



The Compass Curriculum: True North

Blueprint for a Universal KS4 Offer

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In partnership with:

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1. Introduction

Fylde Coast Academy Trust (FCAT) is a multi-academy trust serving 10 schools across the Fylde Coast in Blackpool and West Lancashire. Established in 2012, it serves over 6,000 pupils, aged 2-16. Blackpool, the largest town in FCAT's catchment area, contains seven of the ten most deprived areas in England. Approximately half of our pupil population lives in areas ranked in the bottom 10% of the [Index of Multiple Deprivation](#).

Our Trust is guided by a core set of values that prioritise diversity and inclusion to ensure all learners – regardless of background or socioeconomic status – have equal access to progression opportunities. This underpins FCAT's approach to everything from partnerships to community engagement and curriculum. We want our pupils to be “the best they can be”.

Wider context

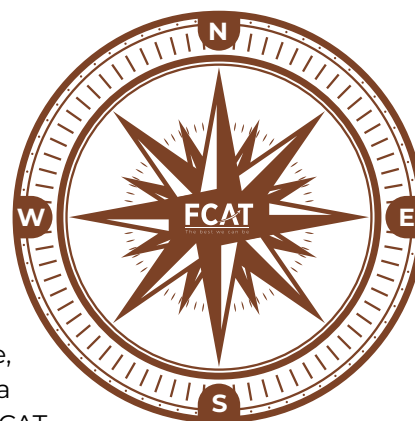
For young people, the transition from Key Stage 3 (KS3) to Key Stage 4 (KS4) marks a critical juncture. Nationally, it is also a stage when engagement often drops sharply; where the traditional academic offer does not always provide a clear or motivating path forward. This is exacerbated in areas of high deprivation, with research showing that [persistently disadvantaged pupils leave secondary school almost two years behind their peers](#) and are therefore at much higher risk of becoming NEET. The issue, then, is particularly relevant to learners within Fylde Coast Academy Trust.

FCAT's internal data makes the drop in engagement at KS4 visible in a very specific way. Analysis of attendance and engagement across the Trust identified Friday afternoons as a consistent low point – a period of disengagement that cuts across schools in the Trust. For a significant number of students, the Friday afternoon offer, and more broadly KS4, was not connecting with their sense of purpose. This recognition prompted fundamental questions for the Trust about what KS4 should offer students who are growing up in one of England's most deprived areas.

Against this backdrop, in 2024, FCAT launched the Compass Curriculum – a KS4 provision that provides all Year 9 pupils with a unique option to study at a partner college or provider on a course of their choosing, gaining real-world experience in a professional setting.

2. What is the Compass Curriculum?

The Compass Curriculum is a universal Key Stage 4 offer provided to all Year 9 pupils as part of their options selection. It replaces one traditional GCSE with a two-year college course. Every Thursday or Friday afternoon, participating students now leave their school campus for three hours of immersive professional learning, delivered off-site at a specialised partner college or provider. The offer is available to every student regardless of ability or background and is designed to sit alongside the wider GCSE programme.



Compass was developed in an attempt to combat social disadvantage, providing stronger, more relevant and targeted progression routes via occupational pathways driven by labour-market intelligence. While FCAT recognises that Progress 8 is an important measure, it does not fully capture what young people in high-deprivation areas need to thrive. When a system prioritises a data point over a human outcome, it ceases to serve its community. The Compass Curriculum, then, widens the definition of successful outcomes to include attendance, self-regulation, essential skills development and – perhaps most importantly – a student’s confidence and readiness for the next stage of their life.



Curriculum structure and course options

The Compass Curriculum runs across two years, with course selections taking place in Year 9:

- **Year 10:** Students build technical literacy and essential skills in their chosen area (so-called 'foundational mastery'), typically completing a Level 1 qualification.
- **Year 11:** Students progress to a Level 2 qualification or specialist GCSE, providing a clear pathway into Level 3 study, A Levels, T Levels or apprenticeships.

