ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES

IOE – Faculty of Education and Society

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

FINAL REPORT

Association of Colleges and IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society
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Nuffield Foundation

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1. Introduction, aims and objectives

1.1. 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 (referred to in this report 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 on two occasions 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.

1.2. Context

At the time this research was undertaken, approximately 155 FE colleges out of 227 general further education (GFE), 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.

While attention has been paid to lower attaining 16 to 18-year-olds in colleges, especially those who have not attained pass grades in GCSE English and maths (Bibby et al., 2024; 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.

Young people receiving AP in schools including Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) attain extremely poor GCSE outcomes compared to their peers and have higher levels of SEN (CJS, 2020; Timpson, 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 learners often have complex learning and pastoral needs and are at risk of exclusion or becoming 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 to 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 & 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 college provision. This project addressed the research gap through an analysis of the profiles of these young people, provided evidence to understand the provision offered and levels of attainment, and through interviews and case studies demonstrated the complexities of transition including the supportive and inhibiting factors contributing to educational progression, whether this was sufficient and how this varied 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) programmemes 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) the Increased Flexibility (IF) Programmeme was introduced by the then Department for Education and Skills aimed at young people in Key Stage 4 (KS4) 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. At its height in the early 2000s, over half of all secondary schools and three-quarters of FE colleges were involved in IF partnerships (Ofsted, 2005). The programmeme was seen as successful in that 80% of those who started achieved a qualification (Ofsted, 2005) and 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 programmeme of study and the world of work (Devit & Roker, 2005).

In 2004 The Young Apprenticeship programmeme for young people in KS4 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 programmemes 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 Programmemes came to an end as they were considered costly and only benefitted 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 Diplomas were short lived, ending in 2010 without reaching a full rollout. Most 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 programmeme 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 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 & Spours, 2020). Evidence suggested 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 & 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 14 to 16-year-old students in colleges dropped significantly (L. Rogers, personal communication, March 2016).

Interestingly, while college-based KS4 provision in England has witnessed a decline over the past 10 years, in Scotland it has increased. School-College partnerships, aimed at supporting skills for life and work, have seen growth from 53,000 enrolments in 2016/17 and to almost 73,000 in 2019/20 (Hunt et al., 2021). This provision is broader than KS4 with around 20% of children and young people across the 3 to 18 age range undertaking learning at both school and college.

Current provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in FE colleges

While there is a variety of ways in which colleges engage with KS4 students including school link and taster days, there are now three main types of college-based 14 to 16 provision: AP, DE and EHE. In recent years there has been a clear policy focus on both EHE and AP. College-based DE provision on the other hand has been relatively unheralded.

Alternative provision

DfE Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, 2013, defines AP as:

> Education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour.

AP can be full or part-time and is tailored to student needs. Students are often dual registered i.e. registered at two different places, the school is the main and the AP provision the subsidiary. Funding is determined at a local level. AP providers include AP academies, AP free schools, PRUs, independent providers, FE colleges, and voluntary sector providers. Most placements are in state-maintained AP. The main factors for referrals are disengagement from learning and persistent disruptive behaviour for secondary-aged students. Students attending AP often come from home contexts where social and economic deprivation, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse and parental mental health needs are commonplace (Timpson, 2019). Students in AP compared to the state sector are more likely to have SEN and Social Emotional and Mental Health needs (SEMH) and be eligible for free school meals (FSM). In addition, young people attending AP are more likely to be male, with pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds, including Black Caribbean, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, disproportionately represented. These young people are also more likely to be permanently excluded from school (Gill et al., 2017). While many young people attending AP will have been suspended or excluded from school, this is not the case for all students. Among AP students there is a diverse range of needs.

Outcomes for those attending AP are generally poor – this includes academic outcomes, and the vulnerability to experiencing social isolation, substance misuse, youth offending, mental health difficulties and becoming Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) (Timpson, 2019).

Under the coalition and Conservative governments, between 2010 and 2024 there were numerous reports and research into AP and exclusions (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018) which culminated in the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023b). The Conservative government's plans for AP were aimed at making mainstream education more inclusive and reducing the number of exclusions and long-term referrals to AP.

Ofsted (2024) points to the challenge of providing an overview of the AP sector. However, the inspectorate estimates that in January 2023 there were 67,600 AP placements of which 11,600 were in unregistered provision including FE colleges. There were 24,600 total AP placements commissioned directly by schools which may or may not be included in the figure above.

Direct Entry provision

Around 14 colleges (AoC, 2023a) offer provision for DE students aged 14 to 16 and around 1,520 students access this provision currently. Unlike AP and EHE provision, the DfE publishes guidance on full-time enrolment of 14 to 16-year-olds in FE and sixth form colleges. This guidance is updated on a yearly basis and outlines information on funding, accountability, safeguarding, curriculum offer, attendance monitoring and exclusions. Funding for DE provision is based on national 16 to 18 rates. In 2024 the base rate of funding for school-based KS4 students is £5,995 per student (DfE, 2023c), for 16 to 18-year-olds it is £4,843 (ESFA, 2024). Hence students in FE receive less funding than their peers in mainstream school. 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, 2023a).

In line with the recommendations of the Wolf Report (2011), college-based DE provision was introduced in 2013 (DfE, 2014). This made way for colleges to enrol 14 to 16-year-olds on full-time KS4 programmemes either on their own or in collaboration with schools. From the onset the number of colleges offering DE provision remained small and has never increased above 19, with the suggestion being that this has been due to a) the funding model set out above whereby basic per pupil funding for 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges is less than received in mainstream schools and b) college reputational concerns over Ofsted judgements about Progress 8 scores that would be inevitably lower than schools (Noble, 2023). By way of explanation DE students are not taught at college through Years 7 to 9 and students may have had disrupted education prior to starting in DE hence college Progress 8 outcomes are much lower than most schools. While this data now comes with a clear caveat to explain the difference, colleges remain worried about reputational damage (Noble, 2023).

DE provision offers a combination of Level 1 and 2 vocational technical options alongside general qualifications in subjects such as English, maths and science. This sits alongside support for mental health and anxiety (Noble, 2023). DfE guidance also lays out the requirement for relationships and sex education and health education, religious studies and a daily act of collective worship.

In its inception it was envisaged that DE provision would be aimed at all students wishing to study a vocational technical option alongside a more traditional curriculum (Wolf, 2011). In practice this did not happen. Many students attending DE have already experienced alternative education, have had disrupted education, have barriers to learning and are vulnerable to becoming NEET (Noble, 2023; McKenna, 2023). Practitioners, as reported in the national press, have commented on high levels of progression and the 'transformative impact' on young people's personal development (Noble, 2023; Simmons-Blench, 2024).

Electively Home Educated provision

Around 75 colleges (AoC, 2023a) offer provision for EHE students aged 14 to 16 and around 2,500

students access this provision currently. These students are enrolled and funded at the national 16 to 18 funding rate, for part-time courses only, that are fewer than 580 hours per year. There is no nationally prescribed model for provision (DfE, 2023a). Students often study English and maths and may also take a vocational qualification.

Under the 1996 Education Act the responsibility for how a young person is educated ultimately sits in the hands of the parent (DfE, 2019). Some parents choose to home educate from the start of a child's education, other young people are withdrawn from school during the years of compulsory education for a wide range of reasons including mental health and lifestyle choice (Long & Danechi, 2023; Ofsted, 2019; HoC Education Committee, 2021).

It is not known how many children are home educated in England (Long & Danechi, 2023); registration with local authorities (LAs) is currently voluntary though the Children's wellbeing bill legislation proposed in the Kings Speech (Gov.UK, 2024) would create a duty on LAs to have and maintain Children Not in School registers and provide support to home-educating parents. There are though estimates of the number of children registered as home educated adjusted for non-responses. Data collected between 2016 and 2021 by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) estimated the cumulative number of children and young people in England being home educated as 37,500 in 2016 compared to 115,542 in 2020/21 with 2020/21 showing a 34% increase on the previous year. Since 2022 the DfE has collected information from LAs about the number of home-educated children. For 2022/23, the last year for which there is full data, 126,100 children were estimated to be EHE at any point during the year. An increase from the 2021/22 estimate of 116,300 children (DfE, 2024a). Notable is the growth of the EHE population by approximately 20% for the previous five years (ADCS, 2021). Over the course of the pandemic, the number of children who were EHE increased significantly.

Similar to AP students, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are over-represented in home-educated data and young people are more likely to be white than all pupils (Children's Commissioner, 2024). The percentage of registered home educated children with SEN support and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) are broadly in line with the national average (Long & Danichi, 2023). Although a highly heterogeneous group much research references EHE children and young people having experienced bullying or lack of support for poor mental health, anxiety, SEN, poor attendance and/or exclusions (Ofsted, 2019; Centre for Social Justice; 2022).

One issue pertinent to EHE and raised by Ofsted deserves mention: the 'increasing evidence that home education can be a last resort for some families when relationships have broken down between schools and children or parents' (Ofsted, 2019, p3) rather than home education being a choice. This has been echoed in other reports alongside broader concerns about the off-rolling of pupils whereby schools take children off the school roll for reasons that are mostly in the school's interest rather than the best interests of the child (e.g. Children's Commissioner, 2024).

1.3. Theoretical framework adopted throughout the research

This research was underpinned by the work of Bronfenbrenner on ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner is best known for his seminal work on human development (1979) which described environmental settings as a sequence of four nested, ecological systems (micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystem) that influence or determine developmental outcomes from birth. This project, however, is underpinned by the mature form of his theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), a Bioecological Model in which *proximal processes* and the Process-Person-Context-Time model show how the interplay between environment, relationships and personal agency all contribute to development.

Ecosystems

Bronfenbrenner's four ecologies begin with the microsystems, the immediate environments of the developing child. For our learners these included home, college and peer groups. Together, these individual *microsystems* form the *mesosystem* in which the young person operates. Bronfenbrenner's approach explains how interactions with the other people (e.g. parents, teachers) and the objects and symbols (e.g. a puzzle, a maths problem) in the mesosystem will shape the young person's development. An important element of the theory for this project is the recognition of individual difference: the same environment will affect young people in different ways. The *exosystem* encompasses the wider community and may include physical realities such as the type of educational institutions operating within a neighbourhood but can also include a parent's work environment or conditions. The first of these examples will limit or expand educational opportunities, the second may affect the quality or amount of time the parent can devote to their children. What happens in the micro-, meso- and exosystems is influenced by the *macrosystem*, which contains the dominant belief systems and ideologies of a culture, and the policies, agencies and bodies that maintain them. For example, school performance tables and funding mechanisms determine the qualifications and assessment available to students, which then has a direct impact on curriculum and classroom delivery methods. This top-down approach inevitably favours more affluent families, whose micro- and mesosystems are likely to be aligned with the ideologies of the macrosystem, thus enabling smooth transitions for their developing child.

Bronfenbrenner observed that the children of less advantaged families may have little experience beyond the mesosystem of their home, school and neighbourhood, a subculture which may not be consistent with the ideologies of the macrosystem thereby making transitions more difficult.

Proximal Processes

Positive reciprocal interactions (with other people or with tasks) that occur frequently over a sufficient period of time, become *proximal processes* that are 'engines of development' (2006, p801), driving the acquisition of skills and knowledge that cover any aspect of day-to-day life. Participating in progressively more complex interactions enables the young person to become an agent of their own development, but environmental circumstances vary in the extent to which they support the young person to develop their full potential. Advantaged, stable environments encourage positive interactions, support the development of knowledge and skills, and enable smooth transitions at key points in the educational system. Disadvantaged or disruptive environments discourage this, because they do not provide the conditions necessary for proximal processes to develop.

Four constructs: Process-Person-Context-Time

At the core of the Bioecological Model is the construct of *Process*, which encompasses particular forms of interactions between the individual and the environment, resulting over time in the proximal processes that shape human development. The *Person* construct consists of a) the disposition or type of character thar a person has, b) the bioecological resources of ability, skill, knowledge and experience, and c) the demand characteristics that invite or discourage reaction from the social environment. As a concept it offers greater understanding of the role of the environment in shaping behaviour since individuals react differently to the same environment. For our research, it is also useful to note that these three types of person characteristics are also incorporated into the definition of the microsystem as characteristics of others with whom the young person interacts - parents, friends, teachers. *Context* refers to the immediate or more remote environments in which human beings live their lives. The combination of *Person* and *Context* has an effect on the relation of *Process* to outcome. For example, an unstable home background may have less impact on a highly resilient individual.

The inclusion of *Time* into the model refers to both individual development over the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived, the latter illustrating the links between development and policy. For example, the cohort of young learners we met in our interviews had been educated entirely in the post-Gove period, whilst some of their parents will have had their 14 to 16 education during the New Labour widening participation era. In terms of ethos, curriculum, qualifications, assessment and funding the two periods were dramatically different. The relationship between these four constructs is not fixed, and dynamic interactions between them can result in significant change in outcomes that can be driven by any of the constructs.

Reducing the impact of disadvantage

What is striking from the review of current provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges above is the dearth of explicit research into and knowledge about these young people. Even among AP which has been subject to substantive research, much of the literature and commentary on AP references the role colleges play as a post-16 destination for young people who have attended AP settings (Ofsted, 2024; Tate & Greatbatch, 2017) rather than the role that colleges play for 14 to 16-year-olds. Similarly, college EHE provision is rarely referenced other than as a post-16 progression option and there is no published research on DE. The literature reviewed does though suggest that many of the learners in this cohort may have experienced disadvantages resulting in particular educational needs.

Bronfenbrenner had an abiding concern with the environments (home or school) experienced by the less advantaged, in which he observed a 'growing hecticness, instability and chaos' (2006, p796). He noted that such environments can produce physical or psychological distress on the part of the young person, which then creates difficulties for them in maintaining control over their own behaviour. Accordingly, more of parents' (or teachers') time and energy is directed to behaviour than to developing knowledge and skill in dealing with the environment. Bronfenbrenner emphasised the importance for optimum development of strong and enduring relationships with adults who could engage with the child on a regular basis over an extended period of time and had concern for their wellbeing and development. Bronfenbrenner frequently linked his work to the policy context, which resonates with the current project, since policy and politics are key drivers of state education, directly impacting on the classroom experience.

1.4. 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 project set out to provide:

- An in-depth understanding of who post-14 learners in colleges 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 college-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.

2. Methodology

Overview

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.

Quantitative analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individual Learner Record (ILR)

Analysis of data from both the NPD and ILR datasets provided a detailed picture of 14 to 16 students in FE 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[1] data. RCU, long-term data partner of AoC, undertook this work.

The analysis explored the scale of provision across England and identified the characteristics and profiles of these students to specifically address Research Question 1: What are the characteristics and profiles of these learners and do these remain stable over time?

In undertaking the analysis decisions were made about the grouping of young people in AP, DE or EHE. Both DE and EHE are funded through the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and were clearly identifiable. The 2020/21 dataset indicated just over 2,500 EHE students, just over 1,600 DE students and just over 4,000 'other' students who did not fall into either of these categories. The initial assumption was that the 'other' category represented AP; however, when exploring the data it became clear that other/AP was a more complex picture that could be broken down into 16 to 19 no funding, 16 to 19 funded and European Social Fund (ESF). Communication with colleges who had students in the 16 to 19 funded category indicated that they were EHE students. For the purposes of this report these 700 14 to 16 students were included in the EHE category. ESF funded students were removed from the analysis given the temporary nature of the funding. That left just under 3,000 students identified as funded by schools and/or the LA who were classified as AP. A small subset of these students, 480 out of 2,980, were not on the NPD and are reported on separately where possible. The NPD only includes children and young people on state schools' rolls in England. For example, it does not include independent schools, learners who are home-educated nor young people who have recently arrived in the UK. Throughout the report these students are described as 'AP no NPD'. Note, colleges interviewed as part of this research did not identify specific groups of AP students.

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

Survey of 14 to 16 provision in FE colleges in England

Anonymised survey data about 14 to 16 provision were collected from college leaders via a sector wide survey sent to all colleges in England, to gain an insight into the nature of this provision. Of the 227 colleges in England at the time (AoC, 2023b) valid responses were received from 72 institutions, a response rate of 32%. Most respondents were from GFE colleges.

Data collected explored the breadth of the curriculum offer including how this embraces academic, technical, and vocational education, 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. 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.

Contextual semi-structured interviews with senior leaders of the 14 to 16-year-old provision

Online semi-structured interviews with 19 senior leaders of the 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 provision, how students are recruited and their progression pathways, the perceived impact of the provision and any distinguishing features.

Fieldwork visits to case study colleges

Following input and guidance from the Advisory Group, 10 colleges were selected for fieldwork visits. These represented different populations in terms of the range of provision, type of location, size of college, size of local authority and level of social deprivation. Each college was visited twice.

During the visits, interviews were undertaken with current and former students, parents and carers, teachers and support staff, governors, Senior Management Team (SMT), employers and LA representatives. Follow-up interviews were also undertaken with leaders of the provision. The college visits foregrounded the voices of the young people themselves in addition to wider stakeholders. In addition, 13 lesson observations were undertaken which provided insight into pedagogical approaches adopted when working with these students. Through this sampling approach, it was possible to explore the facilitators and barriers to their transition experiences – preparation, contributing factors, aspirations, and plans – both into their college-based 14 to 16-year-old provision and post-16. See Table 2.1 for the number of participants interviewed.

Table 2.1: Case study participants

Students	151
Formers Students	12
Teachers	36
Support Staff	20
SMT (Principal, VP, AP)	5
14 to 16 Leads	10
Parents and Carers	20
Governors	7
LA Representatives	5
Employers	5

Interviews with students mostly took part in small groups with a few individual interviews. These interviews were structured to facilitate student-led dialogue about their prior experiences to attending college, their experiences of college and the support received and their future plans or ambitions. All members of the research team had experience of working with and interviewing participants, whether children, young people, or adults, who could be regarded as vulnerable and were experienced in working sensitively with all those involved.

Interviews with staff explored teaching approaches, social and pastoral support, support for transition at post-16, and wider factors that contribute to the experience of young people, for example employer engagement. Parents and carers were asked about their perspectives of college provision, the impact on their child and the factors that have contributed to or inhibited this. Interviews with employers enriched understanding of their contribution to 14 to 16 provision, the level of involvement and their experiences of supporting the young people. Interviews undertaken with governors and LA representatives offered insights into the strategic direction of 14 to 16 provision in the college and the locality, the approach taken to resourcing and responsibility for the provision offered.

Analysis of data

Linked NPD and ILR data

Throughout the report descriptive statistics are presented from the analysis of linked NPD and ILR data in addition to more current ILR/MiDES data. These data demonstrate trends and patterns over time at the national, institutional and learner level. In the report data are presented on the collective and student subgroups, AP DE or EHE provision. Close attention was paid within the data reporting to where student numbers were low and the impact this might have on the analysis.

Survey data

Categorical and rating scale data from the survey were analysed in Excel and SPSS. Data from the open-ended questions were analysed using a thematic approach with key themes identified through an iterative process of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Fieldwork and interview data

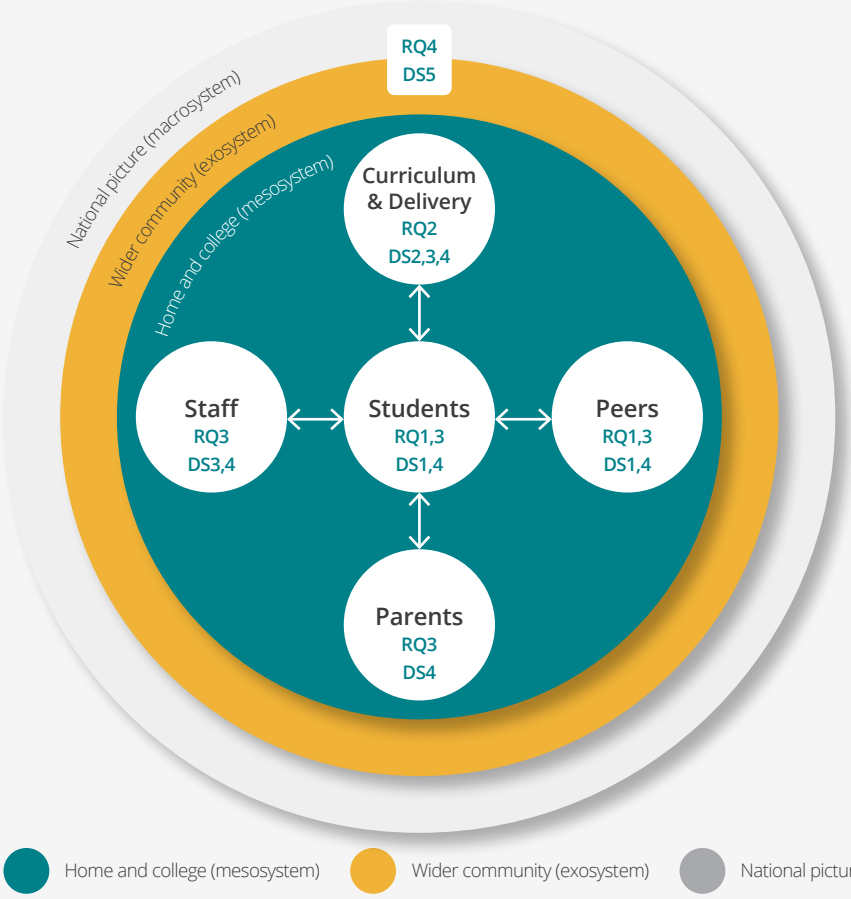
Where permission was granted to record interviews, they were fully transcribed. Field notes were made if interviews were not recorded. Throughout the research the qualitative analysis drew predominantly on thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and case study analyses (see Cohen et al., 2018). The first stage of the analysis was the development of a coding frame – undertaken independently by members of the research team. Codes were then compared to look at inter-rater coding to ensure that the coding frames were appropriate. When agreed, the coding frame was used for each set of interviews to ensure consistency of approach.

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.

Synthesis and interpretation of findings using ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) was adopted in this research since it shows how development is influenced by both environmental settings and interactions with people or tasks in the environment. Figure 2.1 maps the overarching research questions and each data set against the key elements of the mesosystem of 14 to 16 FE providers, stakeholders and beneficiaries, and located within the exosystem of the wider community and the macrosystem of the national picture to demonstrate how the findings from each element of the research were combined to answer research question 4: How is the social ecosystem functioning at the individual, institutional, community and national level to enable young people to flourish?

Figure 2.1: Research questions and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model



Research Questions:

RQ1. What is the learner profile?

RQ2. What is the educational offer?

RQ3. What are the factors that develop potential?

RQ4. How does the ecosystem add value?

Data Sources:

DS1. Analysis of NPD-ILR data

DS2. Survey of 14 to 16 provision

DS3. Contextual interviews with lead staff

DS4. College case studies

DS5. Synthesis of all data

It is important to note that the data presented in the report covered different time periods. The linked NPD-ILR data covered the period 2015/16 to 2020/21. The survey was undertaken in early 2023 and focused on data from the academic year 2022/23 and progression data 2021/22. Contextual interviews were undertaken in spring 2023 and visits to college took place between the summer term 2023 and autumn 2024. Provision for 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges is not static and has changed during these timescales with some colleges stopping provision and others starting up. It is therefore natural that there are some differences between findings from the linked NPD-ILR data with findings from the fieldwork.

Ethical considerations

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. All outputs were aggregated so that individuals could not be identified.

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.

All interview participants were provided with a briefing sheet about the research and a consent form prior to agreeing to be interviewed. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw. Where participants gave permission, interviews were recorded.

Group, rather than individual interviews, were chosen for students given their 'loosening effect', in which opinions are valued, and where participants are more likely to express their perceptions openly. It was also felt, based on prior experience, that students may feel more comfortable in discussing their experiences in focus groups rather than individually. The notion of informed voluntary consent was explained to the young people and the researchers explained how their data would be used. At the start of each interview, the project team made clear that these young people were under no obligation to participate in the research.

This entire report is about 14 to 16-year-olds in FE colleges. In presenting the findings the words students and learners are used to represent these young people. Where comparative data is included, such as state-funded AP[2] schools or mainstream secondary schools, this is made clear.

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

3. Findings

3.1. A diverse group of young people

A common theme across all interviewees – students, teachers, SMT, parents, governors, and LA representatives – 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. The only exception to this was where students had been home educated throughout their entire life prior to joining college, they were able though to comment about their friends who did attend school.

Critical to understanding the implications of the findings in this report is that readers appreciate the journeys and experiences of young people who find themselves in college, whether AP, DE or EHE. Hence, this first section starts with the stories of some of the young people themselves before unpacking the quantitative linked NPD-ILR data to describe the characteristics of these learners. In providing these narratives an attempt has been made to capture the diversity, complexity and breadth of experiences of the young people.

3.1.1. Understanding who the 14 to 16-year-olds in college are

Alternative provision students

In both student journeys presented here poor behaviour contributed to the move into college, however, the pathways were quite different.

Not fitting in at school

Leo[3] spoke of never really fitting in at secondary school and even at primary he felt that he was always the one getting told off because he was so much taller than all the others. As he said, "I've always been better at anything that means I'm not just sitting at a desk so when school told me about this and I came for the interview I was up for it straight away".

He commented that "School was just horrible for me. I need to be on my feet doing things and so when it got to the breaks, I would just be like charging around and then I'd get put in isolation… And my mum was getting texts all the time about me doing bad things and it might just be not queuing up properly".

Coming to college was an instant change, "I went from being the problem one to being one of the best just like that. A big thing is the way that [14 to 16 coordinator] has looked out for me. Because I'm infill[4] she checks every class to see I'm there and everything is OK. It's the complete opposite of school where a lot of the time I was just being taken out of classes and put on my own. And I can talk to her about anything, so can my mum actually".

3. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of individuals mentioned in this report.

4. 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.

From mainstream school to PRU and then college

Jess had been to two mainstream schools and a PRU before attending college. As she said: "In my PRU I wasn't necessarily bad, so they didn't want to keep me there. I wasn't really that bad. It was just a lot of things built up. So they just put me there. And then my old school, which I was still under, they knew about the college, so they decided to pay for me to come here." In school Jess had frequently spent time in isolation and commented that "I went into school to sit in isolation all day. I wasn't allowed out in break for lunch. I would eat in the isolation room. I was in there for a good two months." She was also put on a restricted timetable for a while and at one stage she commented that she was only allowed to join the science lesson in school.

At college Jess was studying English and maths and a vocational qualification in sports and commented that: "Being at college is a lot better than mainstream. I don't think like I've been this good in a school since, like primary." She also added that "My mum said that she's realised like a difference in my behaviour and how I am just as a person."

AP students generally attended college for between half a day and two days with much smaller numbers attending for three days a week or more. A common theme across AP provision was that school wasn't working for the young person. This was for a variety of reasons and included students where schools were unable to meet their needs and/or students not fitting into mainstream education including mental health needs and, in some instances, behavioural issues. AP settings had a varied mix of students including those who were "highly academically able who were not fitting into the mainstream school settings" (Lead) as well as those who were struggling academically.

In one college, students who applied for this provision tended to struggle in mainstream school and often experienced behavioural and mental health needs. Many students had experienced isolation or exclusion from their mainstream school and enrolled in the college provision as an alternative option. From the perspective of the LA representative, students tended to enrol on AP when schools were struggling to manage their behaviour, or they were experiencing high anxiety or mental health challenges. Similarly, the students from the same college typically reported coming to college due to behavioural needs and not being allowed back in school, as well as not getting on with school or preferring a different (vocational) way of learning.

