Effective practice in supporting Entry/Level 1 students in post-16 institutions (2015/27)

Research report

November 2016

Tim Allan, John Rodger, Michael Dodd and Matthew Cutmore – York Consulting LLP

Contents

List of tables

Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings from a qualitative research study to explore effective practice in supporting students studying at Level 1 or below in post-16 institutions.

The study was commissioned by the Department for Education and undertaken between January and June 2016. It has been structured around two main strands of primary research:

- **Visits to education and skills providers:** in-depth, semi-structured consultations with staff and Entry/Level 1 students in 15 post-16 education and skills providers in England. An above average proportion of 16 year old students in these providers that start at Entry/Level 1 go on to achieve a Level 2 qualification by the age of 18, i.e. the sample is comprised of providers that appear to be effective at supporting Entry/Level 1 students to progress to, and achieve at, Level 2.

- **Visits to local authorities**: in-depth, semi-structured consultations with representatives from 10 local authorities in England. With one exception, each skills provider in the sample is located in one of these 10 local authority areas.

A total of 85 provider staff, 18 local authority staff and 89 students have been consulted for the study. All of the students had either completed, or were undertaking, a programme of learning at Entry Level or Level 1.

Recruiting and enrolling

The providers in the sample attach considerable importance to the work they undertake with students, and especially Entry/Level 1 students, their parents/carers and their schools prior to the formal enrolment process. A number of common themes are evident in these 'pre-enrolment' activities, including taster days and tours, supervised dry runs on public transport, identifying and implementing additional support measures and delivering briefing sessions for parents/carers.

Providers commit time and resources to pre-enrolment to ensure that staff are well informed about the needs and preferences of all new students and that students feel comfortable and confident in their new surroundings. Providers agree that pre-enrolment plays a significant part in ensuring that Entry/Level 1 students are able to attend, achieve and progress.

The research did not uncover any atypical or innovative practice amongst the provider sample that relates specifically to enrolment. Interviews with students are commonplace, as are literacy and numeracy assessments and vocational skills assessments. All of the providers offer a form of grace period – typically six weeks – during which time students are able to change vocational area, to sample different areas or to change qualification level.

Students with additional support needs are identified through a range of channels, including education, health and care plans, meetings with schools, information provided by schools and students self-disclosing to the post-16 provider. An array of support structures exists, including one-to-one support, group-based interventions and access arrangements for assessments and exams/tests.

Providers are also increasingly aware of, and are expanding their capacity to support, the mental health needs of their students. The provision of student counselling, as well as support for students with dyslexia, has also assumed a higher priority in recent years.

Delivery and support

A positive and supportive culture is evident across the providers in the sample. Staff have high expectations for their students, regardless of their background or level of study, and seek to develop their self-confidence and independence. They recognise the importance of building the resilience of Entry/Level 1 students to enable them to flourish in a post-16 setting.

Entry/Level 1 students are more likely to have academic and pastoral needs than students studying at higher levels. They may also be more prone to attendance and behaviour problems. Providers agree that identifying and managing these issues requires regular and effective communication across the organisation. Ten of the fifteen providers report improved communication between vocational departments and support staff/functions. Five of these providers recognise this as a change in culture, especially on the part of some vocational teaching staff.

Monitoring of student attendance, progress and achievement is very rigorous across the provider sample. In many cases it is a weekly, and sometimes daily activity, underpinned by robust and well-populated information systems. There is strong buy-in to using the systems across the different departments within the providers.

Key Workers, Progress Tutors and Personal Learning Advisors (also known by numerous other titles) are central to the success of Entry/Level 1 students. They will often be the first ones to discuss attendance, achievement or behaviour issues with students. Students will confide in them and turn to them for help. They are, in many ways, the unsung heroes of their institutions and require a wide and bespoke skillset to do their jobs well.

All of the providers have drop-in facilities, staffed by experienced support workers. These can be used either as a 'time out' facility for students struggling with a classroom environment, or as a study base where students can seek support about completing assignments, compiling portfolios or to ask specific questions in advance of exams and tests.

In the past there has been a tendency to allocate tutors/teachers who were less confident teaching at higher levels to students studying at Level 1 or below. Clearly, however, there has been an attitudinal shift, with consultees across the sample keen to stress that, in order

to achieve the best results, it is in fact the very best teachers who should be working with Entry/Level 1 students.

The research uncovered numerous examples of where providers have built in flexibility or have tailored their offer in way that is particularly pertinent to Entry/Level 1 students. Examples include allowing students to switch between vocational areas after having successfully completed Level 1, moving students from Level 1 to Level 2 mid-year (although views differ on the practicality of this) and using third party specialist providers to deliver short courses to students at most risk of disengaging.

English and maths

It is evident that English and maths have a high strategic priority within all of the providers in the sample. This is true of senior managers, department heads, teaching staff and support staff.

Providers agree on the importance of delivering English and maths in a way that is demonstrably different to how students were taught at school. This can include contextualised learning (using the vocational context to provide real world examples linked to English and maths), smaller class sizes and a range of approaches to destigmatise the two subjects. Such approaches have included maths days, maths and English themed events and project-based activities.

Three providers in the sample have centralised the timetabling of English and maths. Others allow vocational curriculum leaders to determine when they should be timetabled. Timetabling a lesson straight after a group tutorial has proven effective for Entry/Level 1 students, as attendance at these tutorials is mandatory.

Other approaches that providers take to try and overcome issues of student absence include timetabling English and maths lessons in the middle of the day, physically escorting students to their lessons and offering incentives. At one provider a small cash reward is made for 100% attendance at English and maths lessons across a term. In another, vouchers for a free breakfast in the college canteen are offered for regular attendance.

In addition to timetabled sessions, students have access to a range of additional support with English and maths. This includes group and individual catch-up sessions, specific study areas or hubs for students to work on English and maths exercises with dedicated support staff, and drop-in sessions or small workshops to help students keep pace with the curriculum.

Progression to further learning or employment

Planning for progression effectively starts as early as the enrolment stage, when programmes of study are devised and learning goals agreed. More formally, however, the process for Entry/Level 1 students typically starts in February or March each year.

Examples cited by the providers as effective for Entry/Level 1 students include progression themed tutor group sessions, 'progression week' initiatives, employer visits, enterprise events and various employability activities such as CV writing and interview skills development.

Local authorities and post-16 statutory duties

Each local authority in England has a statutory duty to secure sufficient suitable education and training provision for all young people in their area aged 16 to 19, or up to age 25 for those with a learning difficulty assessment or an education, health and care plan. To fulfil this duty, authorities need to have a strategic overview of the provision available in their area and are required to identify and resolve gaps in that provision.

Representatives from the ten local authorities in the research sample unanimously agreed that, in their areas, there is an adequate amount of appropriate post-16 provision to meet student demand. This includes provision at Level 1 and below. A concern was however raised about a perceived shortage of supported internships, with authorities (and providers) reporting that successfully engaging employers in supported internships on the scale that would meet local demand is a challenge.

A similar number of authorities have outsourced their targeted information, advice and guidance (IAG) work with young people that are not in not in education, employment or training (NEET) as deliver it in-house. Under both models, those responsible for targeted IAG typically have a similar remit, i.e. to support the transition of young people who are NEET back into education or training. They review information on NEET young people and make referrals to appropriate provision and services, e.g. youth services, housing, health, professional coaching and various types of re-engagement provision.

Despite no longer being mandatory, strategic commissioning statements or statements of need are still developed by the majority of the authorities in the sample. In themselves, these provide no guarantee of success in terms of maximising participation and reducing NEETs, but representatives from the seven authorities that have such statements are all of the view that they can make an important contribution.

Some of the authorities in the sample have developed/funded activities to engage the hardest to reach young people in structured learning activities. These include life coaching services and 'study programme' type interventions delivered by providers that specialise in working with young people facing multiple barriers.

Whilst not a formal/documented role of the authorities in the sample, it is clear that the majority have been central to the establishment and ongoing facilitation of various provider groups, networks (formal and informal) and forums. For example, one local authority has established a Careers Guidance Network which meets on a termly basis. Another has established a Secondary Head Teachers Forum which meets fortnightly. A third is facilitating the co-timetabling of English and maths across small providers, whereby

students from different providers will be taught English and maths together (this is recognition of the difficulties faced by smaller providers in recruiting and retaining high quality English and maths tutors).

In conclusion

The providers in this study all have an above average rate of progression between Entry/Level 1 and Level 2 amongst 16-18 year-old students. They have not achieved this through any single intervention or approach. There is no silver bullet. Rather, their success is based on a multitude of (often seemingly small) activities, tactics and processes which combine together to provide a learning environment that supports and encourages Entry/Level 1 students to achieve and progress.

The main body of this report offers many examples of the ways in which providers work with their Entry/Level 1 students. Some, but by no means all, are evident across the majority of the sample in various forms. Some are mutually exclusive and even contradictory, demonstrating that seemingly opposing approaches to the same issues can be equally effective.

It is therefore not a case of prescribing 'what works'. Providers differ too much in almost every aspect of their composition for this to be meaningful if attempted in any detail. However, many of the examples provided in this report are replicable and only very few require the investment of significant levels of funding.

