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

# Interim Report

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

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**Acknowledgements**

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# 1 INTRODUCTION, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

## 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 findings reported here are therefore restricted to staff perceptions.

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. One important element of this next stage of the project is the interrogation of quantitative data gained through analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD) data that is linked to data from the Individual Learner Record (ILR). The linkage of these sets of data will enable us to provide a comprehensive picture of the student characteristics of 14 to 16-year-olds in FE and their progression pathways. The importance of this should not be underestimated given the lack of publicly available data on 14 to 16-year-olds in FE. The other important element of this next stage of the project is learning from the students themselves and wider stakeholders such as parents/carers, employers, local authority representatives and governors. These voices are missing from the data reported here.

## 1.2 Background

Approximately 180 FE colleges out of 227 (AoC, 2023a) 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 students on alternative provision (AP), some of whom have been excluded from school and some of whom have not, electively home educated (EHE) learners who attend FE for up to 16 hours per week and 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 (Lupton et al., 2021), 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 include non-attenders, those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those who are disengaged from mainstream education.

Young people receiving AP in schools including Pupil Referral Units attain extremely poor GCSE outcomes compared to their peers and have higher levels of SEN (CJS, 2020; Timpson review, 2019). Among EHE learners, although a highly

heterogeneous group, it is acknowledged that children moving to EHE often have complex needs and the lack of national data on educational outcomes raises questions about attainment and progression (HoC, 2021). Regarding DE students, colleges report that their 14 to 16 learners often have complex learning and pastoral needs and are at risk of exclusion or becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Sezen, 2018).

Previous research has drawn attention to transitions at age 14 (Cook et al., 2014; Thorley, 2017) particularly in relation to university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools. Noteworthy is that the growth in 14–19 institutions occurred during the period when the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) led to a reduction in young people taking non-EBacc subjects and vocational qualifications (Rogers and Spours, 2021). UTCs and studio schools were distinctive not just in terms of 14 plus entry but in the delivery of a curriculum that offered high quality vocational and technical education alongside academic qualifications. Indeed, evidence suggests that the young people who are the focus of this research project are attracted to vocational and technical qualifications (Gutherson et al., 2011), something that is at the bedrock of FE institutions.

There is little collective knowledge of this heterogenous group. They 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. This 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.

**Education for 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges: an historical perspective**
Colleges have been working with 14 to 16 year old students in colleges for many years through AP, link or day courses, Increased Flexibility (Golden et al., 2005) and Young Apprenticeship (NFER, 2010) programmes and Aim Higher (McCaig et al., 2008) initiatives. For the purposes of this report the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act is taken as a starting point which stated in section 18 that an FE college is permitted to provide secondary education suitable to the requirements of persons who have attained the age of fourteen years.

In response to the Green Paper, 14–19: Extending opportunities, raising standards, 2002 saw the introduction of the Increased Flexibility Programme by the then Department for Education and Skills aimed at young people in Key Stage 4 who would benefit from a college based vocational option. Students attended college one

day a week in years 10 and 11 usually working towards a Level 1 vocational qualification. The programme was seen as successful in that most of those in the first cohort continued in education or training post-16 (Golden et al., 2005). Students liked the practical approach to learning and could see connections with the programme of study and the world of work.

In 2004 The Young Apprenticeship programme for young people in Key Stage 4 working towards a Level 2 vocational qualification was rolled out with learners spending up to two days a week in the workplace (NFER, 2010). Both programmes saw many hundreds of young people attending college. The vocational qualifications learners achieved were regarded as 'equivalent' qualifications (qualifications other than GCSEs) and contributed to the overall point scores that were calculated for students at the end of KS4 and included in government league tables at that time. In 2011, as an outcome of the Wolf Review, the value of these technical qualifications in Performance Tables was significantly reduced. Increased Flexibility and Young Apprenticeship Programmes came to an end as they were considered costly and only benefited a relatively small number of students.

In 2008 the 14 to 19 Diplomas were introduced. These modular courses combined theoretical study with practical experience in the chosen subject, as well as core training via Functional Skills and Personal Learning. Diplomas were intended to include collaboration between schools and colleges, with students studying in both environments over a week. The 14 to 19 Diplomas were short lived, ending in 2010 without reaching a full rollout. The majority of the small number of students who worked towards a Diploma achieved a higher or Level 2 equivalent qualification (Featherstone et al., 2011).

The 2011 Wolf Review of vocational and technical education recommended that colleges should offer students who would benefit from a college based vocational option a full-time KS4 programme and be subject to the same performance indicators as schools. From September 2013 new legislation meant that FE colleges and sixth form colleges could enrol and access direct funding for 14 to 16-year-olds who wished to study high-quality vocational qualifications alongside general qualifications including English and maths (DfE, 2014). This was the start of the DE provision and also meant that colleges could enrol EHE students.

The subsequent introduction of new accountability measures including the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in 2011, and Attainment 8 and Progress 8 in 2016 (DfE 2016) also influenced the educational landscape for 14 to 16-year-olds (see Rogers and Spours, 2020). Evidence suggests that a greater number of 14 to 16-year-olds in school were 'encouraged' to take EBacc subjects which contributed significantly to Progress 8 scores and consequently students had a limited curriculum choice (Rogers and Spours, 2020). School teachers were concerned that the restriction of subjects might increase disengagement, particularly among lower-attaining students

(Neumann et al., 2016). Anecdotal evidence from FE staff indicated that schools were so focused on Progress 8 that they no longer wanted students to undertake vocational qualifications in colleges. As a consequence the number of disengaged 14 to 16-year-old students in FE dropped significantly (L. Rogers, personal communication, March 2016). Indeed, one of the interviewees who took part in this research commented:

> We used to have busloads of students in from local secondary schools for hairdressing or bricklaying – hundreds of them… That all changed when schools had to put everybody through so many GCSEs as a result of Progress 8.

**Current provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in FE**
While there is a variety of ways in which colleges engage with Key Stage 4 students including school link (one day a week provision) and taster days, there are now three main types of college based 14 to 16 provision: AP, DE and EHE.

Alternative provision

In terms of numbers of students, AP is the largest college based 14 to 16 offer. Just under 6,000 14 to 16-year-olds access college based AP provision in England across 181 or 80% of colleges (AoC, 2023a). AP can be full or part time and is tailored to student needs. Students stay on the roll of a school or pupil referral unit. Funding is determined at a local level. Exploration of the National Pupil Database (NPD) in the second year of the project will enable a clearer analysis of this group of students.

Direct Entry provision

In line with the recommendations of the Wolf Report (2011), college based DE provision for 14 to 16-year-olds was subsequently introduced in 2013 (DfE, 2014). From the onset the number of colleges offering DE provision has remained small and has never increased above 19, with the suggestion being that this has been due to a funding model whereby basic per pupil funding for 14 to 16-year-olds in FE is less than their peers in mainstream schools and college reputational concerns over Ofsted judgements about Progress 8 scores that would be inevitably lower than schools (Noble, 2023). In 2023 13 colleges are signed up to deliver in the 2023–2024 academic year. Currently there are around 1,500 students in DE provision (AoC, 2023a). Funding is based on 16 to 18 rates. There is an expectation that colleges will deliver full time (25 hours a week) provide a broad and balanced curriculum and offer specific accommodation and leadership for 14 to 16 students (DfE, 2023).

Electively Home Educated provision

Around 75 colleges (AoC, 2023a) offer provision for EHE students aged 14 to 16. Around two and half thousand students access this provision currently. These students are enrolled and funded, at the 16 to 18 funding rate, for part-time courses

only, that is fewer than 580 hours per year. There is no nationally prescribed model for provision (DfE, 2023). Students often study English and maths and may also take a vocational qualification.

## 1.3   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. 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 do these 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.

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.

## 2   METHODOLOGY

### 2.1   Overall design

A five-stage mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach has been adopted for the research (see Figure 2.1). 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 NEET. 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.

Figure 2.1: The research design
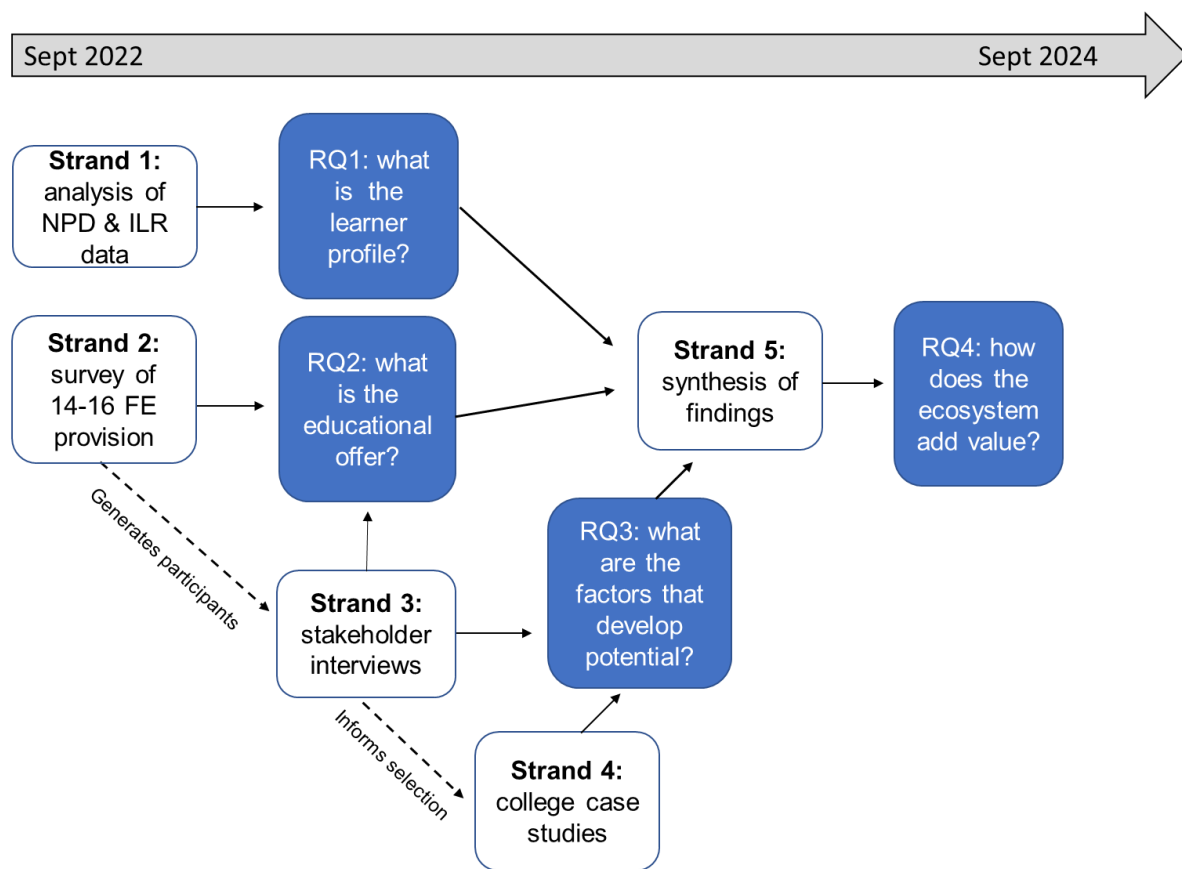
Strand 1: Analysis of linked National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individual Learner Record (ILR) data

This strand focuses on the analysis of data from both the ILR and NPD datasets to provide a detailed picture of the 14 to 16-year-old cohort in FE colleges in England. Linking student records from the ILR and NPD datasets will allow us to understand the student experience immediately prior to the 14 to 16 phase and their subsequent progression into further education at 16 years of age. The dataset will consider cohorts from 2015–2016 to 2021–22.  RCU, as the long-term data partner of AoC is undertaking this work.

The analysis will provide a comprehensive picture of the student characteristics and their progression pathways. Data will be presented on the collective but also available on student subgroups based on DE, AP or EHE provision. Close attention will be paid within the data reporting to where student numbers may be very low – and any impact this might have on the analysis. We made a successful application to the DfE for access to this data and analysis has begun.

Strand 2: Survey of national FE 14 to 16 provision

This strand directly addresses RQ2 and contributes to RQ4. Data was collected from college leaders via a sector wide survey of all colleges in England.  More detail is provided below.

Strand 3: Semi-structured interviews with senior leaders of the 14 to 16-year-old provision

The purpose of Strand 3 was twofold: 1. To enrich the level of detail about the 14 to 16-year-old provision offered in colleges, specifically in relation to the local ecosystem, and how provision is operationalised and 2. To assist with the identification of the case study colleges in Strand 4. Strand 3 makes a distinctive contribution to RQ3 and RQ4.

Strand 4: Case studies and qualitative data

Strand 4 will build on and enrich the data gathered in the previous strands to provide in-depth understanding of the complexities of 14 to 16-year-old educational provision and how this is addressed in colleges. This strand addresses RQ3 and contributes to RQ4.

Ten FE colleges have been selected for case study visits. Those selected represent different populations in terms of the range of 14 to 16-year-old provision, type of location, size of college, size of local authority (LA) and level of social deprivation. Each college will be visited on two occasions during the research.

Strand 5: Synthesis and interpretation of findings

Strand 5 answers RQ4. The distinctiveness of Strand 5 brings a focus on different levels of the social-ecosystem and how these function at individual, institutional, community and national levels to support young people and factors that might inhibit this. Ecosystems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) shows how human development results from reciprocal interactions between the young person and the people, objects and symbols around them. Drawing on this theory, Strand 5 will enable us to model how a significant change in environment supports the learner to develop the competence, knowledge and know-how that can lead to improved outcomes.