Where behaviour or engagement with education was an issue, most students spoke candidly about this during the interviews.

> "I came to the college because school just wasn't going well for me. I just kept getting in trouble in school and all of that. And so they thought that college would be a better option. And yes, it was." (Student)

In many cases, as in Leo's story above, the move to college had made an immediate difference.

> "When I first started coming here, to now, my behaviour's a lot better. I get up earlier now, and attendance wise is better. Because before I was at like, 60s in attendance last year, now I'm at like 90s." (Student)

In another AP provision, two dual roll students who had been suspended from school had exhibited no behavioural issues at all when studying construction in college. These students were not singular instances, many AP learners and their teachers spoke of how their behaviour had changed since being in college.

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." (Lead)

In colleges where schools referred students at risk of disengagement from education or those perceived to be in danger of permanent exclusion to college AP, in both instances it was felt that studying a vocational qualification in a different environment might be of benefit to the learners.

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 AP provision was offered as an option other than the PRU. Here the vocational element was important with some students influenced by peers who had previously attended college and been successful in music or construction.

Direct Entry students

Two contrasting student journeys open this section providing a window on how the curriculum offer in schools and anxiety issues contributed to their entry into full time education in college.

A narrow curriculum

Jack had no issues with his mainstream school, he came to college because of engineering, "I couldn't do any of the subjects I wanted at my old school so I moved". His older sister had studied at the college and "done amazingly well". Jack was very focused on his studies and extracurricular activities and said he liked all the sciences but probably physics best. He also liked maths. At college he played sport and played piano and guitar in the evenings. Jack appreciated the small classes at college and felt they also benefitted the staff: "Because it gives them time to organise things for us. The maths teacher is really organised...we always get links to online extra work that we can do, especially as it got to GCSE time, revision tasks and so on."

Jack was clear about his ideal future and wanted to be a musician along with engineering. He was thinking of doing an apprenticeship in electrical/instrumentation engineering. If he didn't get an apprenticeship after GCSEs he planned to stay at college, taking an alternative route to be an engineer, alongside being a musician.

Anxiety prior to college

Sally used to suffer from severe anxiety and was very withdrawn. She would spend nearly all her time in her room, barely seeing her family, as she felt "so drained from all the negatives" of school. Sally left school and applied for college. During the induction, students were separated from their parents and made to chat with each other. While Sally "hated" this process, it pushed her out of her comfort zone, and she has formed strong, long-standing relationships as a result. As she said "They were making you speak to people around you and I had never done that, like, by myself. But by doing that, my best friend now, I was sat next to her. At the time, we didn't

know it, but it really pushes you to get yourself out there because you're never going to get over anything until you've tried a different experience."

Sally felt that the positive environment at college had helped her focus less on the negatives and "look at life in a completely different way". She attributed this change to the supportive teachers and the friendly, respectful atmosphere. Sally expressed that college has "really changed [her] life".

Across DE most practitioners described these young people as having some form of disadvantage and not thriving in mainstream secondary schools. Across Leads and teaching staff it was felt that students had often dealt with negative experiences in school, including bullying, lack of school support, mental health needs and anxiety, and hence why they were attracted to an alternative educational opportunity. For some learners the issue that wasn't working in mainstream was the narrow curriculum offer, as seen in Jack's story. In another example a student with a passion for musical theatre had decided to attend college where he saw the vocational provision as a much better opportunity than the limited drama classes offered at mainstream schools.

Practitioners also spoke about how young people were looking for something different and that often this was about wanting to make a fresh start. Students, too, were looking for a fresh start:

> "I went really quiet in year nine because something happened, so like, I just didn't speak to anyone. I didn't go to lessons or anything. And then when I came here, I realised no one knew who I was. So I thought, I can be myself again and have a fresh start." (Student)

Students similarly reported coming to college due to issues in their mainstream school, including a lack of support, bullying, as well as mental health needs and anxiety. Parents also commented on these issues.

> "[Child] was being bullied at school and I have to say the school wasn't helping at all with that. [Child] was suffering, she just became a shadow of herself. So that's why we applied for a place here. After just one term we had our child back. This school really has given her life back to her." (Parent)

Even when students had been attracted by the vocational opportunities the colleges offered, most have had poor or mixed experiences in school including bullying and special needs not being met. Among teachers, mental health needs including social anxiety were high on the list as to why students attended DE. There was though variability across this group of learners and the mix of students as one Lead 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." (Lead)

In one DE provision all students were described as having some form of learning need or difficulty and the group included school refusers and those with behaviour issues. This college accepted referrals for young people who might otherwise be excluded, and learners with support needs that were not being met in mainstream school.

Mental health issues were common 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. In another college one third of learners were described as having some form of learning difficulty, meaning that the majority did not. In this college some learners chose the college for the vocational pathways, or small class sizes.

Electively home-educated students

The case studies here offer an insight into two different journeys into college for EHE learners and distinguish between EHE students who have been home-schooled for a considerable length of time and those who have been withdrawn or required to withdraw from secondary school.

Bullying leading to EHE

Molly had a lot of trouble at school, "like bullying and things". She didn't feel that the teachers really wanted to help, so in the end her mum withdrew her from school. She felt that the lessons at college are really good, "more inclusive than it was at school. The teachers make sure everyone is alright and always answer your questions." She also felt that in comparison with school it is easier to make friends at college because everyone is from different backgrounds.

Molly enjoyed the responsibility of getting herself to college for a specific time or for her lessons. "You have the freedom to do stuff, but you still have to go to the lessons." She felt she had gained skills she would not have got at school and is better prepared for post-16 study, "because you know what college is like, it doesn't make it as unknown. You have a better idea of what you're going to be stepping into instead of being in the school environment not knowing what you're gonna be walking into."

Long term EHE

Tom had been home educated for several years and was taking English, maths and science GCSE at college. His older brother had progressed from home education to university and a successful career. Reflecting on school, Tom felt that: "it just drains creativity and turns out lots of very similar people, really". Alongside his GCSEs, Tom was coming into college to study music, supported by involvement with a local youth music group two evenings a week. Additional qualifications being taken outside college included the Gold Arts Award, (Level 3 qualification with 16 UCAS points) and the DofE Silver Award for which he was volunteering at a youth centre, taking part in sport and planning for the expedition which involves a camping trip.

Tom had already made some progress with a potential career through his independent efforts and had been nominated for a national digital award and been on the radio. Tom felt that an additional benefit of college was learning how to "be comfortable in different situations, not just being in classrooms, but in presentations, or just approaching people in the canteen, that's life skills and it's just as important as the academic things. I think it makes you more resourceful".

Evident from the above is that some EHE learners might have attended school until recently and some would not have attended school for several years. In addition, there were EHE learners who had never attended school and for whom college was their first experience of a formal educational setting. This notion of different pathways for EHE students depending on their prior experience of school was a recurrent theme in the interviews and college visits. So, while existing provision for EHE had primarily been for longer term EHE students, colleges were finding that the majority of

EHE students now had attended school.

> "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." (Lead)

Leaders of EHE provision commented on the diverse socioeconomic status among EHE students with some being very affluent and others much less so and from deprived backgrounds. One college was increasingly being approached by students from more affluent areas to access EHE provision.

Students relatively new to being home-educated spoke of how school had not been able to meet their needs and of bullying and hence why their parents and carers had withdrawn them from school.

> "For me, I think it was just the teachers and the people there and the way that they handled mental health, people with mental health was terrible. They used to put me in a room when I was at my lowest, all on my own, with no teacher and no people, and that I was literally sitting in a room by myself for like an hour. I was really upset." (Student)

In another example one student commented, "And basically, the teacher said that if I didn't want to do a reduced timetable, I couldn't go to their school". These reasons for coming out of school aligned with Leads and teachers who also spoke about undiagnosed learning difficulties or because the family had felt the young person's mental health was deteriorating with bullying being mentioned as a particular problem.

Parents shared a similar perspective in their reasons for withdrawing their child:

> "She experienced bullying and went into herself. During Covid she worked well at home. She struggled when she had to go back to school and spent the weekends in tears." (Parent)

Many providers reported that EHE numbers were growing and for some this was especially the case since Covid when students had previously been in mainstream school and seemed to relate to anxiety and in some cases unmet needs. As one LA representative commented, in this LA in 2016 the number of EHE was 140 children and young people, now in 2024 it had reached 800.

> "When I first started the job, it would have been people that did it out of a lifestyle choice. But we're getting more people now, it's because of anxiety, unmet SEN needs, and just disengaging schools, school phobics as well, school refusers." (LA)

Among more traditional EHE students, most came to college to gain access to additional GCSEs and to sit exams. In some instances, EHE students felt that they might get more support from teachers in college compared to their home tutors, who mainly provided online lessons:

> "We came here for GCSEs. Because we had like tutors and stuff, but they weren't that good. So we wanted face to face teachers. And this was a really good alternative because we managed to do like the whole course in one year." (Former student)

Other long-term EHE students were attracted by the offer of vocational qualifications in addition

to GCSEs. For example, one student had been home educated by his parents since the age of four and was doing some GCSEs at home. At college he was doing GCSEs in English and maths in addition to animal care. He reported that he really enjoyed the vocational subject.

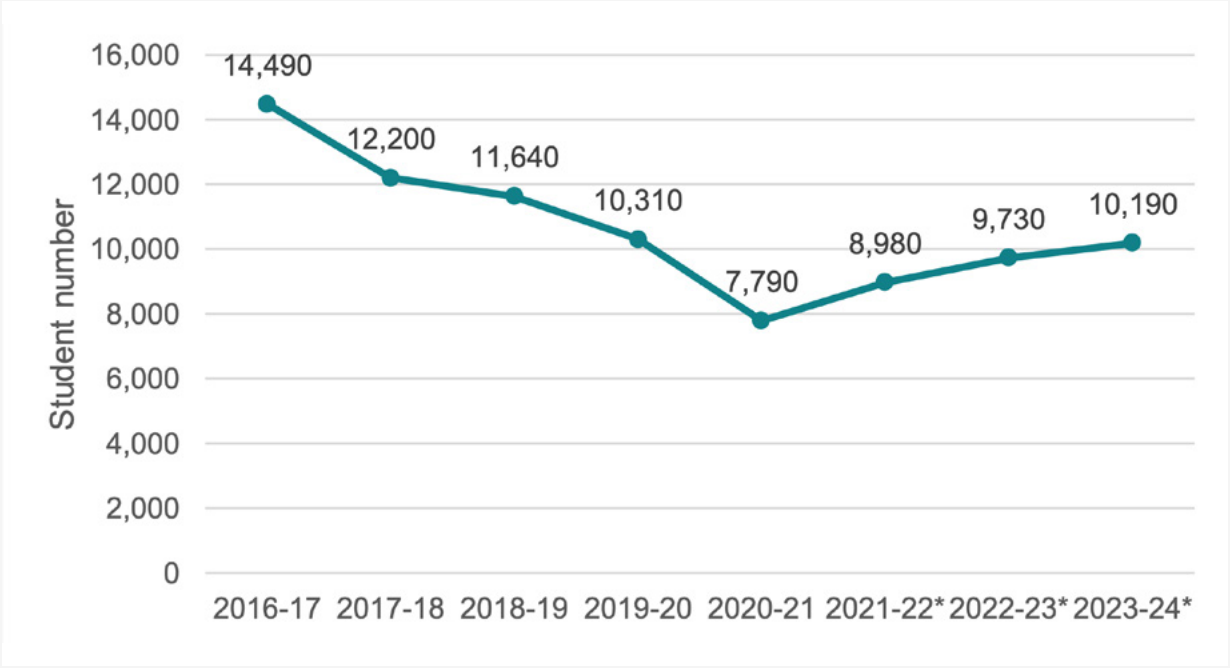
3.1.2. The profile of 14 to 16-year-old students in colleges

This section draws on the analysis of the linked NPD-ILR data from the academic years 2016/17 to 2020/21. Where relevant these data are supplemented with more recent ILR/MidES data.

Number of students over time

The number of 14 to 16-year-olds studying in college has varied over time (see Figure 3.1). What is noticeable is the substantial decline of these students in colleges for the period 2016/17 to 2021/22. Of note is that the low point came in the middle of the pandemic when school referrals in particular would have been impacted. Thereafter student numbers have risen.

Figure 3.1: Number of college-based 14 to 16 students (rounded)



Source: ILR/MiDES data

It is plausible that the decline in numbers from 2016/17 was linked to the implementation of Attainment 8 and Progress 8. Indeed, one interviewee 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."

It is also likely that the impact of Covid-19 has influenced student numbers.

When the data is broken down into distinct groups, it is AP that has reduced most dramatically, from 10,540 in 2016/17 to 3,380 in 2023/24. DE provision has remained fairly stable in the same period (1,550 to 1,520) and EHE provision has increased from 2,410 to 4,800.

Characteristics of 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges over time

Age

A higher proportion of 15-year-old students compared to 14-year-olds are studying in colleges compared to what is seen in state secondary schools in England (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Proportion of 14 and 15-year-olds in colleges 2016/17 to 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
14-year-olds	34%	37%	38%	36%	35%
15-year-olds	66%	63%	62%	64%	65%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

By contrast, in state-funded secondary schools, the difference between the proportions of 14 and 15-year-olds was much smaller. In 2016/17, both age groups were evenly represented (50%), and this remained nearly unchanged, with 51% of 14-year-olds from 2017/18 to 2020/21 (DfE, 2024c). What this does highlight is that many students are beginning their educational journey in college halfway through KS4, when GCSEs are generally studied in school for two whole academic years. It is possible therefore that these students might be disadvantaged in the continuity of their KS4 educational experience and may be changing courses or starting new subjects in Year 11.

Reasons for students joining 'late' in the GCSE cycle could include those educated at home wanting to sit GCSE exams and qualifications in college, new arrivals to the country who it is acknowledged are difficult to place in mainstream schools midway through the GCSE course and those students who have been excluded or suspended from school. In one of the case study colleges, for example, they only took full time AP learners in Year 11.

Looking across the different groups of students, of interest is the disparity of 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds across provision types (see Table 3.2). Among AP, AP no NPD and EHE there is a larger proportion of 15-year-olds than 14-year-olds in each year. This pattern is similar to that seen in state-funded AP (DfE, 2024c). By contrast DE proportions vary across the time series from a relatively balanced proportion of each year group in 2016/17 to one where 15-year-olds gradually outweigh 14-year-olds over time. This does suggest that in the most recent years that many 15-year-old students join in the 'second' year of KS4.

Table 3.2: Percentage of 14 and 15-year-olds in colleges by AP, DE and EHE during 2016/17 to 2020/21

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
AP	14-year-olds	36%	39%	45%	39%	35%
	15-year-olds	64%	61%	55%	61%	65%
AP no NPD	14-year-olds	24%	27%	24%	19%	18%
	15-year-olds	76%	73%	76%	81%	82%
DE	14-year-olds	51%	47%	48%	42%	43%
	15-year-olds	49%	53%	52%	58%	57%
EHE	14-year-olds	29%	33%	33%	35%	32%
	15-year-olds	71%	67%	67%	65%	68%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Gender

Across the college students in each successive year – 2016/7 to 2020/21 – there was a higher proportion of males than females. In 2016/17 there were 8,339 males and 6,154 females compared to 4,064 males and 3,727 females in 2020/21. It is interesting that over time there has been a narrowing of the gap between males and females to four percentage points in 2020/21 (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Gender split among 14 and 15-year-olds in colleges 2016/17 to 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Female	42%	45%	46%	46%	48%
Male	58%	55%	54%	54%	52%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

The comparable data trends among 14 to 15-year-olds in state-funded secondary schools was static over the same period with marginally more males (51% from 2016/17 to 2020/21) than females in school in contrast to the fluctuation seen in colleges.

When looking across AP, DE and EHE different patterns emerge but none match those seen across state-funded secondary schools in England over the same time period (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Gender split among 14 and 15-year-olds in colleges 2016/17 to 2020/21 according to AP, DE and EHE

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
AP	Female	38%	35%	35%	34%	32%
	Male	62%	65%	65%	66%	68%
AP no NPD	Female	43%	49%	48%	43%	42%
	Male	57%	51%	52%	57%	58%
DE	Female	52%	54%	54%	55%	55%
	Male	48%	46%	46%	45%	45%
EHE	Female	52%	54%	56%	56%	58%
	Male	48%	46%	44%	44%	42%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Historically boys have been more likely to be excluded from school than girls (DfE 2024e). Hence perhaps why AP and AP no NPD have larger proportions of boys than girls. Similarly in state-funded AP provision most pupils are boys (DfE, 2024c). In both DE and EHE the patterns of boys and girls are rather similar over time and in both there are slightly higher proportions of girls than boys.

Ethnicity

Overall, across 14 to 16-year-olds attending colleges between 2016/17 to 2020/21 the majority of students were White – frequently accounting for around 80% of the 14 to 16-year-old cohort. Evident also is that the proportion of Black/Black British, Mixed and White students has remained consistent over time (see Table 3.5). While for many years Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils have the highest rates of suspensions and permanent exclusions (DfE, 2024d), the largest group of students excluded from school in terms of numbers has consistently been White. This may contribute to trends seen here. As a benchmark for the academic year 2020/21 the proportion of white students in all secondary schools was 68%.

Table 3.5: Ethnicity among 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges 2016/17 to 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Asian / Asian British	7%	7%	5%	4%	4%
Black / Black British	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Mixed	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%
White	81%	80%	79%	83%	82%
Other / Not Known	6%	7%	9%	6%	7%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Similar patterns were seen across AP, DE and EHE. The exception was the smaller group of AP no NPD students where the highest proportions of white students in each cohort was 60% (2019/20) and the lowest 40% (2020/21).

Exclusions

Between 2017/18 to 2019/20 the proportion of students excluded the previous year on the NPD was similar. Thereafter a six-point percentage gap emerged in 2020/21 (see Table 3.6).

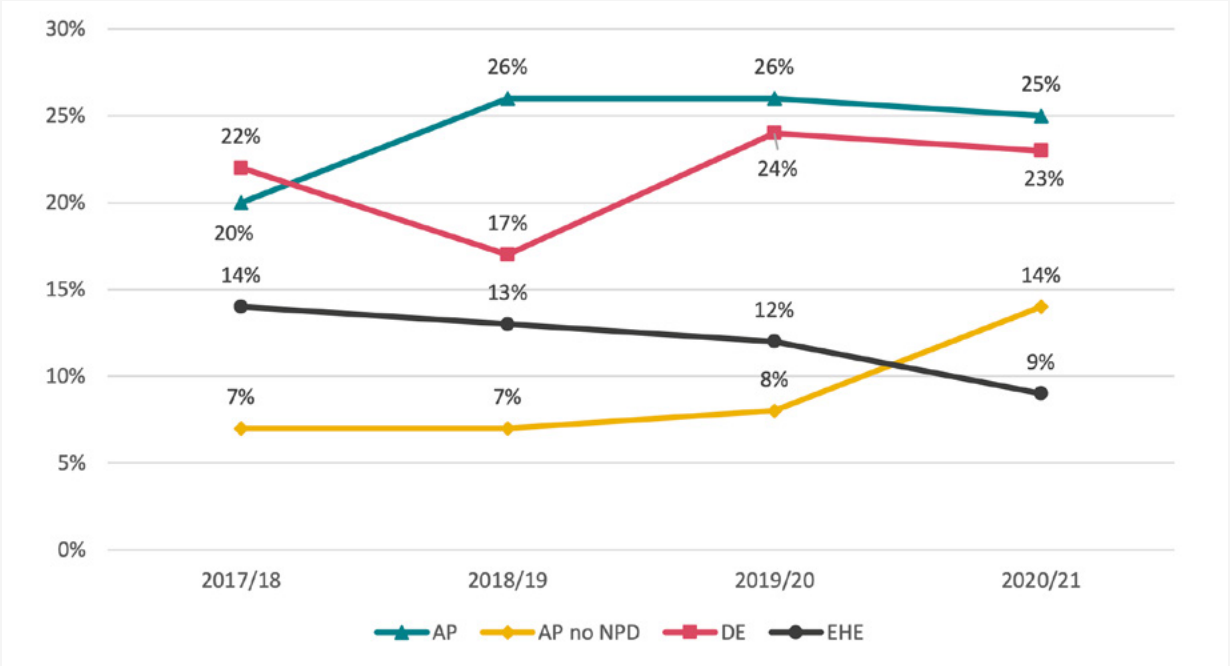
Table 3.6: Percentage excluded in the previous year on the NPD

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
14-year-olds	18%	19%	20%	18%
15-year-olds	17%	17%	18%	12%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

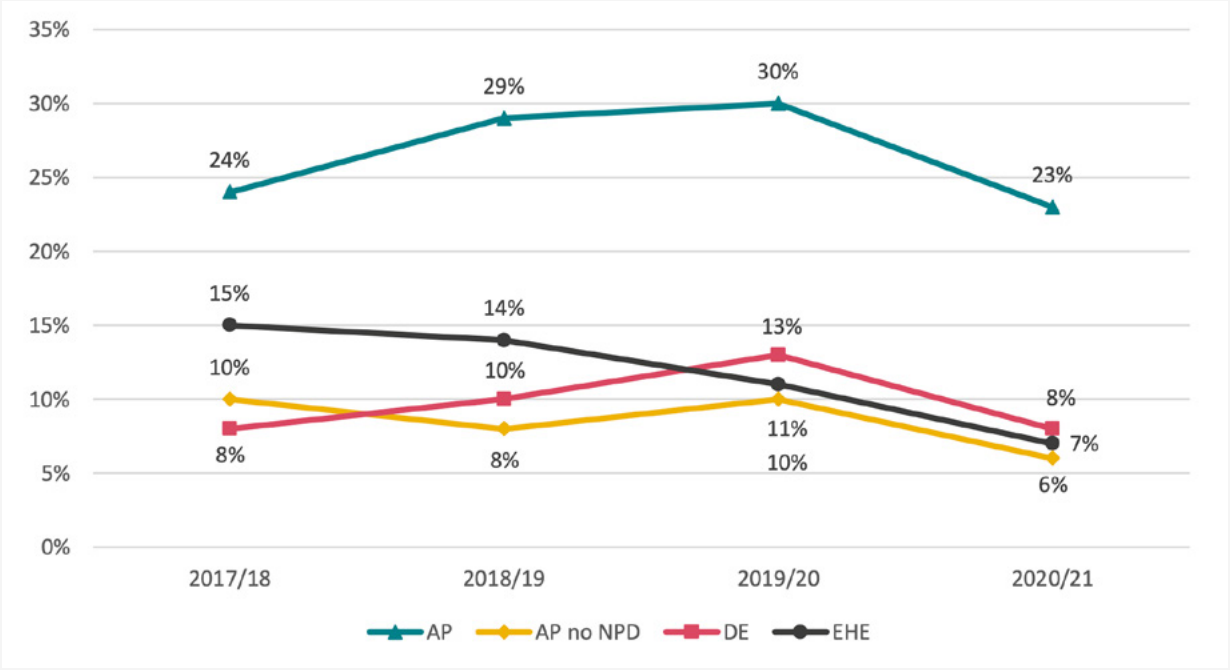
Looking across AP, AP no NPD, DE and EHE there is an immediate difference in terms of 14- and 15-year-olds, with AP students having a far higher percentage of 15-year-olds excluded in the previous year than other cohorts. This makes sense in relation to the peak years for exclusion in mainstream settings. It also makes sense in that DE has a more stable cohort over time with similar numbers of 14-year-old and 15-year-old students in each year (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3).

Figure 3.2: Percentage of 14-year-olds excluded in the previous year on the NPD by group



Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Figure 3.3: Percentage of 15-year-olds excluded in the previous year on the NPD by group



Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Learners with learning difficulties or disabilities (LLDD) profile

Across the learners between 2016/17 to 2020/21 the overall proportion of learners identified with a LLDD profile has gradually increased (see Table 3.7).

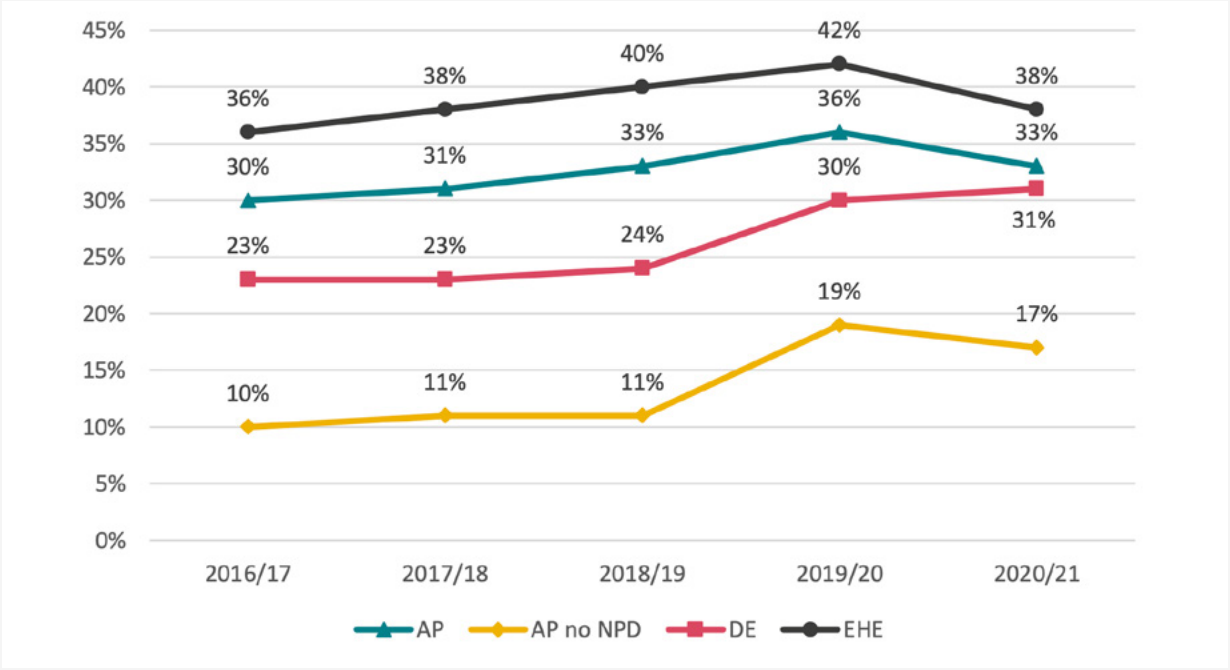
Table 3.7: LLDD among 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges 2016/17 to 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Yes	27%	28%	30%	35%	34%
No	66%	63%	61%	57%	58%
Not known	7%	8%	9%	7%	8%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

When looking across AP, DE and EHE what emerges is differences across each group – the caveat here is in the variation in the proportion of unknowns over time especially within AP. The proportion of LLDD within EHE has been higher than AP, AP no NPD and DE in each year between 2016/17 to 2020/21 – see Figure 3.4. Also apparent is that AP and EHE have followed a similar trend over time as illustrated by the lines in the chart – both rose and fell in similar years. DE had a noticeable increase following 2018/19 as did AP no NPD. Also evident is that the AP no NPD cohort have had fewer proportions of learners saying yes to a LLDD profile than all other groups.

Figure 3.4: Proportion of AP, AP no NPD, DE and EHE responding yes to a LLDD profile over time



Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

As readers may be aware there are many categories within primary LLDD need and this meant that there was a lot of suppression of data. Hence numbers were calculated under Dyslexia, Autism, Social and Emotional Difficulties, Mental Health and Moderate Learning Difficulties. All other groups were put into an Other category (see Table 3.8).

