

Avenue Centre for Education (ACE) and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo

Reach
Quality
Targeting
Sustainability



ACE and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo are Careers Excellence Award Winners 2019 for Partnership of the Year

The sustained partnership between this Pupil Referral Unit and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo has created the Zoo Academy, a course for young people with challenging behaviour that promotes resilience, self-confidence, behaviour management and teamwork, sparking an interest in animals which can then be nurtured into re-engaging them, while introducing them to a variety of roles. The course develops the students' soft skills, encouraging teamwork and improving self-esteem and building confidence within the students.

A meaningful partnership

The partnership between ACE (for selected students who have been excluded or are in danger of being excluded) and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo (an internationally recognised zoological organisation, major tourist attraction and significant local employer) has continually developed and strengthened over the last seven years.

From an initial contact as a leisure and tourism trip, the partnership is now an established six-week program, for up to six students at a time. The activity runs four times per year and is available to all secondary aged students in Luton who are referred through to ACE.

The partnership has three core aims that are developed over the six-week program:

- To develop students' self-confidence, team work skills, resilience and engagement through theory-based classroom learning about animals and practical hands on, behind the scenes work. This is with a different class of animals each week, starting with invertebrates and finishing with primates and ungulates
- To introduce students to a range of different employees across the organisation through a program of meaningful encounters – including animal care, the finance team, steam train drivers, electricians, animal moves and transport co-ordination
- To introduce students to the range of jobs that are animal and/or tourism related and local opportunities for careers (and at ACE, linked back to post 16 options, local colleges and training providers).

An empowering graduation ceremony – in a zoo!

All students who attend the course finish with a graduation ceremony. They can invite family and friends and receive a free day pass to ZSL Whipsnade Zoo.

Senior management from ZSL Whipsnade and ACE attend the ceremony, and present certificates and awards. The partnership allows ACE to deliver an accredited Small Animal Care course. The program is being built into the [Luton 16x16 Careers Program](#) and our newly launched Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme.

Since its initial start in 2013, the working partnership between ACE and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo has flourished. The course develops the students' soft skills, encouraging teamwork, behaviour management and improving self-esteem and building confidence within the students. Successful students who perform well are invited back on the Student Mentor Programme, where they support with equipment set up and classroom activities, and act as role models for new students attending the course.

We are now working towards having the course accredited for a Level 1 qualification and we are working together to trial an AQA Level 1 Small Animal Care course as an introduction to working with animals which will benefit the most challenging and vulnerable students at ACE.

All hands (and paws) on deck

We have sourced animals as permanent residents for the ACE classroom, as well as a therapy dog when required. These additional activities are an important resource for the most challenging students. ACE staff attend the Zoo Academy summer holiday programme to support with activities which is fantastic Continuous Professional Development.

Both organisations have strong commitment to outreach work. We build links with local communities to using our expertise and passion to re-engage students and young adults who feel that they are being left behind.

ACE recruits and supports students with challenging behaviour – and eases the process of them overcoming the barriers of meeting new people, going to new places and developing new skills. This combined with the unique facilities and opportunities of ZSL Whipsnade Zoo has developed into a valued part of both organisation's work.

Testimonial from the young people's experience

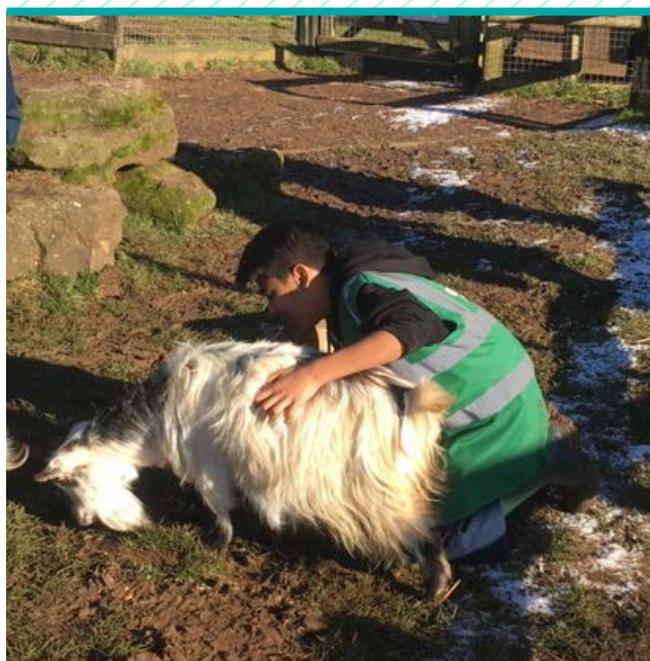
"For students, the best parts of the course are the animal encounters - particularly the animal feedings we get involved with ("do we really get to do that?") and the practical learning; even when cleaning out muck!

The most popular day is the one where we work with primates: "this is so amazing". The students enjoy being given responsibility and are often surprised by how many skills they develop and how the experience improves their confidence; "can't believe I just did that". They also recognise how much they are learning about animals, employability skills and themselves and are keen to share this with their families and staff back at ACE. Students often ask whether they can come back to zoo academy as a mentor and those that do take their role supporting the new student seriously. Students get a real buzz when working at the zoo, in their Whipsnade tops and they get asked questions by members of the public; "she thought I worked there and was asking me where things are".

When Whipsnade staff visit ACE, sometimes bringing animals with them, students are keen to engage and to ask questions and recognise that this is something special; "would never get to do this at my old school". Students improve their behaviour and attendance to be able to attend and are always eager to talk about what they have done and learnt. Most students ask to go back a second time and that engagement shows how much the value the experience.



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