



# The educational provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in further education colleges in England

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Acknowledgements

This report is the final output from a two-year project, The educational provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in further education colleges in England, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted by Association of Colleges and IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, which ran from September 2022 to October 2024. We are grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for their funding and support.

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# Introduction

**This report is the final output from a two-year project on the educational provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in further education (FE) colleges (hereafter referred to as 'colleges') in England. It used linked National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individual Learner Record (ILR) data; a survey of colleges in England; interviews with senior leaders from colleges, and in-depth fieldwork visits to 10 colleges to shed light on this hitherto neglected educational provision. This research tackled the evidence gap surrounding 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges, a group of young people who are often invisible in government policy.**

At the time this research was undertaken, approximately 155 colleges<sup>1</sup> out of 227 general further education, specialist and sixth form colleges (AoC, 2023) in England provided some 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 college for up to 16 hours per week and full-time students termed direct entry (DE) who have chosen to study at a college. These students include non-attenders, those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those who are disengaged from mainstream education. Some colleges also offer school link (one day a week) provision.

Currently there is no published research on the collective experience of 14 to 16-year-olds receiving part or all their education in colleges.

1. AoC (2023) Colleges in England, as at 4 January 2023. London: AoC.

# Aims and objectives of the research

The project investigated the opportunities and trajectories for 14 to 16-year-olds educated in colleges in England.

The overarching research questions were:

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 research aimed to facilitate real-world change by supporting policymakers to improve educational opportunities for these young people, enhancing accountability to prevent them from becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET), and highlighting the need for equitable and inclusive policy making.

# Methodology

This exploratory research used a mixed-methods approach involving quantitative and qualitative data that was shaped to build a carefully constructed evidence base. Through the triangulation of evidence, it was possible to provide the first large-scale research contribution about the characteristics and profiles of 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges, the educational offer and provision they receive, their experiences and progression and the factors that enable these young people to develop their potential and the barriers within this.

Analysis of data from both the NPD and ILR datasets provided a detailed picture of the 14 to 16 students in colleges in England. Linking data from the NPD (information about schools) to the ILR (information about students in post 16 learning providers including colleges) enabled us to understand the student experience immediately prior to the 14 to 16 phase and their subsequent progression into college at age 16. The dataset considered cohorts from 2015/16 to 2020/21 and where appropriate was supplemented by current ILR/MiDES<sup>2</sup> data.

Anonymised survey data about 14 to 16 provision were collected from college leaders via a sector wide survey sent to all colleges in England. Data collected explored the breadth of the curriculum, the qualifications offered 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.

Online semi-structured interviews with 19 senior leaders of the provision were undertaken. 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.

10 colleges were selected for fieldwork visits – each was visited on two occasions. Interviews were undertaken with current (N=151) and former students (N=12), parents and carers (N=20), leaders of the provision (N=10), teachers (N=36) and support staff (N=20), SMT (N=5) governors (N=7), employers (N=5) and local authority (LA) representatives (N=5). Thirteen lesson observations were undertaken which provided insight into pedagogical approaches adopted when working with these students.

Interviews were fully transcribed where permission had been given for them to be recorded, otherwise fieldnotes were made. Throughout the research the qualitative analysis drew predominantly on thematic analyses. The range of interviews undertaken together with the quantitative data enabled the use of triangulation across different interviewees and at different times to ensure the validity of the findings. The research was undertaken within the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and approved by the IOE ethics committee. RCU researchers working on the project were all ONS accredited researchers and accessed the NPD and ILR data via ONS Secure Research Service (SRS). This work was undertaken in the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service using data from ONS and other owners and does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners.

2. MiDES is a secure server which allows colleges to access in year data benchmarks.

# Findings

## A diverse group of young people

Students aged between 14 to 16-years-old attending college are a heterogeneous group and encompass learners from a full range of abilities. Common across all students, AP, DE and EHE, was that mainstream school wasn't working for them, 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. Anxiety and mental health needs were common across all groups of learners, as were instances of bullying in school. Similarly behavioural issues were seen across AP, DE and EHE cohorts. Although in the case of EHE learners this is likely to have been more common among recent school students who had been encouraged or asked to leave school.

The number of 14 to 16-year-olds attending college dropped considerably between 2016/17 to 2021/22 and since then has risen. AP numbers reduced the most which mirrored a similar pattern to students in state funded AP and the dip during the pandemic. DE provision remained broadly stable and EHE provision increased substantially.

A higher proportion of 15-year-olds than 14-year-olds were studying in colleges compared to state secondary schools in England – this was mostly driven by AP and EHE although over time DE had moved from a relatively balanced proportion of each year group to one where 15-year-olds outweighed 14-year-olds. This does suggest that in the most recent years many students join half-way through key stage 4 (KS4) and might be disadvantaged in the continuity of their KS4 educational experience.

The proportion of boys and girls were similar over time in DE and EHE and in both there were slightly higher proportions of girls than boys. By contrast AP had higher proportions of boys than girls. Historically boys have been

more likely to be excluded from school than girls. As might be anticipated AP had a far higher percentage of 15-year-olds excluded in the previous year than other cohorts. However, except for 2018/19, exclusions among 14-year-olds were similar across AP and DE.