Table 3.8: Percentage of LLLD categories across 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges

Percentage Learners	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Dyslexia	21%	20%	18%	17%	17%
Autsim	9%	9%	11%	12%	13%
Social and emotional difficulties	10%	11%	11%	12%	13%
Mental health	5%	8%	10%	10%	11%
Moderate learning difficulty	12%	9%	9%	8%	7%
Other	43%	43%	41%	40%	39%
Total	100%	100%	100%	99%	100%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Deprivation

There has been almost no movement on deprivation for this group of students across the five years of data explored here. While the 14 to 16-year-olds appear across all quintiles of deprivation, a large proportion of these students are in the two most deprived quintiles (see Table 3.9). The Deprivation Quintiles were based on the Indices of Deprivation. Each learner was assigned a quintile based on the Lower Super Output (LSOA) area in which they resided – calculated on their home postcode. Each LSOA was ranked from most deprived to least, with an equal number of LSOA in each quintile.

Table 3.9: Levels of deprivation across 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges between 2016/17 and 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Quintile 1 Most deprived	31%	32%	33%	33%	32%
Quintile 2	23%	22%	23%	22%	22%
Quintile 3	19%	18%	18%	18%	18%
Quintile 4	15%	16%	15%	15%	14%
Quintile 5 Least deprived	12%	12%	12%	13%	13%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

In exploring the quintile distribution across AP, DE and EHE from 2016/17 to 2020/21 three findings stand out:

1. Across AP, AP no NPD, DE and EHE over half of the students are in the two most deprived quintiles at the beginning and end of the five-year period.

2. There is little movement across the five years.

3. DE students have the highest proportion of students in the most deprived quintile. In 2016/17, 45% of DE students were in quintile 1, compared to 29% of AP, AP no NPD and EHE. In 2020/21, 56% of DE students were quintile 1, compared to 24% AP, 29% AP no NPD, and 27% EHE.

Level profile

The level profile captures the level at which the students were studying in college. Evident is that the proportion of students at Entry Level and Level 1 has reduced over time such that in 2020/21 over half of the learners were studying at Level 2 (see Table 3.10).

Table 3.10: Level profile: percentage of learners of 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges between 2016/17 and 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Entry and other	26%	25%	23%	19%	15%
Level 1	37%	35%	32%	30%	28%
Level 2	35%	38%	42%	49%	55%
Level 3	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

The flexibility of colleges does mean that across all years between 2016/17 and 2020/21 there has been a small percentage of students studying at Level 3.

Alternative Provision

The AP data from 2016/17 to 2020/21 indicates that most learners, about 70%, were working below Level 2 with the other 30% usually working at Level 2 (see Table 3.11).

Table 3.11: Level profile: percentage of AP learners in colleges between 2016/17 and 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Entry and other	28%	30%	27%	27%	21%
Level 1	43%	42%	41%	42%	48%
Level 2	28%	27%	31%	30%	29%
Level 3	1%	1%	2%	0%	1%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Direct Entry

DE learners were predominantly working at Level 2 or above. This might be anticipated given that many of these students, but not all, actively decide to go to study at college at age 14 and also the fact, as seen above, that most students are in college for the duration of KS4 – unlike those in AP and EHE (see Table 3.12).

Table 3.12: Level profile: percentage of DE learners in colleges between 2016/17 and 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Entry and other	4%	3%	3%	3%	5%
Level 1	3%	4%	3%	3%	4%
Level 2+	92%	92%	94%	94%	91%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data. The merging of Level 2 and Level 3 to create a Level 2+ category is due to data suppresssion.

Electively home educated

The variation of levels seen in the EHE students over time perhaps reflects the diverse nature of this group – some of whom have been home educated for a long period of time and others who have left school more recently (see Table 3.13).

Table 3.13: Level profile: percentage of EHE learners in colleges between 2016/17 and 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Entry and other	14%	13%	11%	11%	11%
Level 1	37%	36%	36%	29%	24%
Level 2	42%	45%	48%	55%	62%
Level 3	7%	6%	5%	4%	4%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Summary

The number of 14 to 16-years-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. The increase in EHE provision was commented on many times by interviewees.

A higher proportion of 15-year-olds than 14-year-olds was 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 KS4 and might be disadvantaged in the continuity of their KS4 educational experience.

The proportion of boys and girls was 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. Hence perhaps why AP had larger proportions of boys than girls. This was similar to state-funded AP where more boys are likely to be placed in state-funded AP than girls even if they haven't been excluded. 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 a LLDD profile 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, AP no NPD, DE and EHE students in the two most deprived quintiles. DE students had the highest proportion of students in the most deprived quintile.

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 in across EHE students over time perhaps reflected the diverse nature of this group.

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/asked to leave school. Among EHE students where parents had chosen to follow the EHE route, parents often brought high expectations with them of what college could offer.

3.2. The profile of colleges offering 14 to 16 provision and why

3.2.1. Numbers of colleges offering provision

During the five-year period of the NPD/ILR data the overall number of providers with five or more learners dropped considerably from 179 in 2016/17 to 114 in 2020/21. This could be in part due to the area review process which took place at this time a resulted in a series of college mergers. ILR/MiDES data for 2021/22 to 2023/24 shows a jump in AP and EHE providers after 2020/21 (see Table 3.14). Evident is that the flux in provision is mostly with providers of AP. As suggested in section 3.1.2 it is possible that the decline in numbers from 2016/17 was linked to the implementation of Attainment 8 and Progress 8.

Table 3.14: Number of providers with five or more learners offering provision between 2016/17 to 2023/24

	All providers	AP including AP no NPD	DE	EHE
2016/17	179	121	17	85
2017/18	161	105	20*	84
2018/19	148	92	19	81
2019/20	124	74	18	77
2020/21	114	64	14	73
2021/22	119	74	14	80
2022/23	116	77	14	78
2023/24	111	72	14	70

Source: Linked NPD / ILR and MiDES data. * These are locally reported data from colleges and may not tally with DfE records.

Note that this table uses linked NPD/ILR data for the years 2016/17 to 2020/21 and that in this dataset the number of providers was the same for the AP cohorts with or without NPD data hence there is a single column. The data presented from 2021/22 to 2023/24 is drawn from the ILR/MiDES data alone.

Looking at the ILR/MiDES data for 2021/22 to 2023/24 it is evident that about 40% of colleges offered more than one type of provision (see Table 3.15). The most common combination is AP and EHE, with AP only and EHE only also accounting for a large proportion of the provision offered.

Table 3.15: Colleges offering varied forms of provision with five or more learners in each group of students

Type of provision	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
AP only	29	32	34
DE only	4	3	3
EHE only	34	32	30
AP and DE	2	3	3
AP and EHE	38	38	32
DE and EHE	3	4	5
AP, DE and EHE	5	4	3

Source: ILR / MiDES data

3.2.2. Size of provision

There was high variability in the number of students enrolled in each college, regardless of whether this was AP, DE or EHE (see Tables 3.16, 3.17, 3.18). Some provision was for small groups of learners up to 49, medium sized provision up to 99 with larger provision comprising groups of over 100 or even 150 or more students. Within AP and EHE most provision was for small and medium groups of students, although provision with larger groups of students was also evident.

Table 3.16: Number of 14 to 16-year-olds in AP

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
5 to 49	46	42	42
50 to 99	16	22	17
100 to 149	5	9	7
150 and over	7	4	6

Source: ILR / MiDES data

Table 3.17: Number of 14 to 16-year-olds in DE

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
5 to 49	4	4	4
50 to 99	3	5	4
100 to 149	1	0	2
150 and over	6	5	4

Source: ILR / MiDES data

Table 3.18: Number of 14 to 16-year-olds in EHE

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
5 to 49	49	44	29
50 to 99	23	22	24
100 to 149	6	5	8
150 and over	2	7	9

Source: ILR / MiDES data

3.2.3. Student numbers by region over time

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 (see Table 3.19). Variability in student numbers over time was apparent with student numbers in the North East being broadly consistent over the five-year period in contrast to other regions where a sharper reduction in numbers was seen. Data for the South East showed a different trend with a greater uptake of students after 2017/18 compared to other regions followed by a drop in numbers in 2020/21.

Table 3.19: Student numbers by region 2016/17 to 202/21

Region	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
East Midlands	1,750	1,280	950	930	680
East of England	1,230	970	860	780	590
London	1,340	1,070	1,080	860	710
North East	660	430	430	460	490
North West	1,730	1,380	1,350	1,280	990
South East	2,060	1,750	2,080	2,060	1,520
South West	2,210	1,990	1,590	1,250	920
West Midlands	1,340	1,110	1,050	920	720
Yorkshire and the Humber	1,630	1,690	1,570	1,590	1,130

Source: NPD / ILR data

A breakdown of 2020/21 data in comparison with all KS4 students by region gives a slightly different perspective (see Table 3.20). Yorkshire and the Humber have the highest relative numbers at 8.9 per thousand, followed by the North East at 8.4. London has the smallest number of college-based 14 to 16-year-olds in colleges in comparison with overall population at 3.5 per thousand.

Table 3.20: 14 to 16-year-olds learners in colleges per 1,000 population by region in 2020/21

Region	Population of 14 and 15-year-olds as at Census 2021	2020/21	Learners per 1,000 population
East Midlands	111,374	682	6.1
East of England	146,146	586	4.0
London	203,826	710	3.5
North East	58,956	493	8.4
North West	174,621	991	5.7
South East	217,841	1,519	7.0
South West	122,749	922	7.5
West Midlands	144,028	720	5.0
Yorkshire and the Humber	127,781	1,132	8.9

Source: NPD / ILR data

Looking at learners per 1,000 population by AP, AP no NPD, DE and EHE (see Figure 3.5) demonstrates considerable regional variability.

Figure 3.5: Learners per 1,000 population by region and provision type

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Numbers of AP students in colleges have reduced over time across all regions for the period 2016/17 to 2020/21. In most regions this has been a gradual trend, with the exception of the South East where there was an increase in AP students during 2018/19 and 2019/20 before dropping in 2020/21 (see Table 3.21).

Table 3.21: AP student numbers per region over time

Region	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
East Midlands	1,450	970	580	450	250
East of England	790	470	310	270	200
London	390	310	310	250	220
North East	370	120	110	50	20
North West	1,110	770	660	640	400
South East	1,280	930	980	1,150	800
South West	1,350	890	690	540	260
West Midlands	810	590	500	410	210
Yorkshire and the Humber	550	420	260	230	120

Source: NPD / ILR data

Distinctive to the AP no NPD student numbers is that London has consistently had larger cohorts than all other regions. Across all regions the number of AP no NPD students has fallen during this five-year period (see Table 3.22).

Table 3.22: AP no NPD student numbers per region over time

Region	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
East Midlands	70	40	30	30	10
East of England	100	80	80	10	20
London	610	520	540	310	250
North East	140	50	30		
North West	160	140	130	70	30
South East	220	200	270	120	60
South West	250	360	80	90	20
West Midlands	280	160	190	80	50
Yorkshire and the Humber	110	100	90	70	30

Source: NPD / ILR data

Distinctive to DE is the much higher number of students in Yorkshire and the Humber compared to other regions and the growth in students in the North East (see Table 3.23). Evident also is that some regions have small groups of DE students and in the case of the East of England there is no provision. DE provision has reduced quite dramatically in London.

Table 3.23: DE student numbers per region over time

Region	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
East Midlands	10	20	50	40	20
East of England	70	50	20	30	
London	250	130	80	60	40
North East	90	120	170	220	280
North West	260	270	270	230	200
South East	120	100	130	80	100
South West	120	150	150	160	180
West Midlands		90	50	90	90
Yorkshire and the Humber	640	810	870	930	710

Source: NPD / ILR data

Across EHE most regions have seen an overall growth in student numbers between 2016/17 and 2020/21 and in two there has been a decline (see Table 3.24). The South East and South West contrast with other regions in the rise and fall in EHE student numbers over this period, albeit that the South East had the largest group of EHE students in 2020/21.

Table 3.24: EHE student numbers per region over time

Region	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
East Midlands	220	250	290	410	400
East of England	280	370	450	470	370
London	90	110	160	240	210
North East	60	140	120	180	190
North West	210	210	290	350	360
South East	440	530	710	720	550
South West	490	590	680	470	470
West Midlands	250	270	310	350	360
Yorkshire and the Humber	340	370	350	370	280

Source: NPD / ILR data

3.2.4. The rationale and vision of 14 to 16-year-old provision in colleges

A second chance, a fresh start

As seen in the section on a diverse group of learners, it was clear that many students were looking for a fresh start and were not thriving in school. This was in line with the provider perspectives where the underpinning rationale for offering 14 to 16 provision 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. A key component of offering a second chance was the focus on vocational and technical education. Senior staff and Leads commented on the lack of access to vocational and technical education in schools, and there was a perception that some schools have become increasingly academic.

The provision was seen as a transformational opportunity for young people, where they could reset and gain a second chance. Senior staff saw their role as offering young people the opportunity for a fresh start in a more adult environment. Similarly, Leads 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".

This rationale behind the 14 to 16 provision often aligned with the colleges' wider vision and strategy, which typically focus on inclusivity, developing young people's aspirations, and providing opportunities to succeed.

> "It's all about quality, enrichment, and giving them the best start, you know, that learn, succeed, flourish. They're coming at it from a slightly different perspective, but they should still have every opportunity going." (Governor)

Reengagement with education featured regularly among interviewees, and there was every expectation that these students would progress into college post-16 and not become NEET.

> "The student at 14, you can look after them, you can keep them till they are 21. And I always think that's important. I mean, there's a pipeline anyway, but there's potential for growth because further education doesn't always get the promotion in schools that it should." (Governor)

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

Several Leads spoke of extensive histories of pre-16 provision including the Increased Flexibility Programmeme – 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.

Meeting the needs of the community

While each 14 to 16 setting is unique, Leads, SMT, LA representatives and governors commented that this provision was to support local need. Among governors, there was often mention of local deprivation and the need to support young people, while senior staff addressed opportunities for EHE students to achieve GCSEs in English and maths, as well as supporting new arrivals to the UK. Leads noted that supporting local need 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." (Lead)

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.

Consideration was also given to the long-term strategy for meeting community needs. One governor addressed the rationale of increasing local employment through developing young people's skills, while another emphasised the importance behind long-term investment in provision:

> "Sometimes you've got to get your head out of the short-term budget and what's the long-term benefit...Like what is the end result from these kids versus when would it be." (Governor)

Another governor acknowledged the college's duty to support young people.

> "The college is here to serve the community...we have a duty because we've got the means and we've got the skills and we've got brilliant facilities, we've got the means to help those kids."

Capacity to meet the needs of young people

Where colleges had been running 14 to 16 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." (Lead)

Many Leads and SMT commented on the increase in the number of EHE students which in some instances had shifted the balance of provision with AP becoming smaller. In some institutions, funding constraints meant that further growth would not be possible. Many LAs and governors considered the sustainability and growth of the provision, contrasting the demand from young people with the funding challenges.

> "As for whether it's financially sustainable long term, I don't know...I mean there's clearly an increasing need for provision of this type and we can only do so much as an individual college." (Governor)

Summary

The overall number of providers with five or more learners dropped considerably from 179 in 2016/17 to 111 in 2023/24. Like the drop in student numbers, 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. 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. Some provision was for small groups of learners up to 49, medium sized provision up to 100 with larger provision comprising groups of 150 or more students. 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, particularly for EHE students, 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 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 NEETs, 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.

3.3. Recruitment of students and the application process

How did learners hear about 14 to 16 provision?

For many learners and their parents, the first hurdle on the path to a place in college was finding out that such provision even existed, which could be by happenstance:

> "My mum just randomly came across this college, and then we had an open day and a meeting and brought me here like, like ASAP. And it was a really, like, good change." (Student)

Word of mouth was frequently mentioned as the first step towards college, and those young people who had discovered college in this way often said they were actively spreading the word amongst their own friends or relatives:

> "We found this college because my best friend went to this college because she was also home schooled and she got her qualifications in here and now she's working. I've already got multiple of my friends to come next year. My brother's coming next year." (Student)

In areas with a well-established 14 to 16 provision there could be a sense of 'everyone knowing' about its existence, and also some of the reasons why it might be a good option:

> "I think we've all kind of either heard it or knew someone who actually came here. Because, like, my sister, she suffered really badly with bullying at her old school. She moved here and you could just tell how her attitude changed straight away." (Student)

However, word of mouth could also lead to disappointment, and in some colleges the learners were very aware of competition for places because demand outstripped supply:

> "I tried to encourage my friend to come here and sadly he wasn't able to get in but he definitely was very keen about coming here...for year 11." (Student)

Social media was another common source of information. Some of this was informal, such as Facebook groups set up by parents, particularly within the Home Ed community. But some colleges had official Facebook pages and other channels.

> "We actually found out about this school at the college through social media, so I emailed for further information. We then had an interview with [headteacher] and were very impressed. They offered us a place and [child] wanted to go. It didn't feel like a return to mainstream at all." (Parent)

Learners who had discovered the provision via these informal routes often described negative reactions from their schools, where teachers apparently warned against college entry:

> "They basically told me that I was going to fail everything if I came here. They kept saying that it wasn't a very good school – that people just sat here and deteriorated. That I should not go there – but that's not what it's like at all." (Student)

Whilst the interviews provided examples of discouragement from schools and teachers, there were

also learners whose school had told them about the college provision because their teachers felt it would suit them better than mainstream.

Some learners knew about the provision because of the 'Year 9 letter'. There is a mandatory requirement for every LA to inform all parents of the options for their child in Year 10 and 11, including the local colleges, and some staff acknowledged that this was crucial: "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". Some learners also knew about this:

> "I remember I asked people in my school, like, did you get this letter? And they were like, yeah, but they didn't really read over it. But I was like, I want to go there." (Student)

LAs were also referred to in relation to specific, individual guidance that steered a learner towards 14 to 16 provision, for example when monitoring EHE learners:

> "I learned about it because I was homeschooled and my mum was teaching me. And there was this woman that used to come in every year after we've done all our work at homeschooling. And because I was at the age and in Year 10, she offered me a place in the college." (Student)

LAs also had an important role in providing education for new arrivals to the UK. These young people may have very little choice of provision, because schools are understandably reluctant to take in learners part way through the GCSE programmeme. Colleges with 14 to 16 provision may play a vital role in helping LAs to meet their responsibilities.

A rigorous admissions process

Whatever type of provision was offered, colleges all described a rigorous and detailed admissions process to ensure a good fit between the individual learner and the programmeme. There was considerable diversity in how admissions procedures had developed, even within a single college. In comparison with 16+ admissions, the process for these younger learners could be complex and time consuming, but that was an essential part of ensuring that each student was on the right programmeme. Staff often commented that since mainstream school had 'failed' these young people it was vitally important that college got it right.

The initial contact with a learner was usually via one of three routes: 1. parental request to the college, 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.

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,
- a strong focus on the identification of any pastoral support needs,
- greater emphasis on engaging the support of parents,
- enhanced information sharing with schools,

- where possible, details of the curriculum followed in Year 9,
- a requirement for parents to state why their child should be offered a place.

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.

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 recognising what had been achieved in this time.

In some colleges the admissions process had been designed to accommodate a 'roll on' element in which learners were received throughout the year. A common reason for late starts was the need to provide for new arrivals into the UK, but there were also examples of learners who made a late decision to switch from mainstream or home education.

In the absence of such 'roll on' provisions learners could be told that they would have to wait many months for a place. One learner who arrived in the UK in October was initially told she must wait until the following September for a school place:

> "Then some people told me about the college and the day that I came here to visit they interviewed me, they said I could take the English exam and I took that within seven days and after I wrote the exam they said you can come and join us, and that's when I started here, that was in February." (Student)

There was also some 'roll on – roll off' provision in which the learner could – or would – return to school. Although 'roll on – roll off' provision was not a common mode of delivery, one LA representative felt that the option of returning to school should be considered when setting up 14 to 16 provision:

> "For students considering a move to the college for Years 10 and 11 it's important that the schools don't give wrong information or bad impressions to their students and parents. But there also needs to be a mechanism for returning to school if college doesn't work out." (LA)

The involvement of LAs in the admissions process varied considerably, and there could be substantial differences in how this impacted on colleges. In one area decisions about where best to place a student were made collectively by the Fair Access Panel but schools were not represented, and in another the Behaviour Panel was managed by the LA but chaired by a school Headteacher.

The considerable variation in 14 to 16 provision across the country, and the many ways in which college provision varies from mainstream schools, 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." (Lead)

Entry criteria – more than a grade

There was little reference to qualifications, grades, or predicted grades as an element of the recruitment and selection process. One factor that could influence acceptance 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 hone in on how well they're going to take to study at Level 2 with regards to the independent study, but also just to get a flavour of their passion for the vocational area." (Lead)

Some colleges used infill as an effective way to offer a broad curriculum for AP or EHE learners, in which case an important consideration was that applicants could demonstrate that they were sufficiently mature to be able to cope with studying alongside post-16 learners.

An additional entry requirement for EHE applicants was that colleges usually specified a certain length of time for which home education had been taking place, usually at least one term but sometimes longer. This enabled the college to explore whether the young person was indeed being educated at home. Where EHE learners had been educated at home for many years, the interview process and needs analysis may be the only sources of information, though LAs were often very supportive in this process:

> "Because of our relationship with the local authority now what we try and do is give a provisional offer to a young person – because we have had occasions where our local authority have said 'we've gone out and visited this family and we don't think this is the right place. The family have shown no evidence that they are doing any home schooling'". (Lead)

Several colleges always had waiting lists, and oversubscription was often part of the reason for tight admissions procedures to ensure the provision would be right for each young person who was offered a place.

The initial testing and diagnostic assessment with the involvement of the SENCO and pastoral team was therefore crucial and given the high proportion of students 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 sometimes provide greater understanding (for parents as well as the college) of why the young person had struggled in mainstream school.

> "It's easy to ask for help with extra requirements, for example I need an overlay, I can't read on white properly I have to read on purple – I didn't know any of this before I came here but they tested me and that's how I found out." (Student)

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.

LAs could be very involved in determining who would be offered a place, depending on the model of provision offered and the membership and responsibilities of the Fair Access Panels:

> "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." (Lead)

Summary

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/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 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.

3.4. The curriculum offer – meeting the needs of the young people

3.4.1. Student agency and choice

In most colleges, students had a choice in the subjects that they studied. This could be in selecting the vocational area(s) that they wished to follow or the GCSEs/Level 1 subjects that they studied. Vocational options were universally popular. Students particularly appreciated the range of subjects offered and the option to study subjects that they would not have been able to study in school. For a minority of AP students, doing a vocational course at college was listed as one of the GCSE options.

> "In mainstream you don't get vocations, you'd never get the chance to do bricklaying or joinery or a proper sports course. But when you're here you can actually go and do all these things you want to do because they have the workshops for you where they do all that work." (Student)

Students particularly appreciated the skills that they developed through their vocational options.

> "It also helps you develop skills like construction, like you don't get to do that at a regular school. At construction, if you want to learn like how to do this, they'll teach you and plus you get to learn like all the different aspects. So like if you want to do bricklaying or woodwork or carpentry, they'll teach you all those different subjects. 100% better." (Student)

While DE provision has specified curriculum requirements as set out by government, they still provided students with choices about the subjects studied including vocational pathways. Learners in one DE provider were described as following a Progress 8 curriculum, however, the GCSE subjects included those not offered at their previous schools and a full day was spent on a vocational pathway that schools could not offer. In addition to the mandatory subjects students did

three other optional GCSEs plus a vocational pathway comprising six to eight options and delivered by FE staff with industry experience in fully equipped workshops.

Important to the students was how they perceived vocational qualifications to be helping them think about their future.

> "I think with my Voc as well like, you get a qualification out of it and I feel like that is so reassuring because you know that you're working hard and you're getting something from it that you can use in the future." (Student)

In some instances, studying for a specific vocational qualification had also helped students realise that this area was not for them.

> "I really like working with animals and seeing how they are and stuff and I did initially want to do veterinary care when I grow older. But now I'm a bit less interested in that but I think the pathway helped me make that choice." (Student)

The range of subjects offered coupled with choice was also important among the parents interviewed.

> "The subject choice is a huge reason for coming here, it absolutely is. [Child] has been able to pick things that he really wants to learn about and is interested in. It seems to be tailored to the individual. They never feel as if they are wasting their time here." (Parent)

Similarly, another parent spoke of how she had "chased a very specialised syllabus" for her neurodiverse son "that he will find interesting to minimize the barriers." At college her son had been able to study psychology and sociology which he wouldn't have been able to do in a mainstream school. At home he was studying classical civilisation.

Parents valued vocational course as these provided different opportunities for their children who were perceived as coping less well with the academic subjects offered in school.

> "She knows she's not academic. In mainstream the non-academic ones, they get labelled, don't they? We can't all get As in English and math and science. Some of us want to go down the chefing route or the animal care route." (Parent)

Teaching staff also recognised how these additional qualifications could support the educational transitions and development of students.

> "For a learner who is anxious about coming back to college and hasn't got fond memories of those GCSEs that they didn't feel that they were achieving very well at, something like animal care is a good means to get them back on the programmeme and arts as well." (Lead)

In some instances where students did not have a choice this was for a specific reason. For example, in one EHE provision, students did three GCSEs: English, maths and science in one day a week. The aim being to open up progression routes for these learners within and beyond college. It was also apparent from the visits to this college that these students were undertaking many activities and subjects outside of college.

> "The most important thing about the 14 to 16 provision here is that the 'one day per week plus homework' model does not get in the way of family home schooling. My own children have chosen from French, German, art, literature, history, classics, Spanish and the sciences." (Parent)

A few EHE parents did suggest that the provision could be further enhanced by offering a broader range of qualifications, such as adding another GSCE subject.

3.4.2. Tailoring the curriculum to student needs

All staff had a strong focus on supporting students to progress and hence looked to tailor the curriculum to meet their needs. In addition to choice, consideration was also given to the number of qualifications studied and the level of qualifications.

In one college EHE students attended for between two and four days a week depending on their timetable. Students could select up to five subjects including two vocational subjects. For GCSE, the subjects offered included English language, English literature, maths, chemistry and biology, and for Level 2 vocational qualifications students could select from animal care, art, IT and performing arts. Few students were reported to select five, rather the approach taken was about tailoring the approach for each young person.

> "For one learner taking four subjects is the right way because they're ready... For some, the anxiety and the external agencies that they're working with, such as CAMHS, one subject is enough and then we can build up in their year 11." (SMT)

In a different EHE provision students could study up to four GCSEs in a single year – a minimum of two GCSEs over the two-year period and a maximum of eight. This was to include English and maths. Students were grateful for the flexibility of this approach since they were able to manage their time. It was also felt to be less stressful and the students enjoyed focusing on fewer subjects in depth at any one time.

> "The maximum GCSEs you can do in a year at this college is four, unless you do one externally. It makes sense – all my friends I've talked to are very jealous of this. I've had friends who've got 30 exams in a month and we have 12 max, which feels a lot more, manageable. And sort of all that pressure and hype." (Former student)

Noteworthy that the decision to undertake different GCSEs in a single year was driven by feedback from parents.

In one DE college it was felt that having 10 subjects could overwhelm students and that by condensing this to five would make it easier for them to engage with learning. All students did English, maths, science, business and IT plus a vocational qualification. The students agreed with this perspective.