## 2.2   Data included in the interim report

This interim report sets out the initial findings from Strand 2 – the survey of college 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.

### 2.2.1   The survey

An online survey was distributed to all colleges in England January 2023 with participation closing in February 2023. 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. The survey included GFE, sixth form, land-based and specialist colleges. Of the 227 colleges in England at the time of the survey (AoC, 2023b) valid responses were received from 72 institutions, a response rate of 32%. Unsurprisingly most respondents were from GFE colleges (see Table 2.1). As often happens with surveys, it is possible that there was a non-response bias, with colleges offering provision for 14 to 16-year-olds more likely to respond than those that did not: this will be checked during the analysis of the ILR data. Similarly, where colleges offered 14 to 16-year-old provision, those who viewed this more positively might have responded more frequently than those who did not.

Table 2.1: Type of college across 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 were spanned different geographical locations across England (see Table 2.2) 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.

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.

Table 2.2: Location of college across survey respondents compared to national colleges

| Location of college | Survey respondents | | Colleges in England | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Percent | 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 |

Categorial and rating scale data from the survey was analysed in Excel and SPSS. Data from the open-ended questions was analysed using a thematic approach with key themes identified through an iterative process of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Not all respondents answered all questions, hence the variation in number of respondents (N) throughout the findings.

### 2.2.2 The interviews

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 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 process of analysis of the interviews was guided by the phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019). This iterative process of categorisation seeks to continually refine and test the description as it unfolds. The use of codes enabled the data to be chunked into themes and sub-themes. Interview recordings were fully transcribed. In identifying the quotations and illustrations, care has been taken to anonymise each college and individual respondent as much as possible.

## 2.3   Ethical considerations for Strands 2 and 3

The research was undertaken within the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and approved by the IOE ethics committee. The survey was anonymous. The opening page of the survey explained that by filling in the survey participants would be giving permission for their responses to be analysed as part of the project data: completion of the survey implied consent to participate. It was made clear that responses were anonymous.

All interview participants were provided with a briefing sheet about the research and a consent form prior to agreeing to be interviewed. All participants gave permission for the interviews to be recorded and were informed of the right to withdraw. Following transcription of interviews full text was offered to each interviewee for review. These participants were able to make changes to the interview transcript that they felt were necessary.

# 3   INITIAL FINDINGS

A quantitative description of 14 to 16-year-old provision in England is provided first that identifies the location, breadth and depth of provision including student numbers and staffing: this is based on the survey data. Then follow the findings from the thematic analysis that draw on the interview data and the survey data (including analysis of the open-ended responses). The thematic analysis is grouped into seven main themes and associated sub-themes (see Table 3.1). In reporting the findings all quotations are from interviewees unless it states survey respondent.

Table 3.1: Themes and sub-themes

| Main theme | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| The rationale and vision | A second chance, a fresh start |
| | Meeting the needs of the community |
| | Capacity to meet the needs of young people |
| | Reasons for not offering provision |
| A diverse group of young people | Alternative provision learners |
| | Direct entry learners |
| | Electively home educated learners |
| Application process and recruitment | A rigorous admissions process |
| | Entry criteria - more than a grade |
| | Getting a place |
| Curriculum models | Mode of delivery |
| | A varied curriculum |
| | Enrichment and wider activities |
| | The learning environment |
| Pastoral support | The centrality of pastoral care, well-being and mental health |
| | Attendance safeguarding |
| | Communication with schools |
| | Working with parents and carers |
| | The impact of Covid |
| Student progression | |
| The educational and community ecosystem | The role of the LA and the community in new provision |
| | Collaboration with the LA and schools |
| | Working with employers |

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

### 3.1.1 Location of provision

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 (see Table 3.2). Many colleges offered more than one type of provision, hence the difference in totals. Note that the table does not report on DE regions since this would, in many cases, identify which colleges took part in the survey.

Table 3.2: Location and types of 14 to 16-year-old provision in FE

|  | AP | EHE |
|---|---|---|
| East | 7 | 3 |
| East Midlands | 1 | 1 |
| Greater London | 5 | 0 |
| North East | 6 | 2 |
| North West | 9 | 7 |
| South East | 8 | 7 |
| South West | 5 | 3 |
| West Midlands | 4 | 4 |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 4 | 5 |
| Total | 49 | 32 |

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 (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Number of colleges offering AP, DE and EHE

|  | AP | DE | EHE |
|---|---|---|---|
| GFE college | 42 | 10 | 29 |
| Land-based college | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Sixth form college | 4 | 0 | 3 |
| Total | 49 | 10 | 32 |

When considering the type of location, most provision was situated in urban locations. Although not all colleges in England responded to the survey, it does appear that in some types of locations in England, provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in FE may be hard to access (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Types of location of colleges offered 14 to 16-year-old provision

| Type of location | Total (N=55) |
|---|---|
| Coastal | 6 |
| Coastal and rural | 2 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Coastal and urban | 0 |
| Coastal, rural and urban | 7 |
| Rural | 8 |
| Urban | 32 |

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 (see Table 3.5). The most common combination was AP and EHE, with AP only also accounting for a large proportion of the provision offered.

Table 3.5: Colleges offering varied forms of provision

| Type of provision | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| AP only | 21 | 37.5 |
| DE only | 1 | 1.8 |
| EHE only | 2 | 3.6 |
| AP and DE | 2 | 3.6 |
| AP and EHE | 23 | 41.1 |
| DE and EHE | 4 | 7.1 |
| AP, DE and EHE | 3 | 5.4 |
| Total | 56 | 100* |

* Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

### 3.1.2 Size of provision

Respondents were asked to indicate the size of the college with almost two thirds indicating that the college employed between 251 to 1000 staff (see Table 3.6). It is likely that the one participant who ticked up to 50 was referring to the number of staff who worked with 14 to 16-year-olds rather than the college as a whole.

Table 3.6: Number of staff employed in college

| Number of staff employed in the college | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Up to 50 | 1 | 1.9 |
| 51–250 | 4 | 7.5 |
| 251 to 1000 | 35 | 66 |
| Over 1000 | 13 | 24.5 |
| Total | 53 | 100 |

Respondents were asked to provide the number of staff who were employed solely for 14 to 16-year-old provision and how many FTE staff were working on the provision in total. As will be seen in the section of the report on the curriculum, colleges operated different approaches to the delivery of the curriculum – standalone, infill or a mix of both. An infill approach is where 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 to 16 teaching team. Each approach impacts on the number of staff solely employed to work with 14 to 16-year-olds since part of the students' time may be in different vocational areas across college. 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.

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 (see Table 3.7). 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.

Table 3.7: Number of 14 to 16-year-olds among survey participants

| Number of 14 to 16-year-olds students | AP (N=47) | DE (N=10) | EHE (N=32) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Up to 50 | 36 | 5 | 18 |
| 51–100 | 6 | 2 | 6 |
| 101–150 | 3 | 0 | 6 |
| Over 151 | 2 | 3 | 2 |

As stated earlier DE students are required to be in full time education. This is quite different from AP and EHE students. AP students can be full or part time with part time varying from one afternoon or day a week up to a full five days. EHE students, in contrast, are only permitted to be enrolled and funded for part-time courses, usually up to a maximum of 16.5 hours. Responses from the survey reflected the variability in the contact hours that AP and EHE students have (see Table 3.8). 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. It is likely that the two EHE entries over 20 hours were data entry errors.

Table 3.8: Contact hours delivered in the provision

| Contact hours | AP (N=42) | EHE (N=29) |
|---|---|---|
| Up to 10 | 10 | 11 |
| 11–19 | 11 | 16 |
| Over 20 | 21 | 2 |

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

#### 3.2.1 A second chance, a fresh start

The underpinning rationale for offering 14 to 16 provision in FE was to support the needs of diverse young people who were not flourishing in mainstream education or where schools were unable to meet their needs. As one interviewee said, 'And that's what we've got to keep reminding ourselves, that school doesn't work for them. And if we are not there for them, who else is?' There was a perception that some schools have become increasingly academic and several participants commented on the lack of access to vocational and technical education in schools.

Participants felt strongly that offering this provision was the right thing to do, and that in contrast to the 'failure' experienced in mainstream, this was 'about transforming lives'. As one participant commented:

> There is that opportunity for young people to hit the reset button and go 'do you know what I just need something different'.

Reengagement with education featured in all interviews, and there was every expectation among interviewees that these students would progress into college post-16 and not become NEET. This was similar to the survey responses where participants commented on how the provision provides students with 'The opportunity to engage with education and be back in that environment. To gain qualifications when otherwise they may not'.

> They find a purpose and direction for their future. They feel valued by a team of educators. They have the opportunity to show and develop skills that they aren't able to in a usual academic, school system geared up for assessment via an academically based exams system. (Survey respondent)

For students already interested in a vocational pathway, there was every sense that they would 'enter post-16 education with a clear advantage'.

It was notable that several interviewees across the 19 colleges spoke of extensive histories of pre-16 provision including the Increased Flexibility Programme - for at least 20 years - which meant that staff had worked with these young learners for a long time. As such it was felt that 'they've got that empathy, and they've got that understanding' to work with these learners in college. It also meant that even in large college campuses the 14 to 16-year-olds were simply seen as part of the college:

> So people just see it as another programme in the college and they are just college students.

### 3.2.2 Meeting the needs of the community

All interviewees commented that 14 to 16 provision in FE was to support local need and was premised on collaborative relationships.

> I think it sits with the vision of the city to come together and collaborate to reduce our NEET population… It's about meeting the needs of the city… It is about being a solution for young people before they go down that route of offending, being NEET.

In one college exclusions had been rising in the locality and there was a perceived gap in high quality AP, with the PRU being a 30 to 40-minute drive away. In other colleges interviewees spoke of how the EHE provision was running in response to local demand.

### 3.2.3 Capacity to meet the needs of young people

Where colleges had been running 14 to 16-year-old provision for some time there were many examples of where demand had increased often leading to an increase in the capacity of provision. In some instances this meant opening new sites and broadening the provision across different college campuses.

> I'd say referrals have increased over time. So every single one of those sites is at max capacity. So there's a definitely an appetite for more provision, hence where we've had to open up a new site recently.

Many providers commented on the increase in the number of EHE students which in some instances had shifted the balance of provision with AP becoming smaller. Among this specific group of learners, a practical challenge is for EHE students to sit formal examinations. As one interviewee commented:

> It was originally set up because there was a recognized need for learners who were home educated to be able to sit their exams.

In some institutions, funding constraints meant that further growth would not be possible.

### 3.2.4 Reasons for not offering provision for 14 to 16-year-olds

Of the 16 survey respondents who did not offer provision for 14 to 16-year-olds, 15 elaborated on why this was the case in a free text response. These clustered into two main themes: 1. the local educational ecosystem and 2. whether a high quality experience could be offered for these young people with one respondent simply stating that this was not part of their strategic plan.

With regard to the local educational ecosystem one sub-theme related to the fact that provision was already available in the locality:

In [name of LA] an alternative provision school was created and the school heads liked the model that students could progress to a college - they use progression to us as a carrot dangled to encourage students to attend and get good grades.

A further sub-theme drew attention to the fact that some of these colleges were already doing some small-scale work with 14 to 16-year-olds and did not feel it was appropriate to extend the provision further.

We work with schools on transition and also offer some in school sessions for selected cohorts in trades, but we are a GFE and not the right environment for 14 to 16.

In the case of a specialist institution, while the respondent commented that they were not set up to cater for 14 to 16 provision, however, 'where there is interest, we do assess individual applications for suitability in enrolling pre-16'.

In addition, one college had plans to offer provision in the future:

We have plans to work with 14 to 16-year-olds and we are already having meetings with our feeder schools to understand better what that might look like.

The second theme highlighted concerns about whether high quality provision could be offered. For some participants this related to safeguarding challenges in addition to concerns about capacity: 'We take a very few under-16s on a case by case basis, but do not have the capacity to run more provision. Too many safeguarding challenges.' In one case this was also about cost: 'Safeguarding concerns and the provision is too costly'.

Summary

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.

### 3.3 A diverse group of young people

3.3.1 Alternative Provision learners

A common theme across AP provision was that school wasn't working for the young person. This included students who were 'highly academically able who were not fitting into the mainstream school settings'. The vocational curriculum offered by colleges was perceived to be attractive to AP learners and could help them reengage with education.

> We ask the question, why do you want to come to college? And the answers are this [vocational area] is something I'm really interested in, and I want to get a step on the ladder early. It's what I want to do in the future, and this will set me up.

In one part-time AP provision for example, current students had good predicted GCSE grades, had expressed an interest in their vocational pathway, and achieved a vocationally-relevant qualification at the college. In another college, schools referred students since they were perceived to be in danger of permanent exclusion and it was felt that the learners would benefit from vocational provision.

The context of AP within the locality was also influential. In one LA the college-based AP provision offered a more practical, full-time approach for learners. These learners were not seen as suitable for the PRU and other AP providers because they were only offering part-time provision and these young people needed something different. In another LA college-based AP provision was offered as an option other than the PRU. Here the vocational element was influential with students influenced by peers who have been successful in music or construction.

There were indications that some AP students had poor attendance records at school which improved at college and that some learners coming from school had behavioural issues. In one provision two dual roll students who had been suspended from school, had exhibited no behaviour issues at all in construction. An increase in mental health issues as a reason for referral to FE was also a concern.

3.3.2 Direct Entry learners

Across the DE provision most practitioners described these young people as vulnerable. For example in one provision all DE students were described as having some form of learning need or difficulty and the group included school refusers and those with behaviour issues. Mental health issues were prevalent among these young people and in one college that offered provision for new arrivals, many of these young people had suffered immense trauma and experiences of war.