Perhaps the most significant factor of all is people. It is far more difficult to describe, in tangible terms, what makes a member of staff effective at working with Entry/Level 1 students than it is to explain effective pre-enrolment activities or monitoring systems, for example. But the systems, processes, activities and interventions highlighted throughout this report will only combine to deliver positive results if the right people are driving them. Personality, commitment, empathy, enthusiasm, experience and compassion all play a huge part in how well someone can engage with, develop and support Entry/Level 1 students. These are not qualities that can easily be taught, but they were evident in abundance amongst the staff involved in this research.

1. Research Overview

Introduction

This report presents the findings from a qualitative research study to explore effective practice in supporting Entry/Level 1 students in post-16 institutions. The study was commissioned by the Department for Education and undertaken between January and June 2016.

Thanks are owed to all of the local authority representatives, education and skills provider staff and Entry/Level 1 students that contributed to the study.

Research aims

The overall aims of the research were: a) to identify good practice in recruiting and teaching Entry/Level 1 students; and b) to identify the types of provision and support that best meet their needs. The specific research questions within these aims are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Subsidiary Research Questions

For education and skills providers:
- What are the factors associated with successful provision at Level 1 and below?
- What is the policy/approach for students with Special Educational Needs at providers in the research sample?
- How tailored is teaching and learning to Entry/Level 1 students?
- How do providers decide the type and level of course/learning onto which Entry/Level 1 students are enrolled?
- What mentoring and support do providers offer for Entry/Level 1 students?
- How do providers help students who engage at Level 1 or below to progress to further learning or employment?
- What are the experiences of Entry/Level 1 students with regard to their learning?
For local authorities:
- How do local authorities make sure that all 16 year olds – especially Entry/Level 1 students – are offered a place in post-16 education that meets their needs.

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 of the report provides a summary of the underlying context for the study and explains the approach taken to sampling and primary research. Chapter 3 explores the characteristics of provision in effective providers and considers pre-enrolment and enrolment, tailoring of provision, mentoring and support, English and maths, and how providers help students to progress to further learning or employment.

The approaches taken by local authorities to meet their statutory duties around post-16 provision are explored in Chapter 4. The concluding remarks from the research, structured around the research questions, are presented in Chapter 5.

Summary of the approach[1]

The study has been structured around two main strands of primary research:

- **Visits to education and skills providers:** in-depth, semi-structured consultations with staff and Entry/Level 1 students in 15 post-16 education and skills providers in England. Based on data from 2013/14, an above average proportion of 16 year old students in these providers that start at Level 1 go on to achieve a Level 2 qualification by the age of 18. In other words, the sample is comprised of providers that appear to be effective at supporting Entry/Level 1 students to progress to, and achieve at, Level 2.

- **Visits to local authorities**: in-depth, semi-structured consultations with representatives from 10 local authorities in England. With one exception, each skills provider in the sample is located in one of these 10 local authority areas.

A total of 85 provider staff, 18 local authority staff and 89 students have been consulted for the study. All of the students had either completed, or were undertaking, a programme of learning at Entry Level or Level 1.

---

[1] Further detail is provided in Chapter 2.

2. Context, Sampling and Approach

A summary of the context for the research

An estimated 1,674,600 16-18 year olds in England (87% of the 16-18 population) were in education or training at the end of 2015. Amongst these were 55,100 16-18 year olds (3% of the 16-18 population) whose highest qualification aim was at Level 1. The majority of these students completed compulsory education without 5 good GCSE passes and it is these young people that make up the cohort studied for this research. There were a further 40,400 16-18 year olds (2% of the 16-18 population) whose highest qualification was 'other courses', which include Entry Level qualifications. Two fifths of these students (40%) were in special institutions.[2]

Young people study at Level 1 for a range of reasons. These include (although are not limited to) Level 1 being an established route into Level 2, young people not having decided on their preferred vocational area or being willing to move between areas, and the greater likelihood of Level 1 being offered on a 'roll on roll off' basis compared with provision at higher levels. Even so, many young people studying at Level 1 have already achieved this level.

Across the country, there are large differences in the proportion of students who start an Entry/Level 1 programme at age 16 and who achieve Level 2 by age 18. For example, in 2014 the highest performing local authority in the country against this measure achieved a progression rate of 51% across all of its post-16 providers combined, i.e. 51% of the learners who started an Entry/Level 1 programme at age 16 achieved Level 2 by age 18. The equivalent progression rate in the poorest performing authority was 13%. The national average was 29%.[3]

Using progression statistics alone to compare authorities and providers is not entirely fair. Doing so fails to account for student characteristics, the performance of local schools and the socio-economic circumstances of different areas. Even so, the significant differences in the progression rates of Entry/Level 1 students suggest that provision and support varies considerably across the country and that in many areas there is scope for improvement.

Current evidence on good teaching in the post-16 sector is limited and, with the exception of Ofsted inspection reports and localised studies, is limited still further where Entry/Level 1 students are concerned. The Department for Education is committed to ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to benefit from good quality post-16 education and has commissioned this study to understand more about what constitutes good and transferable practice for Entry/Level 1 students.

---

[2] Source (for all figures in paragraph 2.1): DfE (2016) Participation in Education, Training and Employment: 2015
[3] DfE analysis of Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD), see Annex A

Sampling

Education and skills providers

The provider sample for this study was comprised largely of general FE colleges (Table 2), reflecting the significant concentration of Entry/Level 1 students attending FE colleges relative to other types of provider. The sample included single site, relatively small colleges and large, multi-site institutions.

Table 2: Provider Sample by Type of Institution

Provider type	Number
General FE College	12
Sixth Form College	1
Specialist Agricultural College	1
Private Training Provider	1

Source: York Consulting

The profile of providers by region is shown in Table 3. Seven of the nine English regions are represented in the sample.

Table 3: Provider Sample by Region

Region	Number
North East	2
North West	4
Yorkshire and Humber	2
East Midlands	2
West Midlands	3
London	1
South East	1

Source: York Consulting

Alongside institution type, three other criteria informed the selection of the provider sample:

a) **Performance:** only providers whose student progression rate from Entry/Level 1 to Level 2 was above the median were considered[4]. As such, all of the providers in the sample appear to be effective at progressing their Entry/Level 1 students.

b) **Location:** although no geographic quotas were set, the intention was to select a sample that included representation from most English regions.

c) **Local authority:** the 15 providers were to be selected from 10 different local authority areas.

All of the providers in the sample are in the top two quartiles of post-16 providers nationally in terms of their Entry/Level 1 to Level 2 progression rate for 16-18 year olds[5]. Against the same measure of progression, each provider is also in the top quartile nationally for its own specific provider type.

Local Authorities

Representatives from 10 local authorities were consulted for the research. Of these 10 authorities:

- Six authorities have an Entry/Level 1 to Level 2 progression rate for 16-18 year olds, across all their post-16 providers combined, that is above the national average of 29%.

- Four authorities have an Entry/Level 1 to Level 2 progression rate for 16-18 year olds that is below the national average.

- Six authorities have an above average proportion of young people that are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and four have a below average proportion[6].

- Five authorities have an above average proportion of 16-18 year olds whose activity is recorded as 'not known'. The other five authorities have a 'not known' rate that is below the national average.

Across the sample of authorities, the Entry/Level 1 to Level 2 progression rate in 2013/14 ranged from a high of 36% to a low of 21%.

Approach

The researchers spent part or all of one day at each of the 15 providers in the sample. During the visits, in-depth semi-structured consultations were undertaken with senior

---

[4] Based on data from 2013/14 and excluding providers with fewer than 50 students on Entry/Level 1 provision in that year.
[5] Based on DfE data from 2013/14.
[6] Source: DfE (2016) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neet-data-by-local-authority-2012-16-to-18-year-olds-not-in-education-employment-or-training

managers, recruitment and enrolment teams, academic and pastoral support staff, department heads, teaching staff and students that were undertaking, or had previously completed, an Entry/Level 1 course. The final decisions over who was consulted were taken by the researchers' nominated point of contact in each provider. Typically this was a member of the senior management team.

Table 4 shows the number of staff and students in the providers that took part in the research.

Table 4: Provider Consultees

Consultee role/position	Number
Staff	**85**
Senior managers	20
Recruitment and enrolment staff	11
Academic and pastoral support staff	28
Tutors and heads of department	26
Students	**89**

Source: York Consulting

Representatives from nine of the ten local authorities were consulted face-to-face and one was consulted by telephone. These consultations (which were also in-depth and semi-structured in nature) were typically held with staff that have day-to-day responsibility for ensuring that the authority meets its post-16 statutory duties. Consultees included 14-19 Programme Managers, members of Post-16 Learning and Skills Teams and Participation and Engagement Managers, amongst others.

Research tools for the study were agreed with the Department for Education in advance.

3. Characteristics of Provision in Effective Providers

Introduction

This chapter highlights the characteristics of provision for Entry/Level 1 students in providers that appear to be effective at progressing these students to Level 2. It covers their approaches to pre-enrolment and enrolment, culture and communication, the tailoring of the learning experience, mentoring and support, English and maths, and the support that students receive to help them progress to progress to further learning or employment.

Pre-enrolment

A common theme across the sample is that providers aim to minimise the number of students that arrive at their institutions 'unannounced' at the enrolment stage each year. This applies regardless of students' abilities and prior qualifications, but is particularly relevant to those in the Entry/Level 1 cohort.