> "When you're doing too many things, it's harder to get, like, higher scores in everything. So if you're doing less, you can get higher scores in, like, the more important ones." (Student)

Having fewer subjects to study was perceived by students as reducing stress levels compared to the many GCSEs that they would be required to take in mainstream school.

> "And I also like the fact that it's less lessons, as you only do the subject that you picked and

> then maths and English. But in school you have science, you have RE and all of the other stuff. And you get a lot of homework and a lot of lessons to stress about that have to be done really quickly." (Student)

Similarly, one parent commented on how the subject reduction in their child's curriculum was "perfect", because it covered the three core GCSEs "that they really need but does that in a flexible way that helps with any issues the young person might have".

To further support students, colleges offered different levels of qualifications, again related to need. This was not about whether students were AP, DE or EHE. For example, although most DE students were studying at Level 2, one DE provider focused on Level 1, the aim being to ensure that students got the foundations right so that they could move onto the next level post-16. In another DE provision only the top-level students took double science, whereas the other students did a single award.

There was similar variation across AP and EHE students. In an AP provision for new arrivals, students spoke of doing Level 1 and then Level 2 in English and maths as part of their stepped progression at college. Frequently colleges offered both Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications to students taught in the same group so that they could work at their own level.

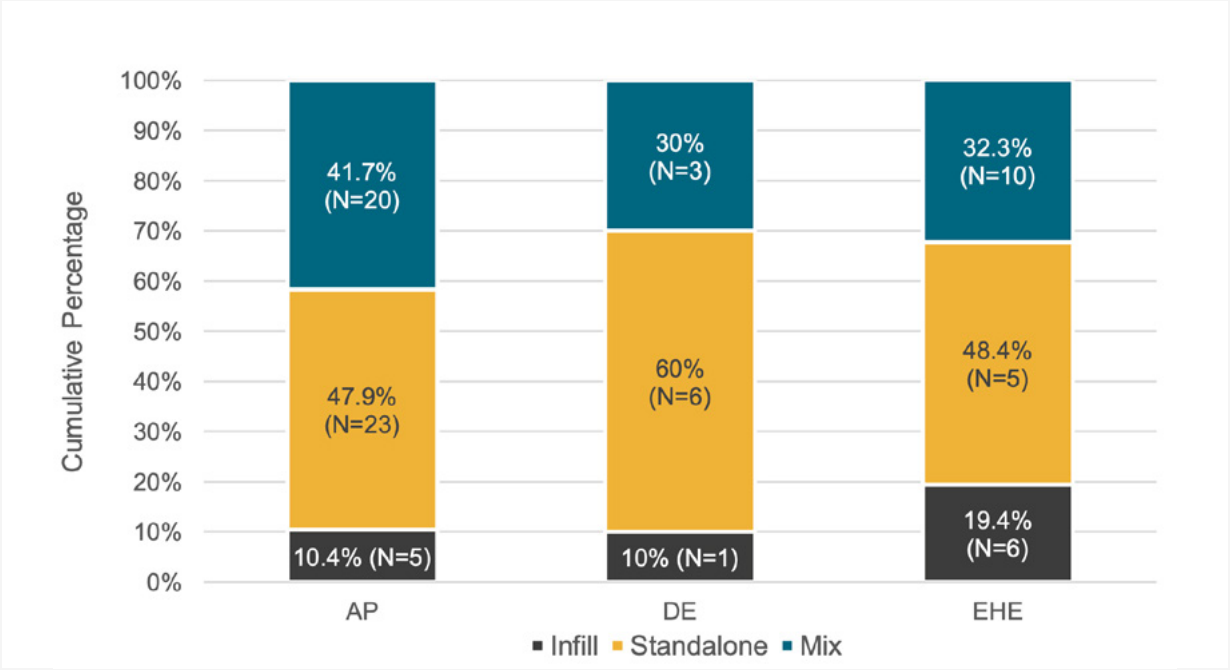
On a broader level, one college offering both DE and EHE provision tailored its curriculum at each campus to align with the specific needs of the local community.

> "The community needs here is very much the parents want the child to access vocational subjects and that's what the parents want. That's the big drive here and we've got amazing vocational facilities here. In the other campus the community needs is more we want our child to go into more academic subjects." (Lead)

3.4.3. Mode of delivery

Three approaches to curriculum delivery were identified from the survey: 1. standalone delivery when students were taught within the peer groups by dedicated 14 to 16-year-old staff, 2. infill models where students typically had their vocational specialisms taught in the wider college often by college staff and with older students, and 3. a mix of standalone and infill. Standalone and mixed were the most common amongst survey participants. 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 the students and the limited hours that they can attend college (see Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6: Mode of delivery



Source: Survey data

While all DE providers are required to have a separate area for their students, the positioning 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 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. By contrast, one college operated an infill model where students studied for 50% of their time on their vocational area alongside post-16 learners.

The approach taken to AP and EHE varied in relation to the curriculum model adopted which partly depended on group sizes and whether both groups were taught together when offered in the same college. In one college offering both 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 AP and EHE students followed the same programmeme whereby 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. The vocational option operated as an infill model with the intention that post-16 students would act as role models.

There was no evidence to suggest that the adoption of infill, standalone or a mix of approaches was perceived differently by students. The different environment in which vocational education took place did though appear to be one of the highlights of the week for many students.

> "I think Friday's probably my favourite day as well, just because you get a change of your environment as well, so you're not here all week. And I enjoy my Voc as well, I like my teachers there, and I like learning the subject as well, because it's one of the main reasons why I like to come here as well." (Student)

Even when provision (AP, DE or EHE) operated as standalone with discrete vocational classes across the college campus it was felt that the 14 to 16-year-olds benefited from having older students around them.

> "I just think like there's different people around you and it's like more older people around you and you pick up more skills." (Student)

This was echoed by staff in the college:

> "In terms of that they can come into a college surrounded by older, more mature people, and what it means is that their maturity goes up very quickly as well because they're just being role modelled by older people." (Lead)

Some colleges had a different offer for EHE and AP students usually 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 programmemes, 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.

3.4.4. Timetabling and time in college

The requirement for DE students to be in full time education is quite different from AP and EHE students. For anyone reading this report who is less familiar with the entries recorded in the ILR there are two fields that relate to the hours that learners are timetabled to be in college: 1. Planned learning hours – total planned timetabled hours for learning activities for the teaching year and 2. Planned employability, enrichment and pastoral hours – total planned employability, enrichment and pastoral activity for the teaching year. In the sections that follow the calculation of hours is based on a college year of 36 weeks and 6 hours a day.

Alternative provision

Most AP students were in college for a small amount of time with the majority (77%) having planned hours of up to 20% of a college year. This could be up to one day a week or a block of time. Across the smaller cohort of AP no NPD, there was more variability in yearly hours across the five-year period and in terms of the number of yearly hours. For example, 2016/17 saw over two thirds (67%) of this group of students with planned hours of up to 10% of the college year with a considerable drop to 32% in 2020/21. This was the equivalent of up half a day a week over a college year. In comparison with AP students there were higher proportions of AP no NPD students with higher yearly hours with a considerable number of students with planned hours of over 50%, equivalent to two and a half days a week.

Similar patterns of planned hours were seen in the college visits where some students attended college for half a day a week for a vocational subject and some for one day a week – again usually for a vocational subject. Of interest is that there were several colleges where AP students were timetabled for three days a week which doesn't align with the NPD data. It is possible that since 2020/21 there has been an increase in the yearly hours that AP have in college.

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. This seemed to reflect individual students and their

experiences of school rather than the college. For example, in one college AP learners gave the following responses about their time in school.

> "Two days at school and then three days at college. And the hours are the same, so like six hours. School is just maths and English, and then it's basically the same. I also have art."

> "I actually don't go there [to school]. I do, like, online lessons. But I have to go into the school to do my exams."

In a different college where AP students were doing the same vocational subjects two parents offered contrasting perspectives on attendance at school. In one case the parent reported that her son hated going to school and also that she had had no contact with the school. In the other case the son was enjoying attending school alongside college.

> "He has two days a week at school where he does maths, English and science GCSEs and some of those classes are one to one – you couldn't get anything better and he's responded really well to those although he has struggled in his mock exams."

Direct entry

As should be the case, DE yearly hours were much higher than AP and EHE with most students full-time. That said there was some variability within the five-year data with a small proportion of students on fewer yearly hours than might be anticipated. For example, 11% of students had planned hours of less than 50% of the college year in 2020/21, the equivalent of two and a half days a week. This could be for different reasons such as anxiety and/or mental health issues or if some students started mid-year.

Electively home educated

The variability of timetabled yearly hours in college among EHE students was evident from the data. What was interesting was the year-on-year increase in the proportion of students with planned hours of up to 40% of the college year (equivalent of around two days per week) from 11% in 2016/17 to 25% in 2020/21. The most common planned hours for this period were up to 50% of the college year, equivalent to around two and a half days a week. The proportion of EHE learners recorded as having planned hours of over 60% of the college year (equivalent to over three days) was curious since DfE restricts these learners to a maximum of 16.5 hours or just under three full days per week. This has decreased over time.

Findings from the college visits echoed the variability in hours for EHE students according to the individualised curriculum that they followed – see section 3.4.2. Tailoring the curriculum to student needs. As with AP students, there were differences in what EHE students were doing when not in college. In the visits it was apparent that some EHE students had a full educational programmeme outside of college including extracurricular activities, whereas other students were only studying what they did in college.

> "At college we just did the core subjects. Because obviously because we were only three days a week and we had a limited time frame. So it was just a core three. But we did two outside history and geography." (Former student)

3.4.5. The curriculum offer

Curriculum overview

Students studied a range of both academic and vocational technical subjects, from English and maths to vocational technical qualifications (VTQs) in construction, animal management and creative industries. Table 3.25 provides an overview of the subjects studied throughout 2016/17 to 2020/21. For ease of understanding these have been clustered into groups.

Table 3.25: Overview of subjects studied 2016/17 to 2020/21

Learners (Rounded)	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Agriculture, Horticulture & Animal Care	940	740	690	720	570
Arts, Media & Publishing	1,560	1,450	1,430	1,420	1,080
Business, Administration & Law	800	730	710	470	390
Construction, Planning & the Built Environment	1,780	1,430	1,210	1,170	890
Education & Training	60	60	60	0	30
Engineering & Manufacturing Technologies	2,150	1,720	1,510	1,320	910
Health, Public Services & Care	1,080	920	840	920	740
History, Philosophy & Theology	720	820	780	740	600
Information & Communication Technology (ICT)	1,500	1,210	1,110	810	510
Languages, Literature & Culture	3,220	3,650	3,930	3,640	3,180
Leisure, Travel & Tourism	1,070	850	950	970	790
Preparation for Life & Work	6,400	5,730	5,940	5,690	4,050
Retail & Commercial Enterprise	1,830	1,390	1,350	1,270	940
Science & Mathematics	2,840	3,310	3,580	3,790	3,530
Social Sciences	300	350	430	410	340

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Naturally the numbers reduce in several clusters over time due to the large fall in student numbers during this period. However, some clusters are consistently attracting larger numbers of students than others. This is understandable for maths and science and English (languages literature &

culture) but was perhaps a little surprising for preparation for life and work. The more detailed consideration of the 2020/21 subjects studied that follows therefore presents information on English, maths and science and preparation for life and work separate to the other subjects.

English, maths and science

In the survey data 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 (see Table 3.26).

Table 3.26: English and maths provision offered for 14 to 16-year-olds

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

Source: Survey data

The picture provided from the linked NPD-ILR data evidenced that high proportions of DE students were studying English and maths at Level 2. Among EHE about half the cohort were studying these subjects at Level 2. Fewer AP students studied English and maths in college, which may be because many are part-time and most likely studying English and maths in school (see Table 3.27).

Table 3.27: English, maths and science take up by AP, AP, no NPD, DE and EHE

	AP	AP no NPD	DE	EHE
GCSE English	7%	6%	132%*	49%
Functional Skills English	13%	38%	9%	35%
ESOL	0%	21%	0%	4%
GCSE Maths	7%	8%	86%	50%
Functional Skills Maths	13%	52%	9%	36%
Science/Applied Science	3%	21%	94%	22%
Functional and Basic IT skills	2%	25%	7%	5%
Other English and maths	1%	15%	11%	9%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data. * The percentage for DE GCSE English is over 100 because some students were also taking GCSE English Literature.

Preparation for life or work

Many students were studying qualifications related to preparation for work and/or employability skills and foundations for learning and life. The percentage rose from 44% in 2016/17 to 55% in 2019/20, with a slight fall in 2020/21 (52%). Participation in preparation for life and work varied with far higher proportions of DE students engaging in both subject areas (see Table 3.28). This is probably for two reasons: 1. DE students are full-time in contrast with AP students who are mostly part-time and EHE students who have restricted hours and hence DE students may have greater flexibility in their timetable and 2. Given the time that DE students spend in college, providers were looking to encourage students to develop wider transferable skills that bring with them additional qualifications.

Table 3.28: Preparation for life and work 2020/21 across different groups

	AP	AP no NPD	DE	EHE
Foundations for Life and Learning	20%	31%	63%	27%
Preparation for work	7%	15%	91%	18%

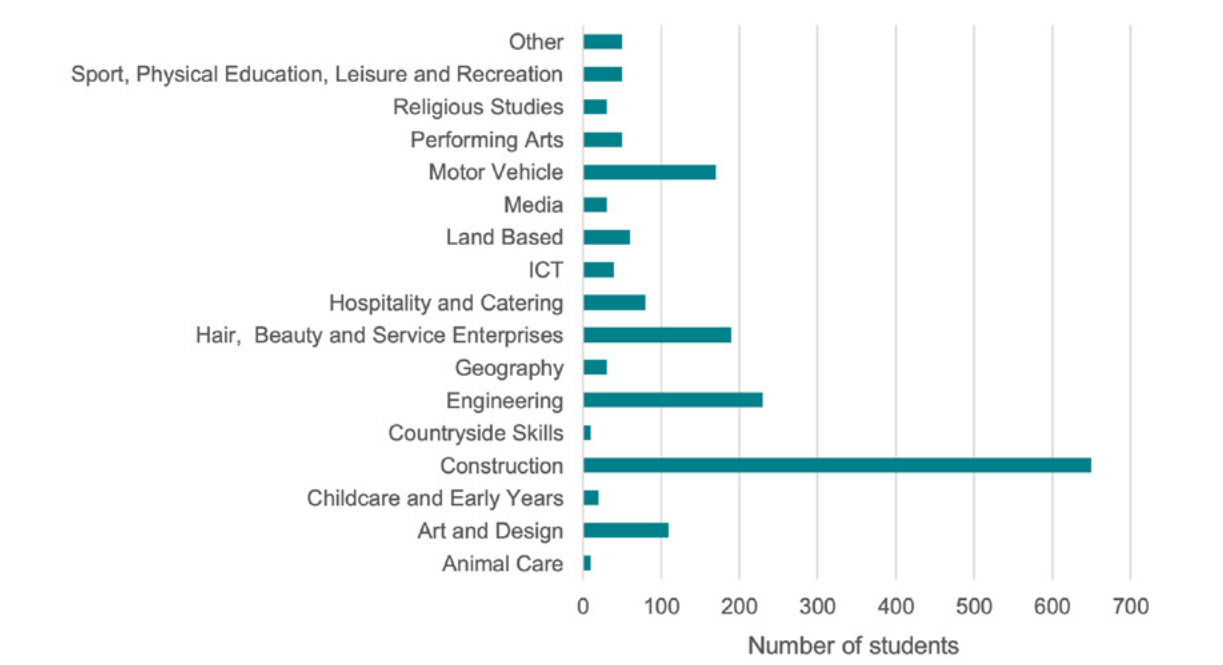
Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Within foundations for life and learning, common qualifications included foundations for learning and life; learning, employability and progression; personal and social development; vocational studies. Distinctive to DE were qualifications related to citizenship. Preparation for work and/or employability skills was explicitly focused on preparation for work, employability and skills.

Other subjects

Among AP students, construction was by far the most population vocational subject, followed by engineering, hair and beauty and motor vehicle (see Figure 3.7).

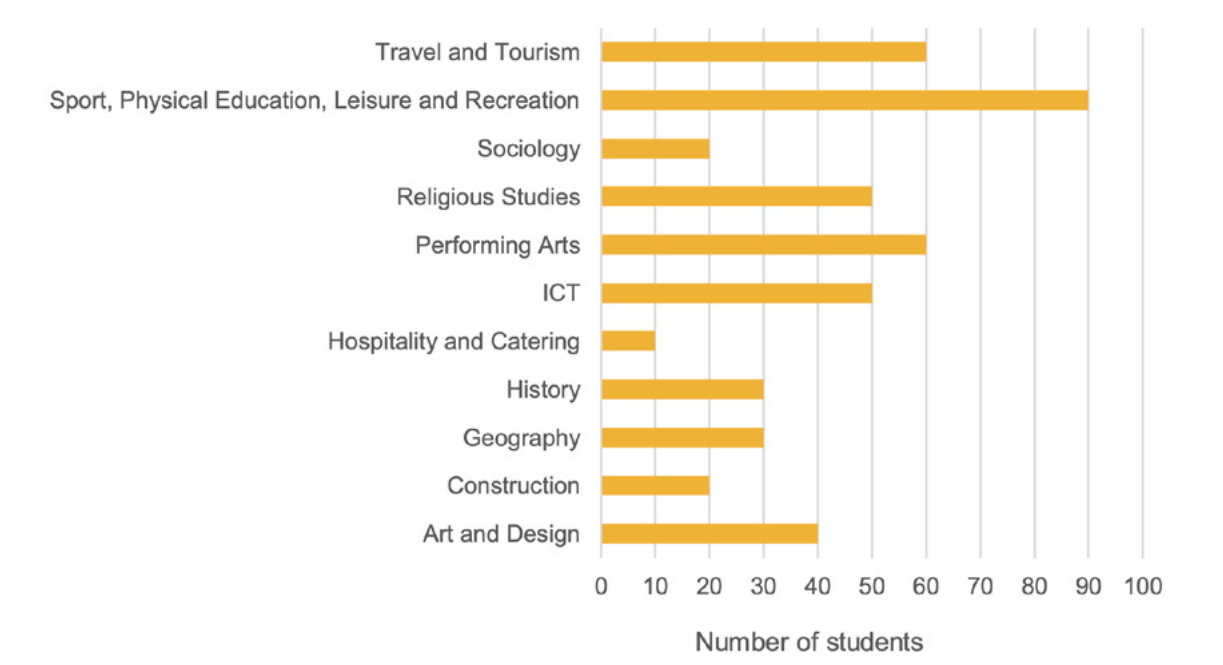
Figure 3.7: Number of AP students taking other subjects



Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

AP no NPD students studied a narrower range of subjects than all other student groups. It was interesting that travel and tourism was popular with this cohort in contrast to AP and EHE where no students had studied this (see Figure 3.8).

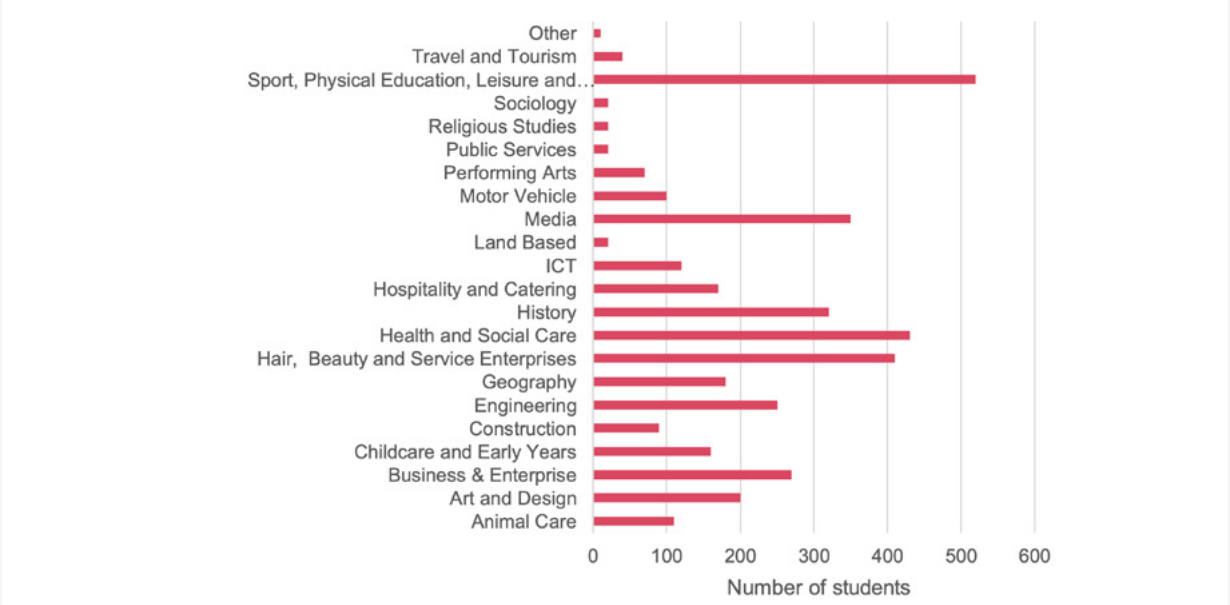
Figure 3.8: Number of AP no NPD students taking other subjects



Source: ILR / MiDES data

DE students studied the largest range of subjects compared to other groups, however, some subjects had small numbers of students. Most popular were sport, health and social care, hair and beauty and media (see Figure 3.9).

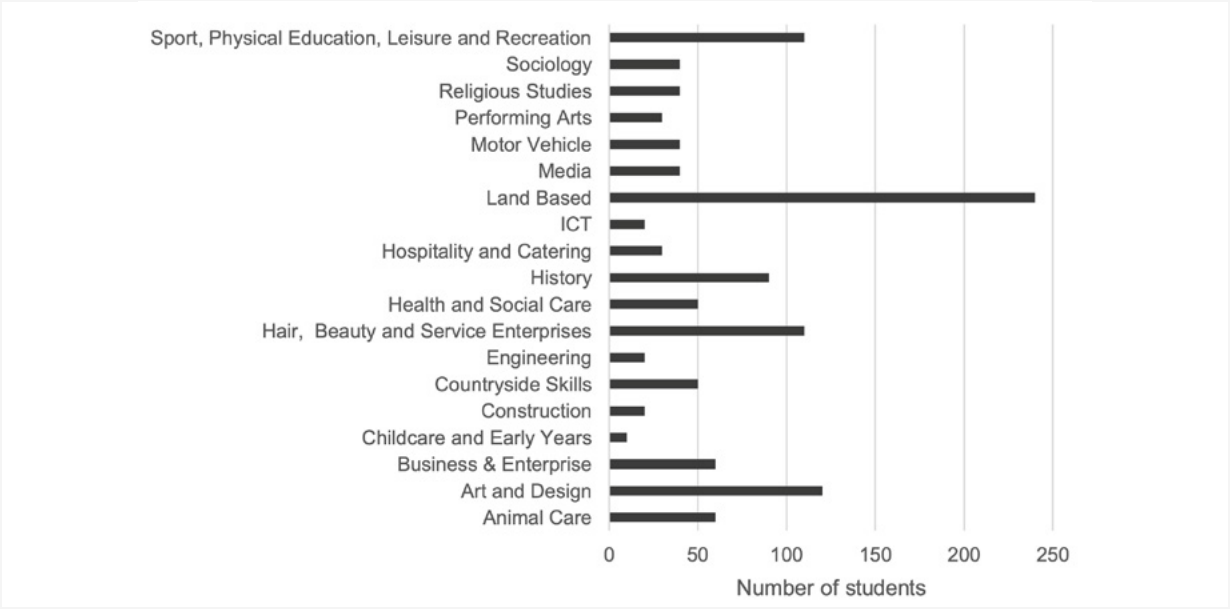
Figure 3.9: Number of DE students taking other subjects



Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

Distinctive among the EHE students was the large group taking land-based studies. Thereafter art and design and sport were the most popular (see Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: Number of EHE students taking other subjects



Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

The curriculum offer as a whole

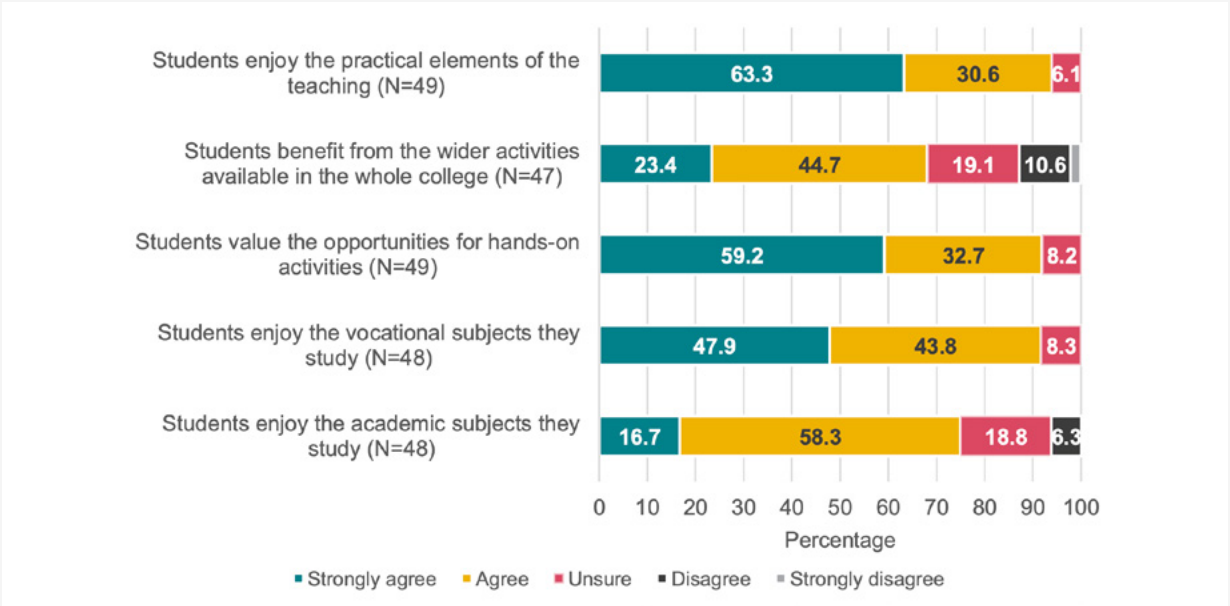
The importance of student choice of subjects has been covered earlier in the report (see sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.2). This highlighted the different approaches to the design of the overall curriculum across colleges – the number of subjects studied and at what level, and the number of vocational and academic subjects that were offered. A few further examples are provided here.

In one college where AP and EHE students were taught together, the use of infilling meant that a wider curriculum could be offered such as ESOL, construction, brickwork, plumbing and science – this was only when it was known that there were no students over the age of 18. 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 English and maths. 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.

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 programmeme including vocational subjects, such as hospitality, hair and beauty and other key skills. In some colleges where learners could enrol throughout the year care had been taken to ensure that these students could gain an award irrespective of when they started by breaking down Level 1 courses into certificates.

For DE students the combination of GCSEs and vocational qualifications varied. 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 health science or engineering in addition to GCSES.