There was though variability across this group as one provider commented:

> The nature of the learners that come to us, I'd say that everyone's got a different reason, and I think I've already said that they make a choice to, to leave a mainstream school and come to us because something isn't working. Probably at the top of that list is learners with support needs in school who don't meet the threshold for an EHCP.

In this college, about 35% of the learners have SEND which they felt had either not been recognized by their previous school, or where this had been, the students didn't feel that it had. Several interviewees spoke about how young people were looking for something different and that often this was about wanting to make a fresh start and for some learners the issue that wasn't working in mainstream was the narrow curriculum on offer.

### 3.3.3 Electively home educated learners

Across the EHE provision the heterogeneity of this group was recognized. Some EHE learners might have attended school previously and some would never have attended school with college being their first experience of a formal educational setting. Indeed, in the extended quotation that follows, one college spoke about different pathways for EHE students depending on their prior experience.

> Our existing provision for EHE is for those who have chosen not to educate their children probably from primary, but certainly from secondary school, and they have a structure. And they are educated, and quite aspirational as well. Those are infilled into our existing provision as EHE in the main are further ahead than their peers in mainstream education. And the parents know what they want and they have very high expectations of both their child, and of us as their provider.

> And that is different to somebody that maybe is EHE applying because they haven't had the support. They haven't really elected to home educate. They actually have no other choice but to do that. As in, if their child has been severely bullied at school, and school are doing nothing about it, then their only choice is to take them out and be EHE.

As in the illustration above, several providers commented about where EHE learners had previously attended school, they had often experienced anxiety and bullying. In one provision for example,

> In the main a lot of learners have come out of secondary school either because they've been experiencing some sort of learning difficulty that has been undiagnosed and that has led to anxiousness and stress and the school being – in the parents' words – not supporting. And they've come out of that because the family has decided that their mental health is deteriorating.

Concerns about the mental health of EHE learners who had been withdrawn from school were mentioned several times and how the flexibility of the timetable could support these learners.

> With the home educated students, our experience is that a huge number cannot cope with that 8.30am to 3.30pm, five days a week and their anxiety levels and the impact on their mental health has meant that many parents have felt like the only alternative is to look at the home education option. What we can offer is a much more flexible timetable, so they aren't in for that length of time, and often that flexibility of a timetable is enough to be able to reengage those students into education.

Many providers reported that EHE numbers were growing and for some this was especially the case since Covid:

> A lot of students have mental health issues, especially this year, because they either haven't been in a secondary school or they've had that online learning. They're struggling with going back into face to face education, and especially back into a very large group of 30, 35, 40 children.

Summary

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 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.

## 3.4   Recruitment of students/application process

### 3.4.1   A rigorous admissions process

A striking similarity across providers was a rigorous and detailed admission process to ensure that the right students are on the programme, although there was considerable diversity in how admissions procedures had developed. Even within a single college the mix of 14 to 16 provision could require modified procedures that took account of the different routes by which students arrived at the college. The overall picture was complex but that was an essential part of ensuring that students were on the right programme. In addition, the complexity and diversity of provision was often linked to a strong emphasis on devising a procedure that met local needs, taking account of the educational ecosystem and other community factors.

The initial contact with a learner was usually via one of three routes:

1. parental request to the college, often based on word of mouth or local knowledge,
2. via a local school, including partnership agreements and referrals of individual learners, or
3. via the LA, including referral of individual learners and acting as a conduit for parental applications.

Some types of provision were an obvious 'good fit' for one of these models (e.g. EHE parents/learners often applied directly to the college) but there was no single approach that could be definitively associated with any particular type of learner, with any one college, or indeed with any one community or ecosystem.

Whatever route had brought a young person into contact with a college, they would then become part of an admissions process that had been designed specifically for 14 to 16 learners. Key features that separated this from the 16+ application process might include: the involvement of local Fair Access or behaviour panels, wider use of diagnostic testing and assessment to identify both academic and pastoral support needs, greater emphasis on engaging the support of parents, and enhanced information sharing with schools. The interview process could involve staff with academic, pastoral, SENCo and safeguarding roles to ensure that any needs were identified as early as possible so that they could be met when the learner started at college.

For EHE applicants, it was usual for colleges to specify a certain length of time for which home education had been taking place – usually at least one term but sometimes longer. And for those young people who had never been in formal education, then the interview process and needs analysis were the only sources of information. Where AP provision was of short duration, for example, a vocational pathway for one half-day per week, then the admissions process was less detailed. For instance, in one college schools themselves made the initial 'selection' of those learners who would most benefit from attending, with the college 14 to 16 coordinator visiting schools to conduct interviews.

Taster days were almost universal, and a trial period was common. In one college, which recruited AP and EHE learners all students did an induction when they started, having been offered taster sessions prior to this. For most students this was for two weeks but this could be extended if it was felt not to be long enough. Any students joining in-year would do the same induction. The college had embedded a college certificate as part of the induction mindful that for some students the college wouldn't be the right place and of the importance of recognizing what had been achieved in this time.

> We've actually just put on a course for induction, because I was concerned about students coming for induction, and leaving with nothing. So we've introduced the RPA college certificate and they will do digital skills. They won't

be able to do a full qualification, but the way we've started to structure it is that they will get tasters of everything. So they'll do some vocational, and then they'll basically have at the end of that a college ticket to say that they've done an induction to the college, they've done digital skills and things like that, so they won't ever walk away with nothing.

Evident in the above illustration was that in some colleges the admissions process also had to accommodate a 'roll on' element in which learners were received throughout the year. There was also some 'roll on - roll off' provision in which the learner could return to school.

> And it is a roll on, roll off key stage four program. So, we have maths and English. We obviously offer those functional skills, predominantly ICT and PSHE. And then we wrap around our vocational and our wider key skills. For some young people, they just need a bit of respite. They just need a bit of time out of school.

Even within these apparent similarities there could be substantial differences in approach, for example, when describing the role of LAs in the admission process:

> Decisions are made collectively by the Fair Access Panel (FAP) about where each young person is best placed. Schools are not represented on the FAP.

> The Behaviour Panels are managed by the local authority but they're chaired by the head of a school in the region.

The considerable variation in 14 to 16 provision may have contributed to a strong emphasis on explaining the offer to students and parents at the very start of the process:

> I meet the children and the parents before we do any interviews with the course leader. I meet them first to explain fully what the provision is, ensure that they've got realistic expectations of what we can do and what we can't do. We are a very small unit and there's only certain things that we can do, so I make sure that everybody's very clear about what expectations are from the children and from us.

### 3.4.2 Entry criteria – more than a grade

In contrast with other forms of educational entry requirements, there was little reference to qualifications, grades, or predicted grades as an element of the recruitment and selection process. One college that did refer to grade expectations was offering a vocational pathway one afternoon per week, and predicted grades provided by each school were helpful in several ways:

We framed [our] qualifications to match some of the Progress 8 qualifications which then benefited the learner, but also it then in turn added value to the school as well. We've now got learners who have got good predicted GCSEs, but they have expressed an interest that they want to go into, say, the professional construction industry and the qualification that we deliver, and how we deliver it, allows them that insight to be able to see that career pathway going forward.

High levels of need were anticipated for the 14 to 16 students, and interviewees frequently pointed out that these learners were applying to the college because mainstream school, for whatever reason, had not been able to meet their needs. Colleges were very clear about their criteria: these tended to focus around what the college could do for the learner and whether their individual needs could be met.

Another factor was the learner's interest in the vocational pathway and ability to commit to this for an extended period of time. In one college this was a key part of their three day Taster course:

The second element is that they do a vocational project. So, they get set that on the first day of their taster. And this is really to home in on how well they're going to take to study at level two with regards to the independent study, but also just to get a flavour of their passion for the vocational area.

In colleges where the 14 to 16 provision involved infill, applicants needed to demonstrate that they were mature and able to cope with studying alongside post-16 learners. Infill provision was often the preferred model for EHE, and the variability amongst learners in this very diverse group needed consideration:

The home educated learners are generally very motivated and hardworking and can often raise standards within the classroom/workshop because of their attitude to learning. They are often very mature and well educated meaning that the academic levels are good and achievements high. There are also however, those for whom education hasn't worked due to anxiety, personal issues, brought on for a whole host of reasons. (Survey respondent)

### 3.4.3 Getting a place

It was clear from the interviews that the degree to which a young person (and their parents) could exercise personal agency in the decision to move from mainstream school into college provision varied from those who made a positive, fully informed choice, to those who had no option. This was not necessarily related to the type of provision. For example, there were several colleges amongst the interviewees where the provision was so popular with parents that they had waiting lists.

Each campus advertises through their local college's Facebook and Twitter and social media. We get about three times the amount of applicants than we have spaces for in the main, which again, is why we'd love to grow them.

Oversubscription could be another reason for tight admissions procedures to ensure the provision would be right for that student. The initial testing and diagnostic assessment, with the involvement of the SENCo and pastoral team, was crucial to ensure that any learning needs could be met, and this could involve consideration of whether the learner could also be supported post-16. Given the high proportion of students in 14 to 16 provision who have learning needs, emotional issues or problem behaviour, the time and resource required was often considerable. Some applicants already had an EHCP but for many this was the first time they had ever been assessed, and previously undiagnosed issues could provide greater understanding (for parents as well as the college) of why the young person had struggled in mainstream school.

An expectation that parents would provide a statement on the referral form about why they think the child should be attending was commonplace, as was an admissions process that ensured parents understood what the provision offered - and also what was expected of parents. However, this was not usually a factor in offering a place:

> We meet every single parent. But we don't use that to determine places. We use it to outline our expectations, our curriculum, to try and match the learner's intentions with our offer.

LAs were often very involved in determining who would be offered a place, with different degrees of school involvement in this process:

> There are five colleagues from the local authority, the person in charge of the EHCPs, four colleagues who manage the EHE side, and inclusion team, and we discuss every applicant and share the information. The local authority often has a lot of additional information and then it would be agreed whether we think it's right to offer a place.

Summary

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 approach to the curriculum,

applicants need 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.

## 3.5  Curriculum models and approaches

### 3.5.1  Mode of delivery

The approach to delivering the curriculum included standalone delivery when students were taught within the peer groups by dedicated 14 to 16-year-old staff, infill models where students typically had their vocational specialisms taught in the wider college often by college staff and with older students, and a mix whereby the approach contained a mix of standalone and infill approaches. Standalone and mixed approaches were the most common amongst survey participants, although as anticipated a higher proportion of EHE providers adopted an infill model than seen in AP and DE, most likely due to the part-time nature of these students and the limited hours that they can attend college (see Table 3.9 and Figure 3.1).

Table 3.9: Mode of delivery of AP, DE and EHE provision

|     | Infill | Standalone | Mix | N |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| AP | 5 | 23 | 20 | 48 |
| DE | 1 | 6 | 3 | 10 |
| EHE | 6 | 15 | 10 | 31 |

Figure 3.1: Mode of delivery: percentage of respondents
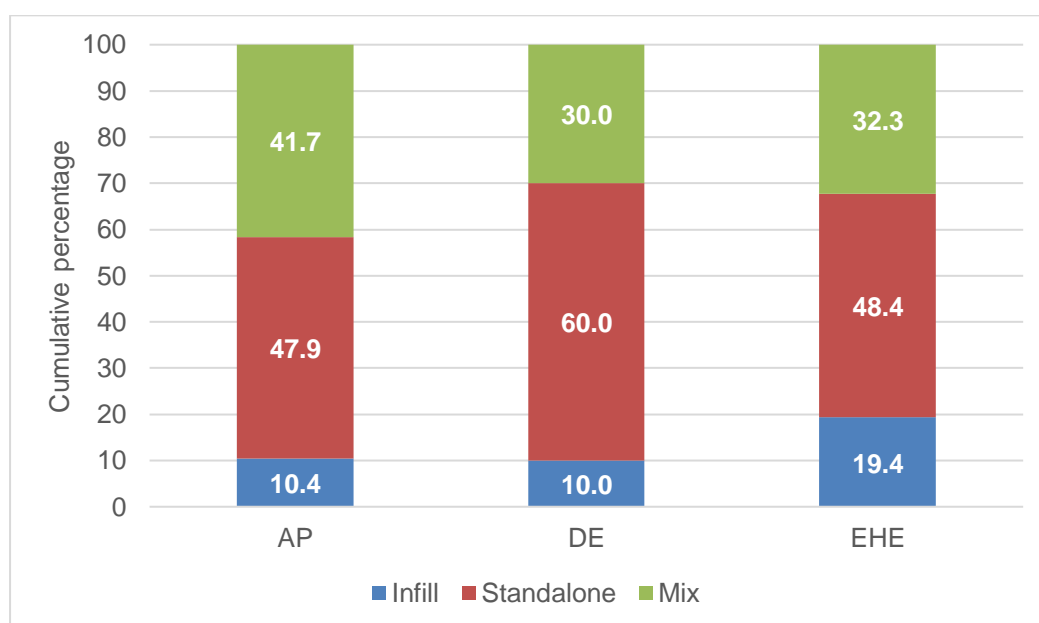
Evidence from the interview data confirmed that as required all DE providers had a separate area for 14 to 16-year-olds, however, the positioning and set up of this within the wider campus varied in relation to the extent that the students might interact with the wider college and the curriculum model adopted. In one college, for instance, learners studied vocational qualifications on the DE site and did not engage with the wider college. In another DE provider students spent 50% of their time in their dedicated area and 50% in their vocational areas in the wider college but were always with their own age group. As a final contrast, one college operated an in-fill model where 14 to 16-year-olds studied for 50% of their time on their vocational area alongside post-16 learners.

