

The educational provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in Further Education in England

Interim Report – executive summary

**The Association of Colleges and IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education
and Society**

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ASSOCIATION
OF COLLEGES



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We are especially grateful to everyone who has participated in this research to date.

1.1 Introduction

This interim report is the first output from a two-year project on the educational provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in Further Education (FE) in England. It sets out the initial findings from a survey of colleges in England on the educational provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in FE and 19 semi-structured interviews that were undertaken with leaders of this provision. Staff perceptions from the surveys and interviews were largely positive about the value of the provision. The next stage of the project will explore these findings further including analysis of the outcomes and progression for students and the perspectives of the learners themselves.

Background

Approximately 180 FE colleges (AoC, 2023¹) in England provide education for 14 to 16-year-olds who have found that mainstream school does not meet their needs. This cohort of approximately 10,000 young people includes three groups of learners: 1. students on alternative provision (AP), some of whom have been excluded from school and some of whom have not, 2. electively home educated (EHE) learners who attend FE for up to 16 hours per week and 3. full-time students termed direct entry (DE) who have chosen to study in FE.

While attention has been paid to lower attaining 16 to 18-year-olds in FE, especially those who have not attained pass grades in GCSE English and maths currently there is no published research on the collective experience of 14 to 16-year-olds receiving part or all of their education in colleges. These students are often invisible in government policy due to falling between school and FE. There is no coherent understanding of the curriculum and wider support offered, whether this varies according to local decision-making arrangements and what factors contribute to success or not. The project will address the research gap through an analysis of the profiles of these young people; gather evidence to understand the provision offered and levels of attainment, and through interviews and case studies evidence the complexities of transition including the supportive and inhibiting factors contributing to educational progression, whether this is sufficient and how this varies across regions.

1.2 Aims and objectives of the research

The aim of the project is to investigate the opportunities and trajectories for 14 to 16-year-olds educated in FE in England.

The overarching research questions are:

¹ AoC (2023) Internal document: College ILR/MiDES (Market Intelligence Data Exchange Service) data 2022/23.

1. What are the characteristics and profiles of these learners and do these remain stable over time?
2. What is the educational offer/provision that these young people receive?
3. What are the experiences and factors that enable young people to develop their potential and does this vary across the three groups of learners?
4. How does the social ecosystem function at the individual, institutional and community level to enable young people to develop their potential and what are the barriers within this?

The project will provide:

- An in-depth understanding of who post-14 learners in FE are including identification of regional variations, how this reflects local/national needs and the implications arising from this.
- Analysis of the curriculum and support offered and how this differs across the groups of learners.
- Evidence of the transition into 14 to 16 provision, including choice and agency and barriers to progression.
- Analysis of transition patterns post-16, the supportive and inhibiting factors and how this varies across regions.

These outcomes will be used to:

- Evidence the role and scale of FE based 14 to 16 provision.
- Inform the provision offered by colleges at national, local and institutional levels.
- Provide an evidence base for practitioners to develop classroom delivery.
- Raise the profile of these learners to policy makers.
- Influence policy, funding, and accountability decisions at a national level.
- Identify system factors within FE, the local community and nationally that enhance opportunities for these young people.

Overall, the research will improve our understanding of the complexity of post-14 transitions into FE for vulnerable learners, the factors that support them to progress and how FE contributes to this. Recommendations will be made for policy and practice.