Providers begin their engagement and liaison work with schools at different points. Four of the providers in the sample have exposure to students from as early as Year 7 and undertake school visits and keep-in-touch activities periodically from then until the end of Key Stage 4. The majority of providers focus their efforts on young people once they have selected their Key Stage 4 options. Even so, a number of practices are evident in pre-enrolment which are common to the majority of the providers in the sample. Examples, starting with those that are most relevant to Entry/Level 1 students, include:

- **Taster days and tours:** these are normally organised for groups of students, although where appropriate are arranged on an individual student basis. This may be appropriate where, for example, a student has anxieties about coming to the provider, has been home educated, is uncomfortable in groups or has very specific support needs. The visits often include the opportunity to see lessons being delivered, to meet members of teaching and support staff and to have meals in the providers' cafés or restaurants.

- **Dry run journeys:** supervised journeys on public transport from the students' homes to their new post-16 setting.

- **Planning for additional support:** close and regular liaison with school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators to enable the early identification of, and planning for, students' additional support needs.

- **Briefing parents/carers:** information sessions for the parents/carers of prospective new students, in some cases held prior to formal open evenings, to explain the range of programmes and qualifications available at the provider.

- **School and student engagement:** class talks, assembly talks and attending school open evenings and parents/carers' evenings.

Student feedback: pre-enrolment

"Someone from [the training provider] came to my school and I really liked what he said about the course….I thought 'I can do that'."

Student, Private Training Provider

Case study example: FE college's relationship with nearby special school

An FE college in the South East of England has a well-established relationship with a local special school. Staff at the college had noticed that some of the students that had enrolled from the school were struggling to make the transition and needed more support. In partnership with the school, the college has recently put in place a programme to allow prospective students to visit the college on a weekly basis during Year 11. The visits can involve tours of the provider premises, drop-ins at different vocational areas and meals at the college restaurant. Staff at both the college and the school are confident that the programme has had a positive impact on the preparedness and confidence of the young people concerned.

Case study example: early engagement with potential students

An FE college in the North West of England begins its engagement and profile raising work with students in local secondary schools from Year 7 onwards. They do this through an array of activities that includes vocational taster days, speaking at assemblies and in classes, and running academic and vocational events such as science and maths evenings and hair and beauty fashion shows.

Through these activities, combined with more bespoke interventions such as individual student tours, it is possible that a student starting on a programme at Level 1 or below would have met the Head of School Liaison at the college between 5 and 10 times before formally enrolling. Staff feel that this regularity of contact provides an important foundation for the students, and especially for Entry/Level 1 students who may be more susceptible to anxieties and concerns about the transition to a new learning environment.

Why commit time and resources to pre-enrolment?

The providers in the sample have an obvious commercial rationale for raising the profile of their organisations amongst prospective students, their parents/carers and their schools. They have places to fill and most are in direct competition with other local providers.

However, their reasons for undertaking pre-enrolment activities go far beyond the need to achieve a critical mass of students. Providers consistently reported that they do it because they consider it essential to *get to know their students* – and especially those in the Entry/Level 1 cohort – as well as possible before they start on a programme of learning. The providers unanimously agree that doing so has the following benefits:

- The most appropriate packages of support can be put in place for students (where needed) from the outset.

- Tutors and support staff are better informed about students' circumstances, needs, challenges and individual preferences. This enables the staff to plan and react accordingly.

- Students feel more comfortable and confident in their new surroundings.

Representatives from all of the providers in the sample said that pre-enrolment plays a significant part in ensuring that Entry/Level 1 students are able to attend, achieve and progress.

> **Provider feedback: pre-enrolment**
>
> *"The better you know the students, and the earlier you get to know them, the better the support you can give them."*
>
> Deputy Principal, FE College

Processes and practices at enrolment

Evidence gathered during this study does not point towards any atypical or innovative practice amongst the provider sample that relates specifically to enrolment. Providers decide/agree on the most appropriate learning programme for each student via a combination of:

- The pre-enrolment activities described in the previous sub-section;

- Interviews with students;

- Literacy and numeracy assessments;

- Vocational skills assessments;

- Social, emotional and behavioural diagnostic assessments;

- Discussions about students' additional support needs.

All of the providers offer a form of grace period – typically six weeks to tie in with Individualised Learner Record reporting requirements – during which time it is relatively straightforward for students to change vocational area, to sample different areas or to change qualification level.

The study also found no evidence of providers being disproportionately risk averse in the selection of qualification levels for their Entry/Level 1 students. In other words, nothing arose to suggest that the providers would intentionally put students on a lower level programme when they had a good chance of succeeding at a higher level. However, the following points are of note:

- Staff at two providers (both FE colleges) said that if any doubt exists about the most appropriate level for a student, the college would prefer to start them at a lower level and move them up midway through the year rather than start them at the higher level. The view at both of these providers is that this approach helps to reduce drop-out and maintain student motivation.

- Other providers questioned the feasibility and practicality of moving students up mid-year, citing the fact that they would have missed a proportion of the course at the higher level and catching up could therefore be challenging.

Provider feedback: changing qualification levels mid-year

"It is much easier to move them up a level during the year than to move them down. Moving them down can really dent their confidence and motivation."

Head of Foundation Studies, FE College

Early identification of support needs

Students with additional support needs are identified through a range of channels, including education, health and care plans, meetings with schools, information provided by schools and students self-disclosing to the post-16 provider.

In part attributed to their pre-enrolment work, all of the providers in the sample are confident that, in the majority of cases, support needs are accurately identified at an early point. That said, there are isolated reports of some schools being reticent about sharing information and of them withholding certain details (especially around behavioural traits) as they reportedly want their students to have a "fresh start" in a post-16 environment. This was mentioned most regularly in one of the local authority areas with a below average Entry/Level 1 to Level 2 progression rate.

Providers also recognise that some students do not disclose their support needs, learning difficulties or disabilities and that these may have gone unnoticed at school. In response, examples of practice that are reported by providers to be effective include:

- Training for staff to help them recognise traits and behaviours associated with particular learning difficulties and disabilities.

- Support staff observing all new students in a classroom environment early in the academic year with a view to identifying undisclosed difficulties or needs.

- Close and regular dialogue between the teaching staff and support staff to highlight and respond to additional needs as quickly as possible when they arise.

All of the providers are also increasingly aware of, and are expanding their capacity to support, the mental health needs of their students. The provision of student counselling, as well as support for students with dyslexia, has also assumed a higher priority in recent years.

There is strong agreement across the sample that establishing the right packages of support at the earliest opportunity gives those students the best chance. There is also a view, shared by the majority of providers, that support should be withdrawn as soon as it is safe and practical to do so as this helps move students along a journey towards greater independence.

Student feedback: identifying support needs

"The [Inclusive Learning] team have gone out of their way to help me. I get one-to-one help in lessons and they have changed my timetable so that I can have the support I need."

Student, FE College

Student feedback: identifying support needs

"My [access] needs were assessed and they said I could use a laptop in class and in exams. They also give me more time in exams"

Student, GFE College

Case study example: effective provision for students with Special Educational Needs

Each year at an FE college in the North of England, approximately 200 students with Special Educational Needs join the college's Learning for Living and Work programme – a specialist department that prepares students for either independent living or supported employment. Provision on the programme includes a bespoke learning plan and curriculum timetable that is well aligned with each student's needs. The programme also includes personal and social development, employability skills and Functional Skills.

One element of the programme that was perceived to be particularly effective is the real life work experience that the college provides to students via in-house placements. This includes working in the college's two cafés, both of which have been established to provide opportunities for students with Special Educational Needs, and working with grounds and buildings maintenance staff.

Learning for Living and Work has attracted excellent feedback from parents/carers, students and employers. In 2014/15, 50% of learners on the Learning for Living and Work programme progressed onto a Level 2 course at the college and a further 30% progressed into another positive destination, e.g. employment with training.

Case study example: diagnostic assessment for learners with additional needs

An FE college in the North of England undertakes a Student Diagnostic Assessment for all students with Special Educational Needs. The diagnostic covers nonverbal receptivity, space and touch, conversational skills, paralanguage, gaze and eye contact and chronemics and use of time. Accompanying the Student Diagnostic Assessment is a Risk Assessment Review (covering significant hazards, adverse effects and control measures) and an Individual Learning Plan which includes a behaviour strategy, communication strategy, short and longer term targets and targets for maths and English. Staff at the provider consider this approach, which includes the review and updating of all of the aforementioned documents, as a core component in supporting learners with additional needs to develop and progress.

The importance of a positive and supportive culture

The culture within a skills provider can have a direct impact on how well students perform and how supported and safe they feel. It can help to reverse negative attitudes towards education that have been formed at school and can be integral to student achievement and progression.

Although not always easy to capture through tangible examples, a positive and supportive culture is evident across the providers in the research sample. The vast majority of staff who contributed to the study:

- Demonstrated high expectations for their students, regardless of their background or level of study;

- Spoke of promoting independence, increasing students' motivation and confidence, making them more resilient and giving them a platform from which to progress.

- Stressed the importance of building the resilience of Entry/Level 1 students such that they can cope with life in a post-16 setting, as well as raising their aspirations and sense of self-belief.

- Demonstrated a genuine interest in the academic and personal wellbeing of their students and a strong desire to see them succeed.

It is difficult to correlate these values or characteristics directly with student or provider performance, but staff at the case study providers have a shared belief that they impact positively on the learning experience and learning outcomes. This can be especially important for Entry/Level 1 students, whom, staff report, are more likely than other students to have formed a view that they will not achieve much, either educationally or in life more broadly.