Most students were white and between 2016/17 to 2020/21 the overall proportion of learners identified with Learner Learning Difficulties or Disabilities (LLDD) had gradually increased over time. There had been almost no change in levels of deprivation across the five-year period, with a large proportion of AP, DE and EHE students in the two most deprived quintiles.

Students studied at different qualification levels in college ranging from Entry Level to Level 3. There was a gradual increase in the level of qualifications studied over time such that by 2020/21 over half of the learners were studying at Level 2. The variation of levels seen across EHE students over time perhaps reflected the diverse nature of this group.

## Recruitment of students and the application process

The overall number of providers with five or more learners dropped considerably from 179 in 2016/17 to 111 in 2023/24. While mergers meant the number of overall colleges dropped in this period, the flux in provision was mostly with providers of AP: some colleges appeared to have taken the decision not to continue this provision type, possibly linked to the implementation of Attainment 8 and Progress 8 and funding constraints. Over 40% of colleges offered more than one type of provision. There was high variability in the number of students enrolled in each college, regardless of whether this was AP, DE or EHE. In AP and EHE most provision was for small and medium groups of students, although provision with larger groups of students was also evident. There were regional differences in student numbers in each year from 2016/17 to 2020/21 with the North East having fewer students than all

other regions. The breakdown of 2020/21 data in comparison with all KS4 students by region gave a slightly different perspective. Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest relative numbers at 8.9 per thousand, followed by the North East at 8.4. Looking across the same data by AP, DE and EHE demonstrated considerable variability.

Colleges offering 14 to 16 provision have reacted to a perceived growth in young people with needs that schools can't address, particularly for EHE students. This provision was perceived to have widespread benefits for the community: schools have more options for an alternative education offer, local communities see a drop in exclusions, a reduction in NEET, and a corresponding fall in the societal difficulties that such circumstances can lead to. Also important was that the 14 to 16 provision offered support and a way forward for EHE learners to gain qualifications and progress. Provision was described by interviewees as responsive to local needs in situations where funding was available.

Learners and their parents had discovered 14 to 16 provision in a variety of ways, ranging from happenstance to formal referrals. College staff described rigorous application processes for students that were designed specifically for these younger learners given the range of applicant circumstances and individual needs. Diagnostic assessment of individual needs was important, and taster days and 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<sup>3</sup> to the curriculum, applicants also needed to demonstrate that they had the maturity to work alongside older students. Parents were engaged in the application process and most often colleges used this as an opportunity to explain what the provision offered and the expectations of parents and their child. Across all colleges, a key criterion for admission was

to establish how the college could meet the individual needs of each applicant.

## The curriculum offer – meeting the needs of young people

Students studied a range of academic and vocational technical subjects, from English and maths to vocational technical qualifications (VTQs) in construction, creative industries and hair and beauty. Many students were studying qualifications related to preparation for work and/or employability skills and foundations for learning and life. The curriculum offer in terms of its flexibility and depth, and its emphasis on vocational learning, was attractive to learners who valued the opportunities for hands-on activities and the practical elements of teaching. Students, parents and teachers emphasised the importance of choice and of how the curriculum was individualised to the needs and interests of the learners, regardless of whether they were AP, DE or EHE. Choice not only included the subjects studied, but the levels at which qualifications were offered, and particularly for EHE students the number of courses followed. Several colleges had deliberately reduced the number of qualifications taken in comparison to the many GCSEs than mainstream students take which was valued by students and parents alike. Focusing on fewer subjects was perceived to engage students with learning and reduce stress levels.

Most AP students were in college for a small amount of time having planned learning hours of up to 20% of a college year – one day a week or a block of time. Among EHE students the most common planned hours were up to 50% of the college year. Across AP and EHE students there were differences in what these students were doing when not in college, for example when AP students spoke of their time in school, some attended school full time on the days when they were not at college and others did not.

3. 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.

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, wellbeing 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.

## The college learning environment

High levels of student-teacher interaction in taught classes was commented on by many students and their parents in addition to teachers as making a difference to teaching and learning. Often students were in smaller classes than might usually be seen in mainstream and this was a contributory factor to student engagement and their sense of being valued. Evident from the students was how the learning environment in college encouraged them to ask questions more readily than when in school and of how they felt supported and listened to by teaching staff.

Teachers were aware of the different ability levels and needs of students and adapted their teaching accordingly. Students commented on how they were not made to feel “stupid” in class and emphasised how the lessons contributed to mutual respect amongst the learners. Evident throughout many student and former student interviews was how the more relaxed college environment – including approaches to rules, uniform, being allowed off-site, and use of first names – enabled young people to feel more at home in college than when they were in mainstream school.

Students valued the vocational opportunities in college especially given the industry standard facilities that colleges have. Overall, the college learning environment was seen to remove some of the barriers that students struggled with at school and hence support their

educational and personal development.