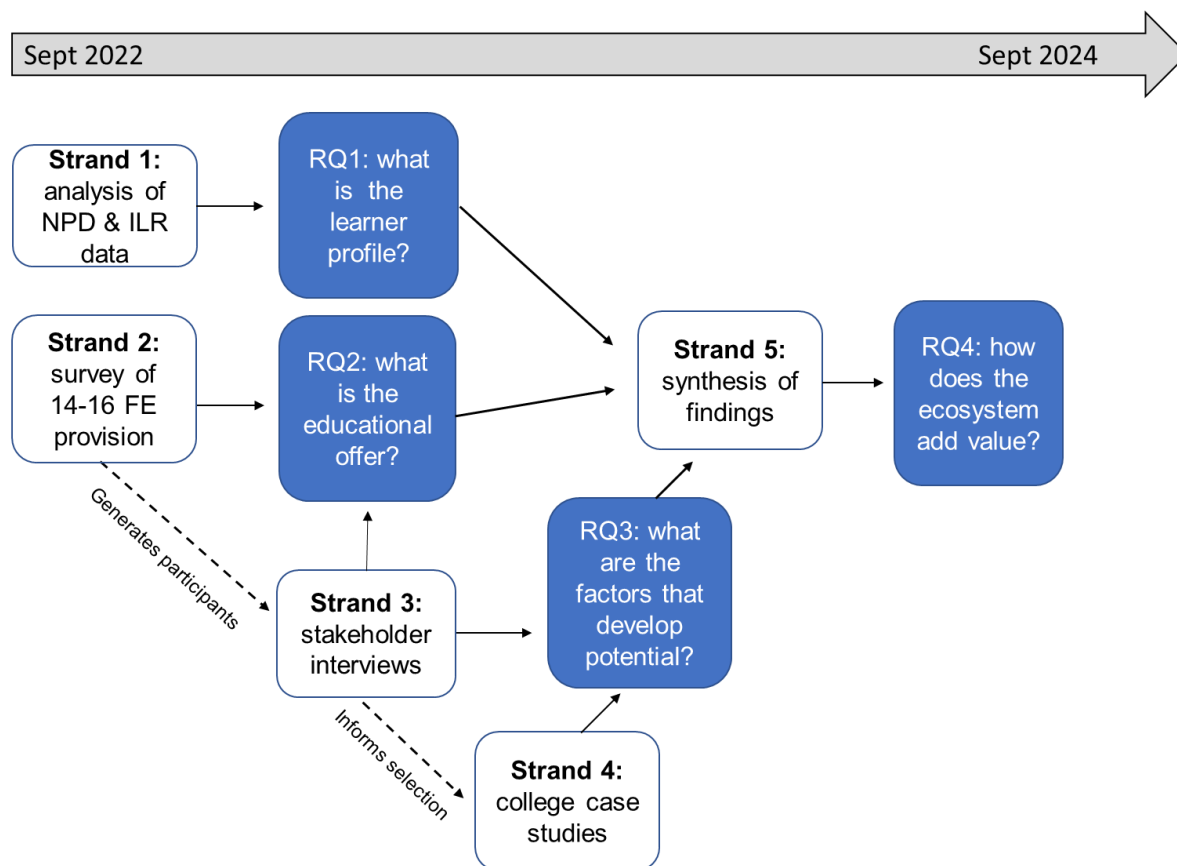
1.3 Methodology and data included in the interim report

Overall design

A five-stage mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach has been adopted for the research (see Figure 1). Through triangulation of evidence, it will be possible to provide the first large-scale research contribution about the educational offer, experience, and progression of 14 to 16-year-olds in FE, many of whom are

highly vulnerable, at risk of disengagement from education and of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Figure 1: The research design



Strands 1 and 2 will provide a national picture of 14 to 16-year-old educational provision in FE colleges in England. To date this information does not exist. Strand 3 delivers a more refined description of the provision offered especially the local educational and social ecosystem and facilitates the selection of the case study colleges. Strand 4, through in-depth case studies, provides rich descriptions and analysis of the systems and processes that enable the different groups of learners to develop their potential from the perspectives of all stakeholders. In Strand 5 synthesis of the findings from Strands 1–4 will provide insights into how the local and national social ecosystems are functioning to support young people and the barriers and inhibiting factors within in this.

Data included in the interim report

This interim report sets out the initial findings from Strand 2: the survey of colleges in England and Strand 3: interviews with leaders of 14 to 16-year-old provision across 19 colleges. Work on Strands 1, 4 and 5 is ongoing and will be presented in the final project report.