All of the providers in the sample make it clear to prospective students that they are a place offering 'a clean slate' or 'a second chance'. This appears to be well received by students and especially by Entry/Level 1 students. Linked to this, a theme which emerged regularly during the research was around the importance of treating students, including Entry/Level 1 students, as adults. Examples were observed of mutual respect between tutor and student having a positive impact on the attitudes of young people who had previously been disruptive or disengaged.

Staff at all of the providers in the sample are aware that some Entry/Level 1 students have received relatively little praise in their lives and have developed low self-esteem. They are therefore keen to praise their achievements at the provider (however small) and, where appropriate, encourage them to take examples of their work home.

Provider feedback: a niche at Level 1 and below

"As a college it is important that we have a distinctive feature. There are over ten colleges within a thirty-minute travelling radius of us. As a small college we are open to predatory takeovers from larger institutions. We feel we have now found our niche which is around Level 1 learning and disadvantaged students. We are seeking to expand this offer over the next few years."

Principal, GFE College

> **Provider feedback: Treating students as adults**
>
> *"We believe in treating students as adults and we encourage them to take responsibility for their own futures. This can have a positive impact on all our students, including those at lower levels. One student who exhibited very bad behaviour at school has recently been Pupil of the Month."*
>
> Vice Principal, Curriculum, 6th Form College

> **Student feedback: confidence and resilience**
>
> *"I am becoming more determined year-on-year. I was nervous and didn't like speaking out but now I am more confident and have someone to go to if I have any problems."*
>
> Student, Land-based College

> **Student feedback: confidence and resilience**
>
> *"It's more chilled out than school…more like a family."*
>
> *"The college is a safe area to do my work. The tutors and other people on my course are really friendly."*
>
> *"It is a happy and friendly place."*
>
> Students, FE Colleges

Effective internal communication

Ten of the providers in the sample report that communication between vocational departments and support staff/functions has improved in recent years and that this has helped them to more effectively manage attendance and behaviour issues amongst Entry/Level 1 students. Five of these providers recognise this as a cultural shift, especially on the part of the vocational teaching staff, some of whom, historically, have tended to only engage with student support departments on an arms-length basis.

Other examples of communication cited by the providers as having been effective include:

- Ensuring that teaching staff have a clear understanding of internal referral routes for different academic and pastoral issues. This includes the parameters or conditions where a referral is warranted.

- Databases and information systems that are regularly updated and reviewed, giving staff a holistic view on student performance and useful information on how they can best be supported.

Physical learning environments

Providers use a range of models to ensure that the physical learning environment has a positive impact on participation, achievement and progression. Within the research sample, approaches cited by providers as having been effective include:

- **Minimising movement by bringing the learning to the students:** in six of the providers, lower level students receive the majority of their provision in the same classroom or teaching space. Removing the requirement for the students to move around the provider for different sessions is reported by providers in the sample to increase attendance, including at English and maths lessons.

- **Allocating particular buildings or groups of classrooms for specific purposes:** for example, learning support areas, individual/group study areas and English and maths drop-in areas.

- **Linking learning environments:** a provider in the sample with a standalone foundation unit (see 'The Role of Foundation Units', below) has created a social space with food preparation facilities that adjoins both the foundation unit and the main college building. This is seen to work well as an informal way of introducing students in the foundation unit to the main campus.

Tracking, monitoring and review

Monitoring student attendance, progress and achievement appears to be rigorous across the provider sample. In many cases it is a weekly, and sometimes daily activity, underpinned by robust and well-populated information systems. Importantly, there appears to be strong buy-in to populating and using the systems across the different departments within the providers.

All of the providers have mechanisms for identifying the early warning signs of students beginning to disengage from their learning programme. They will, for example, look for patterns of non-attendance, discuss these with the students to identify the causes and try to put in place the necessary support or contingencies to address them. Most also have a policy of 'hitting the first absence hard', which includes contacting parents/carers as an immediate priority. Providers have found that amongst Entry/Level 1 students especially, failing to act early can lead to repeated non-attendance.

More formal review processes are also commonplace. For example, providers typically have a version of a Student Review Board involving a student-by-student review of attendance, achievements and support needs, leading to the identification (or revision) of an appropriate package of support. Covered under 'Mentoring and Support', all providers also have systems for maintaining a regular, one-to-one dialogue with students throughout their learning programme.

It is also important to note the significance of realistic goal setting, especially for Entry/Level 1 students. For example, whilst providers would like all of their students to have attendance levels that are as close to 100% as possible, they recognise that there is a cohort of students for whom this has to be an incremental process. Within this cohort is a concentration of students at Entry Level and Level 1.

Provider feedback: realistic expectations

"There is no point saying to a student who's got attendance issues: "we want 95% attendance from you". We might start with a target of 65% for that student and build up from there."

Course leader – Construction

Case study example: effective provider-wide information system

A sixth form college in the North of England has (what the researchers consider to be) an excellent provider-wide information system which is used and updated regularly by staff at all levels. The system combines attendance monitoring and goal setting with information entered directly by students about their characteristics, preferences and circumstances/ situations in which they feel confident or uncomfortable. They can also provide reflections and feedback in relation to their progress and learning goals. Parents/carers can also use the system and are reported to access it regularly. The system has received very positive feedback from Ofsted.

Case study example: a holistic approach to planning and review

At a private training provider in the sample, formal student reviews take place monthly with sector leads. These are augmented with weekly meetings with key workers to ensure that academic or social issues are identified at an early stage. Each student has an Individual Learning Plan in which progress towards short, medium and long-term objectives is recorded and monitored.

Quality and improvement

Providers in the sample were keen to emphasise the supportive culture that surrounds staff development and improvement. For example, at five of the providers, consultees explained that following lesson observations, tutors and teachers are supported to address any identified weaknesses rather than receiving criticism for them. For some, this not only contrasts sharply with their experiences in other providers, but also helps to foster a similar approach with their students.

In the past there has been a tendency to allocate tutors/teachers who were less confident teaching at higher levels to students studying at Level 1 or below. Clearly, however, there has been an attitudinal shift, with consultees across the sample repeatedly saying that *"you need your best staff to teach your most difficult students"*. In addition to their strong interpersonal skills, these staff are able to break down concepts for students into manageable chunks, enabling them to better understand the subject and make inroads into negative attitudes towards education (and especially towards English and maths).

Tailoring the learning experience for Entry/Level 1 students

The role of foundation units

Eight of the fifteen providers in the sample have 'foundation units' (or equivalent). These are used as 'incubators' to enable students who are not ready for life in the main provider setting (typically a college) to participate in learning in an environment in which they feel comfortable and which supports them to make the transition to the 'main' provider, if and when appropriate.

> **Case study example: specialist Foundation Studies department**
>
> An FE college in the North of England has a Foundation Studies department which provides further education for students aged 16-25 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders and behavioural problems. Students study a 'Preparing for Life and Work' course lasting between one and three years. The course is taught through projects, which provide a theme for work over a number of weeks. Projects are designed to combine activities and skills from all areas of the curriculum and provide opportunities for students who are different levels to work together.
>
> The department employs specialists in mental health and behavioural problems who are skilled at using cognitive strategies to support the students.
>
> A range of work experience opportunities (including supported work experience in the college) are available to the Foundation Studies students. In 2015/16, 81% of the students took part in structured work experience, the vast majority of whom were placed with external organisations.

Flexibility of provision

Across the provider sample, the research uncovered numerous examples of providers building in flexibility and tailoring their offer for Entry/Level 1 students. These examples include:

- Having a range of progression routes in the same vocational area beyond the next level of learning;

- The flexibility to move young people from Level 1 to Level 2 mid-programme (although as explained earlier, consultees' views on the practicalities of this are mixed);

- Having links to third party niche providers who can provide specialist delivery of short courses more suitable to the most disengaged students.

Mentoring and support

It is important here to make a distinction between: a) funded support provided specifically for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities; and b) the range of support mechanisms that providers put in place to ensure that their lower level students are supported to achieve their learning goals.

Below we focus on the latter. Examples that arose regularly during the consultations (i.e. they were cited by more than half of the sample) and which were reported to be effective for Entry/Level 1 students, include:

- **Key Workers, Progress Tutors, Personal Learning Advisors:** referred to by a multitude of names but essentially fulfilling the same remit, these members of staff are usually students' first port of call within the provider and play an extremely important role in helping students to achieve their goals. They will often be the first ones to discuss attendance, achievement or behaviour issues with students. Students will confide in them and turn to them for help. They are, in many ways, the unsung heroes of their institutions and require a bespoke skillset to do their jobs well.

- **Role models:** at some providers, former students (including those that started at either Entry Level or Level 1) are invited back to speak about how they have progressed. Tutors also regularly remind the students that they *"weren't born teachers"* and that some faced problems during their own education. In certain curriculum areas, the tutors arrange for Level 1 students to work alongside Level 3 students, to "s*how them where they can get to"*;

- **Drop-in facilities:** accessible to all students but predominately used by those studying at Entry Level and Levels 1 and 2, all of the providers have drop-in facilities, staffed by experienced support workers. These can be used either as a 'time out' facility for students struggling with a classroom environment, or as a study base where students can seek support about completing assignments, compiling portfolios or to ask specific questions in advance of exams and tests.

