



# The Brunts Academy, Nottinghamshire

Digital Development Grant Recipient



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## background

Based in the centre of Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, The Brunts Academy is a large secondary school and is part of the Evolve Trust. With over 1,500 students on roll, the school specialises in the performing arts and believes all young people are entitled to a first-class education, irrespective of starting points, postcode, financial disadvantage, or Special Educational Need. The school has a key focus on innovative, 21st Century learning and wanted to explore ways of creating new opportunities for its high number of pupil premium students.

## the project

The Brunts Academy applied for TMC's Digital Development Grant, a £4,000 fund designed to empower schools, arts organisations, and youth settings to trial and test ideas around digital delivery over a 12-month period. The school's application was successful and in 2021 embarked on procuring Virtual Reality (VR) headsets for their pupil premium students. The project idea focused on empowering young people to create their own VR experiences to explore topics such as ancient Rome, supporting mental health issues, and working with local primary schools to build links within the community.

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## at a glance

- The Brunts Academy is a large secondary school and is part of the Evolve Trust
- The school has over 1,500 students on roll and believes all young people are entitled to a first-class education, irrespective of starting points, postcode, financial disadvantage, or Special Educational Need
- The Brunts Academy received a £4,000 grant to support a creative project using Virtual Reality (VR), designed for pupil premium students
- Students have grown in confidence, made new friends, shared their learning and VR creations with peers, supported primary school students, and addressed mental health needs

the mighty creatives  
education



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### Q&A with Niall Mellers, Teacher of Computer Science

#### How did you hear about the grant, and what made you apply?

I joined the school after the grant application had been submitted, but when I heard about it and was asked to get involved it was a no brainer. The school is very keen on 21st Century learning and innovation; it's an important part of our culture, so the grant was a great fit for us. I worked with colleagues on the initial research phase, along with the digital and arts departments and took over leading the project when a colleague left the school. Personally, I was just excited to start using exciting new technologies.

#### Can you tell us a bit about your project?

Originally, the purpose was to give young people experiences they couldn't access due to the Covid-19 lockdown or the area they live – all through virtual reality (VR). The focus was on offering experiences they missed during lockdown. Our students have been able to explore myriad cultural places across the globe including: virtual tours of the space station; using a geographic app to explore various countries across Africa; take boat trips across the world; and

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have also been able to take part in virtual trips to theme parks. None of those could happen due to the Covid-19 restrictions we faced, and some of our students would only be able to access them through school trips even before the pandemic.

Since then, our students have created their own arts and cultural VR experiences. They've built a Roman village, created 'escape rooms', and are building so many creative virtual spaces. Two of our Year 8 students are using the equipment to create a virtual tour of our school, which will enable primary students, SEN students, or students with social anxiety to visit our school using VR even if they can't visit physically.

#### What did you hope to achieve?

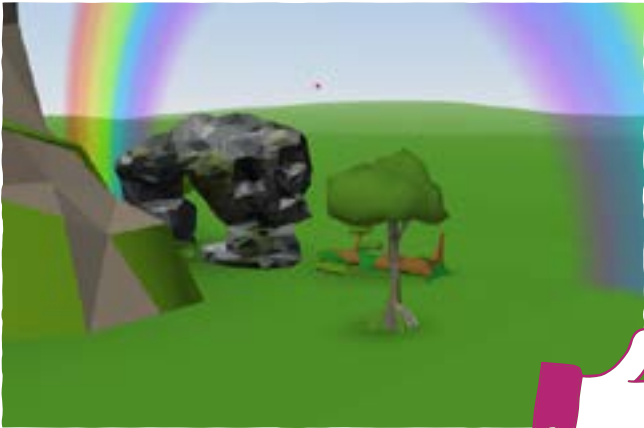
Our priority is often to support our pupil premium students. We have lots of clubs that we run, but what we found was some students already had access to VR at home. Using this funding, we've been able to reach those who don't have that access at home. It was all new and interesting to them.