Figure 3.11: Staff perceptions of how students value of the curriculum



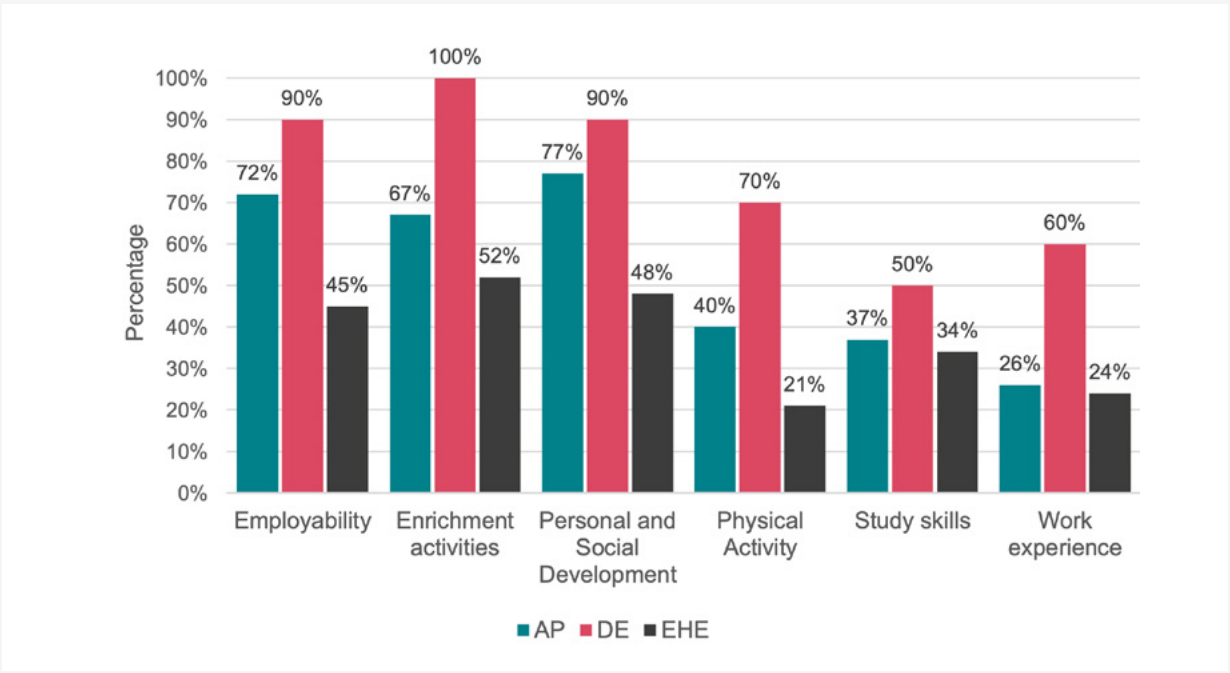
Source: Survey data. Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

Survey respondents perceived students to enjoy both the academic and vocational subjects they studied albeit that those strongly agreeing and agreeing were higher for vocational subjects at 91.7% than academic 75% (see Figure 3.11). 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%).

3.4.6. Enrichment and wider activities

Research into enrichment in colleges indicates that there are three broad aims: development of the whole person, development of employability and work-related skills and support to facilitate progression (Esmond et al., 2024). These aims were reflected in the survey responses (see Figure 3.12).

Figure 3.12: Proportion of wider activities offered across AP, DE and EHE



Source: Survey data

Leaders and teachers recognised the importance of enrichment and wider activities. Evident from the interviews was that many students prior to attending college had had restricted access to broader activities sometimes due to family circumstances and/or finance.

> "I'd also say open up as many opportunities to the young people as possible because these 14 to 16-year-olds are in our provision for a reason – so give them as many opportunities as possible that they wouldn't get if they were in mainstream. So work experience, vocational options, trips out of the college. Some of our learners are at [local attraction] today, and many of our learners will not have been taken somewhere like that by their parents." (Support staff)

Enrichment

The part-time nature of AP and EHE students is likely 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. This though wasn't always the case and there were plenty of examples of part-time students taking parts in trips, visits and community projects. In one college students had recently visited an art gallery and been to the theatre to watch a play.

> "So going to the theatre was really cool because I've not. Last time I was at a theatre when I was really young. So it was really cool to experience it being older, being able to take in the scenery." (Student)

In another college part-time students had visited the National Council house and had a guided tour from the mayor and a roundtable with two councillors. These Level 1 students had been invited back to have a debate in the debating chamber that the local mayor facilitated – dressed in full regalia. The English teacher had helped the students to prepare their speeches and get their questions ready. Other visits that year had included Parliament and the Natural History Museum. Following the visit to London, staff commented about how the bonds and the connections and that feeling of belonging between the groups could be seen in the classrooms.

EHE students, as part of their home schooling, often engaged in a range of enrichment activities. In one college two EHE students spoke about doing the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

> "Yes, we're both on our silver award now and we're doing it at [a local centre] well, we're registered there but it's not really where you do it because it's all about volunteering and stuff, you do all different things for DofE. So I'm volunteering at a youth centre and there's sport and then the expedition where you go camping." (Student)

One parent noted that the EHE community organised its own enrichment activities to complement what the college offered.

> "Again, the options vary according to what the current Home Ed parents can lead or facilitate, but there are always sports – we've had archery, skating, martial arts, football, athletics. We have a youth group for social activities, and there are lots of things in the area that our children can join, theatre, arts, music. And we sometimes arrange educational visits." (Parent)

Also evident was how some subjects lent themselves to enrichment activities such as performing and creative arts where one student spoke about taking part in Matilda at Christmas time and working on an end of year production of Footloose.

In addition, all students, whether AP, DE and EHE, could access the wider college enrichment offer which could include employer events, guest speakers or trips and visits. Parents too were aware of these opportunities.

> "There's opportunities to do evening classes as well that they run for the younger ones. She did a few evening classes here in the restaurant with some of the chefs. She did the bronze, silver and gold junior chef over a year. It's all a stepping-stone and it's helped her get into her college course." (Parent)

In some instances, colleges offered activities that might be more usually associated with schools such as a prom and a sports day, so that these young people did not miss out and were not disadvantaged in any way.

Curriculum autonomy and enrichment

Many colleges took the opportunity to embed enrichment as part of the timetabled curriculum with wellbeing and personal development allocated 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." (Lead)

Employability could also be timetabled in addition to being embedded in vocational subjects. In one college, some teaching staff also led a tutorial group that was part of enrichment and employability. The scheme of work mapped out different areas for each term and included employability skills. The first term for example focused on students learning the core skills, such as understanding British values or equality, diversity and inclusion, teamworking, organisation and getting ready for college life. In another college students spoke of engaging in Black History month and Pride month as part of their tutor group activities.

Some colleges had embedded additional qualifications into enrichment activities whether this be in relation to wellbeing or employability (seen in section 3.4.5). One college, for example, had embedded a Level 1 Personal Social Development qualification that focused on preparing for next steps.

> "And that is a huge unit that covers everything to do with job search, be it to read job specifications, job descriptions, CV writing, cover letter writing." (Teacher)

In another college they had a student-led subject called activities. At the beginning of the year students were asked about what they would like to learn about in the wider world and what skills they think they need. This led to a range of activities which were different each year. During the college visit this included how to open a bank account, how to read a payslip and how to pay taxes.

Physical Education – choice and agency

The importance of choice and student agency, seen in section 3.4.1, was also relevant to physical activity. In one college the Lead spoke about how the PE curriculum offer looked quite different to that in schools this was since many learners on joining college had said that PE was their "worst subject and they hated it at the previous school and often would go into isolation because they refused to participate". In response the college supported students to become more active through dodgeball, benchball or wall-ball in addition to primary-school type games such as three-legged races. In another college, students, who were reported to have previously never had engaged in PE, were doing boxing and going to the gym for a personal fitness programmeme. It was recognised that for many young people this might be their only opportunity to engage in PE during the week. In another college a student spoke enthusiastically about different sport options.

> "We do have sports and I really enjoy that it's every Friday that we go to sport and we really like it. We can play badminton, football, rugby, whichever we'd like. It's about what we all like to do really. We are first asked what sort of games we like and then we choose." (Student)

Work experience

DE students were more likely to be offered work experience through college, given that most

AP and all EHE students are part-time. 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". DE students tended to have blocks of work experience often with one or two-week placements. Undoubtedly this was valued by the students, especially in relation to their possible future careers and understanding about the world of work:

> "The opportunities that you get to do as well. The amount of things they'll send out and you know...Yeah, work experience, where they set out for you to do work experience. So you get an understanding of what it's going to be like." (Student)

Choice was also important here and students spoke of a wide range of work experience opportunities including in salon, a hotel, working in the theatre, working on a farm, going to a skate shop and in one instance going back to the primary school they had attended. In one college the pastoral tutors organised the two-week placements for their Year 10 students which had included students going to a landscape gardening company, working in plumbing and working with a car mechanic.

For part-time students, work experience was often project-based and linked to the local community. 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 adopted a mix of group project-based experiences or individual work experience depending on the different sites in which students 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 organisation or like a sports club where they do their two weeks' worth of hours." (Lead)

Summary

Students studied a range of academic and vocational technical subjects, from English and maths to 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 in line with funding regulations. 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. Some EHE students had extensive home education when not in college and others did not.

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.

3.5. The college learning environment

3.5.1. Approaches to teaching and learning

While there were obvious differences between students' perceptions of school and college, in relation to the curriculum offered and the opportunity to study a vocational subject, students also spoke of how they felt the approach to teaching and learning differed. These views were often reflected in former student, parent and teacher interviews.

Smaller class sizes

Frequently students were taught in smaller groups than might be the case in mainstream secondary schools. Students appreciated the smaller class sizes for two main reasons: 1. fewer students meant that the classes were less "hectic and overwhelming" compared to school and 2. teachers had more time to offer support with learning.

> "So I just think it's loads better because smaller environments, you get more time learning what you want to learn and then the teachers give you more time and it's just a more enjoyable space." (Student)

Students commented on how smaller classes enabled them to "get to know everyone properly" which supported the development of friendships. Not all classes were smaller than mainstream, such as when students were doing their vocational options in the wider college or when students were infilling into vocational courses. As one student explained in relation to studying hair:

> "The classes here are not really much smaller than at school, and we've always got a lot of people working in the practice salon. There are people coming in so that the Level 2s can do their hair practice on actual clients."

Teachers and parents, too, recognised that the smaller classroom environment meant that teachers were able to better meet the needs of individual students.

> "Whereas here we do have the luxury of smaller group sizes, which probably is really accommodating for young people, but they feel that we not only want them to succeed academically, we want to push them, but we want to know them as people for who they are." (Teacher)

> "Within the Home Ed Community I would say that ADHD and autism are not uncommon. The small class sizes and the manner of teaching provide an environment where these young people can achieve their potential." (Parent)

Having fun while learning

Students talked about preferring the delivery of lessons in college compared with school since they felt they were able to socialize and have fun while learning. Often this was about working together rather than individually.

> "Yeah, more talking to each other and actually working together with people than sitting in silence, working on your own, struggling on your own." (Student)

> "A lot of the theory is like that, learning new knowledge, but we've also had some fun things as well. We've designed out own salon, and we got to make mood boards for a competition called concept which was really fun." (Student)

Parents echoed this, reflecting on the enjoyment that their child experienced at college: "They always come home and mention things that were fun or that they had had support with something".

Students found the approach to teaching and learning more engaging than in school with the implicit suggestion that teaching was more student-centred in college, in contrast to a more didactic style in school.

> "In school they [the teachers] just stand at the front of the class and tell you stuff but with [college lecturer] she's really interested in helping you, she comes over to you, and sometimes at school if you ask for help and you can't understand the teachers get quite frustrated."

Students also gave quite critical accounts of lessons in school:

> "At my old school you were not allowed to take notes while the teacher was talking, so that was not helpful for me because it goes in one ear and out of the other unless I'm writing. You weren't allowed a pen in your hand or anything, so if you couldn't remember all of what had been said you just didn't get it."

Teachers understood that many students had arrived in college with negative attitudes towards school and education in general and hence it was important to provide different opportunities in the classroom and beyond.

> "Whereas a lot of them come in with a really negative attitude towards education in all of its forms. So if you go in almost trying to be like what they've already experienced, then you've lost them already. They don't want to replicate what they've just had." (Teacher)

Variety of classroom activities

In all interviews students talked about the variety of the activities in each lesson and the value of the practical and experiential learning opportunities.

> "And we do a lot more practical stuff, plus we get to do like a lot more than regular schools, like we get to do construction... we don't get to work on sites, but we get to learn how the work builders on sites do it." (Student)

> "Just the way our teacher sets out the lesson, to be honest with you. It's like different parts of the lesson. So we do practical and then it's theory and then some of the lesson you just talk about it." (Student)

The lesson observations endorsed the students' perceptions of the variety of activities and how positive reinforcement created an engaging and productive learning experience for the students. In a construction lesson teachers involved students in their initial explanation by asking coaching questions, which helped maintain student interest and facilitate active learning. After this initial explanation, the class was student-led, with staff available to demonstrate techniques again and offer tips when necessary. When one student struggled to balance cement on a trowel, the teacher demonstrated a technique to enhance the student's understanding through practical guidance.

Another lesson observation demonstrated an activity-based approach in health and social care. All students were engaged in the activities, sharing ideas – no one was disengaged. The session was about disabilities and each student had been asked to research a different hidden disability. The teacher explained that for this whole day session the first session would focus on theory, the second and third would be more experiential. The second session was exploring disabilities – untying and tying a shoelace with one hand, opening a bottle, visual perceptions when using different colours.

Students felt that the practical activities made things easier to learn since they could see their progress.

> "It's easier because you get to see your skills by doing physical things and you can actually see how well you're doing, whether you've got something right or not. And you don't need to lead up to it they just let us get stuck into it straight away, we're doing practical things as soon as we get here." (Student)

Parents, too, emphasised the positive impact of varied activities on their children's concentration, and one noted that multi-skills and practical skills lessons, along with different ways of teaching, greatly enhanced their child's focus. This was also echoed by teaching staff where in one example commonplace items such as Mentos and Coke, were used to show chemical reactions since students could relate to and remember these examples.

> "And they work better because I can say 'oh, do you remember when we did that experiment where we used mints and a coke bottle?' and they're 'oh, yeah I remember that' whereas if I'd asked if they remembered when we used a conical flask and some lithium oxide they'd be like, 'no. I don't remember that'". (Teacher)

Bringing the real world into teaching and learning

Many colleges are equipped with industry standard equipment that is often not available in mainstream schools. A student studying travel and tourism spoke of how one of their 'classrooms' was a set out as a model of an aircraft; a performing arts student talked about different types of studios such as a dance studio with a specialist floor and mirrors and construction students in another college were fortunate to have access to both an indoor and outdoor working area where they could learn all the different trades – this was for 14 to 16-year-olds only. As the employer involved in the provision said:

> "We live in the UK and the weather is rubbish, and the students need to understand that if they are going into the industry they're not always going to be in a classroom where it's warm and dry."

In one college students were studying hair and beauty but these were in different departments and hence located in different areas of the college. Evident from the lesson observations was that the teaching styles overlapped considerably, with a heavy on emphasis on showing and doing, immediate feedback, and building up a set of useful skills that can be taken directly into the workplace (including professional workplace behaviour). The teachers also commented on the real-world environment of the salons, all of which are equipped for external clients to come in and have industry standard treatments. This approach was valued by students:

> "Well I came in to hair and beauty blind because I didn't know anything and I wanted to pick up new skills, and the teachers have taught us loads of different ways to do things, and they showed me. They just show us how to do things, and that's my preferred learning style." (Student)

A tailored approach to teaching and learning

Students themselves recognised that young people might learn in different ways and commented on how teachers personalised their approach.

> "And they're always adapting to your learning style as well so if you learn better by, let's say watching a video, usually they'll put on a video at some point. But for those who learn better by doing worksheets or something, well they'll usually be able to give you a worksheet to work through as well, so that's helpful." (Student)

Current and former students also spoke about how the approach to teaching and learning could foster independence through individual projects and tasks. Independence was also fostered through peer evaluation. For example, in one lesson observation where the construction class did not involve formal assessments, teachers encouraged students to evaluate each other's work at the end of the session. They scored the brick towers based on appearance, neatness of cement, and the alignment of the structures. These opportunities for students to assess each other's work encouraged critical thinking and collaboration, reinforcing the skills learned during the lesson.

Across colleges, there was an acknowledgment that many students were below expected levels and thought was needed about how to approach this.

> "It's difficult to strike a balance between teaching them at the right level and not letting them think that they're being patronised. Because a lot of them are below the level that they should be at their age. So, you're teaching them things that they would have been taught in year seven sometimes." (Teacher)

Throughout the lesson observations and interviews, approaches included varying the pace more, chunking learning, the use of real world examples and lots of activities. In several colleges students were loosely grouped by ability – this naturally necessitated different approaches.

> "The groups are split by ability but obviously within the class you'll still get quite a lot of variation. So I have the lower ability learners in my group. The syllabus will be the same for all of the groups but they may be learning in a different way. My group like to go outside a lot – so if we're doing angles, we might do angles outside on the football pitch – it's just a case of differentiating for the learner." (Support staff)

In a GCSE Science lesson observation students were frequently encouraged to 'look' and 'think' – building their confidence that they did already have much of the knowledge that was needed. The teacher was calm, confident, interesting, and always had the full attention of the group. Questions were directed at all students and the teacher appeared to know exactly who to stretch and who needed easier questions – which kept everyone engaged and encouraged them all to participate.

Formative and summative assessment

Especially where students were undertaking vocational qualifications, they valued the immediacy of feedback provided whether this was formative or summative. In one lesson observation two Year 10 students were 'building a house' and pointed to a partially built tiny house in which they had created a doorway, window openings and so on. They were immensely proud of this and explained that it brought together all the skills they had learned over their first year. Things they liked about the teaching and learning style were the immediacy of feedback, the chance to go at their own pace, and a sense of having learned something new and useful in every lesson.

As part of formative assessment in a hair salon, one student spoke of an assessment on "actual people", commenting:

> "They looked at our customer service skills, how we talk to them, how we interact with them, and then they obviously look at how we do the hair and the skills that we've picked up, and then we get a mark at the end of the lesson rather than having to wait for the results. It means we know straight away what we need to work on." (Student)

In another lesson observation, construction students were working on a graded assessment where they were working independently at PCs in the computer lab. Although all the students said they preferred their practical sessions, when asked about the theory classes they did identify several things they liked and felt were better than school. The most striking of these was that doing work on the computer meant that they could work at their own pace and therefore did not move on until they had understood the topic and completed any tasks correctly. Indeed, one young person commented that at college they "had never been put into a hall where you get stressed out and can't remember things".

The point about the anxiety and stress that some students faced when summative exams took place in large halls was commented on by several teachers. One phenomenon in FE colleges more broadly is the number of post-16 students having to take resits in English and maths. This can mean that some colleges hire out large centres where there can be 500 students in a room. As one Lead commented "this just doesn't work with our students and hence our 14 to 16-year-olds sat their exams on site in a smaller environment". In other colleges, there were instances of students not turning up for an exam due to the sheer pressure felt in that environment.

The support provided by colleges for exam access and preparation was raised by parents. One college arranged for an educational psychologist to supply the necessary evidence for students to receive extra time in exams. In terms of exam preparation, one parent reported additional GCSE support, including mock papers, holiday sessions, early morning study opportunities, and access to revision resources on Teams.

The impact of positive student-teacher relationships in the classroom

The importance of good student-teacher relationships was fundamental in supporting students with their studies. A central aspect of this was that students felt that staff cared about them and how their studies were progressing.

> "[At school] I didn't really get any help... and the teachers weren't really very accommodating but this like everyone seems to care a lot more and actually tries to help." (Student)

The care teachers provided for students and their academic progress was echoed by parents.

> "And I trust that they've got my daughter's best interests and feelings at heart as well. I don't feel like she's in a box. I feel like she's a person that they're invested in, and they care about her." (Parent)

Also essential was how students spoke about it being easier to ask questions when in college compared to school and of how they felt that teachers gave better explanations. Underpinning this was the sense that teachers were patient.

> "We can ask any question we need and they wait for our questions after every topic. They explain the topic to us and then ask us if we have any questions or queries. And if we don't have any questions right now, we can even ask later if we realise that we had not quite understood something. The teachers are very open, we can ask things at any time." (Student)

Teachers were also seen as more approachable than in school.

> "Because in a mainstream school it's usually if you express your thoughts or something towards a teacher that might not be a big kind of, oh what's the word? They kind of be like, oh no I'm a teacher, you're a student. Where here, they actually listen and take on what you have to say." (Student)

Multiple parents emphasised the approachability of teachers, especially in relation to students' additional needs. One parent noted that the mainstream school's poor handling of their child's health needs meant the child lost all trust with the teachers. At college, teachers made them feel valued and listened to. Crucial also was that students didn't feel that they would be made to look foolish in front of their peers.

> "Exactly, when we ask questions here no one laughs at each other or winds each other up." (Student)

> "In school the teachers would just say I can't come round and look at what you're all doing, and they'd just look at me as if I was some kind if idiot. They would tell me to crack on and do your work so then I'd get thrown out because how can you crack on if you don't know what you're doing?" (Student)

Not only did the positive student-teacher relationship impact students, but so did the positive parent-teacher relationships. Most parents praised the communication they have with teachers and other staff, which helped to clarify and accommodate to their children's needs. Overall, these strong parent-teacher connections contributed to a more supportive and understanding environment for the students.

3.5.2. College ethos

One of the most important student themes was that of the ethos of the college and how this was making a positive difference to their experience of education in comparison to their experiences

of school. Where EHE students had not attended school recently or not at all, they often made comparisons based on their friends who were still in school. Student responses chimed with the survey responses and those in the wider interviews. Specifically, students spoke with enthusiasm about the more adult environment, a sense of greater freedom and the mutual respect that underpinned strong student-teacher relationships.

Fewer rules

Students, former students and parents spoke of how the more relaxed rules in college were a positive feature – this might be in relation to the perceived 'silliness' of some school rules or appearance.

> "And the thing with school is that they are very strict with almost silly things, like with my brother when he went to secondary school and it was midsummer and really hot and they forced him to wear his jacket, they wouldn't let him take it off." (Student)

Staff also perceived the college environment to be 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." (Lead)

Students felt that they had more autonomy and that where they were not in a uniform, they were better able to express their identity.

> "Here you have your freedom to express yourself through your clothing. You can wear, obviously, within reason, pretty much what you want. You can do your hair how you like. There's none of those rules compared to school. You go into school with dyed hair. And that's it you're in detention. I don't know how that affects your learning, but according to the school, it does." (Former student)

This was also echoed by parents and staff especially in relation to how college enabled these young people to develop their own identity.

> "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." (Lead)

> "And so particularly in neurodiverse people, you want soft clothing. And there's lots of other kind of self-expression points. So I think that makes it helpful." (Parent)

In some colleges students were required to wear a uniform but this was described as a more relaxed uniform compared to schools. Nonetheless, one former student mentioned having to wear a specific jumper and lanyard, saying it "felt like being in primary school".

The perceptions of fewer rules didn't mean that college staff would not be strict, it was simply a different approach.

> "The rules are more relaxed here with things like first names but in some ways they are very

> strict. Health and safety, they make us very aware of that, I always listen really carefully because I know what could happen if you don't." (Student)

Respect

Students placed strong importance on being able to call teachers by their first names. In several instances this was the starting point of mutual respect.

> "We call everybody by first names here, and that's part of what makes us feel respected, we're all just on first name terms so it feels more equal from the start." (Student)

The redressing of the power relationships between students and teachers seemed to set the beginnings of different teacher student relationships in college where students also wished to show respect to their teachers. While speaking about teachers being more approachable, students did recognise and understand that there was still a difference in the relationship as captured in the following quotation:

> "They treat us like friends in some ways but we are still the pupils, it's not like we are equal in everything. There's always a difference between children and adults so although they treat us in a grown up way I wouldn't ever expect them to stop being the adult in the room." (Student)

Often this contrasted with prior experiences in school:

> "I think respect works two ways, and if I'm not getting it well then I'm not giving it back. That was really the problem with mainstream because they wanted you to give them all the respect but won't ever give you any back." (Student)

A more adult environment

The nature of 14 to 16 provision necessitates that students need to negotiate a large college campus, often with multiple sites, in which there are many older learners. Teachers, themselves, were aware of the demands of the college environment but suggested that this supported the development of the young people.

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

The students themselves seemed to respond to this well and welcomed the more adult approach.

> "Well, I liked school, but I do prefer college because you get treated more of a kid at school. College is better you seem more like an adult, more mature when you're in college than in school." (Student)

This sense of a more adult environment meant that some students changed their approach to learning and described how it made you "Definitely more focused, more mature. Instead of wanting to mess around, you want to get on with the work and get your life sorted."

There was a perception from former students and parents that treating students as adults and being given freedom of choice encouraged self-reflection. For example, former students shared

that having the option to spend free periods as they liked, whether leaving campus or socialising with friends, also motivated them to complete their college work.

> "And I feel the college gives you the ropes of your own life and you decide what to do. And I think that's a better reflection of what adult life is like...Unlike in sixth forms where you're forced, but when you're out of the sixth form in uni, nobody will force you... You will have to force yourself. So I think college teaches you really well to force yourself to do something." (Former student)

A freer environment

Students felt that college was a more positive environment for them and one that they felt comfortable in while learning.

> "With me, it was just really getting my qualifications in a nice, comfortable area that I enjoyed spending time learning. Just spending time and getting my qualifications. It's a nice, enjoyable place." (Student)

One former student described the extra efforts teachers made to ensure that EHE students feel as though they belong.

> "There was a lot of instances of making sure that the college space was kind of available to me, the library and things like that and just generally making it seem less like oh, you're just a temporary student here. You're not an officially student here."

Students made frequent comments about feeling under less pressure in college compared to the stress that they felt before going to school and they also appreciated the allowances made if they were having a "bad" day:

> "It's just so different in the sense that everybody's human. There's no teacher-student, sort of, conflict in a way. I never felt like I was held under any obligation to be absolutely 100% every day. I was allowed to have a bad day but you're not allowed that in school." (Student)

Students themselves realised that many of their peers had also had difficult experiences in school but felt that everyone was welcomed in college.

> "Because even though we're all different, we all kind of connect in a way that we've both come back from a school, or being homeschooled, and we didn't get treated the best. So in a way we all have that deeper connection there, which makes it a more comfortable environment when it comes to students, and as well with the teachers, they're very understanding of why we're here, so as well, that kind of contributes to that as well." (Student)

Summary

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. Throughout the lesson observations and the interviews there was a strong focus on practical activities and how these were linked to more technical learning.

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 who acknowledged that young people learn in different ways, and how teachers tailored the approach to teaching and learning. This was also commented on by parents and former students.

3.6. Pastoral/student support

3.6.1. The centrality of pastoral care, wellbeing 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 and a responsibility of all staff. Dedicated roles included personal tutors, SENCO's, attendance officers, wellbeing officers, inclusion practitioners, teaching assistants and counsellors. In some colleges these were staff from the college pastoral teams who had received training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in dealing with 14 to 16-year-olds. Other colleges, particularly those with large numbers of learners, had dedicated roles for this provision some of which were newly created to meet specific needs of learners, for example a family worker.

