Overture to a promising future

Inspired schemes help to nurture young talent, says Helena Pozniak

At the age of nine, Oliver Pritchard-Barrett was doing the rounds of his home town of Modbury in Devon, changing residents five pence to recycle their bottles. "I wanted to earn my own money," says the 17-year-old, who went on to buy and rent music speakers at 14 and now runs his own website design business. As he wants to study design or engineering at university to help him with future start-ups, he plans to reduce his business activities to concentrate on A-levels.

Pritchard-Barrett's entrepreneurial spirit has flourished at Blundell's School in Tiverton, where staff have encouraged him to enter several industry competitions. He picked up a North Devon Manufacturer Award for an AS-level project and was part of the school's winning regional team, which designed a wind tunnel for an Engineering Education Scheme (EES) competition.

"Schemes such as these help students learn real work skills," says Blundell's mathematics teacher Jennifer Olive, who also coordinates industry projects. "The results can be amazing. As a teacher you can't help but take a step back and admire how students have progressed."

And while not every pupil in a complete self-starter, schools are positively averse to entrepreneurial competition, spawning a host of pupil eco-designers, cake bakers and fledgling fashion labels. "Education more than equipping students with the skills to pass exams successfully," says Karen Ward, head of business studies at the Grammar School at Leeds (GSAL). She oversaw GSAL's entry in the Leeds Enterprise Recovery Programme (Leap), which encourages students to set up companies for continuation of a school year.

Other similar projects allow students to meet deadlines and stay on top of their time. GSAL's lower-sixth formers take the responsibility for financing and selling their products. Ward believes projects allow students to increase their confidence, education more

Key to success: above, from left: Maddie Mortimer of Latymer Upper School; Young Enterprise at St Peter's School; hat crafting at Downe House

While he intends to study geography at university, 'plan B would definitely be to start my own business'.

Pupils have been quick to exploit digital environments that they're familiar with. From a tiny budget, students at Latymer Upper School in London have fulfilled many a teenager's dream by launching a digital record label this summer. Their first offering is a whimsical debut track from 17-year-old student Maddie Mortimer, available on iTunes. All proceeds went to secretary of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, which represents independent schools.

Initiatives such as the respected Young Enterprise (YE), aimed at forging links between education and business, are usually extra-curricular. But many sixth-formers sign up with enthusiasm, especially this year when YE is supporting small company projects for the first time. "After the age of 16, students realise they need to be independent," says Turner, creative director of United by Design. "They learn how to actually make a living."

As well as an innovative idea, teams need time, effort and determination, adds Whitehouse. His students are mentored by a local business and have come with products such as designer bags embellished with old clock parts. They also sell a team even sells a fair in Sweden. "The sales are not quite as much," says Turner, "but the team is quite serious."