- **Tutorials:** often weekly, these can cover both academic issues and wraparound/ pastoral support. At one provider, students studying at Entry Level and Level 1 receive a two-hour tutorial each week. Student feedback obtained for this study suggests these sessions are highly valued.

- **Employability sessions:** timetabled sessions that can include mock interviews, local volunteering and conversations with employers across a range of different sectors to understand their skills and qualifications requirements.

<div>

Student feedback: using drop-in facilities

"I was upset about a recent maths result but it was fine for me just to take some time out and then come back into the group"

Student, Land-Based College

</div>

<div>

Provider feedback: tutorials

"All students have timetabled tutor group sessions with a curriculum tutor. Support workers are present in these sessions and will act as an advocate if a student has a particular issue."

Head of Student Support, FE College

</div>

Reviewing and Refining Support Arrangements

A common feature across the case study providers is undertaking rigorous strategic reviews of the effectiveness of support systems in place. If a well-intentioned mechanism for support is not having the desired effect, it is either improved or another mechanism is put in its place. Three providers mentioned new systems that they would be piloting in the next academic year with the objective of either improving retention, achievement or progression.

Gauging the right level of support for students' needs also to be carefully thought through. Providers acknowledge the need to balance sufficient support to enable progression without providing too much support that students become reliant. This is important as they progress to Level 2 and Level 3 where support resources (with the exception of specific SEN, Higher Needs Funded elements) are less prevalent.

Nine of the ten providers deliberately taper resources over the lifetime of the study programme, for example, gradually reducing the amount of in-class support over time. At one provider, support staff are regularly rotated so that individual students do not become dependent on particular individuals for support.

English and maths

Since 2014, Government policy has dictated that all students without a GCSE at Grade C or above in English and/or maths should continue to study these subjects. In response, providers in the research sample report that they are now committing more resources than ever to the teaching of English and maths, although together these subjects continue to represent the most significant barrier to progression for Entry/Level 1 students.

The following sub-sections explore providers' approaches to English and maths for Entry/Level 1 students. It is important to remember, in considering the findings, that the spectrum of abilities and achievements amongst these leaners is broad, ranging from those with very low level skills and who did not sit English and/or maths GCSEs, to those to who just narrowly missed out on achieving a Grade C.

Emphasising the importance of English and Maths

It is evident that English and maths has a high strategic priority within all of the providers in the sample. This is true of senior managers, department heads, teaching staff and support staff.

Most providers encourage students to talk with English and maths specialists at open days so that they are aware at an early stage that these subjects will be integral components of their programmes and should not be perceived as 'add-ons'. Additional conversations typically take place between students and English and maths teachers at enrolment and as part of the induction process.

There is also agreement across the providers that whilst English and maths are often talked about collectively, in practice it is maths that presents providers with more significant attendance and achievement issues. Staff at most of the providers spoke of it being "socially acceptable" for people to admit a low level of proficiency in maths, but less so in English. They feel that this has an impact on students' attitudes to the two subjects.

> **Provider feedback: the importance of English and maths**
>
> *"Throughout the application and enrolment process, English and maths are conveyed as being central to the course."*
>
> Senior Manager, FE College

Taking a different approach

Providers agree on the importance of delivering English and maths in a way that is demonstrably different to how students were taught at school and stress the importance of this for Entry/Level 1 students. They report the following to have been effective:

- **Contextualising learning:** making direct links between the vocational and English and maths curriculums, i.e. using the vocational context to provide real world examples linked to English and maths.

- **Smaller classes sizes:** in most of the providers, class sizes for English and, in particular, maths, are deliberately smaller than at school. This is reported by the providers to benefit Entry/Level 1 students who may require additional support and/or may feel less confident acknowledging that they do not understand something in larger groups.

- **Engaging learning:** providers try to employ techniques to make the English and maths learning engaging and 'fun'. These techniques have included maths days, maths and English themed events and project-based activities, which are collectively reported by the providers to have had a positive impact on attendance and achievement. In some providers, extension activities are available for more able students.

Picking up on the contextualised learning point, providers in the sample gave examples of English and maths teachers and vocational tutors undertaking joint planning to ensure that both are covering closely related topics at the same point in the year.

At one provider in the sample, a vocational tutor from each curriculum area attends English and maths classes to help strengthen the links between the vocational and English and maths elements. In another provider, vocational tutors deliver the second half of the timetabled English and maths lessons by contextualising what has been taught in the first half by the English and maths teachers.

> **Provider feedback: smaller class sizes for English and maths**
>
> *"We typically have fewer than ten 10 students for Entry Level Functional Skills, ten to fourteen students for Level 1/2 Functional Skills and eighteen to twenty for GCSE."*
>
> Curriculum Leader for English and Maths, FE College

> **Provider feedback: contextualising English and maths**
>
> *"Material is contextualised to have a vocational relevance and timetabled to ensure maximum turn out."*
>
> Learning and Skills Manager, FE College

> **Provider feedback: smaller class sizes for English and maths**
>
> **"*The groups are deliberately small, typically six per class and no more than ten."*
>
> Maths and English Co-ordinator, Private Training Provider

Timetabling

Three providers in the sample have centralised the timetabling of English and maths and a fourth provider is planning to do so. This is said to emphasise the importance of English and maths both to students (as everyone is studying the same subjects at the same time) and to tutors across different vocational areas.

An alternative approach is for vocational curriculum leaders to determine where best to timetable English and maths lessons with a view to maximising attendance and establishing

links with the vocational curriculum. Timetabling a lesson straight after a group tutorial has proven effective for Entry/Level 1 students, as attendance at these tutorials is mandatory.

> **Provider feedback: timetabling English and maths**
>
> *"A key element of our 16-18 study programme is building delivery around a centralised timetable for English and maths. This really helps to demonstrate the importance that we place on these subjects, from Entry Level upwards."*
>
> 16-19 Study Programme Manager, FE College

Specific English and maths areas/units

Seven providers in the sample have either designated certain locations as English and maths teaching areas or have built specific units for that purpose. They are confident that this can help to raise the profile of English and maths teaching and provides an environment that is conducive to the teaching of these two subjects.

> **Case study example: Maths and English Support Hub**
>
> At an FE college in the North West of England, the Maths and English Support Hub is one of nine Active Learning Zones in the college. The Hub provides support, either pre-booked or on a drop-in basis, for students who request additional assistance with English and maths, be that with specific topics or an assignment. Entry/Level 1 students are regularly users of the Hub.

Encouraging and incentivising attendance

All of the providers in the sample acknowledge that securing consistently high levels of attendance from Entry/Level 1 students at English and maths lessons can be challenging. The approaches they have taken in response, and which they report to have had some success, include:

- **Timetabling English and maths lessons in the middle of the day:** students are reportedly more likely to miss lessons if they are timetabled for early morning or mid-afternoon.

- **Timetabling English and maths lessons after a key activity:** as reported earlier, providers are timetabling lessons to take place after group tutorials. This is said to be having a positive impact on attendance.

- **Co-locating the taught elements of vocational delivery with English and maths lessons:** in six providers, English and maths is delivered in the same teaching space as the taught elements of vocational delivery.

- **Escorting students:** examples were cited of where students that are prone to missing English and maths lessons are chaperoned by support staff to the classrooms.

- **Direct Incentives:** in one provider, a small cash reward is made for 100% attendance at English and maths lessons across a term. In another, vouchers for a free breakfast in the college canteen are offered for regular attendance.

English and maths teaching staff

The quality and enthusiasm of English and maths teachers is widely reported across the sample to be of central importance to the success that students, and therefore providers, achieve in this area. Recruiting and retaining high quality teachers is universally acknowledged to be a challenge and one to which none of the providers in the sample has a failsafe solution. Examples of practice include:

- **Upskilling the best vocational tutors to deliver English and maths:** providers report a strong correlation between those vocational tutors that are assessed as outstanding in observations and those that can make a successful transition to teaching English or maths.

- **Growing your own:** one provider has adopted a strategy of recruiting younger PGCE students and gradually building up their timetable of lessons as they become immersed in the culture of the organisation. This theme of 'growing your own' English and maths specialists is said to have an impact, with students responding positively to being taught by young people who are not much older than themselves.

- **Planning for change:** the English and maths curriculum is changing significantly and is at the forefront of the strategic changes to GCSEs as a whole. Successful providers are planning well in advance for these changes and communicating the implications of them across all staff and departments.

- **Cross-curricula links:** all of the providers in the sample strive to ensure that there is a mechanism in place to facilitate cross-curricula dialogue, not only between English and maths teachers and vocational curriculum leads, but also with student support staff who may help students in drop-in sessions or in study areas/hubs.

> **Student feedback: English and maths**
>
> *"The teaching of English and maths is better than at school and I am learning more."*
>
> *"I have increased my maths from an E to a D and my English from an F to a D, so I am improving all the time."*
>
> Students, FE College

Additional support in English and maths

In addition to timetabled English and maths sessions, there are various avenues of support to which all students have access, although these tend to be used by an above average proportion of Entry/Level 1 students and are reported by the providers to be very helpful for them. They include:

- Group or individual catch-up sessions;

- Specific study areas or hubs for students to work on English and maths exercises or assignments with dedicated support staff;

- Drop-in sessions or small workshops to help students keep pace with the curriculum and to assist them in completing assignments.

Student feedback: additional support for English and maths

"Extra classes during Easter break have proved very beneficial."