Given the high level of vulnerable learners, a strong emphasis on wellbeing and mental health was not unexpected:

> "We have a wellbeing mentor… for all our students… We have recently taken on a further wellbeing mentor to support our school infill students… in terms of communication with schools and then with parents, and then with students themselves." (Lead)

The impact of a wellbeing mentor could be a significant factor in supporting a learner to settle and thrive in college. One learner who was autistic and found that college could be a bit overwhelming at times explained how a mentor had helped:

> "And I've also had a wellbeing tutorial with a welfare mentor each week. Recently they turned monthly meetings due to exams. It's kind of like almost therapy, not quite therapy, but he just sits down, ask me how I've been, what's been going on, what's made me stressed recently. And if I if it can do anything to help it, which has been really helpful." (Student)

Not every college had a 'named' wellbeing post, but provision for wellbeing was embedded into other staff roles and was often extensive. In one 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." (Lead)

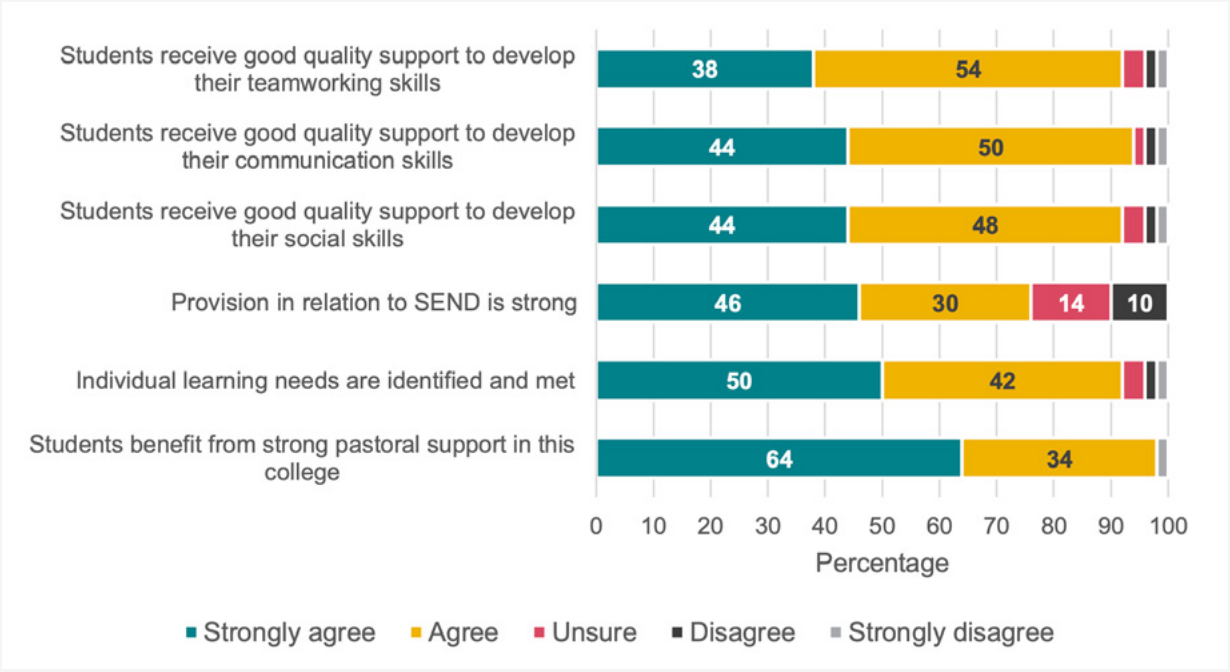
Some learners spoke about their own wellbeing and mental health, often comparing the college environment favourably with their previous schools:

> "I feel like college is better, like for people with mental health, I would recommend them to come to college. Because it's better than school. Because school made my mental health go through the roof. [Lots of echoes of yes from the other students.] Yeah, my mental health was bad in school, it was terrible." (Student)

Favourable comparisons with school did not only apply to those who said they'd had mental health issues, there was a strong sense in the interviews that a key difference at college was "a lot less pressure so I feel that improves your mental health".

The survey data echoed responses from the interviewees about the importance of pastoral support (see Figure 3.13) 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 3.13: Staff perceptions of the quality of support received by students



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

Several Leads 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 behaviour management experts." (Lead)

3.6.2. The importance of relationships and friendships

Creating an environment that supported relationship building was given high importance in the colleges, and the sharing of pastoral responsibilities recognised that a learner might bond with any member of staff:

> "If they've got pastoral issues, it's whoever makes that connection with whichever other member of staff. In practice that means all of our roles are pastoral to a certain extent depending on which member of staff the learner connects with and that is the beauty of [college name] that's our approach really." (Support staff)

Regardless of whether a learner felt they had any wellbeing or mental health needs, it was apparent that learners were building relationships that would make it easy to ask for help if they needed it.

> "They don't just talk and help you just only about the school work they'll talk to you about other things as well, you can have a conversation with them." (Student)

The building of relationships was often supported by the physical environment, particularly when there was dedicated space for learners that was less busy, quieter, with fewer people, all of whom were familiar. In one college where the provision had its own campus and permanent full time staff everyone rapidly got to know everyone else, and this was noted by learners and parents:

> "Another thing that makes this place stand out is the way the students develop such good relationships with all of the staff, it's not just the teachers and support staff but everyone – even the school cook knows every one of them as an individual." (Parent)

A central theme that emerged from the learner groups was the important role of friendship, and the college environment was frequently praised for making it easy to make friends.

> "Coming here I don't feel scared the way that I did in mainstream and that's one of the things that has made it easier to make friends here. At school I just tried to keep away from people." (Student)

One learner gave a thoughtful comparison of school versus college friendships that was enthusiastically endorsed by his peers in the interview:

> "When you're in mainstream school you've got all your friends right, but when you come here and you make friends here, you realise who your actual friends are... All of us here we treat each other like actual pals, like family... In mainstream school it's different. They'll say they're your friend and the next minute they'll be talking about you behind your back." (Student)

3.6.3. External support and access to funding

External support for wellbeing 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 provision. However, colleges acknowledged that the level of funding for 14 to 16-year-olds 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 these learners meant that these young people inevitably had a reduced offer:

> "Somebody comes from a school, they're on the full study programme. 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." (Lead)

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." (Lead)

Parents of EHE learners also referred to the perceived injustice of having to bear so many additional costs in addition to the home education itself:

> "From a government perspective I think the funding for these learners needs to be looked at. For example, it doesn't seem fair that parents have to pay for some of the GCSE exams. And finding private exam centres where they can take a GCSE can easily involve travelling hundreds of miles." (Parent)

3.6.4. 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 the 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. However, 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." (Lead)

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 16-year-olds 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." (Lead)

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." (Lead)

Some practical applications, such as having coloured lanyards that identified the students, were common, though not universal. An alternative could be provided using ID cards where a college had entry and exit barriers.

3.6.5. Achieving a balance between supporting and 'managing' learners

The emphasis on treating all learners as individuals was an integral part of the college experience. Learners appreciated this, particularly those with needs that had not been supported at school:

> "I think the teachers are very understanding of us so all of the teachers know that I have autism and I get help and understanding of that here. I had anger issues when I came here because, well, I would sometimes have to go out of the classroom and calm down. People have definitely noticed a change in me." (Student)

Some students arrived at college with a record of 'bad behaviour' at their school and the interviews provided many examples of the standard response – being placed in isolation. The college response to such issues was dramatically different, with the focus being on keeping learners in the classroom, not removing them. In one interview a learner who acknowledged some behavioural issues explained how at their mainstream school if you did something bad "they would never let go of it", but said that college was quite different:

> "Here they say that every day's a fresh day, so you can start again and that's how it gets better." (Student)

The phrase "every day's a fresh day" was used repeatedly across the colleges by learners and by staff.

> "And I always say, tomorrow's another day, we go again, we try again. And you just have to have that attitude. There has to be another chance, doesn't there? I always say to them 'I'm not looking for a perfect journey, I'm looking for those small progress steps that move you along the road'. You can't expect them to be perfect, it'd be crazy to do that, but I think as long as you're realistic and you know there will be bad days then it's absolutely fine". (Lead)

This attitude conveyed a message of hope and underpinned many success stories. There were of course some learners who needed many "fresh starts" and this could create challenges for staff in reconciling the continuing needs of a tiny minority with those of the majority who had absorbed the adult behaviour of the college. One Lead made an interesting comment that some of their learners, having developed very high standards of behaviour, might now feel that the staff were sometimes "too forgiving" with a learner who had not yet reached this stage. In fact, there were three colleges where a focus group did touch on the topic of "bad behaviour" and whether people should not be given "too many chances". From a staff perspective, of course, "giving chances" was the key to success and progression, and it would inevitably take some longer than others. That colleges were achieving this balance between supporting learners and managing their behaviour was a testament to the successful integration of pastoral and academic functions.

3.6.6. Working with parents and carers

The relationship with parents and carers was of a very different kind than had been experienced in mainstream school. This was confirmed by staff, learners and parents themselves:

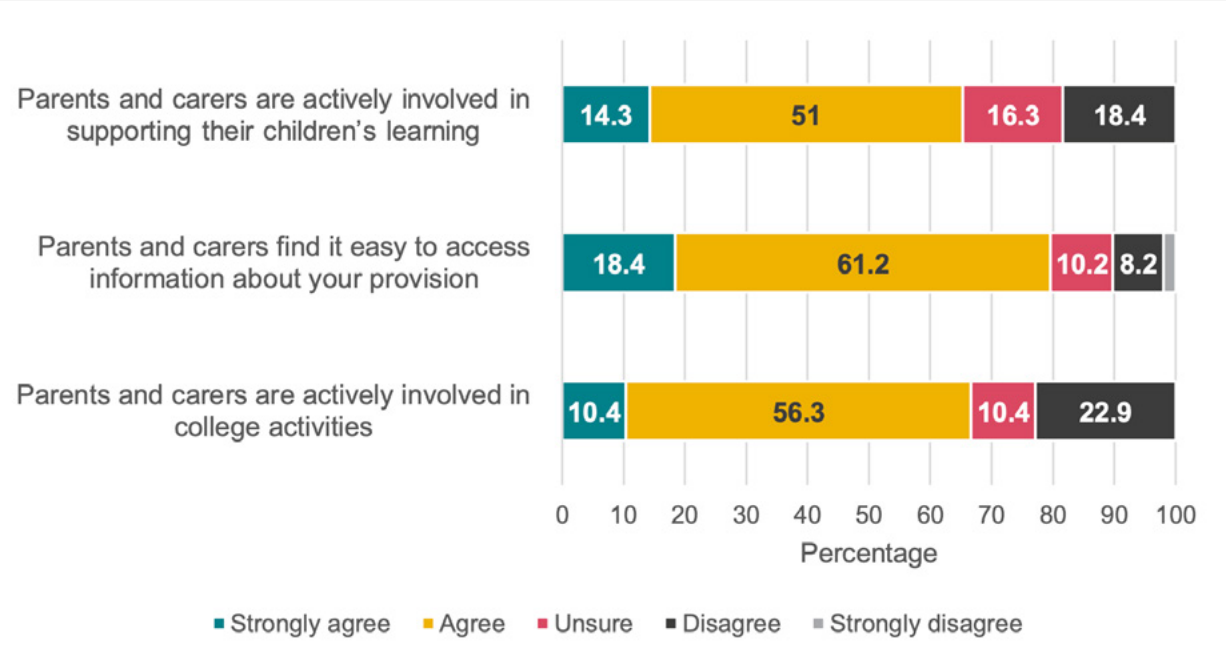
> "Here, they are so responsive to anything we ask or feel. The communication is great, they ring me if they need to know anything or tell me anything – rather than me having to chase them. The staff here are kind, they are supportive, and they treat the students as young adults right from the start." (Parent)

Engagement with parents, carers, or even families was given high priority and it was not only about telling, listening – to learners and parents – was important too, as one learning mentor explained:

> "We use de-escalation and restorative justice kind of approaches. It's often case by case as well. It's just you have to sit, listen and see what they need. And then you build a picture by trying to talk with home. We try to be the best connection with them. I'm on first name basis with a few mums and dads. It's nice and I call up and I go, oh this and that and I'm their friends. And then we just work as a team."

Although parental engagement was often said to be strong, 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 positive with over 65% strongly agreeing or agreeing that parents and carers were actively involved in supporting their child's learning and were actively involved in college activities (see Figure 3.14).

Figure 3.14: Staff perceptions of how parents and carers engage with college



Source: Survey data. 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.

When things were working well, there was an emphasis on having mechanisms for contact with parents that worked both ways.

> "We also have a parent app as well... 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." (Lead)

The importance and value of positive communications that provided parents with good news was frequently emphasised: "If there's a good comment on ProMonitor[3] I always try and make sure I send that to parents so that they're getting good as well as negative" (Lead). Learners were generally positive about the high degree of contact between parents and college:

> "Yeah, they've [parents] been involved a lot, but the 14 to 16 encourages us to be treated more like adults, so trying to get us to do it ourselves, but they'll also still message and tell your parents what's going on so they can still feel involved in like the school life." (Student)

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. 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, the main parental contact was 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.

3. ProMonitor is a learner monitoring system that enables the tracking of learner progress.

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.

3.6.7. Communication with schools

Interviews with parents confirmed the value they placed on being kept informed by the college, but those whose child was in AP provision also needed communication with their school, which it seemed may not be of the same standard as the college communications:

> "There's a lot of support at college, and the teachers are kind to him, and also [14 to 16 coordinator] is always texting to say that such and such a person has praised him today... I've not heard anything from the school, even though he has to go to school on Tuesdays, which he absolutely hates." (Parent)

When a college had AP learners there would of necessity be ongoing contact between college staff and the 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. (Lead)

If AP learners attended college for just a few hours a week the focus of contact might just be monitoring of attendance and the immediate reporting of any absences. 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.

3.6.8. The impact of Covid-19

The learners had been in Years 7 and 8, or 8 and 9, when the Covid lockdowns occurred. Covid was not a prominent topic in the student interviews, but some learners did speak about Covid in the context of the pandemic having triggered a move into college.

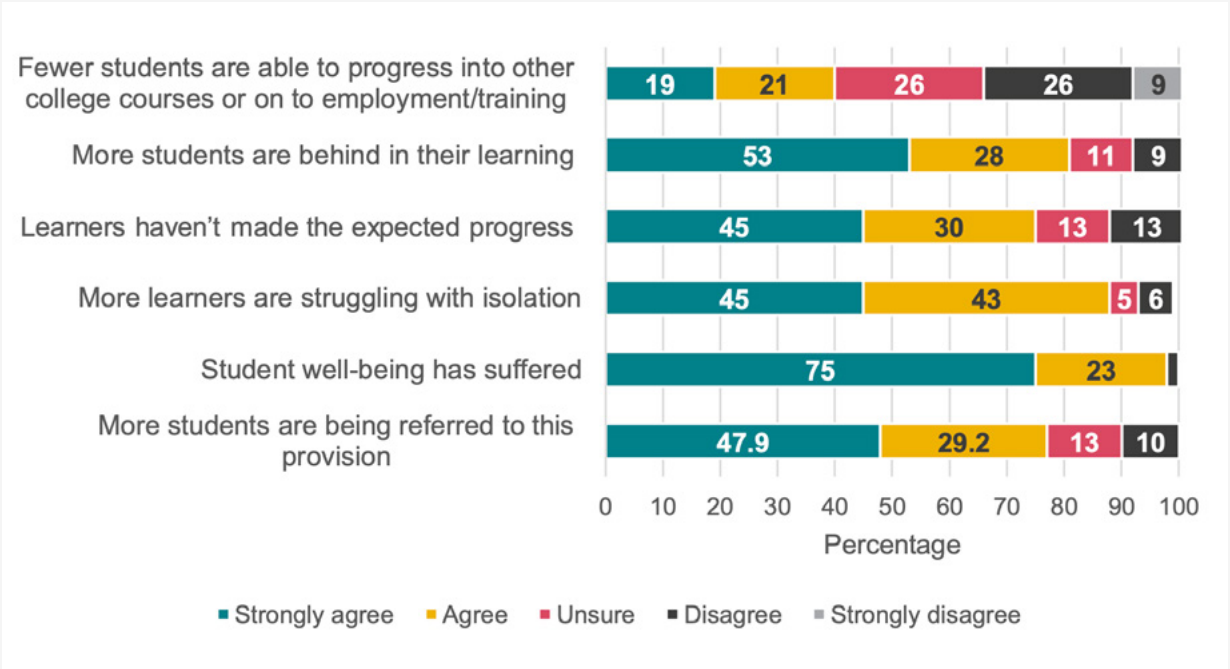
> "Because of the pandemic there were suddenly a lot of limitations due to the lockdowns, things like not being able to have tutors into my home, and I was really just teaching myself from books and that started to definitely affect my mental health." (Student)

Another learner who was already unhappy in mainstream stream school said that problems had intensified with the onset of the pandemic, eventually leading to full time college.

Amongst staff there was a clear sense of the lasting impact of Covid and this was evident in the survey. Respondents perceived that student wellbeing 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 3.15) and how students were seen to be behind in their learning (81% strongly agreeing or agreeing).

Figure 3.15: Staff perceptions of the impact on Covid-19 on their students



Source: Survey data. 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.

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 were the loss of social skills and how students had also missed the additional support systems available when at college. There were reports too about the impact of Covid on recent applicants, with greater numbers presenting with mental health needs, anxiety and wellbeing 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.

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. There were suggestions though of the positive contribution that college provision could make for these learners that would transcend the impact of the pandemic.

Summary

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 as part of pastoral roles in addition to external support from LAs and other organisations. 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.

The impact of Covid-19 on learners was highlighted in the survey. Respondents perceived that student wellbeing had suffered; learners had struggled with isolation and were behind in their learning. The student interviews confirmed that some young people had experienced Covid-related anxiety that could trigger a move into college.

3.7. Student development and progression

3.7.1. Student progression post-16

The progression data is based on year 11s matched into FE (including colleges and independent training providers (ITPs)) for the following year. For the period 2016/17 to 2020/21 75% or more learners progressed to post-16 rising to a peak of 81% in 2020/21. The overall progression rate of 81% in 2020/21 was lower than that for all year 11 students in state funded mainstream schools in England which was 94.1% in the same year (DfE, 2024b). It is though important to recognise that many of the students who are the focus of this research had experienced challenges in the earlier parts of their educational journey and some had had periods of disrupted education. It was not possible to follow up on students who were not in college or ITP ILR data after they left college, however, NPD data for 2016/17 to 2019/20 indicated that an additional 4% and 9% of the 14 to 16-year-old college students progressed into school over the timeframe of the project.

Across AP, DE and EHE post-16 progression was consistent over the five-year period at 80% or over for each academic year 2016/17 to 2020/21 (see Table 3.29). AP no NPD showed a different trend with a substantial rise in progression from 2019/20 to 2020/21. In the final year of the available data AP no NPD learners are in line with AP, DE and EHE albeit a few percentage points lower. This might suggest that the profile of AP no NPD students has changed during the five-year period. Note the actual number of AP no NPD students is small and decreased substantially over this period.

Table 3.29: Progression to FE across all provision types

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
AP	83%	82%	81%	80%	81%
AP no NPD	58%	48%	50%	62%	78%
DE	85%	85%	87%	86%	84%
EHE	81%	80%	80%	80%	81%

Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

National progression data for AP in 2020/21 was 66.5% to sustained destinations compared with around 80% for both AP and AP no NPD students studying in colleges. College data indicates a DE progression rate of 84%, comparatively higher than DfE data of 74.3% for the same group in 2020/21 (DfE, 2024b).

3.7.2. Progression into FE (ILR Providers) – highest level of study

Looking across all students who had progressed into FE , most were studying at Level 2: an increase from 2016/17 to 2020/21 (see Table 3.30). This was due to the decrease in students studying at Level 1 from 23% in 2016/17 to 13% in 2020/21. For learners progressing to Level 3+ this has broadly been 20% of the students although with some variation over time. Progression into apprenticeships was fairly consistent although with dips in 2018/19 and 2019/20. This contrasted with overall apprenticeship starts for all young people in England which declined in the same time period (DfE, 2022a). There had been little change in those studying at Entry Level – broadly 10% of students over the five years.

Table 3.30: Progression into FE – highest level of study 2016/17 to 2020/21

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Entry Level	10%	10%	10%	9%	9%
Level 1	23%	19%	20%	16%	13%
Level 2	39%	44%	46%	49%	48%
Level 3+	18%	18%	16%	20%	22%
Apprenticeship*	10%	10%	8%	7%	9%

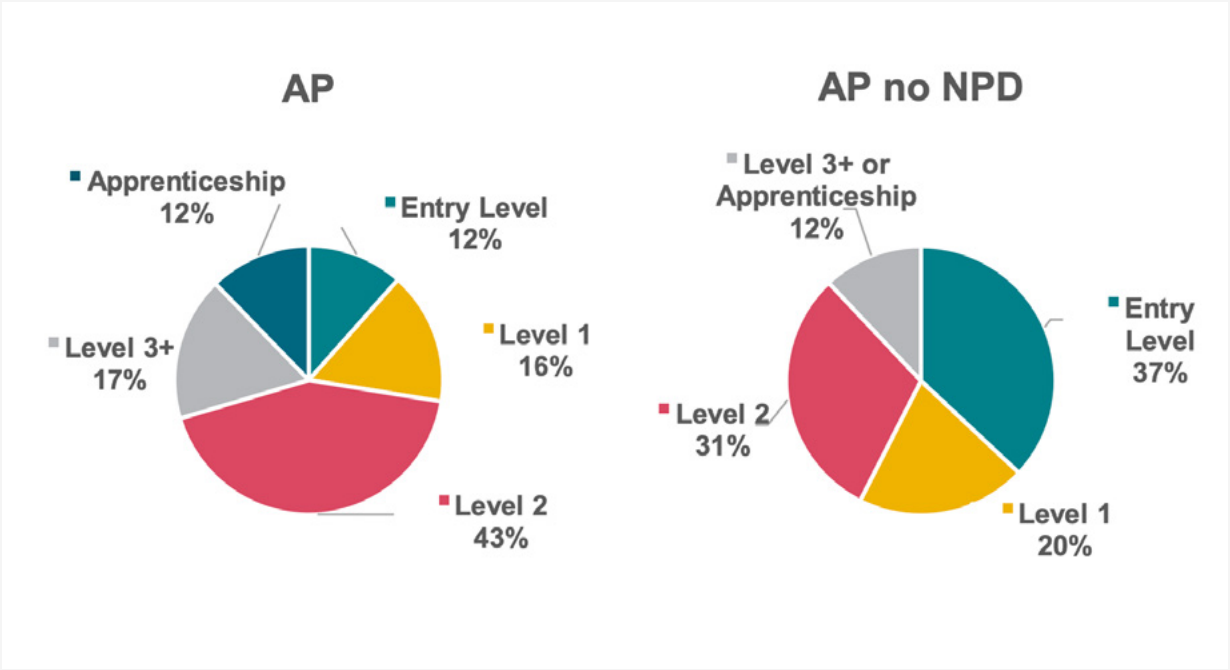
Source: Linked NPD / ILR data. * While the level is not known, it is likely to be intermediate (Level 2).

Level of study data for all 16- and 17-year-old students in England indicates that 67.9% were studying at Level 3, 11.8% at Level 2 and 4% at Level 1 and below (DfE, 2022b). However, this data will include students at 17 who have progressed to Level 3 from Level 2 at 16 and so should be considered with caution when comparing against ILR data for 16-year-olds only.

Progression within AP, DE and EHE remained fairly stable over the period 2016/17 to 2020/21. The exception was AP no NPD where more students were progressing to Entry Level than Level 1. However, progression across provision types in 2022/21 shows clear differences, possibly based on initial starting points and previous educational experience.

Most AP students progressed to Level 2 with almost equal numbers progressing to Level 1 (16%) and Level 3 (17%), and equal numbers progressing to apprenticeship or Entry Level (12% respectively). Many more AP no NPD students progressed to Entry Level (37%) (see Figure 3.16).

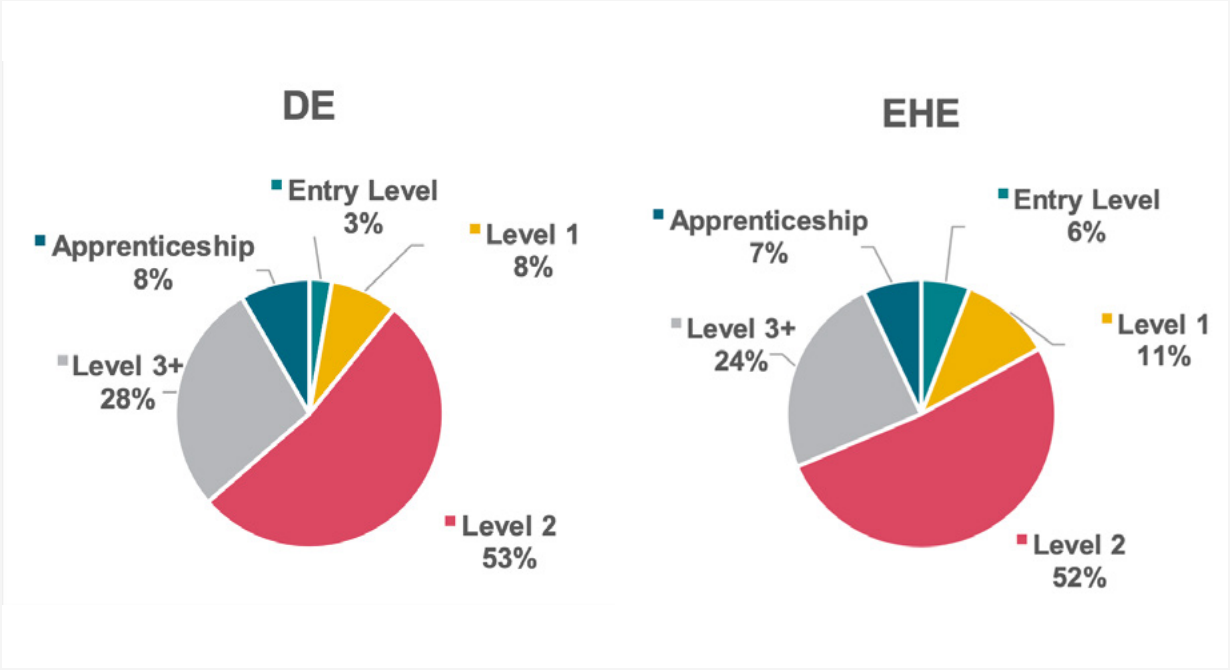
Figure 3.16: AP and AP no NPD progression post-16



Source: Linked NPD/ILR data

Most DE students progressed to Level 2 (53%) or Level 3 (28%). This was similar for EHE students (52% and 24% respectively) (see Figure 3.17).

Figure 3.17: DE and EHE progression post-16



Source: Linked NPD/ILR data

Good progression rates were confirmed through staff interviews, with many staff members reporting that between 85%-100% of their learners progress successfully. One Lead highlighted a 99% progression rate, with only one student unaccounted for due to moving internationally.

> "Ninety-nine per cent have gone to a positive destination. So that could be Level 2, Level 3. It could be [same college], other local colleges. It could be an apprenticeship, absolute mix. That 1% is a young person actually went back to Belgium... and we just don't know where they are." (Lead)

In the survey transition to FE emerged as the most common progression pathway. 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), 68% of respondents reported similar progression rates, while 86% reported this for DE (N=7).