Students can select from a broad range of vocational and academic courses, provided by different colleges depending on each provider's specialisms. Course options span technical trades, land-based industries, sports-related roles and academic routes:

- **Technical and vocational (Blackpool and The Fylde College):** Engineering, Construction, Health and Social Care, E-Sports, Hair and Beauty, Motor Vehicle, Catering, Uniformed Protective Services, Business and Customer Service.
- **Land-based (Myerscough College):** Agriculture, Animal Studies, Green Spaces, Motorsports.
- **Academic (Blackpool Sixth Form College):** Psychology, Sociology, Business Studies, Economics, Film Studies, Ancient History.
- **Sport and community (Blackpool FC Community Trust):** Community Coaching (Level 1 and 2), FA Refereeing.

This breadth of options is deliberate. By offering vocational and academic routes within a universal programme, Compass avoids the risk of being seen as an "alternative vocational track" for students who are not pursuing more traditional academic routes. Instead, it provides a professional choice to all learners.

Since launching in 2024, 650 pupils – a third of all Year 9 students across FCAT's five secondary schools – have chosen Compass, with demand now exceeding available places. In its first year alone, the programme achieved a 97% pass rate for initial qualifications and a 1.9% attendance uplift within the Trust's most deprived schools.



3. Journey

The thinking behind the Compass Curriculum began in early 2023 during FCAT's long-term development planning. During a joint training day, Trust leaders began a candid discussion about the curriculum changes needed to better address social disadvantage and to provide stronger progression routes for our pupils.

Central to this was an appraisal of what Key Stage 4 was and was not achieving for students in our schools. The question they kept returning to was whether the existing curriculum was giving every student something to look forward to – a reason to engage, a sense of agency in their future. The honest answer was that it was not doing this consistently enough. We came to the conclusion that if we keep doing more of the same we'll continue to get the same results. Therefore, we needed to change.

Further informed by our own internal engagement and attendance data – as well as research from Big Education highlighting the demand from young people in Blackpool for a wider curriculum offer – the Trust decided to create one. Over the following 18 months, we undertook research and development.

With support from the Edge Foundation, members of the team visited Cowes Academy on the Isle of Wight to explore their [Maritime Futures Curriculum](#) as a potential model. Although informative, the Trust concluded this wasn't the right fit – Blackpool is coastal in geography but not in its economic identity. However, this helped sharpen thinking about what a locally relevant curriculum should look like.

During year one, we developed partnerships with Blackpool and The Fylde College and Myerscough College. In year two, we expanded our portfolio to include Blackpool Sixth Form and Blackpool Football Community Trust to help develop the programme. Compass launched in September 2024, with an initial uptake of around 35% of our first Year 9 cohort across the Trust's five secondary schools. This was significantly higher than anticipated and an early indication that students were ready for something different.

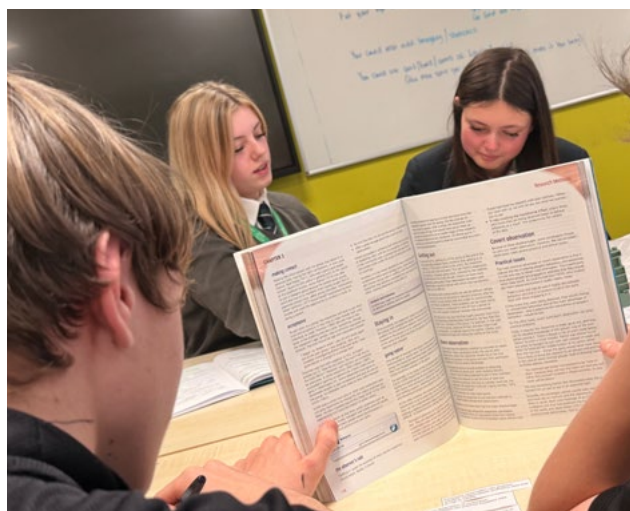




Strategic rationale for development

The Compass Curriculum was not simply developed to shake up the curriculum offer. It is primarily a targeted intervention to address the unique socio-economic landscape of the Blackpool and Fylde region. Core rationale for its development included:

- **Combating social disadvantage:** FCAT serves young people from some of the most socioeconomically deprived neighbourhoods in England. Compass provides these students with stronger, more relevant progression routes into work.
- **NEET prevention:** Local school-leaver NEET rates are significantly higher than the national average. Compass was intended as a proactive “NEET-reducing solution” that could build employability skills before students leave secondary education.
- **Improving engagement and attendance:** Across the Trust, Friday afternoons were identified as having the lowest attendance rates. The programme was deliberately delivered at this time in an attempt to tackle the so-called “Friday effect”.
- **Evidence-based demand:** In 2022, research conducted by Big Education and the Youth Futures Foundation (through its [Connected Futures programme](#)) identified an appetite for a wider educational offer in the region.
- **Beyond Progress 8:** The Trust wanted to go beyond statutory Progress 8 measures to effectively nurture well-rounded, career-ready individuals who can contribute to and improve local and regional prosperity.
- **New pathways into careers and education:** Using local Ipsos Mori data and feedback from Big Education, we identified skills gaps in the regional and local economy and designed some Compass pathways to directly address these.
- **Experiential CEIAG:** Rather than simply providing information about careers and pathways, we wanted students to experience professional environments directly – making Compass a form of hands-on careers education, information, advice and guidance from the outset.



Technical implementation

A later section outlines in detail some of the approaches taken to delivering the new curriculum. However, its design and implementation were broken down into three broad phases:

Coordination and planning

Fylde Coast Academy Trust's central leadership team acted as the primary engine of coordination. The first task was to analyse internal data and identify engagement gaps across the Trust. Simultaneously, we initiated conversations with local further education partners to explore what a collaborative curriculum model could look like. Service level agreements were developed to define the respective roles of the delivery teams at the colleges and the pastoral responsibilities of each school.

Student recruitment

The next phase focused on developing a universal prospectus and recruiting our first cohort of students. It was important from the outset that Compass was presented as a professional opportunity to all students, not an alternative route for lower-attaining pupils. To reflect the full spectrum of student ability and interest, the offer was designed to include a balance of technical trades and academic specialisms. This phase concluded with college taster days, where Year 9 students visited the off-site settings to experience the learning environment first-hand before committing to their two-year pathway.

Logistics and financing

This phase focused on building the logistical and financial infrastructure needed to sustain the programme. This meant procuring dedicated transport, personal protective equipment and other specialist equipment, as well as ensuring that the costs for these were centralised so that families would not be excluded. Longer-term financial sustainability was secured through a combination of school and Trust budgets, civic partnerships and support from the Youth Futures Foundation and Reclaim Fund.

4. A strategic partnership model

A programme of this scale cannot be delivered by a single institution working alone. FCAT and the Compass Curriculum are supported by a network of college, strategic and employer partners, each offering valuable contributions that the Trust could not deliver on its own.

College and provider partners

At present, four external partners support delivery of the Compass curriculum, each chosen for their established expertise in the sectors they serve:

- ▶ **Blackpool and The Fylde College** is the largest provider of technical and professional education on the Fylde Coast. They deliver the broadest selection of Compass courses, spanning engineering and construction to health and social care.
- ▶ **Myerscough College** is one of the UK's leading agricultural colleges and delivers our land-based offer.
- ▶ **Blackpool Sixth Form College** provides our academic strand, offering GCSEs in subjects including psychology, sociology and economics.
- ▶ **Blackpool FC Community Trust**, the charitable arm of Blackpool Football Club, delivers community coaching and FA refereeing qualifications, bringing both professional sporting expertise and strong local community roots to the programme.





Strategic partners and financial sustainability

In addition to our college partners, we have built a strong support network to help us through development and delivery. [Big Education](#) has contributed vital research into young people's appetite for a wider curriculum offer in Blackpool. [Right to Succeed](#) leads the Blackpool [Connected Futures](#) Partnership (of which Compass is one strand) connecting our curriculum to a broader town-wide effort to address youth unemployment. Through our connection with [Edge Foundation](#) and its [Deeper Learning UK network](#), we have discovered how many other academy trusts are working toward similar goals – giving us the confidence to move forward.

Financially, Compass is sustained through a blend of school and Trust budgets, civic partnerships and external support from the [Youth Futures Foundation](#) and [Reclaim Fund](#). This mixed model is deliberate – no single funding stream should be able to destabilise the programme. All outgoings, including the hidden vocational education costs (such as specialist PPE and transport) are centralised by the Trust. We see Compass as a long-term investment in the prosperity of our young people and the communities they will go on to work and live in.