## Pastoral and student support

All colleges recognised pastoral care as a significant part of the 14 to 16 offer, central to the success of their provision. Having the right staff was important, and learners and their parents appreciated the care and understanding they experienced from all staff, not just teachers. Strong relationships with staff were often key to success, as was the importance of peer friendship groups. Given the vulnerability of many of these learners a strong emphasis was given to wellbeing and mental health. Some learners presented with challenging behaviours, and the concept of ‘every day is a new day’ paved the route to success and progression. Attendance was monitored carefully and absence was acted on promptly with calls to the parent, carer or/and school.

Engagement with parents and carers, or even families was often said to be strong, 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 when previous contact with teachers may only have been the regular reporting of poor behaviour.

## Student development and progression

In reading the findings it is important to note that there was nothing to suggest that the experiences and factors that enabled young people to develop their potential varied according to whether they were AP, DE and or EHE.

Progression rates were positive with 75% or more learners transitioning to post-16 for the period 2016/17 to 2020/21, with a peak of 81% in 2020/21. Progression data for college-based AP students was well above that seen in state-funded AP<sup>4</sup>.

4. State-funded AP includes pupil referral units, academy and free school provision and hospital schools.

Overall there had been a positive increase in students studying at higher levels throughout 2016/17 to 2020/21 because of decreasing proportions of students studying a Level 1. Most students progressed into Level 2 post-16, and around 20% of students had consistently progressed into Level 3 or higher. Of some concern was the lack of movement from Entry Level into Level 1 with the percentage of students studying at entry between 9 and 10% of this five-year period. The percentage of students progressing into apprenticeships remained fairly consistent, though there were slight dips in 2018/19 and 2019/20. Given the variation in qualification levels when these students started at college, it was not surprising that progression patterns varied across AP, DE, and EHE.

Students benefited from access to the college's careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) support, including CEIAG teams, career events, one-on-one appointments, sessions with post-16 course teachers, and mentors. This guidance supported students to make informed decisions about their future careers and education pathways. Evident here and indeed throughout the report was that students, former students and their parents typically felt their time in college had made a positive contribution to their academic and personal development.

## The educational and community ecosystem

Strong collaborations between colleges, LAs and schools and the community were often characterised by frequent contact and mutual support, with all parties working together to address local educational needs. Where relationships were less strong this was often due to poor communication or lack of involvement with the LA or school. Insufficient funding was considered a significant challenge across colleges and types of provision in some cases leading to difficult decisions about limiting or closing provision.

There was evidence of engagement with employers, who provided a range of activities

including career information, site visits and guest speaking. Students were perceived to benefit from this involvement with employers highlighting changes in attitude and behaviours and the value of linking English and maths with vocational subjects. That said there was a more mixed picture from the survey respondents regarding employer interaction and student benefits. For some part-time students, employment opportunities were restricted due to the timetable.

## Implications for policy, funding and practice

### Policy:

- Working with schools and colleges, all LAs should assess the suitability of 14 to 16 provision to meet the needs of all young people within their communities to ensure they are given the opportunity to thrive and progress into adult life and work.
- KS3 and KS4 curriculum should be reviewed to allow students the option of studying fewer subjects at greater depth including a wide range of vocational and technical qualifications at a range of levels to meet each student's starting point
- There should be clear guidance covering all types of 14 to 16 provision, not just DE. This guidance shouldn't in any way limit flexibility, but rather create a framework for it to be embedded within the local offer at 14.

## Funding:

- College-based 14 to 16 provision should be funded at least in line with school funding for this age group. AP provision should be planned and funded for groups which allow for delivery to be financially viable from the start of the college year.
- EHE students should be able to access additional learning support in line with their needs.
- Financial support for transport and free school meals should be extended to ensure equal access to college provision.
- Providing funded opportunities for young people to attend college for vocational options during the school week could mean that some young people would remain in school, but also benefit from the broader options colleges offer. This could also support transition at 16.

## Enhanced data collection and monitoring:

- DfE should provide clear guidance on how to code 14 to 16 students who study at colleges. As noted in section 2 of the full report, some students may be categorised inaccurately in the current system as a result of different uses of terminology for 14 to 16 groups. Aligning system terminology more closely with the language used by colleges could help this process and support better tracking of student outcomes.
- Providing a national tracking system for student progression and outcomes would provide a better understanding of how colleges support young people's post-16 transitions and their future development. Enhanced data collection and analysis can offer insights into the effectiveness of college provision and inform future support strategies.

# Future research

**The aim of this research was to explore the experience of 14 to 16-year-olds as they study at college. As discussed, there is little research in this space and there are plenty of opportunities for further study. We recommend that consideration should be given to further research into three key areas. Firstly, a cost benefit analysis of the short-term costs of college based 14 to 16 provision in relation to the longer-term impacts for students. Second, further research into tracking student destinations and outcomes over time would develop understanding of the impact of college based 14 to 16 provision. Finally, future comparative studies exploring the experiences of young people who are educated exclusively at home, or in other alternative provision settings, will provide deeper insights into the benefits and limitations of college provision.**



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