An online survey was distributed to all colleges in England in January 2023 with participation closing in February 2023. This included GFE, sixth form, land-based

and specialist colleges. The intention was to capture responses from colleges that offered provision for 14 to 16-year-olds and those that did not. In the case of the latter group the aim was to understand the reasons why provision was not offered and what could be learned from this. Of the 227 colleges in England at the time of the survey valid responses were received from 72 institutions, a response rate of 32%. Unsurprisingly most respondents were from GFE colleges (see Table 1).

Table 1: Type of college - survey respondents compared to national colleges

Type of college	Survey respondents		Colleges in England	
	Number (N)	Percent	Number (N)	Percent
GFE college	61	84.7	160	70.5
Land-based college	4	5.6	11	4.8
Sixth form college	6	8.3	44	19.4
Specialist college	1	1.4	12	5.3

Survey respondents spanned different geographical locations across England although there were fewer respondents from Greater London than might have been anticipated and larger numbers of respondents from the North East and East than might have been anticipated (see Table 2).

Table 2: Location of college - survey respondents compared to national colleges

Location of college	Survey respondents		Colleges in England	
	Number (N)	Percent	Number (N)	Percent
East	10	13.9	22	9.7
East Midlands	5	6.9	14	6.2
Greater London	6	8.3	32	14.1
North East	9	12.5	15	6.6
North West	12	16.7	39	17.2
South East	10	13.9	34	15
South West	6	8.3	22	9.7
West Midlands	6	8.3	23	10.1
Yorkshire and the Humber	8	11.1	26	11.5

Data collected explored the breadth of the curriculum offer including how this embraces academic, technical, and vocational education, the qualifications offered and at what level, and employer engagement. Attention was given to support put in place to meet the wider needs of students, enrichment, employability, and student progression. The survey also explored the impact of Covid-19 on these learners. The survey contained a mix of categorical questions, rating scale-questions, multiple choice and open-ended questions.

In Strand 3 of the research 19 online semi-structured interviews with senior leaders of the 14 to 16-year-old provision were undertaken. Colleges were drawn from different geographical regions – rural, urban, coastal, supporting different groups of learners (AP, DE, EHE), of different sizes of provision, from local authorities (LAs) of different sizes and representing different levels of social deprivation.

Questions focused on the rationale for the provision offered, how this fits the strategic mission of the college, its place in the community and educational ecosystem, and challenges, opportunities, and barriers. Participants were asked to describe the set up and operation of the 14 to 16-year-old provision, how students are recruited and their progression pathways, the perceived impact of the provision and any distinguishing features.

The research was undertaken within the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and approved by the IOE ethics committee.

1.4 Initial findings

The profile of 14 to 16-year-old provision offered in FE colleges

From the 72 valid survey responses, a total of 56 colleges offered 14 to 16-year-old provision and 16 did not. For those offering provision 49 offered AP, 10 offered DE and 32 offered EHE across many geographical regions in England. Many colleges offered more than one type of provision, hence the difference in totals.

Unsurprisingly most provision for 14 to 16-year-olds was in GFE colleges with small amounts of provision in land-based and sixth form colleges. When considering the type of location, most provision was situated in urban locations.

Looking across the responses it was apparent that over half (57.2%) of colleges offered more than one type of provision for 14 to 16-year-olds. The most common combination was AP and EHE, with AP only also accounting for a large proportion of the provision offered.

There was high variability in the number of 14 to 16-year-olds enrolled in each college, regardless of whether this was AP, DE or EHE. Some provision was for small groups of learners up to 50, medium sized provision up to 100 with larger provision comprising groups of 150 or more students. The median number of 14 to 16-year-olds for AP was 28, for DE 55.5 and EHE 64.5.

Given that DE students are required to be in full time education it was not surprising that the mean staff FTE for people working on this provision in total across the college was higher than for AP and EHE: 10.5 for DE, and 5.2 and 5.4 for AP and EHE respectively. This was also true of the number of staff employed solely for the 14 to 16-year-old provision: DE mean 9.27, AP: 4.67 and EHE 2.84.

