruitment. He thrived – so much so, that he impressed his colleagues by completing tasks faster than expected and even helped bring in new business.

Today, Daniel is a full-time employee at Orb Recruitment. Reflecting on his time at Harrison College, he shares, 'I came to Harrison College fed up with sixth form, where I





felt I wasn't supported. If it wasn't for Harrison College, I wouldn't be the person I am today with the skills and life experience. I cannot express enough how thankful I am for Harrison College and Orb Recruitment for making me more confident and making me grow a lot as a person.'

Bridging the gap: industry partnerships with purpose

Harrison College's work approach has thrived because of the dynamic, long-standing partnerships it has cultivated across a wide range of industries. From healthcare and construction to finance, retail and even the world of horse racing, the college has built a robust, diverse ecosystem of employer collaborators. These employers are committed to inclusion, innovation and impact. Through bespoke internships, project-based learning and collaborative problem-solving tasks, employers work hand-in-hand with the college to provide meaningful, not tokenistic, opportunities for young people with SEND.

Real-world, real value

These are not one-off visits or superficial experiences. Harrison College students participate in structured, skills-driven internships with organisations like the NHS, Genuit Group, Autism in Racing, Orb Recruitment and the Doncaster Chamber of Commerce. They are involved in everything from business development and customer service, to digital innovation and health care strategy. Students are not only exposed to the inner workings of these industries – they are contributing to them.

These partnerships are symbiotic. Employers gain access to a fresh, enthusiastic talent pool often brimming with creativity, attention to detail, and out-of-the-box thinking. In return, students benefit from genuine workplace exposure, mentorship, and often long-term employment, or apprenticeship offers.

Employers frequently report that students not only meet expectations – they exceed them. They show up prepared, motivated and eager to learn. Their presence helps foster more inclusive and empathetic workplaces, encouraging other staff to think differently about ability, potential and recruitment.

Building a more inclusive economy

Harrison College's partnership model is not just about preparing students for employment – it is about helping shape a future where businesses and communities are stronger because they are more inclusive. A key element

of this mission is equipping employers with the tools and understanding they need to support neurodiverse and SEND employees effectively. Harrison College regularly delivers in-workplace training sessions for local and national employers on topics such as Autism in the Workplace, Inclusive Recruitment Practices, and Supporting Neurodivergent Staff. These sessions are tailored to each employer's context and workforce, helping businesses develop confidence in supporting both their current staff and the diverse talent entering the workforce.

A model of success

In 2024, less than 10% of Harrison College's leavers were NEET – a figure significantly lower than the national average for SEND students. Over 90% move into employment, further education or apprenticeships, with many staying in their placements long-term.

Reflecting its successes in helping its students progress into positive outcomes, the college was the proud recipient of the FSB Regional Diversity & Inclusion Award and the National SEND Awards Support into Employment accolade in 2023.

A blueprint for change

Harrison College Doncaster offers a blueprint for how the system could, and should, work for young people with SEND. By aligning education with employability and ability with opportunity, the college is proving that the right support does not just change lives – it builds futures.

Learn more about Harrison College at: harrisoncollege.co.uk.

References

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