Student Support Manager, FE College

Student feedback: additional support for English and maths

"I like the drop-in sessions as I can do my homework at college and there is always someone who is ready to help with my assignments"

Student, FE College

Progression to further learning or employment

The sub-sections below explain the approaches taken by providers to help Entry/Level 1 students to progress to further learning or employment.

In reality, it is not just those activities that concentrate specifically on progression that enable students to continue on their learning journey or to enter employment. Rather, it is a provider's holistic approach to its Entry/Level 1 students, in many cases starting at the pre-enrolment stage and continuing throughout their time at the institution.

However, to avoid duplication with other parts of the report, the following sub-sections focus on how providers engage their students in discussions about progression and support them to make the appropriate decisions and transitions to their next destination.

Starting early

Planning for progression effectively starts as early as the enrolment stage, when programmes of study are devised and learning goals agreed.

More formally, however, the process typically starts in February or March, i.e. halfway through the academic year. Staff at the providers in the sample consistently emphasised the importance of 'starting early' with Entry/Level 1 students, reporting that they can, in some cases, require more intensive support or need longer to come to their decision about next steps than other students.

Advice and support

Various channels of advice and support are available to students, including Entry/Level 1 students, as they prepare for their next step. Examples cited by the providers as effective for Entry/Level 1 students include:

- **Key Workers, Progress Tutors, Personal Learning Advisors:** staff in these roles have multi-faceted responsibilities, one of which will often be to have periodic discussions with students about progression. These discussions tend to become more frequent in the second half of the year.

- **Progression themed tutor group sessions:** as in the Midlands FE college example at the top of this page, providers will often dedicate tutorials to progression related discussions and activities from February/March onwards.

- **Preparation for employment:** for students whose intended next step is employment (including supported employment), tuition is available on CV writing and interview skills. Employer visits and enterprise events are also relatively common.

Student feedback: work experience

"All Level 1 students have Work Experience Learning for one hour per week. This involves a combination of guidance and career talks, plus discussion of wider issues."

Student Support Manager, FE College

Case study example: Progression Tutors

An FE college introduced Progression Tutors two years ago. Progression Tutors are allocated a caseload of students and provide year-round pastoral support. Their role includes:

- Delivering student tutorials;
- Providing one-to-one pastoral support;
- Planning for and overseeing student progression.

Since their introduction, student feedback on the Progression Tutors has been extremely positive.

Organisational approaches

In addition to the student-facing elements of progression planning, the research identified organisational approaches or attitudes which exist 'behind the scenes' but which have a direct impact on how students are supported. These include:

- **Not giving up on students:** where students do not look to be on track for a positive destination, or for their preferred destination, providers will initiate a range of actions (e.g. additional IAG sessions, catch-ups, tasters in different vocational areas) to help them make an appropriate next step.

- **Challenge and accountability:** in all providers, there is an expectation that students on Level 1 programmes will, wherever possible, progress on to a Level 2 course. Departments are challenged to provide suitable reasons where this is not the case.

Case study example: RAG system to identify students at risk of not progressing

At an FE college in the North West of England, a RAG (red-amber-green) system is used to rank the likelihood of Level 1 students progressing to Level 2. Where vocational tutors, English and maths teachers and Progress Tutors are all in agreement that the student will progress, the student is rated as green. Where there are differences of opinion, the student is rated as amber and where there are shared concerns, they are rated as red. Additional support plans are identified for students rated as amber or red.

This intensive focus on progression is based on the premise that there should be a minimal number of students who remain as amber and very few students who are red. The view amongst senior management at the college is that students rated as either amber or red indicate that the provider has either put them on the wrong course or level, or that they have not provided sufficient support to enable the students to progress.

Work experience and enterprise

For many learners, a beneficial way of developing confidence and preparing them for the next step is exposure to work experience and enterprise. Evidently some Entry/Level 1 students will need more intensive support than others to get them to a point where they can participate safely in work experience. For some, work experience on the provider premises may be the most appropriate approach.

Where they had undertaken work experience or been on placement, there was general agreement across the students consulted for this research that the experience had contributed to their self-development and/or had deepened their understanding of the company or sector they had experienced.

Providers are aware of the importance of developing strong relationships with the employers who host Entry/Level 1 students for work experience or placement purposes. It does not always play out as expected and, whilst the onus is on the young person to adapt to the employer's environment, the employer must also be willing to acknowledge and respond to the fact that some Entry/Level 1 students will not be grounded in the same work ethics and adherence to rules that most people would take for granted.

Student feedback: work experience and enterprise

"Being on placement really helped build my confidence"

"I enjoy the placement…..it helped me understand what a job at that company would be like."

Students, Land-based and General FE Colleges

Case study example: work experience as an integral part of the learning journey

At a private training provider in the North East of England, work experience is positioned as an integral part of the offer to students. It is a priority for staff at the provider to begin making plans for placements as soon as possible after enrolment. In addition to external placements, the provider uses its workshops for construction placements and its bistro for catering placements.

4. Local Authorities and Post-16 Statutory Duties

Introduction

Each local authority in England has a statutory duty to secure sufficient suitable education and training provision for all young people in their area aged 16 to 19, or up to age 25 for those with a learning difficulty assessment (LDA) or an education, health and care (EHC) plan. To fulfil this duty, authorities need to have a strategic overview of the provision available in their area and are required to identify and resolve gaps in that provision.

This chapter looks at how the local authorities in the research sample are meeting their post-16 duties. In particular, it considers the balance between supply and demand, the ways in which authorities target and engage young people that are (or are at risk of becoming) NEET and the role that some have taken as the facilitator or co-ordinator of provider networks and forums in their local areas.

In each authority area, there will also be a cohort of young people for whom post-16 study at Entry or Level 1 is the most appropriate route, but who are not considered to be at risk of becoming NEET, neither are they hard to reach nor have additional learning needs. Beyond periodically checking that there is an appropriate range of post-16 subject choices and progression routes in their area, local authorities are not typically involved in the activities and processes through which these young people make the transition from school to a post-16 setting. This chapter intentionally focuses on those cohorts of young people in whose transition the authority will have more direct involvement.

Level 1 provision at post-16: supply vs. demand

Representatives from the ten local authorities unanimously agreed that, in their areas, there is an adequate amount of appropriate post-16 provision to meet student demand. This includes:

- Provision at Level 1;

- Progression routes from Level 1 to Level 2;

In other words, none of the authorities reported a shortage of provision for Entry/Level 1 students. In fact, more than half of the authorities spoke anecdotally of there being an over-supply of post-16 provision at Level 1 and of the influence that this could have on provider behaviours. Four authorities did, however, question whether there is a sufficient amount of provision available locally below Level 1.

Views vary on the quality of local provision, although none of the local authority representatives suggested that Entry/Level 1 provision per se in their area gave them cause for concern. The overriding message is that, in the areas covered by the research, if a

young person requires a place on a post-16 programme at Level 1 or below, there should be no significant barriers to prevent them from accessing one.

A concern was however raised about a perceived shortage of supported internships[7]. Echoed by the majority of local authorities in the sample, there was a common view across authorities that successfully engaging employers in supported internships on the scale that would meet local demand has been challenging.

Case study example: local authority-led supported internship programme (#1)

In response to a shortage of supported internship opportunities for young people in their area (only one local provider was offering supported internships), a local authority in the North of England has used its SEND Preparation for Employment Grant to establish a new supported internship programme. Each internship will last between six months and one year and involves a combination of English and maths tuition, employability skills training and a work placement. The first year of the programme involves 18 young people and 6 employers.

Case study example: local authority-led supported internship programme (#2)

A County Council in the South of England has adopted a similar approach to that outlined above. Working with eight local providers and using the SEND Preparation for Employment Grant, the authority has developed a supported internship programme that is currently being piloted with 30 young people. The intention is to double the size of the programme next year.

Strategic plans and statements

Whilst no longer mandatory, seven of the local authorities in the sample continue to produce 14-19 strategic plans or statements of need which outline the work that will take place to meet the statutory duties relating to:

- Securing sufficient suitable education and training provision for all young people aged 16 to 19 and those up to age 25 with an LDA or EHC plan.

- Making available to all young people aged 13-19, and to those up to 25 with an LDA or EHC plan, support that will encourage, enable or assist them to participate in education or training.

---

[7] Supported internships are a structured study programme based primarily at an employer. They enable young people aged 16-24 with a statement of SEN, a learning difficulty assessment or an education, health and care plan to achieve sustainable paid employment by equipping them with the skills they need for work, through learning in the workplace. Supported internships are unpaid, and last for a minimum of six months.

- Promoting the effective participation in education and training of 16 and 17 year olds in their area with a view to ensuring that those persons fulfil the duty to participate in education and training.

- Making arrangements – i.e. maintaining a tracking system – to identify 16 and 17 year olds who are not participating in education and training.

The other three authorities had found that the efforts of developing such plans had outweighed the benefits, as partners would not necessarily follow-through on actions without the prime driver of a mandatory policy push.

A strategic plan/statement in itself is no guarantee of success in terms of maximising participation and reducing NEETs, but representatives from the seven authorities that have such statements are all of the view that they can make an important contribution.

Examples of good practice in the plans/statements, cited either by the local authority representatives or identified by the researchers, include:

- Making clear the authority's expectations, e.g. around the progression of students to employment or further learning.

