



ASSOCIATION  
OF COLLEGES

**Meeting the needs of  
students aged 16-19 who  
were not in school for part  
or all of Key Stage 4:**

**The contribution of  
general FE colleges**

**A research report undertaken by Ruth Perry  
on behalf of the Association of Colleges**

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# Meeting the needs of students aged 16-19 who were not in school for part or all of Key Stage 4: the contribution of general FE colleges

## 1. Background

The issue of excluding and 'off-rolling' children from school has caught the public attention in recent months, with the publication of the [Timpson Review of School Exclusion](#) and the Education Committee's report, [Forgotten Children](#), which explored the reasons behind the rise in numbers of pre-16s in alternative provision (AP) and questioned the quality of the education and training on offer to them. However, far less attention has been paid to what happens to these young people when they move beyond Key Stage 4 and, in particular, how they re-engage with mainstream education and training.

Pre-16 students no longer in school may be educated in alternative settings such as pupil referral units (PRUs), alternative provision academies or free schools, hospital or therapeutic schools, third sector organisations or general further education colleges offering AP. They may also be educated at home - or not be in education, employment or training (NEET). There is no post-16 AP, however, and a considerable proportion of students who were in these alternative settings pre-16 progress into general further education (GFE) colleges.

Colleges have begun to identify to AoC that while they see FE as the natural home for these students, meeting their needs is causing them some significant challenges. Some colleges have pointed out that the considerable differential in funding available pre- and post-16 for these same students is illogical and makes their job – to support the young people to re-integrate into mainstream provision, to achieve on-programme and progress successfully from FE – extremely difficult. This anecdotal evidence has prompted AoC to explore the issue further through a small-scale research project.

### Aims and objectives

The primary aim of the research was to understand better how GFE colleges are working with young people aged 16+ who ceased to attend school during Key Stage 4 (KS4) and went on to enrol at college aged 16+. Specifically, AoC wanted to find out:

- the numbers of such students - and whether these were rising
- the characteristics, needs and circumstances of the students
- the provision offered to these students by the colleges, including learning programmes and support
- the challenges colleges face in meeting the needs of these students
- colleges' opinions on what high-quality provision for these students *should* look like and how that might be achieved.

The students in scope include those who dropped out of school between the ages of 14 and 16, whether as a result of exclusion, 'off-rolling', mental health issues, refusing to attend school or electing to be home educated - either as a positive

choice or because they felt coerced into doing so or that there were no other suitable alternatives.

## **Methodology**

The small-scale research project focused on four general FE colleges of different sizes and in different locations:

- Bridgwater and Taunton College
- Leeds City College
- Walsall College
- Waltham Forest College.

Face-to-face interviews were undertaken with between two and five members of staff at each college, using an agreed topic guide. Four case studies were produced to record the specific findings from each college; these are attached as annexes to this report. The findings from the case studies were then analysed to identify both common factors and areas of difference in the experiences, practice and opinions of the four colleges. Emerging findings were presented to AoC's SEND special interest group to identify if the issues raised were consistent with the experiences of members of this group.

## **2. Findings**

### **The scale of the issue**

All four colleges reported growing numbers of students enrolling who had not been in school for all or part of Key Stage 4. However, none was able to provide precise data. The lack of a specific Individual Learning Record (ILR) category to support data collection was cited as the key barrier to providing accurate numbers. The poor quality or lack of transition information also prevented the colleges from building up an accurate picture of the scale of the issue. They all described transition information provided by the pre-16 provider, local authority, or other referring agency (where students were NEET) as inadequate or patchy, although there were some examples of effective information-sharing. Some interviewees thought there was a culture of withholding information to give students the opportunity for a 'fresh start' or 'clean slate' on entering FE; others thought that information was sometimes not shared out of a concern that the college would not be prepared to take the individual if they knew the full picture.

All four colleges noted that they were heavily reliant on self-declaration. Enrolment or application interviews typically included questions about prior experience and place of learning but not all students gave full or accurate information, some deliberately so. Several interviewees mentioned that as trust built between student and staff, students might disclose more information weeks or even months into their course.

Despite the lack of accurate data, all four colleges were confident in saying that numbers of students with a disrupted experience of Key Stage 4, where the students had been educated in alternative settings, at home or NEET, were increasing year

on year. They attributed the rise to a number of factors. Several mentioned the impact of the Raising of the Participation Age, which meant students who previously would not have come to college – or engaged in any form of post-16 education - were now on roll. One college referred to a small number of such students who were attending ‘under duress’ or because ‘Mum won’t get her benefits if I don’t come to college’. They also saw the increased number of exclusions from school and increased incidence and severity of mental health issues amongst children and young people, resulting in non-attendance at school, as key factors. All four colleges had also seen rising numbers of students who had been home-schooled for all or part of Key Stage 4. While for some this had been a positive choice, for others it was as a result of recommendation or a lack of suitable provision. One college described families being misled into thinking there would be a raft of support available to help them with home schooling; another cited instances where choosing home schooling was presented as the only alternative to permanent exclusion.

Several interviewees also identified some broader societal factors as contributing to the rise in numbers of the students in scope. One suggested that an increase in social deprivation has led to more young people being involved in criminal activity, such as County Lines, which they see as having a strong correlation with disrupted schooling. Another referred to a shift in attitudes towards education amongst some groups as causing more young people, and sometimes also their families, to have a disregard for the value of education or qualifications, leading to disengagement and absenteeism.

One of the key reasons that the colleges felt confident in stating that the numbers of students with disrupted Key Stage 4 experience is rising, despite a lack of specific data, was the fact that they had needed to introduce or expand certain types of provision including:

- courses at Level 1 for students primarily without SEND
- transition programmes for students not ready to learn in a mainstream setting or not ready for a vocational course.

While this provision was not targeted exclusively at students who had been out of school during Key Stage 4, it was designed to meet their needs, along with students who had had a poor experience of KS4. Most of the colleges did not see a need to distinguish between those who had been out of school and those who had had a poor experience of school, in terms of targeting provision. Several interviewees described the impact of a poor school experience, including low attendance, frequent fixed-term exclusions, isolation or internal exclusion, and multiple managed moves between schools, as just as harmful as being out of school altogether.

### **The profile of the students**

Students were mostly frequently described as being out of school during Key Stage 4 because they were:

- not attending because they ‘hated the school environment’
- taken out of school by families because of bullying

- excluded, sometimes for violent behaviour including bringing in weapons or engaging in gang-related violence on the school premises
- 'off-rolled' into AP or home-education as an alternative to permanent exclusion
- unable to attend school regularly because of poor mental health, often with high levels of anxiety
- living in chaotic home circumstances, making education a low priority.

The students had been educated during Key Stage 4 in various non-school settings. Most commonly cited were different types of AP, some offered by the college itself, PRUs or at home. Some had been NEET. Proportions of students coming from these different settings varied depending on the nature of provision in and the demographics of the locality. For example, for one college, the majority of students known to have had a disrupted Key Stage 4 experience had been NEET in the year before starting at college; for another, the majority were progressing from their own 14 to 16 provision, which they delivered on behalf of local schools. A number of other circumstances were mentioned, including girls who had been 'on maternity leave' and young people who had been in hospital, including secure mental health provision, and on extended visits to family abroad.

Interviewees were asked to describe the students in scope with reference to their characteristics, attitudes, behaviours and needs. They spoke of students with low-level literacy and numeracy, poor social skills, low confidence and lack of self-esteem. Some students displayed a lack of maturity, which one interviewee suggested could partly be attributed to their isolation from their normally developing peers. While some students struggled with self-regulation and were sometimes violent or aggressive, others were lethargic or inattentive, often due to a lack of sleep.

Some of the students had low-level SEN. Social and emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs were particularly prevalent, although very few of the students who had been out of school had an EHC (Education, Health and Care) Plan; anxiety and self-harm were the SEMH issues most commonly mentioned. Several colleges referred to identifying previously undiagnosed needs such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia amongst these students; one interviewee expressed disbelief that the school had not picked these up earlier, given the overt nature of the signs and symptoms. The colleges were also keen to stress, however, that SEN was not the cause of low-level attainment for many of these students, and that they had the potential to achieve in the right circumstances.

Several colleges mentioned that there was a higher than average number of safeguarding concerns amongst this student group. They were also more likely to come from the more socially deprived areas served by the college. Some were living in chaotic family circumstances; some were living with family members other than their parents, including because their parents were drug-addicted and/or in prison; some were homeless and 'sofa-surfing'. A number were involved with or affiliated to gangs; many were subject to negative external influences. Three of the four colleges referred to these students often having multi-agency involvement, e.g. with child and adult mental health services (CAMHS), drugs teams, youth offending teams, social services, or street teams dealing with child sexual exploitation (CSE). This multi-

agency involvement reflected the multi-dimensional nature of their needs. One interviewee noted that the individual issues that the young people are presenting with are not new to the college but the complexity of the problems they face has changed:

*It's not uncommon now to be dealing with a student with SEN, who has mental health **and** behavioural issues. There are drug-using students with psychosis, brought on by smoking too much weed. Students with gang affiliation **and** acute mental health needs.*

In terms of protected characteristics, no one ethnicity was cited as more prevalent than another, with cohorts broadly reflecting the ethnic mix of their local area; both males and females were represented. One interviewee identified issues with gender identity as more common for these students than amongst the wider student body.

### **Learning programmes**

All the colleges offered some sort of targeted provision for students who had either been out of school during Key Stage 4 or had been poorly served by school. Three of the colleges did not differentiate between these two similar target groups, while one was offering a programme specifically for students transferring from PRUs. The provision was variously described as 'bridging' or 'transition' and focused on 'learning-readiness' and 'vocational readiness' or on getting 'back on track'. One college with significant numbers of 14 to 16-year-olds was running a 14 to 19 Achieving Together programme with pre-16 and post-16 students working side-by-side. This programme was described as 'designed for young people who have not had the best experience at school'.

In all cases, the primary purpose of the provision was to support students onto further/mainstream courses within the college. While some colleges directly enrolled students onto this targeted provision for a September start, others ran it as a safety net or back-up to catch students dropping out of other programmes (whether at the college or with other providers) who would otherwise become NEET. These courses tended to have multiple entry points.

The provision was characterised by small group sizes (ranging from four students to 15), with high staffing levels, including a range of teaching, learning support and pastoral staff. In two cases, the targeted provision was offered on a smaller campus away from the city-centre main site. The curriculum focused on a blend of personal and social development, English and maths, vocational tasters, and employability skills. Tutors described the provision as helping to build positive attitudes and behaviours for learning, develop positive relationships and build trust between students and tutors. There was a strong emphasis on routine, structure and boundaries, with a firm-but-fair approach. Much of the learning took place through practical activity and project-based learning including community-based and social action projects. Tutorial time and enrichment activities were seen as vital elements of the programme. Two of the colleges offered Princes Trust programmes to those furthest from being ready to engage in formal learning, but in both cases, these were just one aspect of the targeted provision, with other study programmes available which were funded through the standard 16 to 19 funding formula.

All four colleges noted that many students who had been out of school during Key Stage 4 enrolled directly onto mainstream provision, although it was not always possible to identify them, as explained in Section 1 above. Several described certain sectors as particularly attracting these students, including construction trades and automotive courses. One college observed that tutors in these sectors tended to have come straight from industry with expert up-to-date industry knowledge but less confidence in working with more challenging or lower attaining students. The Foundation Learning team in this particular college had offered their vocational colleagues support to design appropriate Entry 3 courses and in one vocational area, was co-delivering the course. This issue had also been identified by members of the AoC SEND special interest group.

Two of the colleges were running, or planning to introduce from September provision, to 'catch' any students who had enrolled on mainstream courses but were struggling, wanting to drop out or had been asked to leave provision elsewhere. Lack of transition information was contributing to students enrolling on mainstream courses for which they were not ready or for which they had not been offered the appropriate support; one interviewee referred to the frustration of not knowing enough to put the right support in place at the beginning of the course, describing how they felt they were 'on the back foot' from the start.

### **Support**

All four colleges had high levels of universal support services including student support/welfare teams; additional learning support staff; safeguarding teams; counsellors; youth workers; and pastoral teams. Senior managers had chosen to direct funding into these services, despite financial constraints, in recognition of the necessity of providing this kind of support and the value that they added. The colleges had come up with creative approaches to enable them to offer the services, including co-funded posts (e.g. one college had on-site police officers co-funded by the local police force and college which was allowing them to find out about students' previous convictions, where they had disclosed them, and to plan appropriate safeguarding measures). Another college had established a mental health team headed up a British Association of Counselling Professionals (BACP) qualified counsellor but staffed by trainees from counselling or psychology courses at the college or neighbouring university.

Some of the colleges had 'embedded support staff' – coaches, pastoral support officers, key workers, and behaviour support practitioners who were part of the departmental or course team, alongside tutors and learning support assistants (LSAs). They also had strong relationships and joint-working arrangements with external agencies which enabled them to coordinate support for individual students and make well-informed referrals. Some also spoke of the importance of good relationships and regular contact with parents as partners in supporting the young people.

Personal and social development was both part of the curriculum and offered in the form of one-to-one or group support in all the colleges. One college described how their student services team runs a series of workshops, e.g. on knife crime; students can opt to attend or a curriculum area can invite them in to deliver the workshop to a particular learner group, as a result of a specific incident or because one or more

students has been identified as at risk. Colleges were also using peer-led support approaches including mentoring and buddying.

### **Success factors**

All four colleges believed they were meeting the needs of the students in scope well, although with certain qualifiers. All mentioned the constraints of the funding or resources available; one senior manager reflected that the way in which staff engage with the students and support them is excellent, but that *'the structure of the provision is a work in progress because there's constantly more to do.'* They cited as evidence of the success of their provision students' increased attendance rates, qualification completion rates, positive progressions onto further courses, apprenticeships or into work and more general changes in attitude or confidence and improved relationships with staff and/or peers.

Colleges were asked to consider the factors that contributed to the success of their provision for students who had been out of school during Key Stage 4. They emphasised the importance of senior management commitment to this student group, which guided their strategic and funding decisions. For example, several colleges mentioned the policy of allowing students who had first accessed transition provision to have a third year in college, despite the reduced rate of funding available. Other senior managers had directed capital investment into developing new facilities for the provision targeted at these students, reflecting their belief that the college is responsible for serving all those within its local community, including the most disadvantaged. Senior managers were also prepared to accept the negative impact on overall attendance, completion and qualification achievement rates that often results from working with vulnerable students.

The support of middle managers across the college was also referenced; it was seen as highly beneficial for all departments to have a sense of ownership of these students, rather than perceiving them as belonging to the foundation or supported learning team.

All four colleges cited the expertise, commitment and attitude of staff working with the students. One manager described how, when recruiting staff, she prioritised attitudes, values and ability to form positive relationships with the students over prior teaching experience: *'They need empathy and passion. We have built a dynamic team who want to work with these students and are comfortable taking a creative approach.'* Others spoke of the importance of treating students with respect, and as the young adults they are.

Small group sizes were seen as critical, along with a high staff to student ratio. This might not always be a high in-class ratio, but a range of different staff available to provide support, in particular pastoral support. The emphasis of pastoral support was seen as a significant success factor, with one course leader noting *teaching and qualifications are important but they are irrelevant if we can't get them [the students] through the door or get them settled and trusting the adults around them enough to start learning.*

Interviewees described the importance of a flexible curriculum with opportunities to personalise, the strong focus on personal and social development and a learning

experience which contrasted with the approach they would have experienced at school. Some mentioned the value of working with the student as a whole person, acknowledging the complexity of their lives and addressing the full range of their needs.

All the colleges cited the importance of the provision being seen to have a clear focus on progression. It should not be seen as an end in itself, a last resort, or a place for those students no-one else wants. It must offer a springboard back into mainstream provision and towards a successful adult life. This was exemplified by one college who spoke proudly of an ex-student who had recently written to let them know that the transition course had given her the confidence to believe she could achieve and after working her way through various levels at college, she had just started a midwifery course.

### **The challenges**

The single biggest challenge cited was the insufficiency of the funding available which interviewees saw as preventing them from providing all of the necessary support and the smaller group sizes that would benefit the students. It also restricted the amount of training they could provide to help staff adopt the most effective practices and understand the issues the students face, which were seen to be constantly evolving. Just one out of the four colleges received high needs top-up funding from the local authority, which was available for their students transferring from PRUs onto their targeted transition provision; the remainder were reliant on Element 1 funding plus additional learning support funding (ALS). This was also true for all of the members of the AoC SEND special interest group.

The reduced funding for a third year in college was also seen as a barrier, either to keeping the students on at all or to offering them an appropriate programme and the right level of support. There was a sense of frustration about this issue, with some interviewees pointing out that it was illogical to invest in a foundation year for students struggling with FE, only to then expect the same students to need a single year of mainstream FE, in comparison with the two years offered to their peers. One interviewee also noted that this problem was further exacerbated because the students were not eligible for support from any employment-related agencies post-college. This meant that there was no-one to support them into work if there had been insufficient time for them to become employment-ready before leaving college. Lack of – or poor quality – transition information was also a key issue. It was preventing staff from placing students on the right courses in the first place or from putting in appropriate support from the start. Both factors increased the risk of students dropping out, becoming NEET and having their sense of being a failure once again reinforced. One interviewee described how students with disrupted Key Stage 4 experience *'can be every bit as complex as those with an EHC Plan and yet they can just turn up with no prior warning'*. Several of the colleges also noted the frequency with which they found themselves dealing with previously undiagnosed issues. They stressed that ALS was insufficient to cover the costs of carrying out the formal assessments and meeting these needs. This issue was one with which the members of the SEND special interest group were also familiar. They described how difficult it was to persuade an LA to undertake an EHC assessment in these cases; LAs were highly unlikely to issue a plan in these circumstances, making it

equally unlikely that the college would receive any high needs funding for the students.

The multi-dimensional nature of students' needs and their increasing complexity was described by some as being beyond the capacity and capability of college staff. One interviewee described how her staff are faced with issues that are 'really outside of our teaching or pastoral remit'. The severity and prevalence of mental health needs and safeguarding concerns were specifically mentioned. Over a third (50) of the students in one department offering targeted provision had live safeguarding concerns, some of them described by the head of the provision as 'very serious'. The influence of the external environment was also cited as a challenge. Where students were involved with or affiliated to gangs or where parents, other family members or peers outside of college exerted a strong negative influence, it could be difficult for colleges to provide a strong enough counterbalance to enable the young people to break away, focus on their learning, and commit to a more conventional or legal route to earning a living, for example. Several interviewees described how students were able to separate themselves from these influences while on the college premises, where they felt safe, but the pull of other influences once they were off-site could just be too great.

Existing metrics for measuring success were seen as inappropriate for accurately measuring the impact or value of the provision or the outcomes for the students. For example, students on one targeted programme had, on average, doubled their attendance from that at school – but this was still dragging down the college's overall attendance figures. A course leader from another college observed,

*Even if they are low-attending, we try to keep with them, build that up, find out why, work with parents, just keep trying. The data may not show this – but the value added is enormous.*

Although there was no evidence of this in the four colleges visited, staff interviewed felt that the potential for negative impact on overall success measures for the college was making some colleges risk-averse and disincentivising them from prioritising these students.