The approach taken to AP and EHE among the interviewees varied in relation to the curriculum model, whether the two groups were taught together when the college offered AP and EHE provision, or followed a different curriculum offer, and according to the size of the groups. For example in one college offering AP and EHE, once a group reached 12, they would be taught as a separate class for their vocational area and English and maths otherwise students would infill. In another college students spent between 10 to 12 hours at college each week with nine hours allocated to their vocational pathway plus a tutorial about development of the whole person. This operated as an infill model with the intention that post-16 students would act as role modules.

Some colleges had a different offer for EHE and AP students often driven by the relationship with schools and the local community. For example in one college AP students spent different amounts of time at school and college dependent on the needs of the students and individual schools. AP places offered for school students were for Year 11 who infilled into post-16. For EHE learners the bespoke provision offered multiple pathways at different levels: GCSE, pre-GCSE, Level 1, Entry 3 and preparation for college programmes, and of different duration to support these young people into college - for example short courses of 3 hours a week. These were standalone pre-16 groups. In addition, some Year 11 EHE students infilled into post-16 provision.
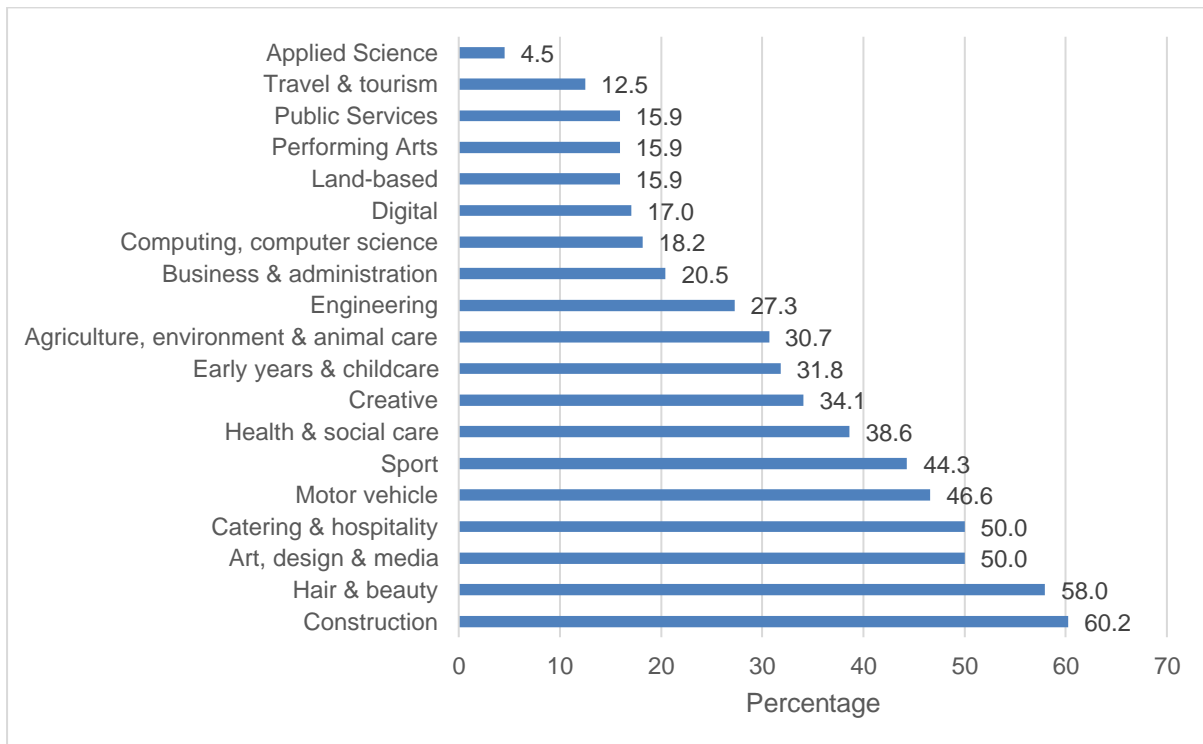
### 3.5.2 The curriculum offer

All colleges offered a varied curriculum to 14 to 16-year-olds that included many vocational options thereby enabling these young people to have a choice in the subjects they studied. Responses from the survey illustrated the breadth of the vocational offer as seen in Figure 3.2.

An obvious benefit of an infill approach, as articulated by the interviewees, was that students had an extensive vocational offer – a multi-skilled course in construction including bricklaying and carpentry, hair and beauty, engineering – including motor vehicle and manufacturing. Catering was only offered to Year 11 students since

these learners could not register for City & Guilds until they reached age 16 and cannot work in kitchens without this.

Figure 3.2: Proportion of colleges offering different vocational subjects



| Subject | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Applied Science | 4.5 |
| Travel & tourism | 12.5 |
| Public Services | 15.9 |
| Performing Arts | 15.9 |
| Land-based | 15.9 |
| Digital | 17.0 |
| Computing, computer science | 18.2 |
| Business & administration | 20.5 |
| Engineering | 27.3 |
| Agriculture, environment & animal care | 30.7 |
| Early years & childcare | 31.8 |
| Creative | 34.1 |
| Health & social care | 38.6 |
| Sport | 44.3 |
| Motor vehicle | 46.6 |
| Catering & hospitality | 50.0 |
| Art, design & media | 50.0 |
| Hair & beauty | 58.0 |
| Construction | 60.2 |

In one college where AP and EHE students were taught together, infilling was offered in subjects where it was known that there were no students over the age of 18, such as ESOL, construction, brickwork, plumbing and science, which meant that a wider curriculum could be offered. In addition, there was standalone provision for the 14 to 16-year-olds in art and design, hair and beauty, business studies and sports.

In another college the curriculum choices for AP and EHE were the same and included level 1 personal development progression, sport and art, Functional skills in maths and English. Most Year 10 students tended to be at entry level and Year 11 students at Level 1. Standalone vocational options included catering, hair and beauty, construction and motor vehicle, although sometimes students infilled.

As a further example in another college EHE learners were offered English, maths, enrichment, employability, and then they infilled into Level 1 vocational provision. In contrast the AP provision was roll-on, roll off. AP students were offered English and maths, ICT, PSHE and a wraparound programme including vocational subjects, such as hospitality, hair and beauty and cooking and other key skills such as enterprise. In some colleges where learners could enrol throughout the year care had been taken to ensure that these students could gain an award. For example in one college some of the level 1 courses had been broken down into certificate and diplomas, 'so they could still start in January and get an award… so we're quite flexible like that'.

For DE students, in addition to the DfE required curriculum, the combination of GCSEs, vocational qualifications and enrichment opportunities varied across the colleges. In one college students took nine GCSEs including, English, maths, combined science, four vocational options, history and Geography. Vocational subjects included animal care, engineering, childcare, hospitality & catering and computing all at Level 2. In another college students took a total of six GCSEs with Level 2 vocational pathways offered in animal care, engineering, hair & beauty, health & social care, digital & creative media and performing arts. Other colleges had an explicit focus on specific vocational pathways, for example, GCSE in maths, English, English Lit, science, geography and citizenship, plus a vocational option – of either health science or engineering.

Across all 14 to 16-year-old provision the curriculum offered was frequently broad and enabled choices. 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. This could be in relation to the level at which subjects were studied or the number of subjects that a young person was studying.

> Sometimes they just want to do the vocational with us because they might still be doing GCSEs outside of the college provision. So everybody's timetable is very different. And it is designed on what their aspirations are, what they're doing at home, and what we can do here and what works best for them.

All respondents offered English and maths at entry level, level 1 and/or level 2 for AP, DE and EHE learners although a higher percentage of colleges offered Level 2 for DE and EHE compared to AP. It should be noted that many AP are part-time and could be taking English and maths through their school. Science was also offered by many providers, although in DE this was higher than in AP and EHE – most likely since this is a requirement of DE provision (see Table 3.11 and Figure 3.3). The fact that not all DE respondents ticked Science may be a respondent error since the interviewees all had Science as required: this will be checked through the analysis of the ILR data.

Table 3.11 English, maths and science provision for 14 to 16-year-olds

| | English study levels | | | Maths study levels | | | Science |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Entry | Level 1 | Level 2 | Entry | Level 1 | Level 2 | |
| AP (N=48) | 24 | 24 | 28 | 24 | 24 | 29 | 12 |
| DE (N= 10) | 4 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 6 | 9 | 8 |
| EHE (N=30) | 16 | 20 | 29 | 17 | 20 | 29 | 10 |

Figure 3.3: English, maths and science provision by proportion of respondents:
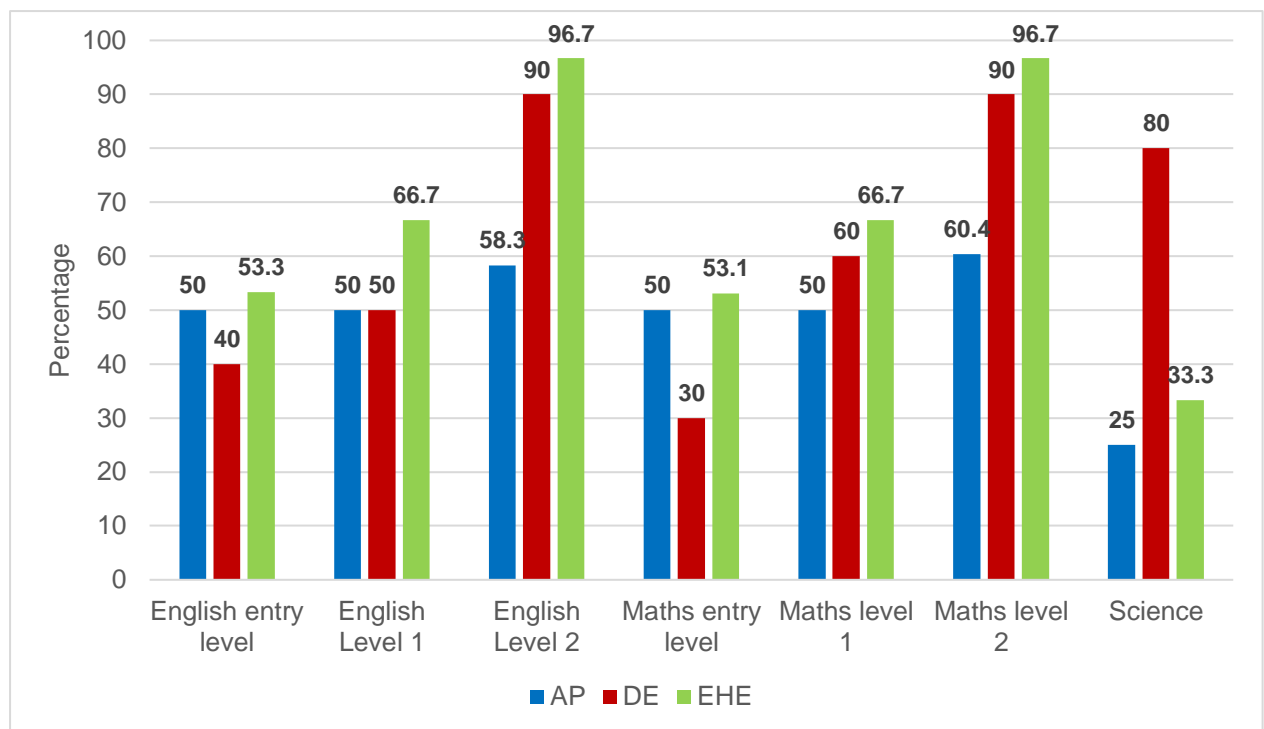


Few colleges participating in the survey offered History and Geography. Geography was offered for AP students in three colleges but not offered for DE and EHE. History was similarly offered for AP students in three colleges but only once in DE and EHE (see Figure 3.4)

Figure 3.4: Subjects offered by proportion of respondents
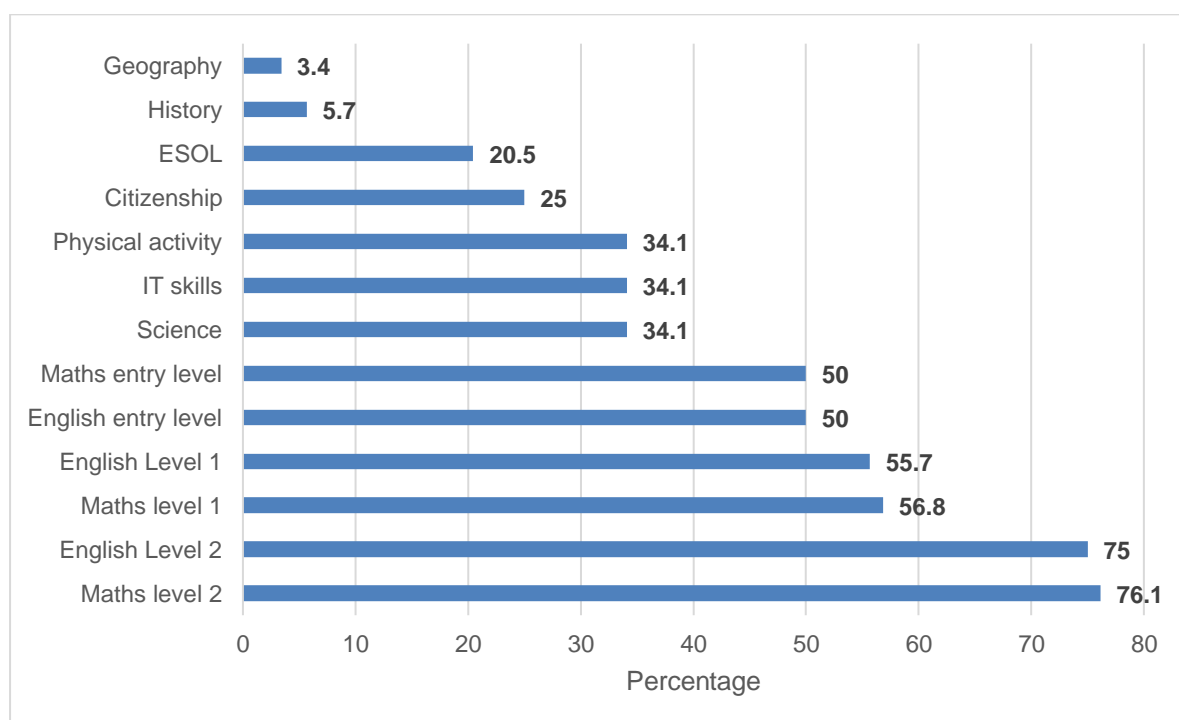
Data from the survey provided helpful insights in thinking about the curriculum offer for 14 to 16-year-olds from a holistic perspective (see Figure 3.5). Evident here was how respondents perceived students to enjoy both the academic and vocational subjects they study albeit that those strongly agreeing and agreeing were higher for vocational subjects at 91.7% than academic 75%. What is also striking is how students were perceived to value the opportunities for hands-on activities (almost 92% strongly agreed or agreed), the practical elements of the teaching (94%) and the extent that students benefited from the wider activities available in the whole college (over 68%).