Responses from the survey reflected the variability in the contact hours that AP and EHE students have. For example, some young people may have been EHE for many years and hence are only attending college for a few hours each week as part of a process towards engaging with formal education.

The rationale and vision of 14 to 16-year-old provision in FE

Colleges offering 14 to 16 provision have reacted to a perceived growth in young people with needs that schools can't address (e.g. because of issues with academic emphasis or a school culture in which some young people could not flourish). This provision was perceived by college staff to have widespread benefits for the community: schools have more options for dealing with incompatibilities in their students, local communities see a drop in exclusions, a reduction in NEETs, and a corresponding fall in the societal difficulties that such circumstances can lead to. As such the provision was usually positively regarded by local schools. Also important was that the 14 to 16 provision offered support and a way forward for EHE learners. All provision was described as responsive to local needs as long as funding was available. Non-participating colleges usually cited pre-existing provision within the locality or a reluctance to take on the safeguarding issues associated with an acceptance of 14 to 16 year olds into college.

A diverse group of young people

A common theme across the interviewees was that mainstream school wasn't working for AP, DE or EHE learners whether this was in relation to issues or concerns that schools did not seem able to address such as bullying, mental health or special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), or in relation to a school curriculum that lacked vocational and technical options that students were more interested in. Evident also was that AP, DE and EHE learners included a full range of abilities. Among EHE students where parents had chosen to follow the EHE route, parents often brought high expectations with them of what college could offer.

Recruitment of students/application process

Interviewees described rigorous application processes for 14 to 16-year-olds that were designed specifically for these groups of learners given the range of applicant circumstances and individual needs. Diagnostic assessment of individual needs was important, and taster days/induction periods were used to further assess how successfully colleges could support applicants in the longer term. Formal qualifications were not widely used as entry criteria, though assessment of the ability to progress and commit to a vocational route was relevant for learners undertaking a

vocational pathway. In colleges adopting an infill approach² to the curriculum, applicants needed to demonstrate that they had the maturity to work alongside older students. Parents were engaged in the application process and most often colleges used this as an opportunity to explain what the provision offered and the expectations of parents and their child. Across all interviewees, the essential criteria for admission was whether the college could meet the individual needs of each applicant.

Curriculum models and approaches

The curriculum offer in terms of its flexibility and depth, and its emphasis on vocational learning, was attractive to 14 to 16-year-old learners who valued the opportunities for hands-on activities and the practical elements of teaching. Most interviewees emphasized the importance of choice and of how the curriculum was individualized to the needs and interests of the learners regardless of whether they were AP, DE or EHE.

There was evidence of the importance of wider enrichment activities for all learners, which, in addition to the wider college offer, were frequently tailored to 14 to 16-year-olds for example, speakers and trips, and community based-projects. In several colleges, well-being and personal development was given prominence in the curriculum with dedicated, timetabled sessions. In general, work experience, for example, was easier to arrange if students were full time, but there were many imaginative illustrations of work experience among part-time students.

Of particular importance was how the ethos of the college learning environment was felt to support 14 to 16-year-olds in their educational and personal development. This was effectively captured in the following quotation from a survey respondent:

The classroom isn't the right learning environment for everyone. We have the flexibility in an FE college to deliver more vocational hands-on learning and entwine pastoral and well-being support into the day to day. Some students need this different approach, and this is a huge benefit to them and their progression, well-being and development.

Pastoral/student support

All colleges recognized pastoral care as a significant part of the 14 to 16 offer, central to the success of their provision. Staff working with these young people were perceived to have a good understanding of how to work with them, with relationships with students being key to success. Given the vulnerability of these learners a strong emphasis was given to well-being and mental health as part of pastoral roles in addition to external support from LAs and other organizations. Attendance was monitored carefully and absence was acted on promptly with calls to the parent, carer or/and school. Knowing the location of every learner was often mentioned as a

² An infill approach is where the 14 to 16-year-old students typically have their vocational specialisms taught in the wider college alongside older students, often by college staff who are not part of the main 14–16 teaching team.

crucial aspect of safeguarding. Engagement with parents, carers, or even families was often said to be strong, and was echoed among survey respondents, though this was not universal. An important part of communication with parents and carers was regular updates from the college on what was going well which could be a powerful experience for parents/carers whose previous contact with teachers may have been the regular reporting of only poor behaviour.

The survey gave respondents an opportunity to comment on the impact of Covid-19 on 14 to 16 learners. Unsurprisingly high percentages of respondents perceived that student well-being had suffered, how learners had struggled with isolation and how students were behind in their learning. An increase in referrals linked to Covid-19 was reported.

Student progression

Across interviewees and survey respondents there was evidence to indicate that the quality of careers advice and guidance was high and supported learners in their post-16 progression. As with enrichment, students benefited from the expertise across the wider college Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) team in addition to support from within their 14 to 16-year-old provision. Among survey respondents and interviewees transition to FE post-16, whether in the same or a different college, was the most common progression pathway. Progression to an apprenticeship was seen across all groups of learners, but not in all colleges. In some instances the qualifications gained in the 14 to 16-year-old provision meant that students could progress to higher level qualifications than school students starting at age 16.

The educational and community ecosystem

Many interviewees spoke of strong engagement and good relationships with the local authority (LA) and of working well with schools and the community. The involvement of FE staff on Fair Access Panels, the local education forum or behaviour panels within the LA was a testament to this. These forums were important in raising the profile of the provision offered by colleges and meant that colleges had prior knowledge of students likely to be referred. There were instances of strong engagement with the local EHE community and the widening of catchment areas for EHE learners was noted by several participants. Where AP students were part time, communication with schools varied. Also apparent was that colleges often worked with diverse communities for example the Gypsy, Roma and traveller community.

There was clear evidence of engagement with employers and of how students benefited from this, especially since employers often reflected the wider college specialism and local community. For some part-time students, these opportunities were somewhat restricted due to the timetable.

1.5 Initial reflections and next steps

Much has been learned about the educational provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in FE from the survey respondents and interviewees who have kindly participated in this research to date.

These initial findings suggest that:

- Colleges are committed to this provision and are providing meaningful opportunities for these young people to flourish and progress their educational journeys.
- Colleges are offering provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in many parts of England with many colleges offering provision for more than one group of learners. Most provision is in urban locations.
- Although overall numbers of 14 to 16-year-olds in FE are relatively small, there is variability in the number of learners enrolled in each college, regardless of whether this is AP, DE or EHE.
- Colleges view this provision as a fresh start for these young people and in so doing are responding to the needs of the local community and the LA.
- The 14 to 16-year-olds attending college, whether AP, DE or EHE are a diverse group of young people, who have different needs, and include students with a range of abilities.
- Among interviewees, there was a strong sense that mainstream school isn't working for these young people – whether that is in relation to individual needs that have not been met or in relation to a school curriculum that lacked vocational and technical options that students were more interested in. These students are looking for a fresh start and for something different.
- Colleges have developed rigorous application and recruitment procedures that are tailored to 14 to 16-year-olds. At the heart of this is understanding the needs of each individual student in relation to what the college can offer.
- The flexibility of the curriculum offer in terms of its breadth and depth, and its emphasis on vocational learning, is attractive to 14 to 16-year-old learners who valued the opportunities for hands-on activities and the practical elements of teaching.
- In providing for these young people, importance is placed on subject choice and of how the curriculum is individualized to the needs and interests of the learners regardless of whether they are AP, DE or EHE.
- Enrichment activities, including trips, speakers, work experience and well-being support the wider personal and social development of these young people.
- The learning environment at college, as distinct from mainstream school, is supporting the development of these learners – smaller class sizes, a more adult environment, less rigid than school, flexibility.
- All colleges recognized pastoral care as a significant part of the 14 to 16 offer, central to the success of their provision. Central to this is the appointment of

staff who understand how to work with these learners, and who are able to build strong student/teacher relationships.

- Safeguarding and attendance monitoring are done with care and in support of these learners. Strong systems are in place to ensure effective communication with parents/carers and schools.
- Covid-19 impacted on the well-being of these learners with some struggling with isolation and being behind in their learning.
- Progression rates were reported to be high with most 14 to 16-year-olds transitioning into college post-16. Students receive high quality career guidance and advice in support of this.
- The 14 to 16-year-old provision offered by colleges is part of the local educational ecosystem. Where these local ecosystems are working well, this is underpinned by strong collaborative relationships with the LA and the local community including employers, parents and carers.

Perceived barriers and concerns

Throughout the report there has been mention of perceived barriers and concerns about offering 14 to 16-year-old educational provision in FE especially arising from the needs of these young people and how these can be met. Allied to this was the on-going impact of Covid-19 where high percentages of respondents perceived that student well-being had suffered, how learners had struggled with isolation and how students were behind in their learning. Here these emerging issues are brought together. These issues and the approaches to overcoming these will be explored in more depth during the case study visits.

On a practical level the presence of 14 to 16-year-olds in FE necessitates additional safeguarding requirements. In the case of DE learners, for example, there is an obligation for learners to have a secure space solely occupied by them which does come at a cost. It was also evident in the report that colleges were monitoring attendance with care often on a lesson-by-lesson basis in addition to the rich offer to support pastoral care and well-being. Indeed, among colleges that did not offer provision for 14 to 16-year-olds there were concerns about there being too many safeguarding challenges and the cost of these.

Often these challenges were linked to the lack of funding to support the additional requirements of these young people, as is captured in the following comment from a survey participant:

The pastoral support required is greater than any department of the college proportionately, safeguarding and welfare intervention is so high that the fees do not cover the costs of the provision.

For DE and EHE students, the funding model for 14 to 16-year-olds in FE is based on the 16 to 19 funding model, which is less generous than the approach adopted for 14 to 16-year-olds in mainstream secondary schools. As one survey participant

commented: 'the 14 to 16 learners have delivery of 25 hours core curriculum on 16 to 18 funding which usually needs delivery of 15 hours on average'.

Concerns about the availability of funding were also expressed in relation to the young people themselves, who were unable to access travel bursaries and, among EHE learners particularly, who could not access funding for free-school meals. Comments were also made about the lack of access to higher needs funding.

Aside from funding issues, the other prominent concern was that of effective communication, either in relation to schools where information sharing could be poor or with some parents who, although involved in the admission process, were hard to reach.

There appeared to be some variability in levels of employer engagement, especially among survey respondents. While some of these concerns seemed to arise from the amount of contact time part-time learners had in college, there were wider concerns about the extent that employers played an active role in college.

Notwithstanding these concerns, interviewees spoke of how colleges were doing their utmost to provide an effective learning environment for these learners. Finding solutions to challenges was often described as part of the ongoing process of developing the provision rather than an obstacle in their path. Underpinning this was a whole college approach and a high level of commitment to these young people.

Next steps

1. Analysis of the linked ILR and NPD data is underway and includes 14 to 16-year-olds in FE from 2015–2016 to 2021–22. The analysis will provide a comprehensive picture of the student characteristics of 14 to 16-year-olds in FE and their progression pathways. The dataset will enable us to show whether the patterns and make-up of the cohort are stable or change over time, how this varies across regions and whether patterns have changed due to Covid-19. It will also support us in understanding in more detail student progression from the 14 to 16 phase.
2. The first set of fieldwork visits to the 10 case study colleges has been completed. The second set of fieldwork visits to these colleges will take place in the Spring and Summer Term 2024. These visits will collect qualitative data from learners and alumni, parents/carers, teaching and support staff, governors, LA representatives, and employers. This will enable a more detailed understanding about the experiences of the 14 to 16-year-olds themselves, the destinations of the young people, the reasons for their choices, contributing factors, challenges and barriers, and indicators of success.
3. In the final part of the research the findings from all the different elements of this project will be synthesized to enable us to identify the factors contributing to the educational experiences in FE during age 14 to 16 at the individual,

institutional, community and national level. This work will culminate in the final project report and include recommendations for policy and practice.