Among interviewees, students typically advanced to the next level in their technical or vocational subjects or enrolled in A Levels. There was a broad agreement from teachers that the vocational options available at college gave students a head start in gaining experience and that frequently the qualifications achieved during the 14 to 16 provision enabled them to progress to higher-level courses than those typically available to students starting at age 16. As one Lead noted, students in the engineering vocational option were "two years ahead" of those starting at Level 1 at age 16, allowing them to enter the workforce sooner.

> "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." (Lead)

This was not just about the technical knowledge gained but also about behaviours expected in college and the workplace.

> "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." (Lead)

Staff 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" (Lead).

Students also felt that their vocational experience made them more likely to secure a place in a post-16 vocational course at the college.

> "I think being here – and if this is one of your personal goals – I think they'll give you a place. Because we've already done construction I think you'll get a place, especially if you're good they'll take you easily and they might get you an apprenticeship." (Student)

In some colleges, students were guaranteed a place post 16. which was particularly valued by students across all types of provision. They were also aware of the requirements to progress to the next stage, including good behaviour and adherence to college policies.

Among the small number of former students interviewed, all continued their education at the same college where they completed their 14 to 16 provision. One former student who initially enrolled at a different college returned after just one week, citing a lack of diversity and an unwelcoming environment as reasons for their discomfort.

> "I actually did go to another college, and I was like, no. And I came back here in the first week...I would say they weren't like welcoming at all...And yeah, it wasn't really diverse. So, I didn't feel as comfortable as being here." (Former student)

Most of the former students interviewed were currently pursuing three A Levels, with choices including art, biology, business, chemistry, economics, English literature, film studies, law, maths, physics, politics, psychology, sociology and Spanish. Their decision to stay at college for A Levels was influenced by their enjoyment of the subjects offered, the broader range of subjects compared to other local schools, and the belief that studying here would lead to better post-16 opportunities, such as university admission and career-specific courses. These former students also appreciated the convenience of the college's location and the chance to remain in education with friends. One former student noted that their decision to pursue A Levels was largely influenced by parental expectations and others chose subjects that they liked.

Former students pursuing A Levels expressed an interest in apprenticeships, particularly degree apprenticeships, or planned to attend university in fields like engineering, genetics, and medicine. Their future career goals influenced these decisions, including one former student who aspires to become an anaesthesiologist.

Some former students transitioned to post-16 vocational courses, for example one enrolled at Level 3 in performing arts, media, and travel and tourism, and another on a virtual reality undergraduate course. One former student completed undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and now works part-time as a library assistant at the college, while another expressed interest in higher education at university.

> "I went on to do a Level 3 course in performing arts... And then I found myself in a really great environment with the performing arts group. And then that led me on to go into university where I did degree and then I did my masters and then eventually came here to work." (Former student)

3.7.3. Careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG)

As with enrichment, students had access to the wider college CEIAG teams and career events that are delivered for all students such as careers fairs. CEIAG teams offered one-to-one appointments and often arranged sessions with post-16 course teachers to support student progress. Some students benefited from transition and progression mentors assigned to specific subject areas in college.

In addition to wider college CEIAG support, the staff provided additional assistance through presentations and workshops on potential career paths. They also provided more general support such as connecting subjects to different career options.

> "The careers staff came to our class and showed us the type of thing we could do as a career and what we would need for that, such as if we go for sciences, what career might we have with those subjects, or if we wanted engineering, what subjects would we need to have done." (Student)

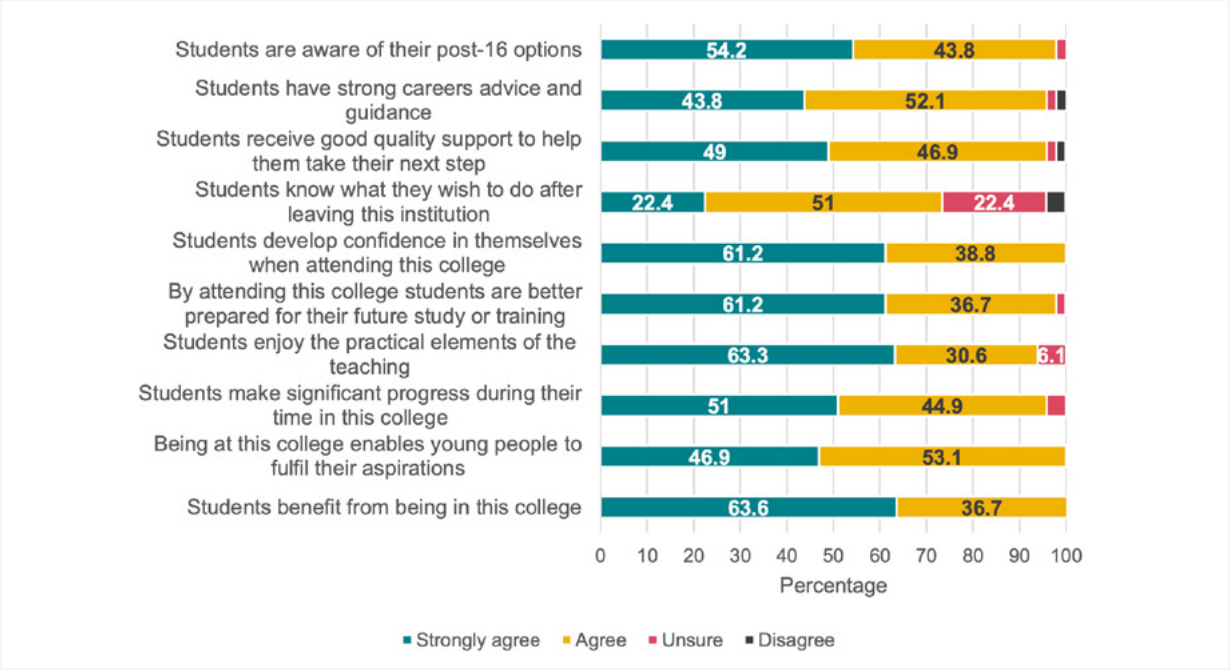
In one college for instance, the one-to-one tutorials in Year 11 focused on next steps, with summer workshops introduced to ease the transition to post-16 education. Another college spoke of how in Year 11 they worked with tutor groups together with the IAG and the college and also brought in lots of businesses to talk to them in addition to allocating time for students to go out into the post-16:

> "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." (Lead)

Many current students had already identified their desired career paths and made plans for their post-16 transition. For example, one young woman was pursuing motor mechanics with the ambition to work in a "garage that doesn't discriminate against women" and another student studying hair and beauty had decided on being a special-effects make-up artist having found about this in a careers session. Other students were moving to apprenticeships.

> "I've already got an apprenticeship offered to me for when I finish here. It started with my work experience which went really well. And then the company asked if I could do one day a week with them for year 11, so that's what I've been doing all this year." (Student)

Figure 3.18: Staff perceptions of the support offered to students in college and how they develop



Source: Survey data. 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.

Data from the survey provided evidence to support the claims made about the quality of the careers advice and guidance and the support offered to students in their progression to post-16 (see Figure 3.18).

3.7.4. Outcomes and impacts

Students and former students spoke about how they felt their time in college had contributed to their academic and personal development. This was also seen in the survey data where 100% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that students benefit from being in this college, that students develop confidence in themselves when attending the college and that college enables young people to fulfil their aspirations (see Figure 3.18).

Essential life skills

Students perceived that they had developed essential life skills, such as time management, independence, communication, responsibility, and organisation, through their experiences of being in college. Former students highlighted how these skills facilitated their transition to different stages in their education. For example, a former student recalled that the pre-GCSE year at the start of college helped them integrate back into education, adapting to academic deadlines and punctuality. Another former student found that the revision techniques learned during GCSEs made the shift to independent study at A level more manageable.

Teachers and parents also recognised the importance of these skills for transitioning post 16, that students may not have gained in mainstream school.

> "That's it. It's real-life skills with the vocational choices. It means they have the basics when they come to college at 16." (Parent)

Academic and vocational skills

Students perceived that they were making progress in their academic and vocational subjects which was often seen through increased interest and aptitude in their subjects. For example, students noted improvements in English and maths skills and greater enjoyment in their studies.

> "My family thinks it's a great improvement from the school I was at previously and they think my grades have shot up and I am more myself and actually enjoy the things I do more." (Student)

As seen elsewhere in the report (see section 3.4), students felt that the vocational pathways offered in college had helped prepare them for work. For example, a learner studying animal care appreciated the practical and essential skills gained for working with animals. However, some students felt that certain course contents, particularly in digital media, did not fully align with industry requirements. Former students were aware that college offered different courses to those available in mainstream and how this had influenced their future directions.

> "I'm not sure if I'd have made the same choices or done the same things if I'd been in mainstream school." (Former student)

For many new arrivals the college provision made a huge difference to their educational trajectories.

> "When I came to this country I was 17, so I was past my GCSE age. So if I went to any normal mainstream school, I probably wouldn't have any opportunity to do my GCSE then and to do my A-levels. But the 14 to 16 department gave me that opportunity." (Former student)

Parents also recognised the programme's role in enabling their children to achieve their career goals, including successful apprenticeships and employment.

> "[My child] would not have got that job in a million years, that apprenticeship, had he not come here." (Parent)

Personal development

Students and former students also commented on their personal development in college including maturity, social skills, confidence, and self-esteem. Among the small number of former students interviewed, this personal growth often translated into heightened aspirations and a clearer vision for future goals.

> "When I first left school, when I first started college, I had no dream of going to university. I think I probably didn't even want to and then it's just growing me as a person I feel like I can actually achieve going to university whereas five or six years ago I probably couldn't have." (Former student)

One student attributed their change in perspective about their future to the diverse environment at college, noting that exposure to people from various backgrounds and careers broadened their outlook.

> "I think [college has changed the way I think about the future]. Just because I'm surrounded by more people from different parts of life and that do different things. It's opened up more options seeing what you are surrounded by." (Student)

Parents and carers also commented on the change in their children often noting a reduction in anxiety and an overall improvement in family wellbeing as their children began to thrive in their educational journey.

> "So when the student is happy, it trickles back into the family. Our family then can be happy, we can relax, we can do other things." (Parent)

Summary

Progression rates were good 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. Post-16 progression remained consistent across AP, DE and EHE, at 80% or higher across the five-year period. There was a notable increase in progression among AP no NPD students, rising from 62% in 2019/20 to 78% in 2020/21. Progression data for college-based AP students was well above that seen in AP nationally with an average of around 80%.

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% in 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 level profiles (see section 3.1.2) it was not surprising that progression patterns varied across AP, DE, and EHE.

Students benefited from access to the college's 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 many sections of 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.

3.8. The educational and community ecosystem

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

As outlined in section 3.2.4, new provisions were established to meet local needs. These initiatives were often prompted by discussions with LAs and schools. For instance, in one area, the college opted to establish DE provision to meet the needs of local learners, which also helped strengthen relationships with their local feeder schools. A particular concern of the LA was the need to reduce the number of permanent exclusions, and the college were keen to meet the needs of the local community.

In another area where the college worked with LAs, community groups and schools the increasing

number of students being electively home educated had been flagged as a concern. Hence the college had seen a role where they could "work alongside families who choose to educate at home in order to provide almost a tuition centre" (SMT).

In some instances, the LA had approached the college about setting up the provision in response to local need. In one example 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. It was often the case that the provision started off with a small cohort, which in some instances had gradually expanded over time due to increased demand.

3.8.2. Collaboration with the LA, schools and the community

Understandably collaboration with LAs, schools and the community varied across colleges, given the mixture of AP, DE and EHE provision, the intent of the provision, its size, the geographical location and surrounding educational offer. Also relevant was whether students came from multiple LAs or mostly from one, for example one college collaborated with five LAs and local schools, and at another college, different sites engaged with different LAs. It was clear that there was no one-size-fits-all approach, however, some general observations could be made about the educational ecosystem and partnerships.

Strong collaboration and relationships

Strong, collaborative partnerships between colleges and LAs were characterised by frequent contact and mutual support. Some LAs reported that regular visits and interactions helped them to foster a deeper understanding of the educational services provided. As a result, they were able to provide families with accurate information about available provisions, facilitating more informed and appropriate student placements.

For those with stronger collaboration and engagement, LAs played key roles in supporting provision at colleges, responding to local needs and ensuring that appropriate educational pathways were available for young people. This included being part of the admissions and referral processes where applications were managed by the LA via their portal or places arranged through involvement in the Fair Access Panel and behaviour panels. LAs also referred individual students to college.

Several LAs played a role in reviewing and standardising educational provisions for 14 to 16-year-olds, ensuring consistent standards were applied across all types of AP. One LA employed an Individual Alternative Education Plan Review for a college predominantly delivering AP, reviewing safeguarding procedures, risk assessments, and support plans every six weeks.

Some LAs also reviewed the education provided to EHE students both at home and in college. One LA reported engaging with EHE students from an early age to help identify future educational pathways, directing parents to appropriate resources, and providing support. Another LA had an attendance team dedicated to ensuring parents understand the requirements of home education. This also included managing young people's expectations and clarifying that college is not necessarily an easier option compared to mainstream school.

Where colleges maintained regular updates with LAs on student attendance and progress, both parties stayed informed about student needs and any emerging issues, enabling timely interventions. For example, one college felt that their LA was very responsive to the college's attendance updates and would contact EHE parents to encourage and emphasise the importance of attendance.

In EHE provision, colleges often spoke of close contact with the LA and their elective home education team whether in relation to referrals or 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." (Lead)

There were also instances of colleges having strong involvement from the local EHE community. Parents at one college emphasised the strong social and academic support, where like-minded parents regularly connect and provide strong curriculum support, including sharing valuable resources.

Several leads were part of Fair Access Panels 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 programmemes.

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.

Many interviewees also spoke of good relationships with schools, which in some instances had been in place for a long time.

> "And I think that's partly to do with the relationships we've built up with the schools. I think you need to create that sort of strong relationship to give these young people the opportunity." (Governor)

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 another 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.

In certain cases, schools are involved in the off-rolling process for EHE students. For example, one LA reported that where a parent/carer chooses home education, they will meet with the young person and the school to discuss next steps. Another LA suggested that a rise in students being off-rolled is a result of schools becoming more aware of alternative options for young people.

> "We have seen an increase in the number of young people coming off school rolls but that's not all due to Covid, it's partly that schools have become more aware of the options for their learners." (LA)

Questions were raised about whether parents and students are making fully informed decisions regarding off-rolling and home education. One Lead questioned whether parents and carers were fully aware of the requirement to supplement college education with home education. This was echoed by a LA representative.

Mixed collaboration and relationships

Some colleges experienced mixed relationships with LAs and schools which mainly stemmed from poor communication or minimal involvement. Where colleges worked across multiple LAs, some Leads expressed much greater involvement from one LA than others whereby one LA was highly responsive in comparison to another where overall feedback was sporadic, or where LAs providing little to no communication.

The same could be true of schools with Leads commenting on the varied quality of relationships with schools which might work well with some and less well with others. One college worked with 60% of schools in the area in which there was no similar part-time AP. 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. Lack of information from schools was commented by on several Leads. Where colleges worked across different boroughs this brought additional work due to different LAs having different systems and procedures.

It should be noted that a minority of colleges, usually DE, deliberately had little involvement with local schools or the LA.

3.8.3. Student travel pattern

The analysis of the linked NPD-ILR data enabled travel distances to be explored over time. Over the period 2016/17 to 2020/21 the average distance in miles remained broadly constant between 5.3 and 5.6 miles. Few students lived near to college. While the percentages across the cohort decrease in relation to distance this represents a considerable number of students. Looking at the 2020/21 data alone, over 1,230 (16%) students are travelling over 10 miles to college – a round trip of over 20 miles each day. For 11 to 16-year-olds travelling to secondary school the average trip length in miles to school between 2016 and 2021 are set out in Table 3.31.

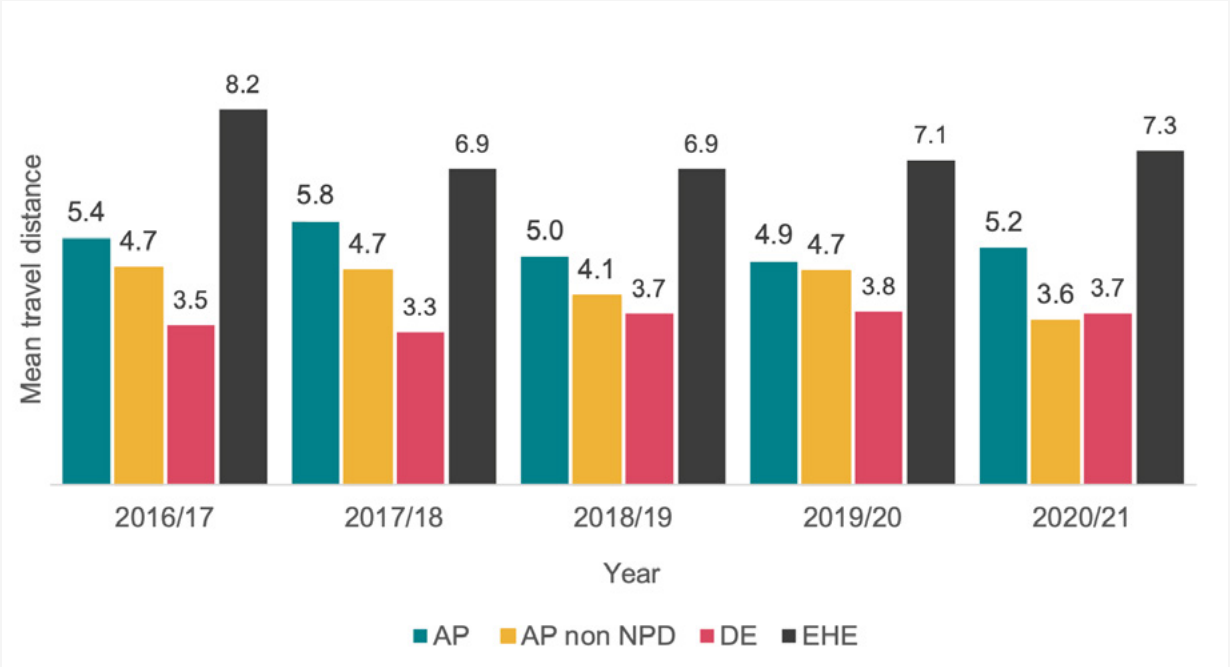
Table 3.31: Average trip length to secondary school aged 11 to 16 2016 to 2021

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	2021*
Average trip length in miles	3.2	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.0	3.4

Source: National Travel Study Factsheets. * Data from 2020 to 2021 need to be interpreted with care due to changes in the methodology of data collection and as a result of Covid-19 and resulting small sample sizes.

College students have further travel distances to college than their counterparts attending secondary school. This might be anticipated given that there are far fewer FE colleges than mainstream secondary schools in England, however, when looking at AP, DE and EHE in turn a different pattern emerges (see Figure 3.19). DE students are consistently travelling shorter distances to college than EHE and AP with EHE students travelling longer distances to college than other groups of learners. Noteworthy is that the mean distance for DE students is more closely aligned with that of mainstream students possibly because these students only make a decision to study at college if the provision is accessible.

Figure 3.19: Mean travel distances in miles across different groups



Source: Linked NPD / ILR data

The variability of travel times was anticipated and acknowledged by students and Leads during the interviews. The widening of catchment areas for EHE learners was noted by several interviewees. In one college set in a semi-rural location, learners were coming from wide distances including large cities and in another, students were coming from quite far away due to the lack of provision in the area. Parents too were driving large distances.

Among one group of AP and EHE learners who were taught together students commented on travelling for 15 minutes, 30 minutes, with one AP student travelling for an hour each way. Frequently AP and EHE students travelled for over an hour with one EHE student reporting travelling for up to one and a half hours each way to college – bus, train, bus. Travel distances were also influential when students were thinking about their next steps and wanted to study closer to home.

> "I want to get an apprenticeship, something in physiotherapy. Or if I don't do that I'll go to another college [part of the same large college group but another campus closer to home]. That's close to where I live" (Student)

3.8.4. Funding

Colleges identified funding as the most significant challenge when running 14 to 16 except for part-time infill students where this was less of an issue. The financial difficulties meant that in some instances colleges were drawing on funding from other college departments to sustain the provision and in other instances the funding levels meant that colleges who wished to could not grow the provision even when they were over-subscribed and having to turn potential students away.

> "We've turned a load of students away and while some of that is the correct decision, there are probably 30 of those that we would be able to help if we could just expand the provision and basically [for] financial reasons that's just not viable." (Lead)

Apparent in section 3.8.2 is that several colleges worked with multiple LAs who often had different approaches to and levels of funding which meant colleges were faced with the balancing act across their provision of meeting a perceived need for an alternative to mainstream within the local community and the financial viability of this.

> "So there's the balance of the community need and what's right for the community and these young people. And there's the other side of it, actually getting the money from the authority to fund it in a way to the right standards is really a challenge." (SMT)

There were also instances where aspects of the provision had already been reduced due to withdrawal of LA funding, for example provision for new arrivals.

> "We used to have a really nice provision for ESOL learners, so English as a second language. But that was partly funded through the Fair Access Panels across the country. It was partly funded by us and partly funded by the local authority. The local authority pulled that funding, so we had to close it. So that was designed for move to country, so either accompanied or unaccompanied pre-16." (Lead)

Turning to the young people themselves, Leads and governors often commented on how the pastoral and support needs for these learners were often far greater than for their post-16 students thereby increasing costs. As noted earlier in the report some colleges were providing free lunches to students not eligible for FSM and offering snacks and food through the day given the family circumstances. In addition, funding versus rising costs meant that paying for enrichment activities was becoming more and more challenging since this was not something that all parents could afford.

> "Just as an example, to get them to see Macbeth, even though it's only local, … we had to set them activities to do, to work from home in the morning so they can make their own way there. We met there in the afternoon because we can't afford to take them there." (Lead)

Interviewees also discussed the potential consequences and impact on the young people if further cuts were made and provision closed. These were seen to be bleak.

> "And I can tell you from working with the children directly for so long, 90% would be NEET because they're at home, they're not attending college or they're not attending schools. They're completely invisible to a system…. And I think that's part of our strategy as a college, isn't it, although, at the end of the year we're looking at finances. (Lead)."

One participant suggested a cost-benefit analysis of the short-term costs versus the longer-term gains since while the immediate cost per student may seem high, investing in these student's education could improve their circumstances and ultimately reduce public service costs. While funding was seen as a challenge across AP, DE and EHE, specific concerns were highlighted more in one type of provision than others.

Alternative Provision

AP must have flexible start dates to meet the needs of students throughout KS4. As one college

explained, places are funded by the school only once the students has been referred. This can mean that at the beginning of the college year the provision is operating with fewer students and therefore insufficient funding:

> "So what they will do, they will make a referral. We will say it's £XX or whatever it is per student or £XX per day. But that payment will start from the day they start with us. If they don't come, we don't get any funding. So then how do you have a provision in place for a child who might hypothetically start with you at some point in the year, and then you've got all these resources and financial equipment? It's not just the people. There's also other things involved, the vocational subjects you're going to put in place. How can you financially make that viable?" (Lead).

Direct Entry

As set out in section 1.2 DE students are funded at the same rate as 16 to 18-year-olds, but in line with schools, colleges allocate 25 hours a week teaching for 14 to 16-year-olds rather than the typical 16 hours a week post-16. While DE students are eligible for pupil premium, funding is still not in line with school funding for KS4 students:

> "So there's a huge disparity between what schools are getting. And ...some of these are some of the most vulnerable, high-risk learners across the region. So they are more expensive to teach, yet we're getting paid less." (Lead)

To address the funding shortfall, one college partnered with local schools which agreed to pay a top-up to cover additional costs. Later the LA stepped in to fund two places for each school to prevent disparities in access whereby schools that had more money brought all the places and those schools that lacked funding would not have been able to get any places and therefore would have a higher exclusion rate. Schools can pay for more places themselves.

Electively home educated

Parents assume full financial responsibility if they educate their children at home and access to any form of additional support is limited. In part it was felt that this is because EHE don't fit into the funding methodology.

> "You can't give them the discretionary 16 to 18 bursary to meet their financial needs because they're not old enough, they're not entitled to the college equivalent of free school meals because they're not old enough. And also if they need additional learning class support it's very difficult to actually access that ... funding for these learners." (SMT)

Noted earlier in the report is that EHE are not eligible for travel bursaries either.

3.8.5. Working with employers

Employer engagement with enrichment activities and work experience was considered in section 3.4.6 on the curriculum where it was also noted that most students were undertaking vocational qualifications as part of their programmeme of study and hence employer engagement was frequently linked to the curriculum. This section therefore looks at wider opportunities for staff and students to engage with employers and the perspectives of employers themselves.

Employers typically provided career information, offered site visits and contributed as guest speakers.

> "I give them a workplace tour and then we'll do a Q&A. I talked to them a bit about the industry and some of the challenges that we face and then we'll do a Q&A where they put their questions to me...So I try and paint a picture of what it's like to work within our sector." (Employer)

Other activities included giving students mock interviews, supporting events and open evenings, conducting regular review meetings to evaluate activities and strengthen college connections, and providing mentoring and financial support. In one college, one employer delivered community projects, ambassador schemes and apprenticeships. In another college the employer focused on marginalised young people who need additional support, offering both one-to-one and group assistance both virtually and in-college. They helped students enrol in programmemes, use online planners, select activities and set goals. Activities offered ranged from gardening and horse riding to digital skills.

In some instances, employers were involved in the development of the curriculum.

> "We also do employer engagement through the year, so we have local enterprise informing our curriculum and telling us the sort of values that they want the sort of thing that they're interested in the employees that they get, we try to embed that into the employability lessons that we do." (SMT)

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." (Lead)

How employer engagement supports the young people

Where high levels of employer engagement could take place, Leads and survey respondents spoke of the perceived benefits for students.

> "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." (Lead)

> "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)

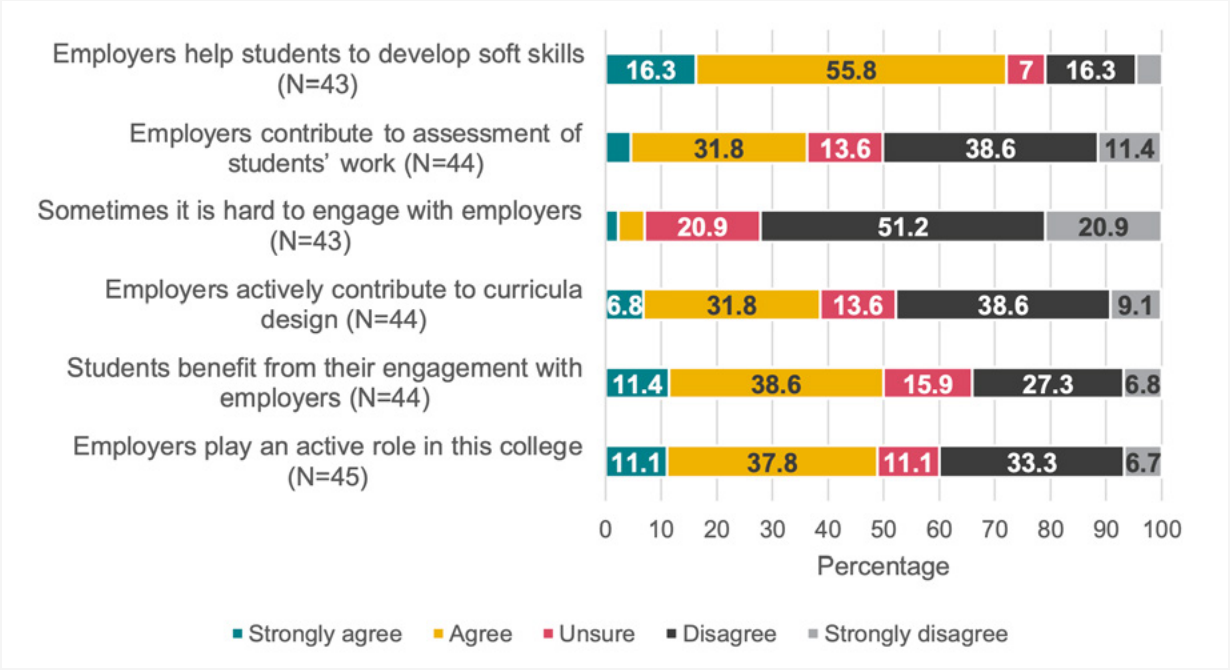
Employers emphasised the advantage of helping students connect their vocational training with their English and maths skills, illustrating how their academic studies are relevant to the world of work and felt that the opportunities provided gave students an insight into particular industries, saying "I think it really does shape that 14 to 16-year-old's outlook on careers". They also commented on the personal development of students such as confidence, communication, organisation, as well as their overall wellbeing.