There's also been a core focus on improving our students' mental health; one main way we've tackled that was to incorporate arts and cultural elements into our VR project. Using a program called Gravity Sketch, students have been able to sculpt things virtually, and there's also been loads of crucial collaboration with students teaching other students how to use the VR equipment - so that peer-to-peer learning has been lovely to see. We're also attached to a few primary schools, and we're planning to take the VR headsets over, along with the experiences our students have been creating, so that the primary students can explore them.





So many of the students have really come out of their shell. They've grown in confidence and are working on long-term projects with the VR equipment now. They've really enjoyed it!



### what impact has the project had on students?

What we hoped for was to provide our students with opportunities to experience things they haven't been afforded before – empower them to create new ideas, to showcase those ideas to others so they can continue socialisation (even in the midst of lockdown), and to build confidence. In particular, we really wanted to build the confidence of our pupil premium students. We recognised this as a challenge, which was exacerbated by the pandemic.

The group ended up becoming their own 'bubble' during lockdown; they've all made new friends, they've taught each other how to make things, they've shared their creations, and are all looking forward to showing these to local primary schools soon.

So many of the students have really come out of their shell. They've grown in confidence and are working on long-term projects with the VR equipment now. They've really enjoyed it. We're planning an event for parents to showcase the work the group has created since the start of this amazing project.

### why do you think funding for these projects is so important for young people?



For us, it gave both teachers and students the opportunity to do something we'd never normally dream of doing. We had way more freedom than in a typical school learning environment. It gave us all time to be really creative with the activities, away from the marking and paperwork. This project wasn't about how well a student performed in a test; it was about providing new, exciting experiences for them.

It's also created so many new creative experiences for our students. Even though we're a digital department, all of the VR experiences our students have created or taken part in include storytelling, arts and culture, and masses of creativity by its very nature.





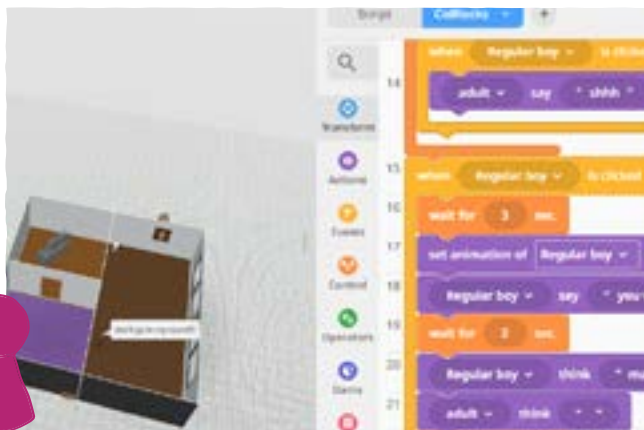
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### what's next?

We're now hoping to roll out the VR equipment across the curriculum and other age groups, and are hoping it can become a key element of planning for various subjects.

Throughout the wider school, we're planning to offer the headsets out to loan to other subjects, so it can be used in lessons for sculpting, sixth formers will be able to use 3D painting apps, and geography and science departments are planning on offering VR experiences like the Space Station tour and combining it with the geographic app. There are even plans for it to be used in English lessons, enabling students to explore a virtual tour of Anne Frank's house.



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### what advice would you give to other schools or organisations that are considering applying for funding?

Focus on being creative and experimenting. If you think an idea's good, but you're not sure it will work, give it a go! You have the time and freedom to explore it, so focus on being creative and experimental, and you'll end up creating some of the most creative and valuable opportunities for your students.

### how did you find working with TMC?

We had regular meetings with TMC so that we could provide updates on the project. It was also helpful to meet with other grant recipients at a digital sharing event. We shared our experiences and it was really interesting to see the range of projects these grants have helped to bring to life. and hear about their experiences. Sometimes you can worry about proving what you have achieved when you've received a substantial amount of funding like this, but the whole experience with TMC was a breath of fresh air and just really supportive.

### how would you sum up the experience?

A lot of fun! The focus was on ensuring the students enjoyed themselves and were happy. It was fun, creative, and offered heaps of new experiences for some of our most vulnerable students.