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**Boosting achievement through reading for pleasure – Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet)**

BMet has run the Reading Agency’s Reading Ahead programme since 2013 with a record 681 participants taking part in 2017. Reading Ahead invites participants to pick six reads of their choice (short texts such as poems and magazine articles as well as books) and record, rate and review them in a small print reading diary in order to get incentives along the way and a certificate on completion.

It is run predominantly though the Learning Resource Centres (LRCs) linking with teaching groups throughout the four college sites. The LRCs promote Reading Ahead to students and tutors at the beginning of the academic year via induction activities and by visiting tutor groups. The majority of participants sign up at the Freshers’ Fairs held at each college. Ways of attracting students to the LRC stand have included story writing where they start with ‘Once upon a Time’ and let students add to and build up the story, book faces and the promotion of Quick Reads. LRC staff then run a number of ‘keeping warm’ activities throughout the year including sending encouraging emails and visiting classes to catch up on progress with the challenge.

Reading Ahead participants are studying on courses ranging from ESOL to GCSE and A level. Librarian Siobhan Williams visits a GCSE Maths class for 15 minutes each Monday morning: *“I take along a relevant text such as a news article or a recipe with a light-hearted review from one of my colleagues to get them laughing. I give out review slips for them to use so that they’re taking part in Reading Ahead.”*

The support of teaching staff is crucial. Foundation Learning lecturer Barry Saville says “*I love it. The Reading Ahead scheme is really good. It gives the students something to strive for. As a tutor, I feel that it benefits the lessons as you can use it as an extension activity and also as a topic of discussion in classes.”*

Functional Skills lecturer Jane Lane comments: *“Students have taken English exams and have done very well. I really believe the Reading Ahead programme has helped as reading is a priority for all English qualifications.”*

Encouragement to take part in Reading Ahead comes from the top. “*As an avid reader myself, I’m a big fan of Reading Ahead as a way to boost confidence and get more of us reading,”* says Andrew Cleaves, Principal and CEO of BMet. *“Reading Ahead has made me think more about the books I am reading and allowed me to take on board a wider range of literature than I would perhaps otherwise do.”*

Participants include the oldest student in the UK (as featured in *The Times* in 2016) who, at a young 87 years, is an inspiration to other participants. Another has read over 30 books to her children. A number of college tutors and staff are also participating in the challenge in order to support students.

One completer wrote in her diary: “*I liked Reading Ahead because the more you read the more better you get, I won’t lie, I didn’t like reading but now I do after doing this.”*  Another recorded: *“It gave me the chance to start reading again. I realised reading brings you to different places. When you feel sad, it changes your emotions. It will help me with my work.”*

Some students have taken part via the Reading Ahead website in previous years but on the whole they prefer using the print diary; this makes it more visible for teaching and library staff too.

LRC staff monitor participants’ progress in a number of ways in order to encourage completion. Fay Dayus, Head of Learning Resources, explains: *“Notes are added to reader records on our library system to alert LRC staff that the student is a Reading Ahead participant. This acts as a ‘conversation starter’, encouraging them to talk about their reading and motivating them to progress further. Participants are also monitored in liaison with curriculum staff whose groups are taking part. They advise us on progress and we can offer suggestions on how to keep students motivated.”*

The LRCs also take every opportunity to celebrate events such as World Book Day and World Book Night with lucky dips, short story writing and prize draws. This year they are planning to hold a Jane Austen themed photo booth and book swaps to celebrate World Book Night.

Kay Burton-Williams, Director of Student Services, concludes: *“BMet has seen a 59.3% increase in learners taking part in Reading Ahead this year and we know it has a tremendous impact on the way they develop their wider skills. It’s very rewarding for us to see students speaking to LRC staff about the different materials they have enjoyed both in and out of class.”*

**Top Tips**

* Get support from senior management so that the whole college is on board.
* Promote the library and reading for pleasure from the start of the academic year.
* Find ways to integrate reading into every kind of course from maths to art and sport.
* Keep in touch with participants during the year to check they’re making progress.
* Use reading ‘selfies’ to make it fun and part of students’ everyday life.
* Ask committed teaching staff to pass on the message to their colleagues.