Figure 3.5 Staff perceptions of how students value of the curriculum
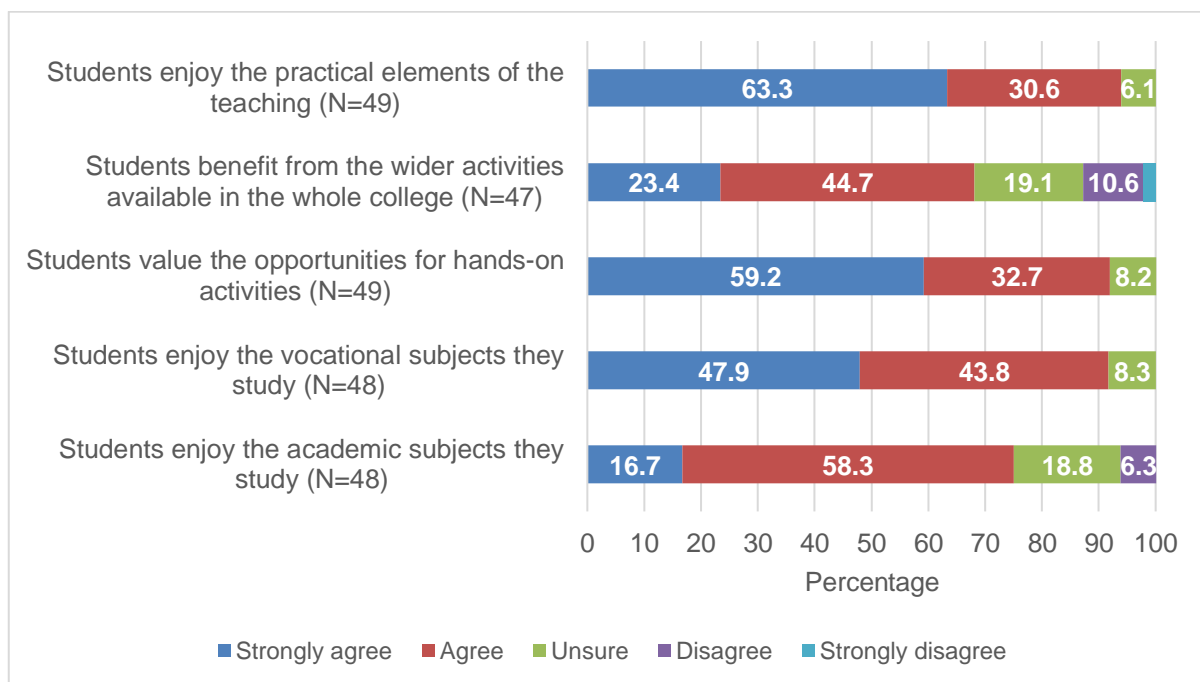


Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

In the open-ended question about the benefits of this provision, many survey respondents wrote about the importance of the vocational curriculum and the wide range of opportunities to explore different vocational and technical skills.

> It is a different experience to school and all 14 to 16-year-olds should have the opportunity to develop different skills and knowledge more relevant to industries they will potentially be employed in.

> For those not wishing to pursue the university route, the training and skills developed and provided in vocational is more appropriate for those wishing to progress to FE and apprenticeships.

These comments were reiterated in the interviews as captured in the following quotation:

We don't go after, the EBacc or Progress 8 or anything like that, because actually what we found is one of the main reasons that students want to choose us is because they want to try hands-on practical technical education.

### 3.5.3 Enrichment and wider activities

Colleges also offered young people opportunities to engage in enrichment and wider activities (see Table 3.12 and Figure 3.6). It was unsurprising that DE students were more likely to be offered work experience through college given that many AP and all EHE students are part-time. Indeed, as one survey respondent commented '14 to 16 do not do work experience through college. This is part of their home education, or, if on-roll, through school'.

The part-time nature of AP and EHE students is likely also to have impacted on the extent to which they could engage in wider activities and enrichment. For instance in one college with part time AP and EHE students a combination of travel arrangements and timetable requirements restricted opportunities.

We're on the edge of a [city], so most of our students are bussed in. So due to the restrictions on timetables and the fact that they're bussed, we don't have a really wide ranging enrichment offer because there is just not time for students to do it.

Table 3.12: Engagement in enrichment and wider activities

|  | AP | DE | EHE |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | % (N= 48) | % (N=10) | % (N= 30) |
| Enrichment activities | 60.4 (29) | 100 (10) | 50 (15) |
| Employability | 64.6 (31) | 90 (9) | 43.3 (13) |
| Personal and Social development | 68.8 (33) | 90 (9) | 46.7 (14) |
| Physical activity | 35.4 (17) | 70 (7) | 20 (6) |
| Study Skills | 33.3 (16) | 50 (5) | 33.3 (10) |
| Work experience | 22.9 (11) | 60 (6) | 23.3 (7) |

Figure 3.6: Proportion of wider activities offered across AP, DE and EHE
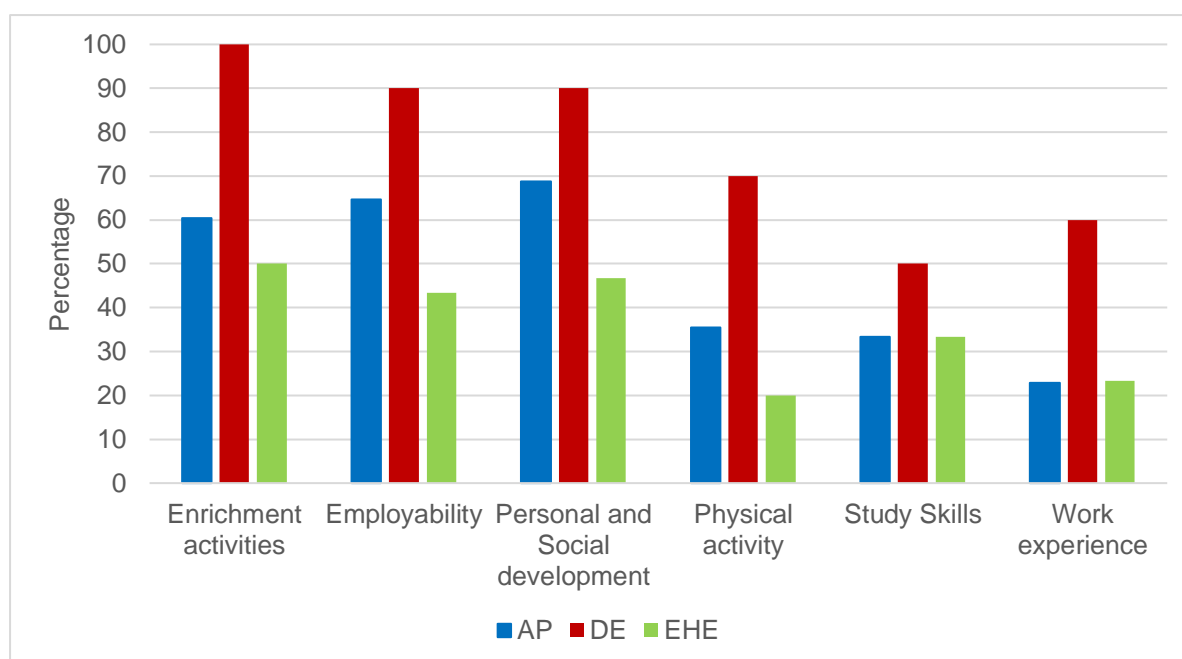


Notwithstanding the restrictions arising from hours in college and travel arrangements, 14 to 16-year-olds, whether AP, DE and EHE, were college students and hence could access the wider college enrichment offer.

> We have lots of events at the college that they attend, so when the college puts on maybe an employer event, or guest speakers, or trips and visits, our learners are automatically invited to be part of that wider organization.

Activities and visits were also arranged by subject teachers in addition to those specifically for 14 to 16-year-olds.

> They can access absolutely anything where we have outside speakers or anything like that and are encouraged to do that. But what we try to do certainly more this year is to introduce more trips specifically for their groups. So the GCSE students had a trip down to London Houses of Parliament, and then to the Natural History Museum.

In some instances, this meant offering activities that might be more usually associated with schools, so that these young people did not miss out.

> We also do things like end of year events that they would get in their schools. We have a Prom and a sports day. We try to replicate some of the activities that would be offered in a school so that students are not disadvantaged in any way.

The element of student choice, so important in the formal curriculum offered, was also important in the enrichment activities provided:

> Enrichment is only given once we've discussed with the kids what they want. So this year, in the 14 to 16 school they do boxing, they do two music clubs. We have also got a band. We do football, we do netball, and we do an Amnesty International course, which comes with a qualification after it if they want as well.

Enrichment activities were also based on community involvement such as making and taking sandwiches for the homeless in the locality or students being asked to paint a mural on the garage wall of a nursing home.

In colleges with part-time students, the work experience element was often project-based and linked to the local community. For example, in one college creative media and design students had done a lot of designs for the local railway station and recording and filming for the local network. Another college with part-time students adopted a mix of group project-based experiences or individual work experience depending on the different sites in which 14 to 16-year-olds were based:

> So some will be doing a project, like [site] has a local garden opposite and we are making bird cages, helping them out with planting of pots etc. Whereas over at the site I'm at now, we are linked with a football team. We do some work with their community teams. Over on [another site] they've got good employer links, so for those individuals it might be more of an individual agreement with an organization or like a sports club where they do their two weeks worth of hours.

By contrast in one college AP students did work experience on a weekly basis:

> So depending upon the young person and what we can do for them, we'll get them in work experience ASAP usually in Year 11 to spend at least half a day or even two days if it works. So work experience is a big part of that as well.

DE students tended to have blocks of work experience:

> All of our 14 to 16 school students do a week or two-week work placements. So we think about the specialisms and at one they work with a hotel, which gives them that external facing and it's a nice transition at that age to it feeling like they're getting in that stakeholder engagement.

In another DE college students had three weeks work experience in Year 10 and Year 11. Evident from the survey was that respondents perceived that students valued work experience opportunities, with 60% strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement 'Students value the work experience/placement opportunities'.

There was a sense from some of the interviewees of how understanding the community was important in enabling young people to feel a sense of belonging:

It's about being in the community as well, it's about understanding what your local community is like, and how we all fit into that. I think that's been a key part for us, especially with some of the enrichment that has been offered.

In several colleges, well-being and personal development was given prominence in the curriculum with dedicated, timetabled sessions.

We have an afternoon of wellness and tutorial, a real big focus this year has been around their mental health and what they've needed. Some afternoons it's been a case of they've just had a cup of tea and some toast and we've had a real good chat. Other times we've had guest speakers coming in.

Other examples included a weekly tutorial about developing the whole person and in the case of DE students a tutorial approach was often taken for the delivery of the PSHE curriculum in weekly sessions.

Similarly employability could also be part of the timetabled curriculum offer in addition to being embedded in vocational subjects.

In addition there is personal and social development, well-being and an employability unit. Wrap around support including tutorials and gang and drug awareness.

### 3.5.4 The college learning environment

Survey respondents were invited to comment on the benefits of the provision offered for 14 to 16-year-olds. The most prominent theme emerging from the thematic analysis of this question was that of the learning environment in college. Other themes included a fresh start, the curriculum offer and progression pathways – quotations from these themes are integrated throughout this report.

Although colleges are large institutions often with thousands of students, the smaller class sizes in which 14 to 16-year-old learners were taught were seen as making a positive difference to these learners. On a practical level the smaller size often meant less noise and less disruption but it also meant that these young people were able to be given more support.

Smaller group size, more individual support in a less regulated environment that suits them better than school. (Survey respondent)

Smaller class sizes with fewer secondary students overall. Placing students in an FE sector can help with the social development and maturity aspect of development. (Survey respondent)

Relationship building was a key aspect of working with the 14 to 16-year-olds:

I think it's a really positive thing to build that relationship and understanding about why a student may behave in a certain way, or speak in such a way, or approach the situation in a certain way.

Among the interviewees it was evident that many colleges had dedicated spaces for 14 to 16-year-old learners to support this. While a separate dedicated space is a DfE requirement for DE students, many colleges with AP and EHE students also had separate spaces their students, although this was not always the case for infill students. In one college, for example, there was a dedicated common room that students could use during break times:

And we've got staff in there, they sit and have their lunches and they chat and they go in on their break times… And that really works in terms of the relationship that they have with the staff.

There was a strong sense that the college environment was more relaxed than in many secondary schools especially in relation to rules and regulations:

Also our approach is very much a college approach with students, teachers are on first name basis and although we have high expectations and rules in place it is a lot more relaxed than secondary schools have become over the years.

Linked to this was how college enabled these young people to develop their own identity:

The FE environment allows learners to develop their own identity in an inclusive setting without the restriction of uniforms. (Survey respondent)

You can come to college, and you can see people who look like you, and people are less bothered, so you can start to fit in earlier in your educational career.

The more adult environment, with older students, and expectations of maturity was also seen to benefit 14 to 16-year-olds:

College removes some of the barriers the learners struggled with at school, such as being in classes with more mature students who value learning, fewer behavioural disruptions, no uniforms, a calmer environment, fewer classroom and staff changes, etc. (Survey respondent)

The environment is different to school, they have more autonomy and maturity is a high expectation which benefits development. (Survey respondent)

Summary
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.

### 3.6  Pastoral/student support

3.6.1  The centrality of pastoral care, well-being and mental health

All colleges recognised pastoral care as a significant part of the 14 to 16 offer, central to the success of their provision. Staff roles included personal tutors, SENCo's, attendance officers, well-being officers, inclusion practitioners, teaching assistants and counsellors. In some colleges these were staff from the college pastoral teams who had received training and CPD in dealing with 14 to 16s. Other colleges, particularly those with large numbers of 14 to 16 learners, had dedicated roles for this provision. Some job roles did not exist in the wider college but were created to meet specific needs of 14 to 16 learners, for example a family worker.

Pastoral responsibilities did not reside purely with the pastoral team; colleges often said that all staff were invested in these young people, with staff/student relationships being a key to success. There were many examples of staff being chosen or volunteering to work with 14 to 16s because they had a good understanding of these learners and how to work with them:

> You've got to have the right kind of staff to be working with these students. [They] are so invested in making sure that these students get a good deal because they haven't, for whatever reason, before they've come to us.

Evidence from the survey echoed responses from the interviewees about the importance of pastoral support (see Figure 3.7) with 98% of participants strongly agreeing or agreeing that pastoral support was strong and 92% strongly agreeing or agreeing that individual learnings are identified and met. In addition, there was a strong sense of how students received support to develop wider skills such as teamworking, communication and social skills.

Figure 3.7: Staff perceptions of the quality of support received by students
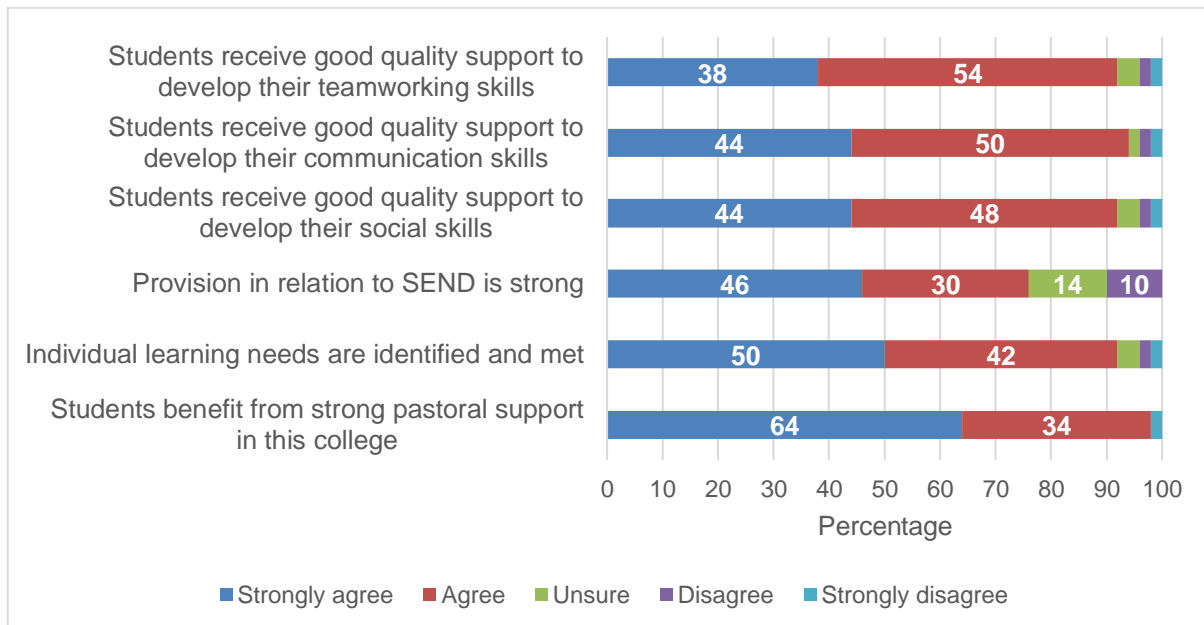


N=50. Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

Given the high level of vulnerable learners in 14 to 16 FE provision, a strong emphasis on well-being and mental health was not unexpected:

> We have a well-being mentor… for all our students… We have recently taken on a further well-being mentor to support our school in-fill students… in terms of communication with schools and then with parents, and then with students themselves.

Not every college had a 'named' well-being post, but provision for well-being was embedded into other staff roles and was often extensive. In one 14 to 16 college 50% of the staff had pastoral roles:

> Every kid is in a group of 15 with one of the pastoral staff or a teacher… they'll meet them for 45 minutes every day… We track every single young person's mental health through a RAG [red, amber, green] rating system weekly. And then if there's any reds that's discussed at our case conference at the end of the week to see exactly what we need to put in and how we need to support that young person.

Well-being often overlapped with safeguarding, and a common theme was that all staff within 14 to 16 provision, regardless of their job role, contributed to the well-being of learners and knew how to flag concerns.

External support for well-being and mental health could be extensive, including LAs and local and national charities. One college had the NHS mental health support team spend two days a week in their 14 to 16 provision. However, colleges acknowledged that the level of funding for 14 to 16s was often inadequate to cover the services that were being provided:

> 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. (Survey respondent)

Colleges with EHE provision were particularly concerned that the lower level of financial support available to learners classified as EHE meant that these young people inevitably had a reduced offer:

> Somebody comes from a school, they're on the full study program. So they meet their citizenship coach, they meet their enhanced coach, they meet the vocational tutor, and they have myself and our own pastoral care… For EHE, they don't necessarily have a citizenship coach and they won't necessarily be in their enhanced session, but they have still myself, attendance and pastoral care within our unit.

A need for greater support for EHE learners in terms of access to bursaries or additional funding which the LAs could draw down was widely expressed. This lack of financial support for EHE learners was sometimes creating serious problems in accessing the most basic requirements, and one college explained they had responded by drawing on the college's own resources:

> Because they're home educated, they're not entitled to bursaries. So, there's occasional issues with them getting into college – they can't afford to get the bus or the train into college, and they don't have free school meals, so sometimes they can essentially go all day without having anything to eat. We have baskets of breakfast snacks that they can take in the classrooms and things like that which are funded via us, because fundamentally no young person should go without access to food.

Beyond the widely identified needs for well-being support, some colleges had learners who had suffered immense trauma, including experience of war. Several spoke of trauma training with some describing a strong focus on trauma-informed practice delivered through college-wide training. In one college it was felt that some staff had personal experience that made them particularly suited to supporting these learners:

> I think the staff that we've got now have maybe experienced particular traumas in their past, so they're able to understand the learners a lot more. I think that's why they get into feeling comfortable in teaching key stage four learners… they're kind of behaviour management experts.

The physical environment of the 14 to 16 provision was also linked to well-being, particularly when there was dedicated space for learners that was less busy, quieter, with fewer people, all of whom were familiar:

> We do learner voice, we do focus groups, so when our learners said to us 'we don't like the refectory it's too loud, it's too busy', we then made a space at lunchtimes that was theirs.

### 3.6.2   Attendance and safeguarding

Many of the learners arrived at college with a very poor attendance record at their school, and strategies to develop and maintain an excellent attendance record were an important part of 14 to 16 provision. Attendance was sometimes part of the tutor or mentor role, but in some colleges an attendance adviser or officer post had been created. Absence was acted on very promptly, with immediate calls to the parent, carer, or school.

When the learners were studying within a designated area attendance checks might only be required at the start and end of the day, but if learners had full access to the college the monitoring of attendance could be time consuming, particularly if the college had an infill model meaning that learners were spread across many classes:

> The coordinator has a list every day of which learners are in and where they are. So, she checks every single period that they've arrived, and they just get used to that, and staff are used to it. The coordinator just pops her head in the door, making sure everything's okay.

Attendance was not only about ensuring that young people had arrived in class, it was also about enabling them to stay throughout the lesson. Strategies for 'time out' if a student felt overwhelmed, with one to one support in a dedicated space, helped students back into the classroom as rapidly as possible.

If a student was known to have anxiety issues or had been out of formal education for some time, the approach was to build up attendance from whatever the student could initially handle. Some colleges worked with the student and parent to negotiate a reduced timetable that could be as little as just one subject to start with, gradually increasing this over time. Some colleges had peer mentors and this could be a way to ease the transition into college:

> They have a student mentor who will meet them in reception, they will take them to their classes… and they look after them for a couple of weeks. And

that's proving invaluable really. One girl did 12 sessions [out of 25] in her first week, which is not bad when she'd not been to school for a year.

If absence was unavoidable (e.g. for illness) strategies were in place to minimise the impact on progress: for example tutors or mentors sending out work to the learner and the parents to say this is the work they've missed for today.

Knowing the location of every learner was often mentioned as a crucial aspect of safeguarding and in this sense there was a clear overlap with an aspect of behaviour management vital to academic success: ensuring that learners were not only attending college but were also in the classroom. Safeguarding was a key issue for all providers, in terms of both policy and practice. Policy for 16+ learners had sometimes been enhanced to meet the needs and requirements of 14 to 16 learners, and there were many references to the provision of training for all college staff on the presence of 14 to 16s in college and the implications. Well-established systems helped to ensure that pastoral issues were picked up promptly:

> The head of school is DSL trained and then as a college we have something called a safeguarding triage so for the 14 to 16, that works that I've got an attendance adviser, a pastoral mentor in the school, and I've got my own EHCP coordinator, so those four people are all part of the safeguarding triage… We use MyConcern[1] for our safeguarding so all staff can report a concern.

Additional concerns were identified when the provision was infill, with 14 to 16 learners joining 16+ classes:

> We do a fair bit of work with the tutors around how to safeguard those [infill] students and how to raise concerns and what they should be looking out for. And we're also very careful about the information that we share with parents up front and make them aware of the fact that they are going to be working alongside 16 to 18-year-olds.

Some practical applications, such as having coloured lanyards that identified the 14 to 16 students, were common, though not universal. An alternative could be provided using ID cards where a college had entry and exit barriers.
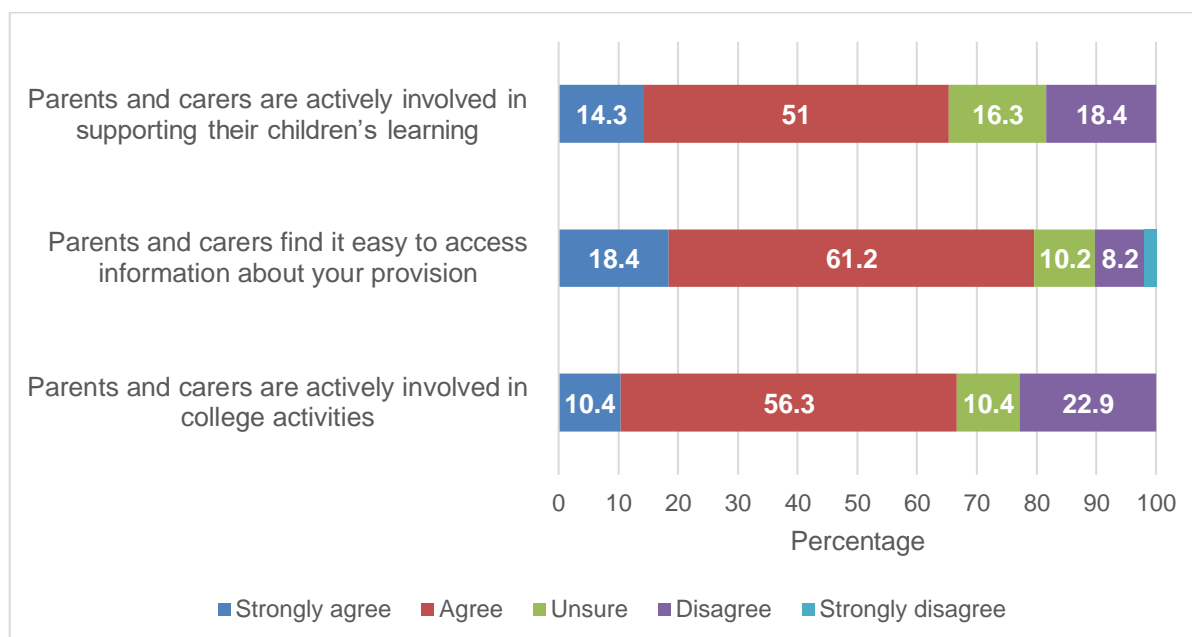
### 3.6.3 Working with parents and carers

Engagement with parents, carers, or even families was often said to be strong, though this was not universal. Some parents could be hard to reach, despite their initial involvement in the admissions process. Among survey respondents perceptions of parental involvement were high with over 65% strongly agreeing or

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[1] MyConcern is a safeguarding management software system for use in educational settings.

agreeing that parents and carers were actively involved in supporting their child's learning and were actively involved in college activities (see Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8: Staff perceptions of how parents and carers engage with college



N=49 except for parents and carers are actively involved in college activities for which N=48      Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

Among interviewees, when things were working well, there was an emphasis on having mechanisms for contact with parents that worked both ways. If there were any issues at college it was important to have clear and consistent communications to parents but equally important was communication *from* parents, for example, letting staff know of any issues at home that might result in the learner having a 'bad' day at college:

> We also have a parent app as well, which our reception admin manages, which we launched, and we're the only site out of the group to have it. And that's really bumped up our parental engagement. They can check in on their child if they've had a bad morning, they just want to say so. There's always constant communication.

The importance and value of positive communications that provided parents with good news was frequently emphasised:

> If there's a good comment on ProMonitor[2]. I always try and make sure I send that to parents so that they're getting good as well as negative.

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[2] ProMonitor is a learner monitoring system that enables the tracking of learner progress.

This could be a powerful experience for parents whose previous contact with teachers may have been the regular reporting of only bad behaviour. Some colleges spoke of regular weekly updates by telephone to update on what's gone well in addition to anything that hasn't gone well.

For learners who were at college full-time, the daily informal contacts with parents would be supplemented with scheduled activities including parents' evenings, written reports, newsletters and termly meetings that involved the learner, their parents, and college staff.

> We do parents' evenings twice a year for each year group. We send a newsletter. There are some online chats and we pick up the phone if there are any issues at all or if someone's done well, we do a weekly call on a Friday. We pick out a dozen students who deserve a mention.

For part-time learners parental contact covered a range from almost nothing, apart from attendance monitoring, to daily contact, depending on the nature of the college provision. In a college where AP learners attended just one afternoon per week, parental contact was only at the annual Awards Ceremony. When AP learners were in college for three days per week, parental contact was likely to be on a daily basis.

Amongst EHE learners there was considerable variation. A college located in an area with a very strong Home Ed community said that EHE parents had a vested interest in their child's education and contacted the college frequently. However, in some colleges the majority of EHE learners had become 'home educated' at the suggestion of their school, in which case the parents may be in full-time employment and were less able to contact the college.

### 3.6.4 Communication with schools

Whilst relationships with schools were sometimes described only in connection with recruitment and admissions, if a college had AP learners there would of necessity be ongoing contact with schools. However, there was considerable variation in the extent and nature of this contact. Where learners had a significant part of their tuition in college there were formal reporting mechanisms and regular contact with the schools:

> And even with schools, we have formal report periods that we do, but if there's been an incident in the day, we will let them know. We may have dealt with it. We don't want them to do anything. But we will let them know. But on the other side, if there's been a commendation made, if that young person has shown exceptional skills or they've engaged in a group conversation where they would normally just sit there and say nothing, we will again let the school know. So, it's about keeping that communication.

If AP learners attended college for just a few hours a week the main focus of contact might just be monitoring of attendance and immediate reporting of any absences. The use of integrated software, such as ProMonitor which is common in FE colleges, facilitated the sharing of information with schools as in the example below.

> And we have a system called ProMonitor. It's similar to a school SIMS[3] system, but the high schools have got the opportunity to log on and see their learners, and anything that gets written about them. And so anything that comes through, our coordinator makes sure that it goes on there so that the schools can see it. If a learner doesn't turn up here, then the school will know.

However, even this level of participation could generate more complex issues: for example, bad behaviour in school being punished by removal from the college provision, even though behaviour at college had been exemplary. One college described how they worked with schools to negotiate extended college provision for a small number of such learners, thereby keeping them in education for Year 11.

### 3.6.5 The impact of Covid-19

The survey had an open question about the impact of Covid on 14 to 16 learners. Unsurprisingly, respondents perceived that student well-being had suffered with 98% strongly agreeing or agreeing with this statement. Also apparent was how learners were perceived to be struggling with isolation with 88% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing with this statement (see Figure 3.9) and how students were seen to be behind in their learning (81% strongly agreeing or agreeing).

Some referred to the challenge of keeping students engaged in online learning, which could be difficult in practical subjects:

> Teaching remotely was extremely difficult as most subjects are practically related. We have a large cohort in construction, where the experience for learners was significantly impacted by the lack of practical activity. (Survey respondent)

Among interviewees and survey respondents concerns about mental health issues were common, as was concern about the loss of social skills. Those learners who were attending college when the lockdowns began may have lost support systems that were provided by the college but absent elsewhere in their lives:

> Break from routine was difficult for the students and missing out on the social aspect of being at college. They also missed the additional support systems available when at college. (Survey respondent)

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[3] SIMS is the Management Information System used in most schools.

Figure 3.9: Staff perceptions of the impact on Covid-19 on their students
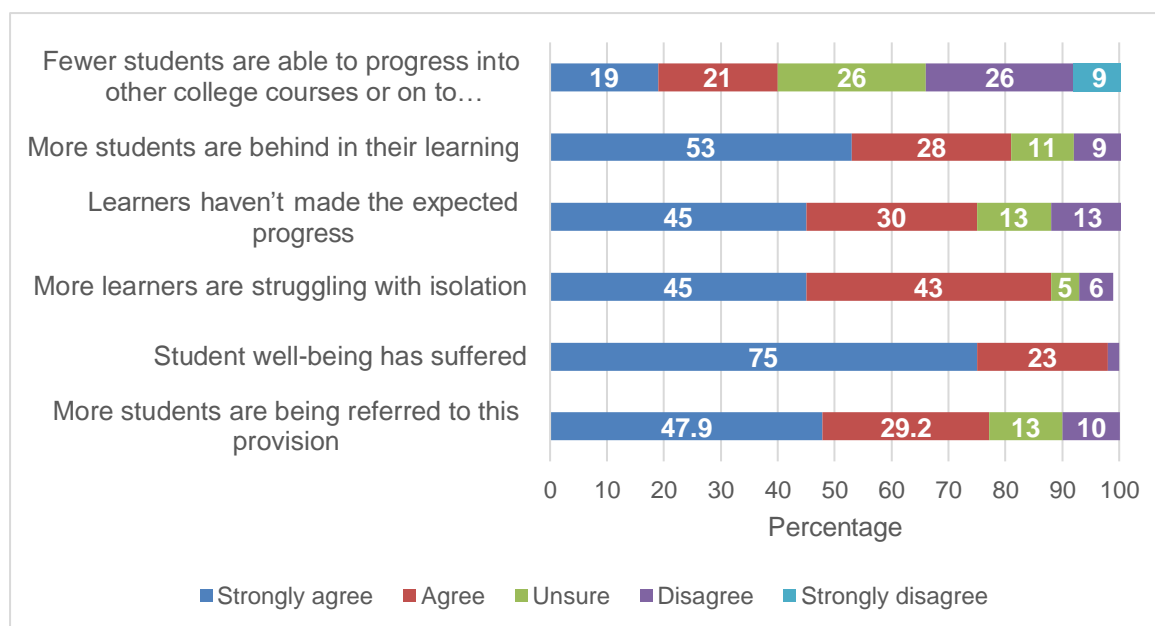


N=47 except for the statement beginning Fewer students are able to progress.., for which N=48. Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

Interviewees and survey respondents also spoke of the impact of Covid and the anxiety felt by young people in going back into a busy school environment, and hence as in this quotation, making the move to being EHE.

> For others, we've definitely found trying to go back, particularly going back into a Year 10 after Covid, they just cannot cope with that intense bang - curriculum, curriculum, GCSEs.

There were reports too about the impact of Covid on recent applicants, with greater numbers presenting with mental health needs, anxiety and well-being issues. As one interviewee pointed out for many of these learners the transition from primary to secondary school was relatively recent which was perceived to make things hard for the students.

> And when you think about the transition between primary and secondary and many of our children, we have now, they went through that transition, then Years 8 and 9 were Covid for them and then they hit Year 10 straight into GCSE and contact teaching and it's become quite difficult for many of them.

Others spoke of poor social skills resulting from the isolation during Covid lockdowns and some identified a sense of learned helplessness, or a belief that they are so far behind it is 'impossible to catch up'.

Interestingly in the survey, responses to the statement about the impact of Covid on student progression were mixed: while 40% agreed that fewer students were able to progress, just over a quarter were unsure, and 34% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

As captured in the following quotation, there were comments that affirmed the positive contribution that 14 to 16 provision could make for these learners that transcended the impact of the pandemic:

> The pandemic has resulted in an increased number of anxious learners unable to return to the school setting, impacting on their progress whilst working from home, but those who join the EHE programme at the college have positive experiences that enable them to progress onto their chosen pathway. (Survey respondent)

Summary

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 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.

### 3.7 Student progression

Interviewees indicated that post-16 progression rates for their 14 to 16-year-old learners were high with interviewees commenting that 'we're looking at 85% of the students that started with us will be moving on to the next level' or that there was a 90% progression rate with most students staying on in college. In one college 20% of learners were reported to go on to an apprenticeship.

In the survey respondents were asked in percentage terms, how many of last year's students in the 14 to 16 provision progressed to apprenticeships, to post-16 in their own college, to another FE college, to work or other. Transition to FE, whether the same or a different college, was the most common progression pathway, as it was among the interviewees. From the valid responses, EHE stood out in that all

responding colleges (N=18) reported that 80% or more of their learners progressed to FE post-16. For AP (N=22) the percentage of respondents reporting that 80% or more of their learners progressed to FE post-16 was 68% and for DE (N=7) it was 86%.

Progression to an apprenticeship was seen across all groups of learners, but not in all colleges. For example of the 22 colleges offering AP, where a valid response had been provided, half (N=11) reported that learners had progressed onto an apprenticeship. On average this was 10% of their learners. For DE four of the seven respondents indicated that students had progressed to an apprenticeship – on average this was 11% of their learners. Only four colleges out of 18 reported that EHE students had progressed onto an apprenticeship: on average 7% of learners.

Progression to employment followed a similar pattern in being seen in some colleges but not all and where students transitioned into work this was for 10% or less of the students with one exception where 15% of students were reported to move into employment post-16. The 'other' category in the survey was more prevalent among AP students. Analysis of the ILR data should provide more information about the 'other' category.

Across all interviewees most learners continued-post-16 within the college, often studying the same technical or vocational subject but at the next level. As one participant commented:

> I think they've got a massive advantage, because I think what they've already got is they've built the skills, and the knowledge and the expected behaviours, in addition for some achieving a qualification as well. This has set them up on their pathway.

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. In talking about boys and girls studying engineering as their vocational option one interviewee said:

> And then they can go to college and by the end of Year 11 they've already achieved a level 2 so they're already kind of two years ahead of everybody else, you know, those that come in at level 1 when they leave school at 16, ours have already done two years at college so it gets them into work quicker doesn't it.

As with enrichment activities, the 14 to 16-year-olds also had access to the wider college Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) teams and career events put on for all students such as careers fairs. IAG teams offered individual one-to-one appointments for the 14 to 16-year-olds and often arranged sessions with teachers of post-16 courses to support progress. As part of wider college provision, some

students also accessed transition and progression mentors assigned to subject areas in college. In addition to IAG support offered from the wider college, the 14 to 16-year-olds staff provided further support. In one college for instance the one-to-one tutorials in Year 11 focused on next steps and summer workshops had been introduced to support the transition to post-16 education within in the college. Another college spoke of how in Year 11:

> We have tutor groups that we work with together with the IAG and the college and then we also bring in lots of businesses to talk to them. And we also have carousels where all our young people go out to the post-16 and have a look and spend an hour walking around it in small groups. So we do that two or three times a year to make sure that most of our young people who want to stay in college, which most of them do to be fair, have a really good idea of what they can go on to.