- Updating the statements each year using the latest verified data.

- Reviewing/evaluating the statements and their effectiveness in communicating and influencing local activity.

- Sharing the statements with local partners.

- Identifying clear priorities to be achieved through the statements.

- Identifying achievable actions or areas of focus (no more than 10) under each priority.

- Specifying measurable impacts through which the statements can be assessed.

An excerpt from a commissioning statement, considered by the researchers to be an example of good practice, is shown overleaf. The excerpt shows the key focus areas and intended impacts under the 'Support young people to participate in education or training' priority. References to local partners have been removed.

Case study example: 14-19 Strategic Commissioning Statement (excerpt)

Priority: Support young people to participate in education or training.

Key Focus Areas (examples):

- Review and further develop strategies to provide support and challenge to providers of education and training, and services working with young people aged 14-19 years old, to influence their strategies for engaging and supporting young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET.

- Continue to provide Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) information to secondary schools to inform the identification and support of those young people at risk of becoming NEET.

- Further develop the processes of identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET based on year 6 information from primary schools to support the transition into year 7 (secondary school).

- Young People Tracking Service to provide management information that allows judgements to be made about the effectiveness of services and programmes in progressing and retaining young people into education or training.

- Collect the views of young people on the impact of interventions and provision they experience in order to inform future commissioned services.

Impacts (examples):

- A reduction in the percentage of young people not in education, training or whose activity is Not Known to us to fewer than 11% by December 2015.

- Work will have taken place with a further two secondary schools to use transition data from primary schools that include RONI information to identify appropriate intervention.

- An auditable process will be in place to demonstrate our management of data and sensitive information about young people.

- Future interventions and commissioning of services will be informed by experiences to date, impact of current provision and the feedback of young people.

Identifying those likely to need lower level provision

Nine of the ten authorities in the sample use Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) information to identify young people with an above average likelihood of becoming NEET. The one authority that doesn't prefers a system whereby their sub-contracted Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) provider meets with schools to discuss young people at risk of NEET, but asks the schools to identify who those students are rather using a data-driven system.

At the time of the research, this authority had a NEET rate and an 'unknown' rate of approximately 3%, which in both cases was below the national average.

The nine authorities that produce RONI data share this with their secondary schools. Seven also have face-to-face meetings with the schools about the data with the aim of ensuring that the most appropriate progression routes and associated support packages are in place for the young people concerned. Three authorities do not have face-to-face meetings, in each case saying that the size of such a task would simply be too great given the resources available to the authority.

In general, it is the authorities with smaller populations that are able to have a dialogue with schools about RONI data and the authorities with larger populations that are not. However, amongst the authorities in the sample, there is no evidence of a relationship between their NEET/not known rates and whether or not they have a one-to-one dialogue with schools about young people at risk of NEET or those who may need lower level provision.

Case study examples: effective use of RONI and destinations data

A local authority in the North of England shares RONI and destination data with all secondary schools in the borough. The authority subsequently arranges meetings with each school and other partners, including the local FE college and representatives from the authority's health and housing services, to discuss the data on a student-by-student basis and ensure that the young people in question are given the best opportunity to progress.

Another authority, also in the North of England, has an annual 'school forum' each November where schools are invited to a meeting at the authority to review and discuss destination data for the previous year and RONI data for the current year.

Advising NEET young people

Across the 10 local authorities that contributed to the research:

- Six have commissioned their targeted IAG work with young people that are NEET to an external organisation.

- Four deliver it in-house via staff employed by the authority.

The reasons behind each authority's preferred approach differ and include cost, economies of scale and previous experience (both positive and negative) of different delivery models. This research did not find any relationship between an authority's approach – in house or external – and the proportion of their young people that are NEET. There was also nothing in the anecdotal feedback from authorities to suggest that one approach is demonstrably more effective than the other. To highlight this point:

- A local authority in the Midlands had experienced considerable problems with the organisation to whom they had contracted their tracking and targeted IAG services.

The proportion of their young people whose status was recorded as 'unknown' was, at the time of the research, amongst the highest in the country and the proportionate of NEETs re-engaging in formal skills and training activities remained below where the authority would like it to be.

- Another authority, also in the Midlands, outsources its targeted IAG and tracking services but has one of the lowest rates of 'unknown' young people and a below average rate of NEET.

Regardless of whether the delivery model is in-house or external, those responsible for targeted IAG typically have a similar remit, i.e. to support the transition of young people who are NEET back into education or training. They review information on NEET young people (obtained from local authority databases, from partner organisations and via their own direct contact with those young people) and make referrals to appropriate provision and services. These can include (but are not limited to) youth services, housing, health, professional coaching and various types of re-engagement provision. Case workers will usually follow up referrals to review whether they have been appropriate and/or to involve additional agencies where necessary.

Case study example: directory of post-16 training and re-engagement provision

A local authority in the North West of England has developed a directory of post-16 training and re-engagement provision aimed at young people aged 16-18. Updated monthly and available both in hard copy and online, the directory is separated into four distinct sections: careers education and IAG; pre-engagement provision; re-engagement provision; and full-time education or training. It contains information on (and supplied by) all post-16 providers in the local area and gives contact details for someone in each provider who can be approached to discuss recruitment. The directory also has specific sections dedicated to Apprenticeships and Traineeships.

Case study example: activities aimed at closing the attainment gap

A local authority in the Midlands is running a multi-stranded programme of activities aimed at closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged (pupil premium) pupils and their peers. The programme covers family learning activities centred on maths, dedicated careers guidance workers who specialise in working with looked after children in Years 10 to 13 inclusive, and research into the most effective use of pupil premium funding.

The programme is not about NEETs per se, but is an integral part of a county-wide approach to reduce the risk of NEET via early intervention.

> **Case study example: Skills for Employment programme**
>
> Another Midlands based authority has made a £2.4m investment in a Skills for Employment programme. This involves awarding grants to schools (matched to the same value by the schools) to buy in targeted IAG services. In addition, the authority awards 10 grants of £40k per year to partnerships of schools, colleges and employers that collaborate on work readiness activities including work experience, English and maths tuition, supported internships and enterprise projects.

Engaging the hardest to reach

Authorities in the sample provided examples of activities that they have developed/funded to engage the hardest to reach young people in structured learning activities. Whilst saying with any conviction whether these constitute best practice is difficult, each is reported by the authority concerned to have been successful:

- **Learning programmes for the hard to reach:** an authority in the North of England is funding a 'study programme' type of intervention, with delivery sub-contracted to a local provider that specialises in working with young people facing multiple barriers. In its first year, the programme has enrolled 12 local young people and uses a sports-based approach to deliver the provision. The intention (outcomes permitting) is to increase the size of the programme next year as the authority feels that the local provider network *"does not offer the most appropriate provision for the very hardest to reach"*.

- **Life coaches:** another local authority in the North of England has funded a targeted 'life coach' service for the most disengaged young people in the borough. This service seeks to involve the parents/carers of the young people concerned, many of whom may themselves face multiple challenges and have developed negative attitudes towards formal learning.

- **Area Behaviour Partnerships:** having closed its Pupil Referral Unit, a Midlands based authority delegated the funds to Area Behaviour Partnerships – groups of schools, colleges and training providers that work together and with other agencies to meet the needs of young people permanently excluded or at risk of exclusion. The Area Behaviour Partnerships have used the funding to procure specialist IAG services, implement preventative approaches in schools, oversee managed moves and to commission alternative provision. Since the Partnerships were introduced, exclusions across the county have reduced considerably.

Facilitating a dialogue with and between providers

Whilst not a formal/documented role of the authorities in the sample, it is clear that the majority have been central to the establishment and ongoing facilitation of various provider groups, networks (formal and informal) and forums. Examples include:

- One local authority has established a Careers Guidance Network which meets on a termly basis and has a regular dialogue with local employers around the skills and attributes they require from job applicants. The network has also received a presentation from Ofsted on the new inspection framework and careers guidance mandate. Attendance at network meetings from representatives across the county has consistently been very good.

- A Metropolitan Borough Council has established a Secondary Head Teachers Forum which meets on a fortnightly basis and also includes representation from the local FE college. The Forum is said to engender *"a really strong partnership approach across the borough and in particular to the transition between Key Stage 4 and post-16"*.

- A City Council has established a 'Learning for Life' strategic group, comprising senior figures from schools, post-16 providers and IAG providers. The current focus of the group is on determining the opportunities and challenges for the city generated by the Government's current apprenticeship policy. The same authority has also established an 'Achievement, Participation and Progression Group' – see the box below.

It is difficult to say whether, and to what extent, the various groups, networks and forums established by the authorities would have come into being anyway, or how effective they would have been without the authorities' efforts to encourage attendance and provide chairing and secretariat functions. However, it certainly seems to be the case that they have helped to engender a strong partnership culture in the areas concerned and have an important role to play in the tackling of NEET related issues.

Case study example: co-timetabling English and maths across smaller providers

The 'Achievement, Participation and Progression Group' was established by an authority in the North of England in recognition of the difficulties faced by post-16 providers – and especially smaller providers – in recruiting and retaining high quality English and maths tutors.

From September 2016, the providers are piloting a co-timetabling approach for English and maths, i.e. students from different providers will be taught together in larger groups.