Employer and civic partnerships

Our partnership with employers and civic leaders is equally significant. By aligning our curriculum with regional economic ambitions – such as the digital sector in Blackpool and the National Cyber Security Centre in Samesbury – we ensure that our students get a head start in a growing local economy. This civic-minded approach also turns FCAT into an anchor institution, driving prosperity beyond the school gates.

5. Delivery and logistics

Delivering Compass has been a logistical feat, particularly given the off-site learning. Of course, this is also what makes it so valuable. That's why the Trust has put in place key steps to ensure it runs as smoothly as possible.

The following key considerations are worth mentioning:

Immersive learning environments

A key element of Compass is the deliberate removal of students from school campus. By attending off-site sessions, learners are immersed in a mature, adult environment. This experience develops their agency while reducing transition anxiety as they progress towards further education. Whether in professional kitchens or construction skills centres, students use industry-standard equipment and wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), offering them an authentic experience of workplace environments.

The shift in environment also acts as a psychological “reset” for many students. Within secondary school, they are often viewed through the lens of their past behaviour or academic struggles. At a partner college, they are treated as junior professionals, often with access to multi-million-pound facilities that no school could afford to maintain. This exposure to high-level industry standards fosters a sense of pride and professional identity that is rarely achievable in a standard classroom setting.

Transport and logistics

Managing the movement of nearly five hundred students across multiple sites is a formidable logistical task. It requires a fleet of dedicated transport, a synchronised timetable across five different academies and a robust system for tracking attendance in real-time. The Trust has invested heavily in these systems, viewing the Compass “afternoon exodus” not as a disruption, but as a key part of the educational week. The bus journey has become the professional threshold where students transition into their work-ready mindset. Logistics are handled by a dedicated strategy, delivery, operational team and school liaisons, ensuring that school leaders can focus on the quality of the student experience. The curriculum runs beyond the end of the school day.

Safeguarding and attendance tracking

Given the off-site nature of the programme, attendance and enhanced safeguarding are tracked at numerous points: bus departure, college arrival and then again in the first 30 minutes after the lesson starts. Using a real-time digital register, school liaisons can immediately intervene if a student is missing. This level of coordination has resulted in some schools recording zero behaviour points on a Thursday or Friday afternoon. Such results suggest that when students are engaged in meaningful, professional learning, the barriers to academic success fall away.

Compass teams, culture and quality assurance

FCAT deploys dedicated Compass teams, with senior staff from the schools leading Compass duty teams at each college. Maintaining high standards in an off-site setting requires a clear oversight strategy. Our Compass quality assurance framework ensures the climate and culture of the Trust is mirrored in college workshops. This cross-pollination of leadership – from school to college – allows for objective monitoring of student behaviour and professional conduct, reinforcing that the Trust’s expectations remain absolute even when students are off-site. We have also supported college tutors’ CPD by inviting them into our schools to see how we deal with difficult behaviour in the classroom. This has been both valuable and well-received, reflecting our excellent partnership working.

Pedagogy and essential skills framework

Student technical training is underpinned by the [Skills Builder Universal Framework](#). This ensures that technical expertise is supported by eight essential skills, specifically focusing on “Aiming High” (to boost academic outcomes) and “Staying Positive” (to support perseverance and long-term life satisfaction).

While technical knowledge may vary or change, the ability to communicate, solve problems and lead others is timeless. By integrating the Skills Builder Universal Framework, we provide a common language for success that spans both school and college settings. We can also use the rich data to track our pupils’ journey through schools, Compass and beyond.

The framework equips students with the psychological resilience necessary to navigate a volatile job market. This focus on character and grit is perhaps the most pioneering aspect of the Compass programme.



6. Outcomes and impact

Since its launch, the Compass Curriculum has delivered results that provide a clear mandate for its expansion. Here is a summary of key findings.

Academic success and progression

- ▶ **High attainment:** We observed a 97% pass rate for Level 1 qualifications in year one.
- ▶ **Seamless transitions:** Early destination data confirms that the curriculum provides a clear head start, with many students now aspiring to move directly into Level 3 courses post-16 – a shift from previous trends of seeking immediate, often low-skilled work.

Engagement and behaviour

- ▶ **The “Friday Effect” on attendance:** Compass students consistently outperform their peers in attendance. In the first cohort, Compass students across the Trust maintained a 92.7% attendance rate compared to 89.3% for non-Compass students.
- ▶ **Behavioural change:** The reduction in “Behaviour Events” is perhaps the most significant data point. For Cohort 1, incidents plummeted from 16,642 to 4,418 – a reduction of nearly 75%. Staff explicitly noted a “significant decrease” in issues and, in some cases, zero behaviour points recorded on Fridays.
- ▶ **Improved school climate:** Qualitative data suggests the break from school and the hands-on nature of Compass helps students focus and feel less “bogged down” during their Monday to Thursday academic lessons.

Education and employment destinations

- ▶ **98% predicted EET rate:** From the first cohort, the vast majority of students are predicted to successfully transition into education, employment or training. Many of them have already applied to study at the colleges that deliver Compass.
- ▶ **Pathway retention:** Over 50% of students chose to remain on their specific Compass pathway for post-16 study, demonstrating high levels of career clarity and commitment.
- ▶ **Transferable confidence:** Over 40% of students are transitioning to a new post-16 pathway, utilising the confidence and maturity gained through the programme to pursue different professional interests.

Essential skills and economic projections

The Skills Builder Framework indicates that students participating in Compass achieve an average skill-step increase of 1.69 steps (nearly two defined levels of competency within the framework's 16-step developmental hierarchy). This generates significant projected economic benefits, including:

- ▶ **Wage premium:** A predicted 5.1% increase in lifelong earnings.
- ▶ **Employment stability:** A 2.1% decrease in the likelihood of future unemployment.
- ▶ **Life satisfaction:** Participants report a 6% increase in life satisfaction and a 5.7% increase in job satisfaction.
- ▶ **Targeted success:** At FCAT schools including [Blackpool Aspire Academy](#) and [Montgomery Academy](#), where Compass is integrated into the weekly timetable, the growth in essential skills (aiming for career readiness) was even more pronounced.

Stakeholder voice

Perhaps the greatest validation of the Compass Curriculum comes from students themselves. 90% of pupils said they would recommend Compass to the year group below, with pupils describing the programme as the “best part of their week.”

They particularly value the independence and professional respect they receive from college tutors, and the opportunity to mix with peers from other schools. This social cohesion is a by-product of the Trust-wide model; students from different academies collaborate on projects, breaking down local rivalries and building a shared identity as Fylde Coast professionals.

Parents and staff have been equally positive in their support. Many express relief that their children are gaining practical, bankable skills alongside their GCSEs, which in turn supports relationships between parents and schools.



Pupil feedback

“It’s a really safe space; the staff are reassuring and it also helps me for my future career path. I am sure of the path I want to take now, which is related to health and social care.”

“It is a great opportunity for the Year 9s to try. It helps you and gives advice on choosing your future career path. I would recommend it to future Year 9 students as it could take you further than one basic GCSE.”

“Compass opens up direct career paths. Plus it helps get you a place in college.”



Parental feedback

“It’s such a progressive idea that the children are able to be engaged in more practical activities relating to potential careers. My daughter’s confidence has definitely increased by spending time at college. She looks forward to Fridays and has never moaned about getting home later as she really enjoys the chance to be involved in more practical learning. She initially wanted to get a job straight from school but now aspires to go to college instead.”

“Thank you for seeing the potential and running with this. More schools need to see that education needs to evolve in order to engage children and prepare them for the current working world.”

“My son is graduating after two years on the Compass programme. At school, he has always tried very hard, but constantly struggles. The effort he was making combined with the lack of progress left him feeling depressed. He may have mild undiagnosed autism and we have even paid for tutors but it wasn’t helping. Then he signed up for the Compass construction course, which gave him a chance to work with his hands. Over two years, he has since won student of the term four times, won two competitions, and his tutor has given him an unconditional offer to study bricklaying or plastering – no matter what grades he gets in his exams. Compass has given my son the praise that he needed. I took him to a bricklaying job and he did really well. As parents, watching him, we were desperate for him to succeed. Now we can see in his body language that he is filled with a confidence that was absent before.”



Staff feedback (member of the SLT at Montgomery Academy)

“Prior to Year 10, R displayed challenging behaviour, often refusing to come to school, attend lessons or follow instructions. When she first joined Compass she was very anxious and did not want to attend the college, often absconding. The new environment, staff and routine were very challenging for her. At school, staff had supported her through some very challenging circumstances at home, but she did not initially have those relationships with staff at the college. Once she settled in (with the help of some one-to-one support) R began thriving at the college. She gained a new sense of purpose and belonging. Her attendance, behaviour, maturity, confidence, self-worth and progress in other subjects has also really improved. It really is amazing to see. This resulted in her winning student of the term followed by the ‘Student of the Year Award’ for the Hair and Beauty course. She has now applied to the college to continue her qualifications and is grateful both for the opportunity and the support that the staff at Montgomery and Compass have provided to help her get to this point.”



7. Case studies

The following short case studies draw on feedback from students in the first cohort to complete the Compass programme, illustrating the range of experiences and outcomes across different pathways and schools.

Construction

Montgomery Academy, Year 11

This student came into Compass recognising they were a practical learner, and hoping a new kind of environment might boost their engagement – a hunch that proved correct. Across two years they covered plastering, plumbing, bricklaying and joinery, gaining hands-on experience across a range of trades at Blackpool and The Fylde College.

Pupils on the course did each trade for a number of weeks in order to get a taste for different aspects of the profession. Offering a consistent timetable, a stable environment, and a strong rapport with their tutor had a real impact on the learning. By the end of the programme, this student had developed practical skills across a range of trades, with plumbing a particular highlight. They are now aiming for an apprenticeship as an electrician.

“This gave a practical side to my school career. I was able to get out of the building and get hands-on. It’s also given me a two-year head start – an advantage over other students when I go on to my apprenticeship.”



Health and Social Care

Aspire Academy, Year 11

This student chose Compass wanting to gain practical experience in a field they were considering for the future. Over the course of the programme they developed a broad range of hands-on skills – including CPR, nutrition, care for young children and an understanding of different care settings. They successfully completed their coursework.

Alongside technical content, this student cited patience and empathy as key skills that they had learned – qualities they see as equally important to their future career. They are now continuing their studies through a BTEC.

“If I could advise a Year 9 selecting their Compass option, it would be to go forward with respect, work hard and never give up.”



Motor Vehicle

Montgomery Academy, Year 11

This student had always been passionate about cars and felt that the traditional GCSE options available to them were not the right fit. Compass gave them an opportunity to pursue that interest in a professional setting, using industry-standard tools and machinery. They subsequently completed a Level 1 automotive qualification at Blackpool and The Fylde College.

What stood out most was the environment. Studying at college felt calmer and more focused than school. The student found themselves looking forward to Fridays in a way they had not before. They are now considering an apprenticeship or further study in engineering or the automotive industry.

“Compass is amazing and opens up a whole new world. It makes you open your eyes and ties to what you want to do further in life. Do it – you won’t regret it.”



8. Conclusion and next steps

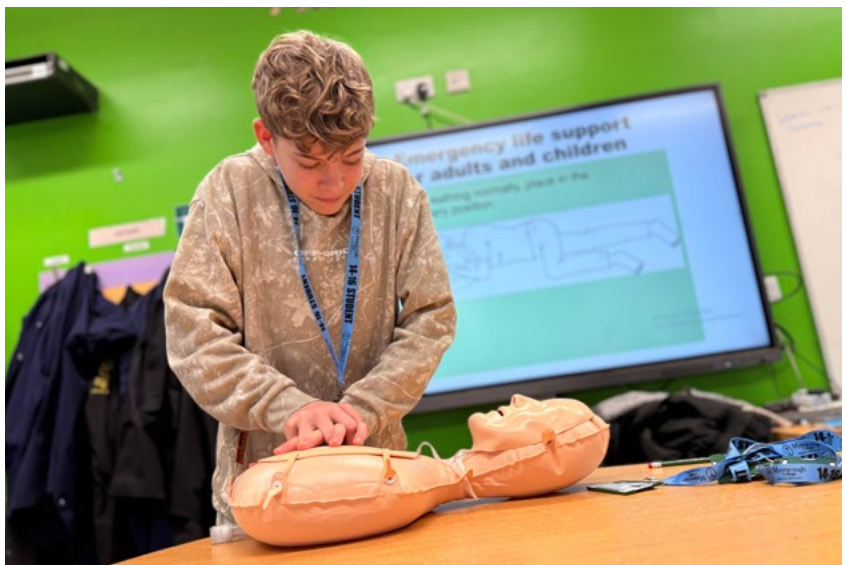
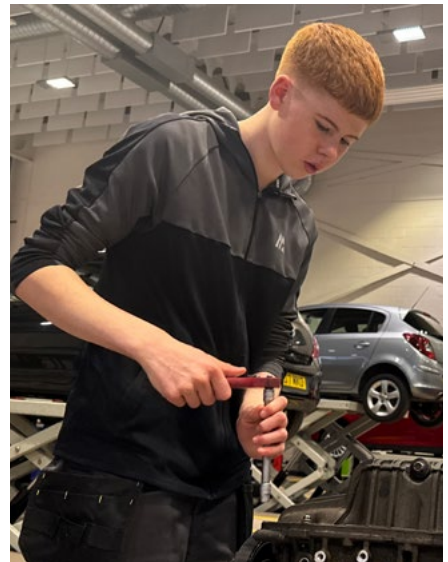
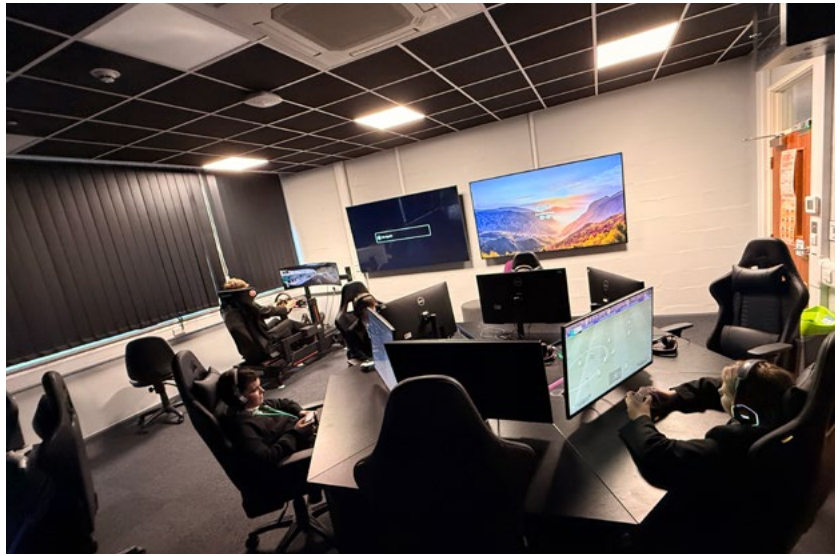
Already, Fylde Coast Academy Trust is in the early stages of developing a themed Key Stage 3 curriculum that would connect to Compass. This would introduce local economic sectors into the curriculum schema so that every subject – from history to maths – has up to 20% of content related to high-growth regional sectors. Our aim is for careers and employability to run as a continuous thread from the moment a student enters secondary school, rather than as a “bolt on” that begins abruptly in Year 10.

We are also exploring the potential to scale the Compass model to include other Blackpool secondary schools. This would allow us to work with even larger numbers of employers and further education providers, potentially creating a “town-wide” curriculum that is unique to our context. This vision could turn Blackpool into a national beacon for vocational excellence, proving that local authorities and multi-academy trusts can collaborate to address the most complex social challenges.

Finally, we continue to engage with the wider national conversation on curriculum innovation. This includes an FE working group and ongoing links with similar initiatives, such as Lancaster University's complementary but distinct approach, the [Morecambe Bay Curriculum](#). These connections will continue to inform our thinking as the Compass model evolves.

Overall, the Compass Curriculum is suitable as a blueprint for any multi-academy trust leader who believes that education should be the primary engine of social mobility. Rather than prioritising metrics, it places the individual first and bridges the gap between school and the professional world.







The world is changing fast and education needs to keep up. Edge is an independent, politically impartial education foundation. We want education to be relevant to the twenty-first century. We gather evidence through research and real world projects and partnerships and use this to lead the debate and influence policy and practice.

Edge believes all young people need to be equipped with the skills that today's global, digital economy demands, through a broad and balanced curriculum, high quality training, engaging real world learning and rich relationships between education and employers.

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