> "With those young people you can see very sudden changes in their attitude, in their behaviour, in the way they approach everything." (Employer)

Also of interest was how employers felt that the education and exposure to vocational work helps

to break down stereotypes, such as the perception that construction is a sector for men.

Figure 3.20: Staff perceptions of employer engagement for 14 to 16-year-olds



Source: Survey data. Note: percentages less than 5% are not displayed.

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 3.20). However, survey responses were divided 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.

The value to employers

A mutual benefit for both students and employers was acknowledged in fostering relationships and enhancing student progression since raising awareness of opportunities in sectors with skills gaps can benefit industries in the long-term, while helping young people pursue careers they are interested in. For example, one employer mentioned that 14 to 16 students had moved on to a Level 3 apprenticeship and subsequently found employment in the sector.

> "We're not just doing it because we need to tick a box for a client, we're doing it because it's important for young people, it's important for the region, it's important for the future of the business." (Employer)

Other identified benefits for their organisations included achieving strategic goals, expanding their customer base through young peoples' positive experience and feedback, enhancing staff CPD through mentoring, and receiving support for their events. Many employers said that they would encourage other organisations to get involved with 14 to 16 provision, highlighting the positive impact that increased support could have on these young people: "I think it just really shapes those

younger people's minds from an early age really."

Summary

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. Employers also spoke of mutual benefits for students and organisations such as fostering relationships and student progression. 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.

4. Key findings and implications for policy

This exploratory 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 due to falling between school and FE. Using linked NPD and ILR data, a survey of FE colleges in England, interviews with senior leaders, and fieldwork visits to 10 colleges, this study is the first to focus in detail on the experiences of these students, the education provision received and how the educational ecosystem enables these young people to flourish and the barriers within this. In setting out the key findings AP no NPD has been included with AP since at no point in the interviews or fieldwork visits did anyone refer to AP no NPD as distinct from AP.

4.1. The characteristics and profiles of these learners over time

Evident throughout the report is that there was quite a lot of overlap in the issues experienced by the three groups of students: AP, DE, and EHE. In all groups there were students who had experienced anxiety and mental health needs, had behavioural issues or specific learning difficulties. While a heterogenous group of young people, there was a common thread for why they were in college: 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. Where EHE learners had been home schooled for a long period of time, most came to college to gain access to additional GCSEs and to sit exams. They were also attracted by the offer of vocational qualifications in addition to GCSEs.

The most noticeable change in the profile of 14 to 16-year-old students studying in college during the period 2016/17 to 2023/24 had been one of student numbers. The downward trend from 2016/17 to 2020/21 seems to have halted with a continued increase in student numbers to 2023/24. This has impacted on the overall profile of students since while DE numbers have remained broadly constant throughout, EHE numbers have increased substantially, and AP numbers have reduced dramatically.

Across AP, DE and EHE 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 suggests that more students are joining late in the two-year KS4 cycle and may need additional support.

The gender profile remained similar over time, although in contrast to DE and EHE where there were slightly higher proportions of girls than boys, AP had a higher proportion of boys than girls. AP had a far higher proportion of 15-year-olds who have been excluded in the previous year but of note was that except for 2018/19, exclusions among 14-year-olds were similar across AP and DE. This could reflect different things in different regions. For example, in Yorkshire and the Humber there are two large DE providers – it is possible that 'AP' students in these regions make the decision to move full-time to college rather than a mix of AP and school. Indeed, in one provider in a different region that offered AP and DE, students were placed on either pathway dependent on what would work best for them. There were no changes in ethnicity: most students in this provision were white.

EHE is the one group where the student cohort has changed over time with a reduction in traditional home educated students and the increase of students who have recently left school – either through choice or because the school encouraged them to attend college. This shift was reported throughout many interviews including LA representatives, SMT, Leads and teaching staff. This was not apparent in the linked ILR/NPD data, perhaps because the data set finishes in 2020/21.

Across AP, DE and EHE the overall proportion of learners identified with a LLDD profile has gradually increased. There has been almost no change in levels of deprivation across the five-year data set used in this report. Over half of the students attending college were in the two most deprived quintiles at the beginning and end of the five-year period.

There has been a gradual change in learner profiles, the levels that students were studying while aged 14 to 16 in college, with more learners undertaking Level 2 qualifications, because of a decrease in Entry Level and Level 1. Throughout a higher proportion of DE learners studied at Level 2. The upward shift where students are studying at a higher level while aged 14 to 16 was echoed in the highest level of study data for post-16 destinations where there was a reduction in learners studying at Level 1 with a subsequent increase in learners studying at Level 2. What was perhaps a little concerning was the lack of movement over the five-year period of post-16 learners studying at Entry Level. Apprenticeships remained fairly consistent over time as did the proportion of learners studying at Level 3.

Across AP, DE and EHE post-16 progression was consistent at 80% or over for each academic year 2016/17 to 2020/21. Progression rates among AP students were particularly noteworthy since these were consistently higher than those reported for mainstream state funded AP.

4.2. The educational offer and provision that these young people receive

Colleges had a broad curriculum offer that included a range of academic and vocational technical subjects. Students appreciated the range of subjects offered and the option to study subjects that they would not have been able to study in school. They particularly valued the skills that they developed through their vocational options.

All staff had a strong focus on supporting students to progress and hence looked to tailor the curriculum to meet their needs. Hence there was no standard offer of what an AP, DE or EHE programmeme might comprise. The survey data showed that all colleges offered English and maths, however, some AP students, for example, might be studying English and maths in school. Even across DE colleges where some elements of the curriculum are mandatory, provision varied in the optional subjects provided and the combination of these. The same was true of EHE students where in some colleges these learners focused on three core GCSEs (English, maths and science) and in others vocational options were offered.

Excluding English, maths and preparation for life and work, among AP students construction, engineering, hair and beauty and motor vehicle were the most popular other subjects. DE students studied the largest range of other subjects compared to other groups, however, some subjects had small numbers of students. Most popular were sport, health and social care, hair and beauty and media with history being the fifth most popular. Distinctive among the EHE students was the large group taking land-based studies as an option. Thereafter art and design and sport were the most popular.

Many colleges took the opportunity to embed enrichment as part of the timetabled curriculum

with wellbeing and personal development allocated timetabled sessions. Employability could also be timetabled in addition to being embedded in vocational subjects.

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 in line with funding regulations. 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. Some EHE students had extensive home education when not in college and others did not.

Leaders and teachers recognised the importance of enrichment and wider activities and indicated that many students prior to attending college had had restricted access to broader activities sometimes due to family circumstances and/or finance. The part-time nature of AP, AP no NPD and EHE students did place some limitations on the extent to which they could engage in enrichment activities including work experience. However, in addition to the wider college enrichment offer to which students were entitled, there were multiple examples across all groups of visiting speakers, trips and community-based projects. DE students tended to have blocks of work experience and reported a wide range of placement opportunities.

4.3. Experiences and factors that enable young people to develop their potential

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 or EHE. All students commented on the college learning environment and the more relaxed ethos compared to their experiences of school. Particularly important was being treated with respect, being listened to and a sense that staff cared. Strong relationships with staff were often key to success, as was the importance of peer friendship groups. High levels of student-teacher interaction in taught classes were commented on by many students and their parents in addition to teachers as making a positive difference to teaching and learning.

Student agency was a prominent theme specifically about choice in the curriculum, and the vocational offer was of universal appeal, which in many instances had enabled students to reengage with education. Students themselves reported feeling more confident in the progress that they were making. The reduction in the number of subjects studied and the choice of which level of qualifications students were working on also contributed to their development. While the notion of a curriculum tailored to individual needs might be tricky in mainstream schools, particularly around different levels of qualifications, the more flexible college structure enabled this to happen.

A strong emphasis was given to wellbeing and mental health as part of pastoral roles in addition to external support from LAs and other organisations. Frequently colleges had dedicated tutorial time and/or enrichment activities to support young people in their personal development. Engagement with parents, carers, or even families was often said to be strong, though this was not universal.

Learners felt supported in their next steps and were helped by college staff in this progression. Students received high quality career guidance and advice in support of their progression – this frequently involved wider college CEIAG teams. Some differences were seen in levels of employer engagement and enrichment activities, although this was not universal. For the most part this was related to the amount of time that students were in college. That said many AP and EHE students were studying vocational qualifications where employer engagement naturally occurred.

4.4. How the social ecosystem functions to enable young people to develop their potential and barriers within this

The learning environment, curriculum, pastoral support and the resulting strong relationships of the 14 to 16 environment combined to have a positive impact on these learners. By using the lens of Bronfenbrenner, it is possible to understand in more detail the factors that enable or hinder student development.

The social ecosystem and the individual

Colleges recognised that many learners had experienced persistent 'failure' through Years 7, 8 and 9 because the academic curriculum and 'teaching to the test' of mainstream school did not play to their strengths. That these learners may leave school at 16 with a belief that they are "stupid" (a word used by learners in several interviews) was not surprising, but a college environment in which they can "pass things" appeared to change these self-perceptions. Three factors in the educational offer underpinned a shift from failure to success for these learners: 1) an assessment and qualifications framework that began at the right level for the learner, 2) a broader curriculum that offered new subjects and 3) teaching and learning styles that enabled understanding.

These three factors, combined with the strong staff-student relationships that are described throughout the research, supported the development of proximal processes as learners found new ways of engaging with staff, but also ways of engaging with the objects and symbols around them – in this case the curriculum content and the ways in which it was presented. An example of this can be seen in the learner journey of Olly.

When Olly talked about the difference that college had made, he began by saying that they don't make you feel stupid for asking a question, all you have to do is say 'can you come and help' and they do, whereas in school:

> "The teachers would just say I can't come round and look at what you're all doing, and they'd just look at me as if I was some kind of idiot. They would tell me to crack on and do your work [but] how can you crack on if you don't know what you're doing?"

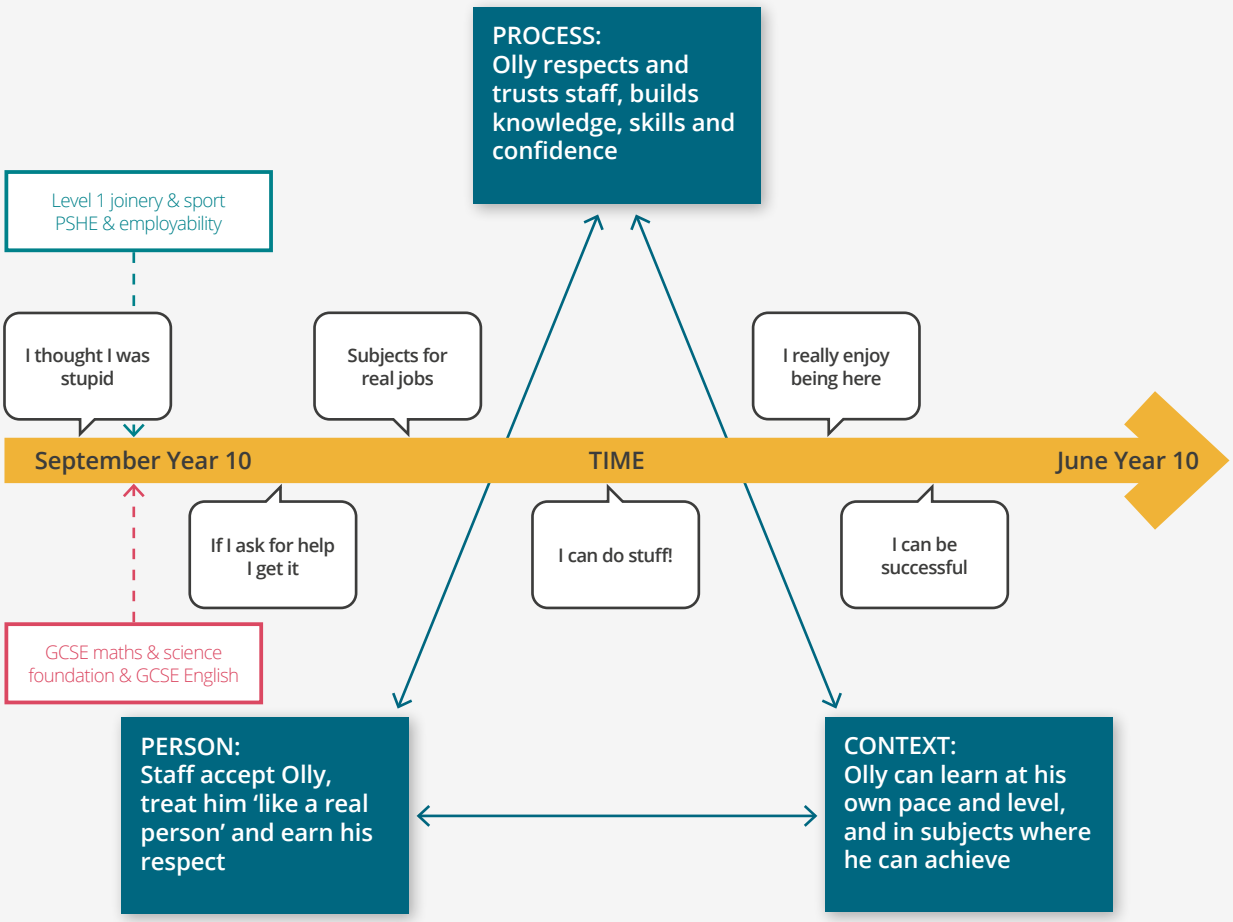
It was clear that he was building respect and trust for his college teachers, and he appreciated being treated like a real person, not just one amongst a big class:

> "I actually enjoy coming, I really do. To be honest when we've had the weekend or holidays or half-terms I actually enjoy that I'm coming back."

The vocational subjects had also been important in building his sense of achievement, offering pathways "for real jobs, good jobs". He had no definite career plans but would pick "something where I can make a success of it". Talking about his experience at college, he said "Before I thought I was just stupid but now I know that I can do stuff".

Applying key elements of the Bronfenbrenner model to Olly's story shows how the Process-Person-Context-Time constructs, combined with those three factors in the educational offer, had a positive impact on learner characteristics, enabling Olly to develop his full potential (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: The ecosystem and the individual



Olly's experience could be found in all of the colleges however, one limitation of the research was the absence of interviews with students who did not make a successful transition post-16 allied to limitations with the destination data.

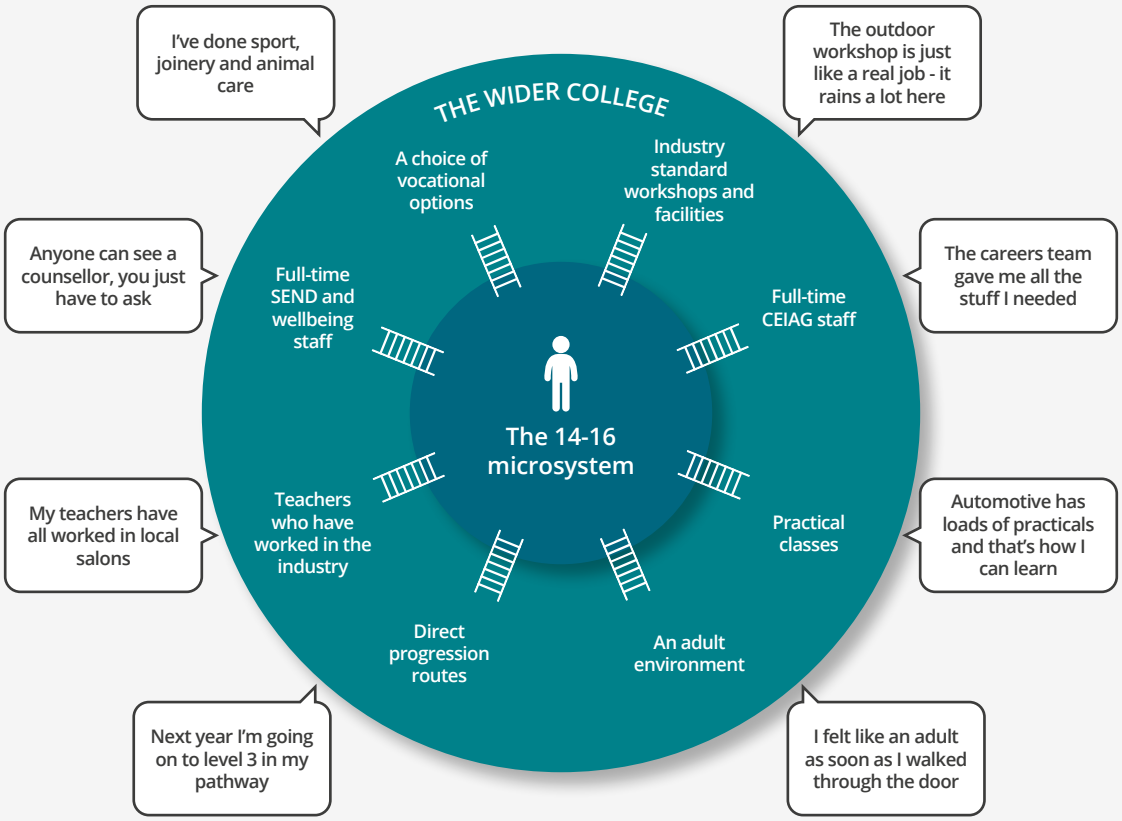
The social ecosystem at the institutional level and the factors that enable learners to thrive

The microsystem of the 14 to 16 provision, combined with the wider college, forms the mesosystem in which the young person is operating. The college visits provided many examples of how the provision was different to mainstream school, and how the wider college gave access to opportunities, facilities and services that could not have been part of the day-to-day life of a school. The positive impact of these benefits has been presented throughout this report.

In Bronfenbrenner's model an important element for development is the transition from one ecology to another. When ecologies are consistent across the micro-and meso-levels transitions will be smooth, if there is dissonance between the levels then transitions may be difficult. The college environment enabled many smooth transitions. For example, the existence of professional units with staff whose sole focus was SEND or CEIAG could provide seamless access to services that for a mainstream school might require an external referral and probably a more difficult transition for the learner.

The interviews contained many examples of how 14 to 16 was integrated into the wider college, and these were reinforced in the college visits. The students themselves described many smooth transitions into the main college environment and also how the young people were being prepared for future transitions (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: The institutional ecosystem and the learner



The inclusion of Time in Bronfenbrenner's model draws attention to how the interplay between Process, Person and Context is ongoing and how a young person's environment may change dramatically at any key transition stage, particularly if they progress to a post-16 destination outside the college. Apparent from the destination data and interviews with staff and students was how students felt prepared for their post-16 transition since they were familiar with the college, they had developed the skills and behaviours anticipated of post-16 students and, where students had successfully studied vocational qualifications were often ahead of their mainstream peers. Naturally some students transitioned to other colleges or went into apprenticeships, however, there was a strong sense from students, staff and parents that they were prepared for this. Certainly, there was evidence that supported successful transitions from former students though this was a very small group of students (N=12).

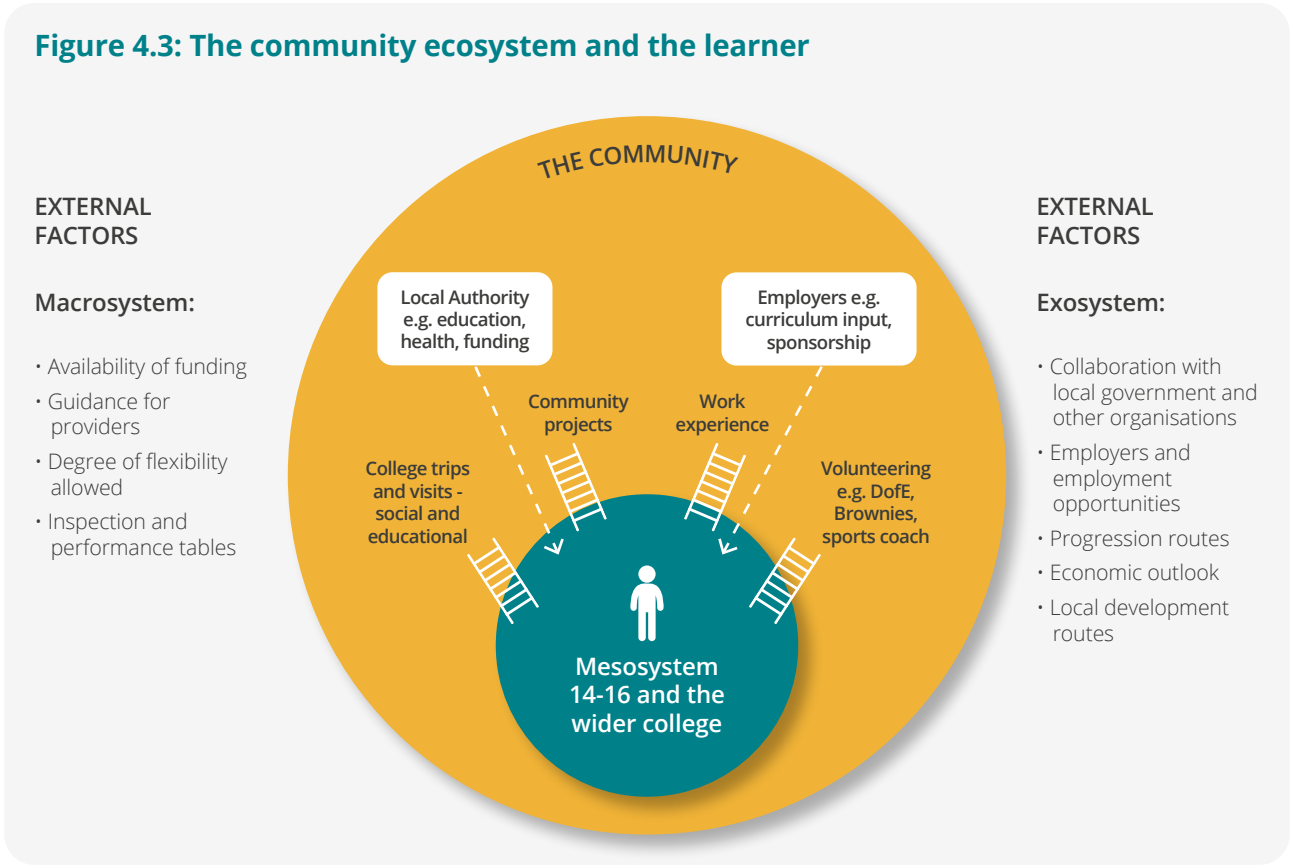
The social ecosystem at the community level and the factors that enable learners to thrive

In Bronfenbrenner's model the external environment is divided into the macrosystem, which

exerts control of education via funding and performance measures, and the more local exosystem which in day-to-day terms may have a greater influence on the individual learner. While there was variation in the local and regional links described in the interviews, for some colleges, the roles of the LA and local employers were important. They were often discussed in relation to what they could – or would – put into a college, but they also offered opportunities for the learners to reach out and pay back. For example, in one college a LA department provided work placements, community projects and an education liaison officer. When the officer was interviewed, they stressed that the learners were giving something back, because the projects they worked on improved the local park which increased its use by the elderly and significantly reduced any vandalism.

Employer engagement was highly rated including input to the curriculum, talks, visits and work experience opportunities. In one interview learners explained that "we've got our own values here that we are all supposed to be aiming for, and they match with a lot of the employer ones". The employer values were featured on classroom posters and included organisations like the army and fire service as well as local employers. In this sense employers were being used in a way that pervaded all aspects of learning and could be referenced in classes, thus providing the consistency that underlies the building of proximal processes (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: The community ecosystem and the learner



Bronfenbrenner consistently referenced the influence of the macrosystem, which encompasses the belief systems and ideologies of a culture, but in practice has a stronger relationship with some subcultures than others. Many of the 14 to 16 learners were disadvantaged in some way, whether by family circumstances, learning needs or mental health issues. Together they formed a subculture of young people 'for whom school wasn't working'. Bronfenbrenner argued that no society can long sustain itself unless it addresses the deprivation of experience that currently exists in many economically developed countries (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p825). Ideally, every young person should be provided with an environment in which they can thrive and reach their full potential. In reality, LAs varied in the support they offered, funding lacked equity, many

schools provided limited information about learners, and the colleges were often underfunded for the services they provided. Any of these could inhibit the development of an ideal environment for each learner.

4.5. Implications for policy, funding and practice

Policy

Colleges fill a significant gap in their local education ecosystem by offering 14 to 16 provision that meets the needs of young people who may not thrive in mainstream school environments and are often invisible to policy makers. However, this vital role is not well recognised, especially at a national level, and is not sufficiently well embedded in the local ecosystem. Overlooking college contributions leads to inadequate recognition of their pivotal role in supporting a wide range of students including some of the most vulnerable within their communities.

College-based 14 to 16 provision focuses on meeting individual needs. However, with the exception of DE, there is no national guidance as to what provision should look like. Where students are withdrawn from school to be home educated there needs to be clarity and consistency in roles and responsibilities.

The current school-based EBacc curriculum offer doesn't meet the strengths and needs of all young people. Students take many academic options at Level 2 (GCSE) which, our research shows, can lead to disengagement and disillusionment with the mainstream education offer. Vocational and technical opportunities are often limited to school-based technical awards.

Funding

Funding is a key challenge impacting on the delivery of 14 to 16 in FE colleges. For all provision, sustainability, growth and funding for wraparound support is a constant battle. Provision is often oversubscribed; some colleges have to turn away young people they know they could support.

AP provision is expensive and needs to be flexible to accommodate students on a roll-on basis across KS4, but schools and LAs can be hesitant to fund places which are yet to be filled. For colleges, running provision without funding for a full group is not financially viable. DE provision is based on 16 to 18 funding rates for around 16 hours a week, but colleges deliver 25 hours to their 14 to 16-year-olds as they are considered to be the home school. EHE is only funded for part-time provision, fewer than 580 hours a year or 16 hours a week.

There is inequity in funding between mainstream and college-based KS4 provision. Access to any funding for addressing vital additional support needs, travel and FSMs is limited or not available.

Data collection and monitoring

Guidance on enrolment codes is confusing as it doesn't use the language used by colleges themselves of AP, DE and EHE, especially AP, including part-time school link provision. These young people are often vulnerable. More accurate coding would allow for improved tracking of progress and progression.

Recommendations for policy, funding and practice

- 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 FSMs 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, 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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