One senior manager also commented on the push from government for FE to focus on Level 3 and above. Given the growing numbers of young people in their locality working at Level 2 and below, the college needed to expand rather than reduce provision at lower levels, and yet this made them seem to be deliberately acting at odds with government policy. She observed that, '*We have to meet them where they are at and take them on a journey towards those higher levels*'.

While student behaviour was described as a challenge, with violent behaviour particularly mentioned, it was seen as a lesser issue than those raised above. All four of the colleges were prepared to exclude students for violence - and drug-dealing on the premises - on the principle that they had a duty to protect students and staff. However, all also had staff trained in behaviour management who were skilled in de-escalation techniques and some had behaviour specialists within their wider team. One college did not accept students who required restraint; this was also true of most of the members of the AoC SEND special interest group.

### **3. A vision for high-quality post-16 provision for students who were out of school during Key Stage 4**

The colleges were asked to describe their vision for high-quality provision for this student group. All saw GFEs as the natural home of this provision and what they described was remarkably similar across the four colleges - and not radically different from their existing approach. Rather it was a version of their existing practice with extra or refined features made possible by additional funding and with some of the challenges identified above ironed out. They spoke of

- a systematic approach to data-sharing at transition that provides the college with the information they need to place students on the right course, shape their programme and put the right support in place from day one
- bespoke programmes, including a variety of enrichment activities, which help students develop their personal, social and employability skills, widen their horizons, raise their aspirations and allow them to progress successfully to a mainstream programme suited to their interests and abilities
- small group sizes and one-to-one coaching and mentoring relationships
- trained, specialist, multi-disciplinary staff with access to high quality welfare services reflecting the need to nurture staff as well as students
- fit-for-purpose facilities with space for one-to-ones, cooling down areas and small group working
- the option for a fully-funded third year for students without an EHC Plan who have needed time to adjust to college and after two years are continuing to make good progress
- post-college employment services for which the students would be eligible that can provide advice, guidance, and where necessary, job coaching to help the students into employment
- better metrics for measuring the success of targeted provision for these students, including a focus on distance travelled
- one or more ILR categories to help track the progress of these students and compare achievements and impact with other student groups, courses or providers.

### **4. Conclusions**

All four colleges had carefully planned provision, in the form of targeted programmes and support for students on these programmes as well as for those on mainstream courses, which was designed to ease the transition into college of students who had been out of school or had a poor experience of school during Key Stage 4. They

had no firm data that enabled them to quantify the number of such students on roll, but they felt certain that numbers were rising.

They saw themselves as serving these students well, within the constraints of the limited funding available and despite a number of systemic problems (e.g. inappropriate success measures and poor transition information) and despite the rising numbers of such students and their increasingly complex needs. Some were concerned that they would not be able to keep doing this, if these current trends continued and no additional funding was made available.

All saw working with students who had been previously out of school or had a bad experience of school as part of a GFE college's core business. Two colleges spoke of the benefits of colleges' starting early, working with 14 to 16-year-olds, rather than waiting to take remedial action post-16. Their overall position is best summed up by a transition provision manager from one of the four colleges:

*There shouldn't be post-16 AP providers. They [the students] need to be in the mainstream. You can't marginalise them for ever; they've got to integrate back in to mainstream society at some point. We can do that in FE but we need more funding to support them well.*

## **5. Recommendations**

Based on the colleges' vision for high-quality post-16 provision for students who were out of school during Key Stage 4, AoC makes the following recommendations:

- i. College access to additional funding to bring post-16 provision in line with funding rates for pre-16 alternative provision.
- ii. Formulation of agreed guidance or protocols regarding information sharing between pre and post-16 providers.
- iii. A fully funded third year for all students (not just those progressing to T Levels) who need some kind of transition provision at the start of their FE experience.
- iv. An ILR category that identifies students who were out of school during KS4 to help track funding and progress.

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents nearly 95% of the 251 colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

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