Data from the survey respondents provided strong evidence to support the claims made about the quality of the careers advice and guidance and the support offered to 14 to 16-year-old learners in their progression post-16 (see Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: Staff perceptions of the support offered to students in college and how they develop
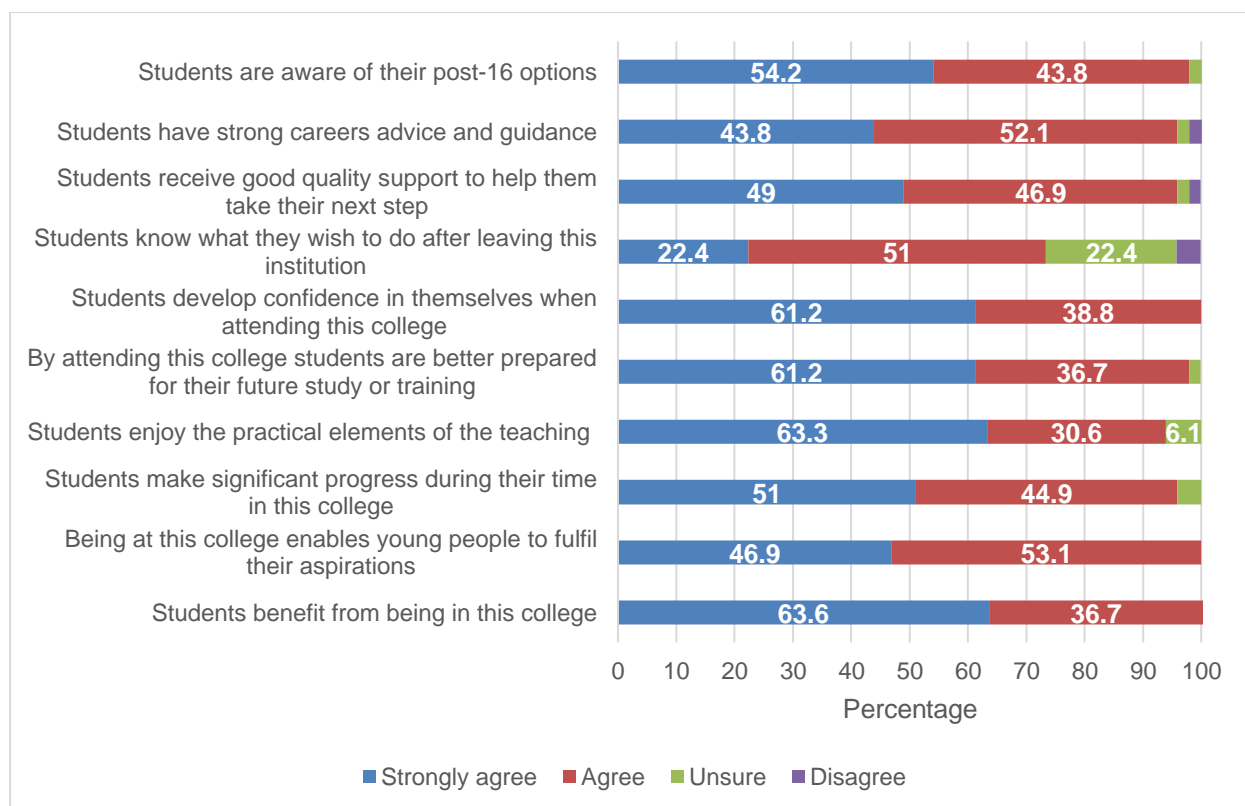


N=49 except for students are aware of their post-16 options and have strong careers advice and guidance where N=48.Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

In responding to questions about the progress these learners made during their time in college, the development of student confidence, their preparation for future studies or training and the overall benefits for these young learners in college, it was remarkable that over 90% of participants strongly agreed or agreed with these statements. The only statement that had a lower level of consensus was Students know what they wish to do after leaving this institution where 71% strongly agreed or agreed.

Similar to the interviewees, survey respondents also perceived that 14 to 16-year-olds learners were ahead when they entered post-16 education:

> 14 to 16 not only provides learners with a suite of GCSE, but a range of vocational programmes. Our learners are ahead when they go to college having studied these programmes through Years 10 and 11.

They also commented on how the effective transition support for these young learners meant that 'the move to college is very much less of a worry for our 14 to 16 provision'.

Summary

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. The case studies and the analysis of the ILR data will provide an opportunity to explore post-16 progression in more detail, especially in relation to the minority of learners who do not make a successful transition. As with enrichment, students benefited from the expertise across the wider college 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.

## 3.8   The educational and community ecosystem

### 3.8.1   The role of the LA and the community in new provision

It was interesting to see that in some colleges, the LA had approached the college about setting up 14 to 16-year-old provision in response to local need. In one instance this was about enabling EHE students to re-engage with education and in another it concerned provision for new arrivals where these young people needed ESOL and pastoral and emotional support and for whom schools were unlikely to be able to accommodate their needs.

In a different example, the establishment of a DE school within the college was a direct response to the closure of a local school. Parental opposition and a determination to keep the school open resulted in some young people having no school to go to when the parents' campaign failed. The college worked with parents, learners and the LA to set up the school.

### 3.8.2 Collaboration with the LA, schools and the community

Many interviewees spoke of strong engagement and good relationships with the LA. In some providers applications for places were managed through the LA via their portal, information about the provision offered was included in the LA 'Year 9s' letter informing parents of their options and LAs also referred individual students.

> At the moment we do our admissions through the local authority. They send out information to all Year 9s across the city about your options going into Year 10 - because there's us and a great long list. We then do open events so people can come and have a look, ask questions, without any commitment.

In one college, the LA was the only referring agency for the AP students and new arrivals. Schools provided detailed referral information which is sent to the LA. The college has little to do with the schools directly since everything goes through the LA to FAP.

It was evident that several interviewees were part of FAP, the local education forum or behaviour panels within the LA. This was seen as beneficial since college staff representation on behaviour panels gives the 14 to 16 provision a high profile locally, and more importantly, involvement with local behaviour panels meant that colleges had prior knowledge of students likely to be referred. In another authority the principal of the provision attended a regular meeting with secondary school heads and the LA. This close working relationship had meant that schools and the LA had supported the college in designing the 14 to 16-year-olds programmes. In some LAs, colleges received support for students with EHCPs through the LA EHCP and inclusion team.

Where EHE provision was offered, providers often spoke of close contact with the LA and their elective home education team whether in relation to referrals and when students were in attendance.

> We are really lucky in that we work very closely with our local authority and they're very keen that we get the right learners, and that this doesn't become a pupil referral unit. So we do the prep, then there are five colleagues from the local authority, the person in charge of the EHCPs, four colleagues who manage the EHE side, and inclusion team, and we discuss every applicant and share the information.

There were also instances of strong involvement from the local EHE community. In one college, there was a recognized need for a centre where EHE learners could sit exams. The area has a strong Home Ed Community with some children having been entirely home-schooled prior to joining the college. To meet this need, learners are accepted from a very wide geographical area. Many learners travel on the College coaches and some families drive considerable distances to access this provision. The widening of catchment areas for EHE learners was noted by several interviewees. For example in one college set in a semi-rural location, learners were coming from wide distances including large cities and in another 'Many students are coming from quite far away due to the lack of provision in the area. For some students there is a hell of a journey and a lot of trains. The net seems to be getting wider and wider'. Participants noted that EHE students do not get a travel bursary and that this needed to be explained to parents at interview.

Many interviewees also spoke of good relationships with schools, which in some instances had been in place for a long time. In one college, the AP provision, for one afternoon a week, was mostly for local high schools and was a testament to the good relationship with these local schools. To support this, the college employed a 14 to 16 foundation learning coordinator who was in constant contact with AP learners and their schools. What this did mean was because the students were almost all on a school roll there was limited contact with the LA. The college did though run part-time ESOL provision for a refugee group who are supported by the LA virtual school. Having someone to be the central means of communication with schools and parents appeared to be important in sustaining and developing relationships with parents and schools.

In one college the fact that all applications went through the manager of the overall provision, as did communications with schools, parents and LAs was seen to contribute to its success.

Another college worked with 60% of schools in the area in which there was no similar part-time AP provision. Communication varied with schools with some having a lot of communication and providing detailed information about the young people and others less so. Similarly in a college that worked with many different LAs information sharing with schools was often lacking in detail. However, they did work with schools to get support in place for young people with EHCPs and there was weekly contact with parents. It was evident that they were meeting the needs of AP from a wide geography. Lack of information from schools was commented by on several participants. Where colleges worked across different boroughs this often brought additional work due to different LAs having different systems and procedures. It was also noted that there could be different levels of communication across boroughs.

It was also apparent that colleges often worked with diverse communities with whom they had built up relationships over time. One college supported traveller families,

Bangladeshi families and looked-after children. Another college had engaged with the Gypsy, Roma and traveller community over a period of five years and had seen a substantial growth in intake to their provision from that community. As the interviewee commented 'there's been a real shift in that community around education and seeing the value of education'.

### 3.8.3   Working with employers

Overall, among the interviewees, there was evidence of engagement with employers in support of the 14 to 16-year-old provision offered with only one participant commenting that this was an area where they would like to do more work. Given that most students were undertaking vocational qualifications as part of their programme of study at college, employer engagement was frequently linked to the curriculum and in some instances employers were involved in the development of the curriculum. Over 72% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that employer engagement enabled students to develop transferable skills with a similar percent strongly disagreeing or disagreeing that sometimes it is hard to engage with employers (see Figure 3.11).

Figure 3.11: Staff perceptions of employer engagement for 14 to 16-year-olds
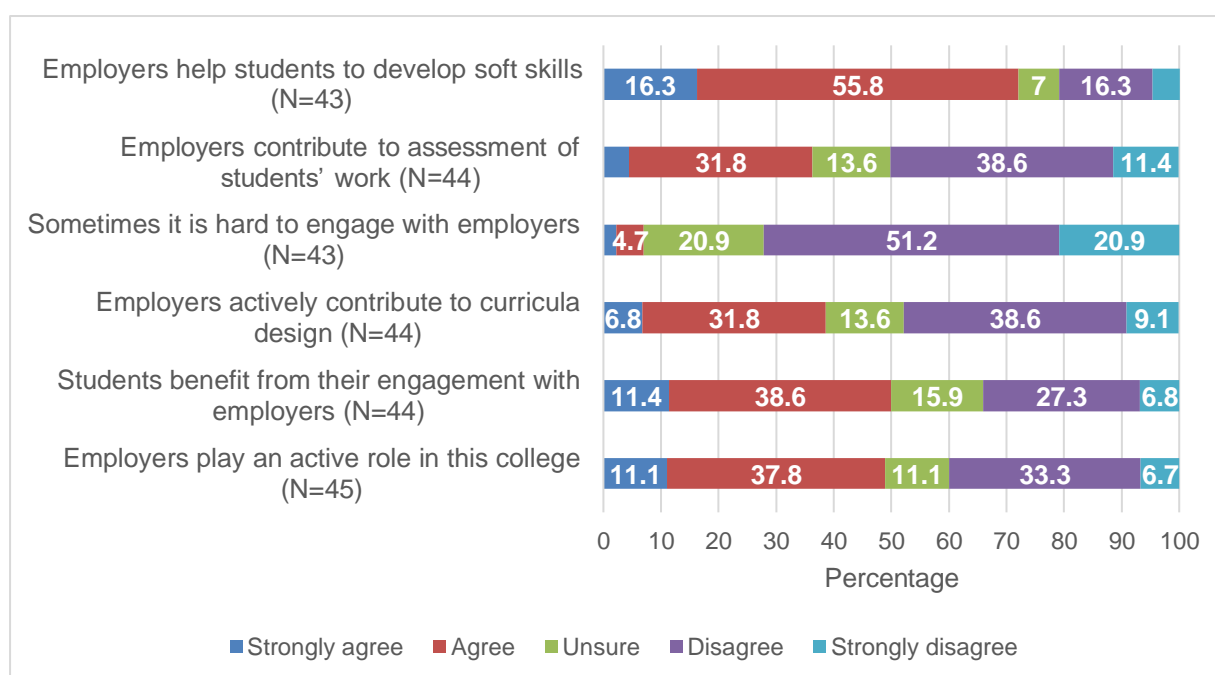


Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

What was notable among survey respondents was the split in relation to those who perceived students to benefit from their employer engagement and the extent to which employers played an active role in the college. Here 50% strongly agreed or agreed with the other 50% being unsure or strongly disagreeing or disagreeing: this did suggest some unevenness in employer engagement across the colleges.

Comments from survey respondents echoed timetable challenges when learners only attended for a limited number of hours and where they might be part-time in school:

> 14 to 16 students engage with employers, but they are mainly on academic programmes (e.g., GCSE) so there is less engagement of employers in the curriculum than in our post-16 provision.

> All part time. Limited opportunity for employer engagement.

> Our 14 to 16 provision is focused on preparing students for further study at college, not work, so we tend not to focus on working with employers until they are on a vocational course.

That said AP and EHE students also benefited from employer engagement. Part-time AP construction learners in one college received outstanding employer support from a local employer foundation that provides every school with six free bursary places in addition to providing all the PPE for learners. These employers also contributed to enrichment activities. At the end of every year there is an Awards Ceremony for the AP learners that involved employers from the four industry sectors.

Engagement with employers often reflected the wider college specialism and the local community.

> And we have lots of links with the employers locally, especially around the arts. Quite a few of our learners want to set up their own business, so we want to be ensuring that we do something around enterprise.

In one multi-site college each curriculum programme has a tier one stakeholder that endorses the curriculum and offers a range of activities – this included giving the 14 to 16-year-olds mock interviews in addition to providing support with work placements. In one college where between 15 to 20% of learners went into apprenticeships an employer committee make a distinctive contribution to the vocational curriculum:

> So we have an employer committee, local businesses, national, we meet termly and discuss the curriculum for vocational areas, and is there anything that they're now not seeing that generally they would like us to add, is there anything that they can provide for us?

In another college students benefited from employer engagement activities throughout the year with work experience linked to the vocational area being studied. In addition, local enterprise informed the curriculum and employer expectations were embedded into the employability lessons.

Where high levels of employer engagement could take place there was a clear sense from interviewees and survey respondents of the perceived benefits for the students.

> I think certainly those links with employers and stakeholders, that tier one stuff I was talking about. And I think that's really important because we have a lot of kids that come to us where they haven't had the best start of education, they've made a name for themselves, and I think the turning point with a lot of them is, getting into the workplace.

> Students can see the reason they need their education and the importance that this can have on their chosen careers. Working with employers can help engage the students and show solidarity between us and the reasons why we do what we do. (Survey respondent)

> How they raise the aspirations of the young people, showing what career opportunities are available regardless of previous education experience. (Survey respondent)

> That employers are able to bring curriculum to life for these young learners and therefore progression opportunities are clearer. (Survey respondent)

Summary

Many interviewees spoke of strong engagement and good relationships with the 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 evidence of engagement with employers and of how students benefited from this, especially since employers often reflected the wider college specialism and local community. That said there was a more mixed picture from the survey respondents from those interviewed: this will be followed up in more detail during the case studies. For some part-time students, employment opportunities were somewhat restricted due to the timetable.

## 4 INITIAL REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

**Initial reflections**

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 16-18 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 with 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.

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