---

5. Conclusions

The factors associated with successful provision at Level 1 and below

This study has obtained input from 15 post-16 education and skills providers across England. The providers differ considerably in terms of size, curriculum offer and the characteristics of their catchment areas, but all have an above average rate of progression between Entry/Level 1 and Level 2 amongst 16-18 year-old students.

The providers have not become effective at progression through any single intervention or approach. There is no silver bullet. Rather, their success is based on a multitude of (often seemingly small) activities, tactics and processes which combine together to provide a learning environment that supports and encourages Entry/Level 1 students to achieve and progress.

This report offers many examples of the ways in which providers work with their Entry/Level 1 students. Some, but by no means all, are evident across the majority of the sample in various forms. Some are mutually exclusive and even contradictory, demonstrating that seemingly opposing approaches to the same issues can be equally effective.

It is therefore not a case of prescribing 'what works'. Providers differ too much in almost every aspect of their composition for this to be meaningful if attempted in any detail. However, many of the examples provided in this report are replicable and very few require the investment of significant levels of funding.

The majority of providers in the sample indicated that they have scope to accommodate more learners at Level 1 and below if demand were to increase. However, significant expansion in student numbers requires an economy of scale which appears to be constrained by institutional competition within and across local authority areas. This has led some institutions to present Level 1 learning as a specialism where students can expect greater wraparound support, particularly in the first year of their learning programme.

Policy/approach for students with Special Educational needs

The Entry/Level 1 cohort has a high concentration of students with Special Educational Needs. It is important to note, however, that this covers a very broad spectrum, from students that self-declare to their provider with conditions that require little additional support, through to those with more significant disabilities who may require bespoke in-class and out-of-class support.

Providers' approaches to supporting students with additional needs are similarly broad, but the successful providers take steps to ensure that all staff working with these students have an informed understanding of their needs. These providers have engendered close

relations between curriculum areas and support functions and provide training to help staff identify and respond to undisclosed needs.

Support structures are varied and tailored to the needs of the individual. They include one-to-one sessions, group-based interventions, access arrangements for assessments and exams/tests, drop-in support (including for English and maths) and help with completing assignments. Providers may have standalone units for teaching Entry/Level 1 students with high levels of additional need, but they maintain a focus on integration.

The learning experience for Entry/Level 1 students

Successful providers have a culture of high expectations for their students regardless of backgrounds, characteristics and qualifications. They demonstrate a genuine interest in students' academic and personal wellbeing and work hard to address issues of self-esteem and negative attitudes towards education. They develop learning programmes that recognise individual student needs and preferences and encourage them to become involved in the democratic processes of the institution.

Monitoring and information systems in successful providers are good, but more importantly are well-populated and are used by staff across the organisation to review and refine their teaching and learning approaches.

English and maths is amongst the highest organisational priorities and there is a consistent message, across the provider, that achievement and progression in these subjects is more important than ever.

There is close alignment and a regular dialogue between those responsible for vocational teaching and those responsible for English and maths. Successful providers try different ways to stimulate attendance and do not shy away from new, unproven approaches.

Most of important of all to the Entry/Level 1 learning experience, however, is people. It is far more difficult to describe, in tangible terms, what makes a member of staff effective at teaching Entry/Level 1 students than it is to explain effective pre-enrolment activities or monitoring systems, for example. But the processes, activities and interventions highlighted in this report will only combine to deliver positive results if the right people are driving them. Personality, commitment, empathy, enthusiasm, experience and compassion all play a huge part in how well someone can engage with, develop and support Entry/Level 1 students. These are not qualities that can easily be taught, but they were evident in abundance amongst the staff involved in this research.

Deciding on types and levels of learning programmes

Successful providers engage early with prospective students, their families and schools and maintain a dialogue from that point on. They try to get to know and understand Entry/Level

1 students in advance of the formal enrolment process and look to minimise the number of Entry/Level 1 students that arrive unannounced on enrolment days.

They use interviews and assessments and take on board learners' views and preferences. They identify and plan for additional support well in advance and make efforts to manage and minimise anxieties and other issues which could jeopardise attendance. They have typically been proactive in training staff to identify and respond to undisclosed difficulties and needs.

Mentoring and support

Successful providers deliver an above average intensity of support to Entry/Level 1 students. They employ support staff that can form a bond that is built on trust and respect. The best staff are adept at raising aspirations, building resilience and using a range of approaches to help students manage and address their barriers to participation and achievement. They are held in extremely high regard by students and frequently go far beyond the call of duty.

Tutorial time is dedicated not only to reviewing academic progress but also to wraparound issues and pastoral support, often steered by the student. In-class and out-of-class support is regularly reviewed and withdrawn on a phased basis where the provider is confident that it will progress students towards independence.

Helping Entry/Level 1 students to progress

Successful providers have appropriate progression routes available to all Entry/Level 1 students and begin a dialogue about next steps at an early point. There is an organisation-wide expectation of positive progression and a culture of challenging curriculum departments where this does not occur.

Providers may encourage students towards a Level 2 programme but will also recognise and accept where other destinations are more appropriate. Support activities to help students prepare for their next step are individually tailored and progression will become the dominant focus of tutorial/support sessions as the end of the year approaches.

The views of Entry/Level 1 students

This study obtained input from 85 students that were either undertaking, or had completed, an Entry/Level 1 learning programme. These students valued the consideration that providers gave to their learning and support needs, both at the outset of their courses and throughout their time at the institution. They felt more suited to the post-16 environment than they had to school and consistently reported that the pace and style of learning was appropriate.

Many of the students were regular users of their provider's support services and spoke in very positive terms about the influence of the support staff on their attendance, retention and achievement. Some said that the support staff had been the difference between them continuing with their course and dropping out.

Amongst the students consulted were some that had started at their provider on a Level 1 programme, had progressed through higher levels and had been accepted onto a university course. From an educational and personal development perspective, these students had achieved more than they thought possible and credited the provider with helping them throughout their journey.

Ensuring appropriate provision for all 16 year olds

Local authorities report that there is an adequate amount of provision at Level 1 to meet learner demand in their area and appropriate progression routes from Level 1 to Level 2. Supported internships appear to be in shorter supply, leading some authorities to use their SEND Preparation for Employment Grants to establish new supported internship programmes.

Strategic commissioning statements, statements of need and other equivalent documents are commonplace despite no longer being mandatory. The best ones are regularly updated and evaluated, shared widely across partners and include measurable impact targets.

RONI and destination data is routinely shared with schools but some authorities – and especially those with the largest numbers of schools – do not have the resource to follow this up with a more in-depth dialogue.

Authorities have been responsible for the creation, development and facilitation of various provider groups and forums. This has helped to engender a partnership culture locally and has improved the sharing of information across key stakeholders.

Analysis Annex

Analysis of progression by Entry/Level 1 students by local authority and post-16 institution

This analysis was based on data from the Department for Education's "Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset" (YPMAD), a dataset produced using administrative data from schools, colleges and awarding bodies to provide a picture of a learner's study aims and cumulative attainment as they age. The analysis identifies young people who did not achieve Level 2 (5+ GCSE A*-Cs or a vocational qualification of equivalent size) at academic age 15 in 2010/11 and were in education studying a qualification below Level 2 at age 16, and estimates how many went on to achieve level 2 by academic age 18 (in 2013/14).

Please note that as this analysis is not based on previously published data the results have been anonymised.

Table 1 below provides the progression rate, that is the proportion of those below level 2 at 15 and studying below Level 2 at 16 who reach level 2 by 18, for the 10 local authorities selected to be consulted as part of this research, as well as the top and bottom performers and England average. The local authority was assigned based on the young person's residence at academic age 15. Progression rates ranged between a high of 51% and low of 13%, and the England average was 29%.

Table 1: Progression to level 2 by age 18 of students who were studying below level 2 at age 16 by local authority.

Proportion of students studying below level 2 at 16 who reach level 2 by age 18	
Local authority	**Progression rate**
Top local authority	51%
Sample local authority 1	36%
Sample local authority 2	34%
Sample local authority 3	34%
Sample local authority 4	33%
Sample local authority 5	31%
Sample local authority 6	30%
Sample local authority 7	27%
Sample local authority 8	25%
Sample local authority 9	21%
Sample local authority 10	21%
Bottom local authority	13%
England Average	**29%**

Source: Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD) 2013/14

The analysis was reproduced at an institution level but only included pupils who remained in the same institution for two or three years, estimating the proportion who achieved level 2 before they left, at either academic age 17 or 18. Note that this different approach means that the institution level results cannot be directly compared to the LA results. A sampling pool was then compiled which only included institutions with 50 or more students studying below level 2 at academic age 16. From this, 15 institutions within the range of the 10 local authorities selected were selected and approached for interview. Table 2 below shows the progression rates of the selected institutions.

Table 2: Progression to level 2 by age 18 of students who were studying below level 2 at age 16 for institutions sampled.

Proportion of students studying below level 2 at 16 who reach Level 2 by age 18	
Sample Institution	**Progression rate**
Sample institution 1	48%
Sample institution 2	38%
Sample institution 3	38%
Sample institution 4	38%
Sample institution 5	36%
Sample institution 6	34%
Sample institution 7	31%
Sample institution 8	31%
Sample institution 9	29%
Sample institution 10	27%
Sample institution 11	27%
Sample institution 12	26%
Sample institution 13	24%
Sample institution 14	23%
Sample institution 15	23%

Source: Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD) 2013/14

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:
aashya.patel@education.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications