

Level 2 study programmes

Ofsted research into the curriculum on level 2 study programmes.

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HMCI commentary

Every year, around 900,000 students aged 16 to 18 take level 3 courses, primarily A levels and other academic qualifications. A smaller group – around 170,000 – takes level 2 qualifications. Most take their level 2 courses in general further education colleges.

While there are fewer level 2 than level 3 students, they should be given greater attention than they have received to date. These are students with unrealised potential: most will be able to go on to level 3 or go on to begin their careers. These are also students for whom curriculum design is exceptionally important. The majority will not have secured five good GCSEs and will often have gaps in English and mathematics. They are at a crucial juncture. Their lifelong employability depends on their teachers' ability to redirect their education into a subject that stimulates and motivates them. Those teachers need college leaders to create the conditions in which this can happen. These students also need a grounding in literacy and numeracy that is secure enough to satisfy future employers.

However, level 2 students have often been less visible than others in the post-16 system. In the corridors of Whitehall and Westminster, they risk being seen as 'other people's children'. As a result, they have been overshadowed by the larger and better understood majority who progress directly onto level 3 study after completing GCSEs.

I've commented before on the extent to which our education system has become dominated by a focus on qualifications. This leaves less space for thinking about the real core of education: the curriculum. Partly because of the way the sector has historically been funded, this way of thinking is endemic in further education (FE).

This focus on assessment without consideration for curriculum has been particularly constraining for level 2 study programmes. The principle that study programmes were based on was to design a programme suited to the students' needs. The reality in the colleges we visited was that options were narrow and flexibility was limited. This is largely driven by the 'straitjacket' of qualifications. Level 2 study programmes have some extras around the edges, but in practice are often dominated by the syllabuses of the main qualification, albeit with English and mathematics teaching added on too.

Level 2 study programmes serve a group of students who have diverse baseline knowledge and skills, compared to those studying at higher levels. A number of colleges spoke to us about the difficulties in knowing what to expect from students based on their GCSE grades. Our research showed a large variation in GCSE grades. Fourteen per cent of students had no passes (at grade G or above) at all, 17% had five standard passes (at grade C or above) and all the rest were liberally scattered in between.

Moreover, while a grade A* tells you a lot about what a student knows, i.e. they have a good understanding covering the vast majority of the curriculum, a grade D

tells you much less. Two students with a grade D might have got the same marks but answered none of the same questions correctly: the gaps in knowledge from one student to the next can be very different. This may in part explain why the entry criteria to level 2 study programmes differs so dramatically between colleges.

There are also very different levels of commitment from students. Some students told us that they had chosen their course to pursue a career in that sector. However, a large majority of students (64%) chose their course for other reasons. Some had had their hand forced by low grades.

I am therefore concerned about the number of courses on offer that college leaders know do not lead to good local employment. In this research, we found many colleges collecting little data about learners' destinations. However, those that did were able to give us a view about which courses had the best and worst employment prospects.

Many of these views reflected local context. For example, 'sport' and 'travel' were identified as having good prospects for employment in some local areas and poor prospects in others. Art and media courses were generally perceived to give the least chance of gaining employment within those industries. However, at least three of the colleges we surveyed reported these courses as having the most applicants. I am concerned that colleges sometimes give false hope to potential applicants about the employment possibilities within an industry. Course adverts often list jobs in the arts, which are unlikely to be available to the vast majority of learners, but underplay the value of other skills these courses develop.

We found that colleges recognised that because a sizeable proportion of students choose their courses in less than ideal circumstances, students can sometimes have little understanding of the courses they are taking up. Schools need to do much more to inform all students about the new vocational routes, so that any student who enters a college comes better prepared. Allowing FE providers access to schools to advertise their services to pupils is now a requirement under law, thanks to the Baker clause. Even if this basic information from schools were to improve, however, students will still need the opportunity to change their minds. One college had introduced a carousel of courses to give students a taster of different industries. The government's intention to provide a transition offer to support as many students as possible to complete T levels could be a prime opportunity to expand this principle. Students without a clear understanding of what they wanted to do next could do a broader curriculum, doing shorter modules across a much wider number of industries.

Government policy requires English and mathematics to be part of all study programmes for learners without a grade C or 4. This has been contentious because putting it into practice has been challenging for some providers. In this study, we found that many colleges were working hard and spending a considerable amount of money to deliver these subjects in ways that were relevant to learners' vocational subjects. This was leading to improvements. Nearly eight out of 10 students we

surveyed said that their English and mathematics skills had improved a fair amount. Around one in four believed they had improved a lot.

This focus and effort, however, has had very little effect on the proportions of students getting good passes in these subjects. National data for 2017/18 on pass rates for resits of English and mathematics at GCSE remains discouraging.¹ Twenty-four per cent of those who did not already have a good pass in English got one. It was only 19% for mathematics. In our 2015/16 Annual Report, we highlighted that while we believe the government's policy on continued English and mathematics study is well intentioned, it is not having the desired impact. These results suggest that this may still be the case.

Many level 2 students therefore need flexibility in the time it takes to move onto their next step. For many students, level 2 is effectively the first year of a three-year course. However, there is a sizeable subset who needs longer than a year to achieve a level 2 and others go from one level 2 course to another. There are also those who do not need an extra year and might in fact be disadvantaged by it. These groups of students should find themselves equally well-served and able to make choices about their programme to reflect their pace of learning. More flexibility might also result in some students finding that they are able to progress more quickly.

An important part of this study was to look at examples of really good curriculum design. We found that the colleges that were thinking most deeply about curriculum did three important things:

- They worked intensively with local employers to design and implement curricula that would set learners up for good local jobs. College leaders told us that in some of their strongest programmes, employers play a crucial role in shaping the strategic focus. Employers are then involved in designing and contributing to how colleges deliver the curriculum. Examples of this included giving talks, hosting visits to the workplace and advising on the programme content to reflect current industry practice.
- They recognised the importance of personal, social and employability skills. For many level 2 students, not reaching a good pass in any GCSEs results in a sense of failure and dents their self-belief and confidence. A high proportion of these students are likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds. Teachers' priorities were to get students to experience success, as well as address students' habits and attitudes to secure a positive next step. Students appreciated this level of support. They saw it as one of the features of college that led them to prefer it to school.
- They evaluated the benefits of their study programmes by properly tracking students' destinations and feeding that back into curriculum design. We spoke to staff about the criteria used to evaluate study programmes. Most

¹ A level and other 16 to 18 results: 2017 to 2018 (provisional), National Statistics, October 2018, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results-2017-to-2018-provisional.

staff saw qualification achievement rates on the main vocational qualification as the primary measure of course quality, rather than students' destinations. In contrast, only one college identified 'developing learners' work skills and behaviours for employment' as the most important measure of quality. A college that had unusually high proportions of students going onto apprenticeships had achieved this because it had set progression to apprenticeships as a strategic goal. It had used data on destinations to track whether its re-designed curriculum had been successful in steering more students towards this route. Other colleges had the data to be able to track this, but did not have the clear goal, had not set the same the internal targets and had not seen the same results.

Overall, what we found suggests that level 2 curricula need to be designed in line with the intended destination for learners, not simply to get them a qualification. Colleges can help those students who know what career they want by thinking about what students need to know to make the step to level 3. This is particularly the case for T levels but also for apprenticeships or academic study. Qualifications are important, but they become a barrier when they stop colleges from looking past the syllabus to what students need to learn. When it comes to students who are less sure what they want to do, colleges can help by having a better curriculum to broaden the options in level 2. Through T levels, the government has the opportunity to set a new direction and bring back curriculum as the central principle behind education for these young people.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Department for Education (DfE) should provide guidance to colleges on what information they should publish on their websites about student destinations, including proportions entering relevant employment. Even in the absence of guidance, colleges should do this better.

Recommendation 2: Colleges should review their current minimum requirements for level 2 and level 3 study programmes to ensure that they are appropriate, and strike the right balance between learners being able to complete courses and learners having access to those courses in the first place.

Recommendation 3: All colleges should engage actively with employers. This should include greater use of employers to co-design and implement aspects of the curriculum and assess learners, as outlined in the Wolf report.²

Recommendation 4: College teachers should be fully up to date with the practices and jobs available in their industry. They should ensure that resources and the curriculum reflect current industry standards and practices.

² Review of vocational education: the Wolf report, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Department for Education, March 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report

Recommendation 5: Work experience placements should be relevant to the learners' programme of study. Teachers should make sure that learners reflect on the knowledge and skills they develop during these. Employers should give feedback on learners' performance on the work placement.

Recommendation 6: The DfE should consider our evidence that the majority of learners feel that they are making progress with English and mathematics, though only a quarter are getting a good GCSE pass when they re-sit the exam. They should evaluate the impact of the policy of requiring students to continue to study English and mathematics and take a GCSE.

Recommendation 7: Colleges should give learners clear feedback on their progress through their study programme, to help build confidence and self-esteem. They should also emphasise to learners the personal, social and employability skills they develop during their level 2 study programme.

Recommendation 8: The curriculum for study programmes should not be restricted by an excessive focus on qualification outcomes. Evaluation of the quality of the study programmes should take into account a broad range of measures, including destinations.

Recommendation 9: The DfE should help students understand the value of study programmes by developing and publishing comprehensive data on the proportions of students who progress into different industries from each type of programme.

Recommendation 10: Colleges should evaluate whether level 2 learners improve their progression into careers by progressing to a level 3 study programme. Colleges should align the level 2 study programme curricula to relevant apprenticeships where available. They should promote the apprenticeships to learners.

Background

Why did we do this report?

1. Ofsted is carrying out a programme of research on the curriculum at all stages of education. We published a commentary on the primary and secondary curriculum in October 2017³ and a report on the Reception curriculum in November 2017.⁴ We published a commentary on phase 2 of our curriculum

³ Recent primary and secondary curriculum research, Ofsted, October 2017; www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmcis-commentary-october-2017.

⁴ Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools, Ofsted, November 2017; www.gov.uk/government/publications/reception-curriculum-in-good-and-outstanding-primary-schools-bold-beginnings.

research in schools in September 2018.⁵ We are continuing our work on how we will assess the curriculum in the new education inspection framework.

2. This research explored the curriculum that colleges have developed for level 2 study programmes. This included looking at the various influences on the design of these programmes and whether colleges design a curriculum with a clear understanding of how it will benefit their students. We have focused on level 2 study programmes because they are an under-explored area of provision. They have not received the same attention as level 3 study programmes in the reforms to vocational education that are currently taking place.
3. The government is developing T levels.⁶ 'T levels' are new technical study programmes. They will sit alongside apprenticeships within a reformed skills training system. This will result in fundamental changes to the 16 to 19 curriculum. A levels already offer a range of highly valued options after the end of key stage 4 for students wishing to pursue an academic route. T levels are intended for students who want to follow a vocational route that students, parents/carers and employers perceive as comparing well with academic study.
4. In its action plan published in October 2017, the government also noted that it intends to create a 'transition year'. This is for those students leaving key stage 4 who are not yet ready to progress directly on to a T level. The government action plan sets this out as follows:

We are also considering what a transition year will consist of. It will provide an offer for 16-year-olds who leave the school system with low or no qualifications so that they can develop the skills they need to progress to further education or employment.⁷

5. At present, students leaving school without good passes in their GCSEs will often take up level 2 study programmes. Therefore, the government can use learning from current practice in level 2 programmes to help design the transition offer.

What have we learned from our wider curriculum work?

6. A main finding from our research programme to date is that the education sector has lost its understanding of curriculum. The 'Review of vocational

⁵ Curriculum and the new education inspection framework, Ofsted, September 2018; www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmci-commentary-curriculum-and-the-new-education-inspection-framework.

⁶ 'Education Secretary announces first new T Levels', October 2017; www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-announces-first-new-t-levels.

⁷ 'Post-16 technical education reforms: T level action plan', Department for Education, October 2017; www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education.

education: the Wolf report’ (2011) also recognises this.⁸ There is no way of determining precisely what has caused this. However, one factor is likely to be that the government and the accountability system, including Ofsted, gave a lower level of priority to the curriculum.

7. Because of this impoverished understanding of curriculum, we found a common practice of conflating assessment – and specifically examinations – with the curriculum. The curriculum is not just about assessment. Assessment should exist to serve the aims of the curriculum, informing educators about how well these aims have succeeded. However, it has become common practice to view the examination syllabus as the curriculum. The weakness in this approach is that examinations only sample what should be learned. They do not cover the whole domain. Using the examination syllabus as the curriculum is a narrow view of what students should learn. An educational culture has developed in which the achievement of qualifications has become a blunt and simplistic proxy for measuring the quality of education.
8. We have tried to consider level 2 study programmes in a way that focuses on what students should learn, rather than the qualification. This is not always straightforward. The context of policy and accountability (including Ofsted’s) for colleges is so driven by qualifications that a focus away from assessment requires deliberate attention.

What is a level 2 study programme?

9. Level 2 relates to the national framework for all qualifications. Because all qualifications test knowledge or competence at a specific level, there is a framework that sets out the level of challenge in that assessment. Level 1 is a GCSE below a good pass. Level 8 is a PhD.

Table 1: Guide to qualifications and credit framework/national qualifications framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Level	Description
1	Secondary education initial entry into employment or further education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GCSE – grades 3, 2, 1 or grades D, E, F, G • Vocational qualifications – level 1
2	Progression to skilled employment Continuation of secondary education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NVQ level 2 • Vocational qualifications level 2 • GCSE – grades 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4 or grades A*, A, B, C • intermediate apprenticeship • level 2 award

⁸ ‘Review of vocational education: the Wolf report’, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Department for Education, March 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report.

3	<p>Qualified/skilled worker, Entry to higher education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AS and A Level • level 3 diploma • level 3 award • level 3 NVQ • Advanced apprenticeship
4	<p>Specialised education appropriate for higher education and technical jobs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • level 4 diploma • Higher apprenticeship • Certificate of higher education • Higher national certificate • level 4 NVQ
5	<p>High level of expertise and competence, entry to professional graduate employment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diploma of higher education • Foundation degree • level 5 NVQ
6	<p>Higher education postgraduate certificates and advanced skills training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational qualifications level 6 • Honours degree • Graduate certificate or diploma
7	<p>Highly developed complex professional knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated master's degree • NVQ level 7 • Postgraduate certificate • level 7 award
8	<p>Leading experts or practitioners with in-depth knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PhD • Vocational qualifications level 8

* Adapted from a table by Ofqual

10. All students are required to take part in education and training to the age of 18. Between the ages of 16 and 19, learners are required to follow a study programme or start an apprenticeship or traineeship. These requirements were introduced to build on recommendations from the Wolf review.⁹

11. Many learners will follow a level 3 academic or vocational study programme post-16. Others will follow a vocational level 2 programme. A small number will study at level 1. A study programme is defined as a level 2 study programme if the main qualification is a level 2 qualification. A study programme is tailored to the learner, but should ordinarily include:

- a main qualification in a specific vocational area

⁹ 'Review of vocational education: the Wolf report', Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Department for Education, March 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report.

- English and mathematics qualifications for students who have yet to achieve a grade C/4 in these subjects
 - information, advice and guidance (IAG)¹⁰ before and during the study programme
 - identification of and provision for specific learning difficulties or disabilities
 - individual tutorials to monitor and review progress
 - group tutorials, covering topics common to all level 2 study programmes as well as those bespoke to the curriculum area/group of students
 - work experience or work-related learning
 - other vocationally relevant activities such as visits to employers, guest speakers and additional qualifications
 - cross-college enrichment opportunities.
12. Level 2 programmes principally perform two roles. First, to prepare learners for work who already have a clear vocational preference but little or no training in it. Second, to address the wider needs of learners who are not yet ready for level 3 qualifications or to commit to a specific vocational route. Our research explores both of these roles.
13. In the current system, the fact that most learners do not aim to study a level 2 programme beyond age 16 may have contributed to lower regard for vocational qualifications. Most learners aim to get level 2 qualifications (usually in the form of good GCSEs) at school. Those who want to progress to vocational education will normally aim to do a level 3 programme. This may create an impression that level 2 courses are only ever suitable for students who have low educational achievement.
14. However, this is not always the case. Many of the students on these courses do have qualifications at either level 2 or higher. For example, one could have a PhD and still need to start studying bricklaying at the beginning. An academically gifted learner who achieved well at GCSE could have a passion for a vocational subject that they could not do at school and therefore want to start at level 2.
15. English and mathematics form a major part of most level 2 study programmes. Since 2014, any student who has not achieved a GCSE at grade C (or grade 4 or above) in English and mathematics by the age of 16 must continue to study for a qualification in these subjects. As a result, most students on level 2 study programmes continue to study these subjects.

¹⁰ IAG, or information, advice and guidance, are integral to the provision educational providers make for ensuring their learners are supported to make informed choices about their careers and next steps into education, training or employment.

Research findings

What do we know about level 2 study programmes, who does them and why?

16. In 2016/17, there were 179,000 students taking level 2 vocational qualifications in the 16 to 19 age range. Students taking level 2 vocational qualifications are more likely to be male than female (99,000 versus 75,000).
17. There is limited national data on the characteristics of students on level 2 study programmes. However, it is a common view in the sector that these students are disproportionately from the cohort of pupils in schools who are harder to teach and who have barriers to learning. This includes students:
 - with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)
 - from disadvantaged backgrounds
 - who are looked after or have left care
 - who are less academically able.
18. One college described its students as follows:

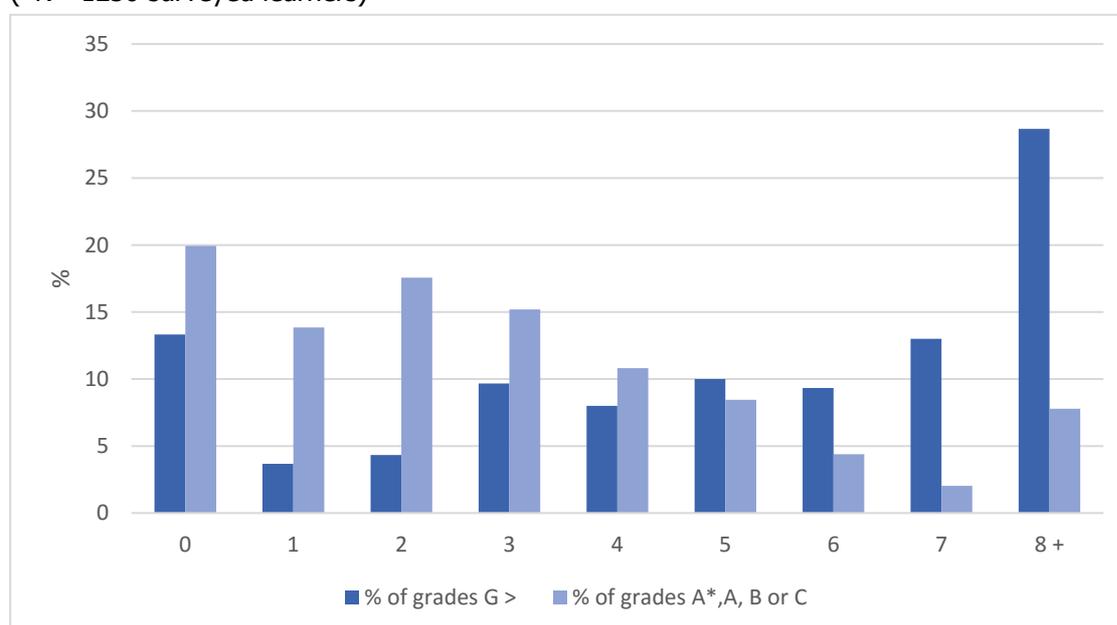
Most level 2 learners share certain characteristics. Many have failed to meet their targets in previous educational settings and have low confidence and self-esteem. Attainment in English and mathematics is often poor. Learners' expectations are low. Their behaviour and self-discipline on arriving at college are challenging. There has been an increase in mental health issues, such as anxiety. There is a decline in learners' ability to talk to customers and clients. Staff have to develop this from a low level, including how to communicate using different styles and body language. Parental and carer support is often minimal for the most disadvantaged students, who may have a range of pastoral support needs. There are large variations by geography across the region and often parochial viewpoints of students from specific locations.

19. As part of our research, we sought the views of students who were either on a level 2 study programme in 2016/17 or had completed one in 2015/16. We had responses from 1,250 students. Of these, 70% were on a level 2 study programme and 30% had completed one the previous academic year. This was an entirely self-selecting group of respondents and therefore may not be representative of level 2 students overall.
20. Those who responded to our survey described themselves as follows:
 - Those who had completed their programme were mostly 18-year-olds (59%), but there was a sizeable minority aged 20 and over (14%).
 - Those currently on a level 2 course were primarily aged 17 or 18 (73%), and a few were 19 (15%).

- Of those who had completed their programme, 7% classed themselves as having a learning disability. For those still on the programme, this figure was 12%. This is lower than the proportion nationally for students on full level 2 courses, which is 19%.¹¹ The incidence of learning disabilities in the school population is 5%.¹²
- Around 14% across both cohorts had no GCSEs before starting college and 22% had no GCSEs at grades A* to C.
- Around 19% across both cohorts had five or more GCSEs grades A* to C.

Chart 1: The number of GCSE qualifications of learners before they started college in 2016/17

(*N= 1250 surveyed learners)



21. When asked why they chose their course, a large majority of students (53%) said they chose it according to their understanding of what the subject area entails: either because they had done it in school and liked it, because they needed it for their chosen job or career or because they thought it aligned with their interests. That leaves a much smaller (27%) but still considerable proportion who were on their course for other reasons.
22. Around one third of respondents chose their course because they believed it would help them in their career. This was a particular consideration for those on health, public service and care courses (52%). Those studying science and mathematics, and agriculture, horticulture and animal care were also more likely to have been influenced by career prospects. In contrast, employment

¹¹ Further education and skills data, Department for Education and Education and Skills Funding Agency; www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-further-education-and-skills.

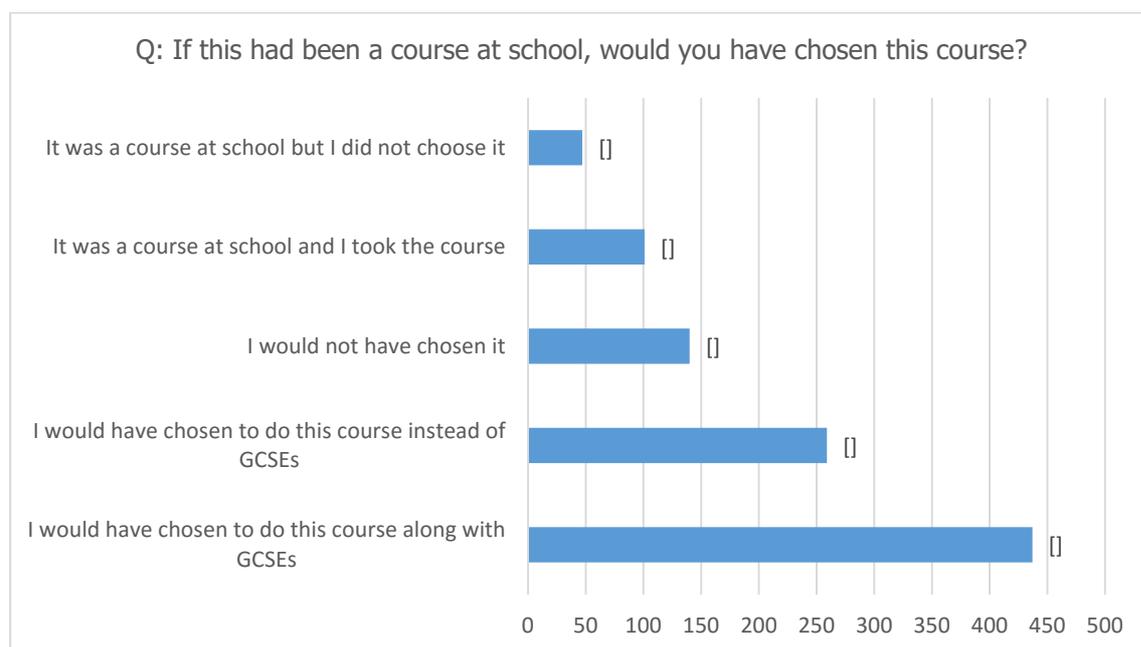
¹² Special educational needs in England: January 2017, National Statistics, July 2017; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2017.

prospects were less of a consideration for students on arts, media and publishing courses (17%), for whom personal strength, interest and enjoyment were of particular influence.

23. Over two thirds of students would have pursued their level 2 subject while at school if the option had been open to them. Only one in five felt that vocational studies were not for them while at school.

Chart 2: Students' course choices on level 2 courses 2015/16

(*N=370 surveyed learners)



24. Students who were interviewed as part of this research were generally more positive about college than school. Commonly cited reasons for this were that they had greater independence and freedom and that they felt they were treated like an adult. There was a lot of reflection on social aspects, but these were unsurprisingly personal and depended very much on whether the student had made friends and fitted in. Some favoured these courses because they preferred studying a single subject in depth. Others liked the wide range of options available. Comments about the quality of teaching and support again were very mixed and showed a wide range of experiences.
25. We asked the students who were currently studying which subjects they liked most and least while at school. Fifteen per cent of those who responded said that either English or mathematics was their favourite subject. Thirty-four per cent said either was their least favourite subject. Mathematics, in particular, was described as 'hard', 'boring', 'too complicated', 'confusing' or 'stressful', or students said they were 'not good at it'. Some of the respondents described it more colourfully as 'hell' or 'just a long lengthy process' or said they disliked it because (accurately) 'it had numbers'. A particularly reflective response summed it up as: 'Hard to grasp. Didn't try hard enough.'

26. Across all subjects, dislike of the GCSE was almost universally linked to either the students' lack of interest in the subject or the difficulty they had in grasping the subject matter. It is understandable that students who have failed in a GCSE might say to others that studying it was irrelevant. However, our evidence suggests this may have more to do with students being bruised by the experience of failure than a genuinely held view. Nearly eight out of 10 students we surveyed indicated that their English and mathematics skills had improved a fair amount and around one in four believed they had improved a lot, even if this had not led to a good pass.
27. There were contrasts between what students who had completed their level 2 study and those still doing it were most proud of. Unsurprisingly, being proud of completing the course and progressing to level 3 was a very common response from those who had done it. Those still studying at level 2 were more likely to talk about growing in confidence and meeting new people. From both groups, around one in three respondents said what they had learned was their source of pride. Around one in five mentioned knowledge gained as what they were proud of (including many students who used the word 'knowledge') and of skill or personal development.

Choosing the right level 2 course

28. Nationally, the achievement rate for level 2 qualifications taken by 18-year-olds in 2016/17 was 81%.¹³ This means that more than one in five of the courses that students started did not result in them completing and passing their qualification. While some of this is due to students not passing courses, there are also many who do not make it to the end of the year.
29. Some of the reasons learners drop out of courses are individual to that learner. For example, one college described increasing mental health issues being an issue. Students, particularly those with pre-existing conditions, were not able to cope with the different, busier environment in college. One college attributed drop-outs to factors such as students becoming care leavers at the age of 18 and coming under financial pressure, or others facing an expectation from family that they would start earning. It was not clear how colleges were collaborating with the local authority to ensure that students who drop out of the college are not being lost from education. The local authority is responsible for making sure that all young people take part in education or training until 18.
30. The most significant factor in drop-outs, or indeed in students taking another level 2 study programme the following year, is that some students find they have made the wrong choice of course. Students who start courses with little notion of what the course entails sometimes find that it is more demanding than, or simply different to, what they expected. The common view of the

¹³ Further education and skills: national achievement rates tables: June 2017, Department for Education; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-achievement-rates-tables-2015-to-2016.

colleges we visited was that the high proportion of students who ended up on the wrong course was due to practices in schools. Many of the college leaders we met expressed concerns about the IAG offered by local schools. In general, it was viewed as weak and especially poor about alternatives to A levels. They also complained that they struggled to create the strong relationships with schools that would enable them to directly advise young people on technical options. One inspector-researcher related the college's description of its relationship with local schools:

Lower achievers are steered to the college. College staff find that school careers staff, often provided by contract, do not understand the nature of level 2 study programmes, particularly in vocational areas. In general, these staff have a poor understanding of the nature and needs of the course, including the demands of the English and mathematics elements. In addition, they do not understand the learning environment in which the students will work, particularly its focus on providing as close an environment to the work one as possible.

31. We looked at the inspection reports of 121 secondary schools that were published between February 2016 and January 2018. Nearly half of the sixth-form section of the reports specifically mentioned advice and guidance about apprenticeships. Around three quarters commented on the effectiveness of provision for students not choosing higher education options. Almost all of these comments were positive. However, inspectors commented on the promotion of college-based routes and apprenticeships for 11- to 16-year-olds much less frequently: in around one in seven reports. When inspectors did see strengths in provision for key stages 3 and 4 students, they mentioned a varied and comprehensive range of advice and guidance. This included advice on further education (FE), employment, training and apprenticeships. Equally, a common weakness inspectors saw was the narrowness of information given to older students. This did not inform these students of all the opportunities available when they make their choices for post-16. This suggests that colleges are right in saying that some, but not all, schools are not promoting choices widely.
32. The government accepted a clause added by Lord Baker to the Technical and Further Education Act 2017. This required schools to allow colleges access to students to give them information about technical options and apprenticeships. It came into force from January 2018. This is a positive step. It should go some way to opening doors for colleges and independent learning providers in those schools that have not been welcoming to date.
33. We have frequently commented in the past on how IAG in schools is too often poor quality, although improving nationally. We found this again in this study. However, we also found that some colleges also fell short in this respect. Too often, they did not offer enough advice on what students can expect to achieve after taking part in specific programmes.

34. Colleges were keen to tell us about the work that they did to help students to choose the right courses. As we would expect, most college leaders reported that they invested heavily in helping learners make their decisions. Advice was often given by specialist staff, qualified to provide independent advice and guidance, or by teaching staff. Since teachers on vocational courses had often worked in the industry, they had a good understanding of the jobs that students could potentially progress into. Colleges commonly offered pre-course materials that described the features of the programme, open days, taster sessions and visits from employers. Another inspector-researcher reported:

Students can use career development software independently to explore their options. All students have an account for using this software and staff monitor its use by students. Ex-students are also encouraged to speak to existing students about careers they chose and talk about their progress. Guest speakers from large employers such as Barclays, local hospitals, construction and a large accountancy firm make students aware of the career opportunities with them. Staff deliver progression guidance through talks in February, in good time for students to explore various options. The advice and guidance are impartial. Staff explore with students options such as apprenticeships, university and volunteering, and stress the importance of developing a range of transferable skills that they can use in various employment sectors. As a result, more girls are going into careers in construction and engineering. Ongoing career advice and guidance are working well with the students. The student services team provides careers induction at the start of their programmes. Seven well-qualified IAG advisers provide themed sessions on a particular sector, such as public services and health. Students have an opportunity to seek one-to-one IAG sessions for an in-depth consultation. Parents are given a study programme pack for their child and a regular report is sent to them. They also contribute to the career choices of their children.

35. In this study, we did not independently test the quality of colleges' careers IAG. However, we did carry out a partial review of the courses that each college offered through its website. For all of the courses we reviewed, websites only provided information about the content of the main vocational qualification being completed. They did not cover the curriculum offer for the full study programme. Very few websites gave information about what role employers played in the study programme.
36. The information on colleges' websites about what learners could expect to progress onto following their level 2 study programme was also very limited. What was most common was a list of possible, and sometimes unrealistic, careers to which learners could aspire. In most cases, these were careers and jobs that required study at level 3 and above, but this was not made explicit.
37. Our analysis was restricted to particular courses. We did not review every course for every college. However, it is still notable that we did not find good

examples of colleges giving students specific and tangible information about achievable destinations.

38. Some colleges had acknowledged that students may not be in a position to make the optimal choice by allowing them to change course within the first few weeks of study. However, two colleges went further. These colleges used curriculum time to expose students to a range of vocational areas. One college had created a carousel of vocational choices to help students get a taste for curriculum areas that they may not have been previously familiar with.
39. In the context of T levels, some students may need a structured opportunity to sample different industry areas – through proper curriculum time and not brief acquaintance through IAG – before committing to a demanding qualification.

Recommendation 1: The Department for Education (DfE) should provide guidance to colleges on which information they should publish on their websites about student destinations, including proportions entering relevant employment. Even in the absence of guidance, colleges should do this better.

Entry requirements

40. As set out above, level 2 students hold a very wide range of GCSEs in terms of number and grades. Some level 2 students have a large number of GCSEs and high grades. In the main, however, students have fewer than five GCSEs and many below a good pass.
41. In terms of starting points in the student cohort, this presents a particularly challenging picture. An A* grade (or grade 9) gives a degree of certainty about what a student knows because they will have had to learn almost all of the domain to achieve that grade. But a D, E, F or G grade (or a 4 to 1 grade) tells very little about what the student actually knows or is capable of. The grade does not provide any insight into which aspects of the domain tested the student knew, only that there were gaps. Two students with E grades could have taken the same test but answered none of the same questions correctly.
42. As part of our research, we reviewed the entry requirements set by the colleges we visited. Thirteen colleges set minimum requirements for students to enrol onto specific courses. Requirements varied widely.
43. In a sample of minimum requirements for entry on to a level 2 study programme in health and social care, each of the following was identified by at least one college:¹⁴
 - four GCSEs at grade D, including English and mathematics

¹⁴ At the time of the review, colleges were still using the old grading system for entry requirements rather than the 9–1 grades.

- four GCSEs at grades A to D, including English
 - four GCSEs at grade D
 - GCSEs at grade D, including English and mathematics
 - GCSEs at grades A to G, including English and mathematics
 - level 1 English or four GCSEs at grade D, including English
 - level 1 literacy and numeracy
 - operating at or above level 1 English and mathematics
 - no entry criteria given.
44. We also considered the entry criteria that colleges set for level 3 study programmes. We found wide variations in these as well. For example, two colleges stipulated that students wishing to start a level 3 course needed to have passed English and mathematics GCSE at grade C/4, but others did not.
45. This means that students applying to these two colleges may be placed on a level 2 study programme despite having achieved well enough to begin a level 3 programme in another college. This could be affecting students negatively in one of two ways:
- a student could go straight onto level 3 without the foundations they need, struggle and drop out
 - a student could waste a year on a level 2 course when they could have made good progress with more challenging work.
46. We saw no pattern in this variation that reflected the level of performance, or the reputation, of the college. This variation may be because of different approaches to managing the risk that some students may not achieve their qualifications. A more demanding admission criteria may indicate that a college is more risk-averse. Colleges with higher entry requirements may be seeking to protect students from further failure if they are on a study programme that is too challenging.
47. Alternatively, it may be a by-product of the lack of assurance about students' level of knowledge that GCSEs provide at the bottom end of the grade profile. Very wide divergence in what students can do could lead different colleges to come to different conclusions about what can be expected from students with a given combination of GCSEs.
48. Colleges said that to determine whether a student would be successful on a level 2 course, they must carefully assess the student's prior attainment in English and mathematics. For example, staff in one college described the college's 'Right learner, right course' approach. During the first three weeks of the academic year, they used a wide range of strategies and careful assessment of each student to make sure that they ended up on the right course at the right level. In another college, students completed an online

assessment during enrolment that allowed staff to choose the most appropriate English and mathematics courses. Students also completed a piece of free writing.

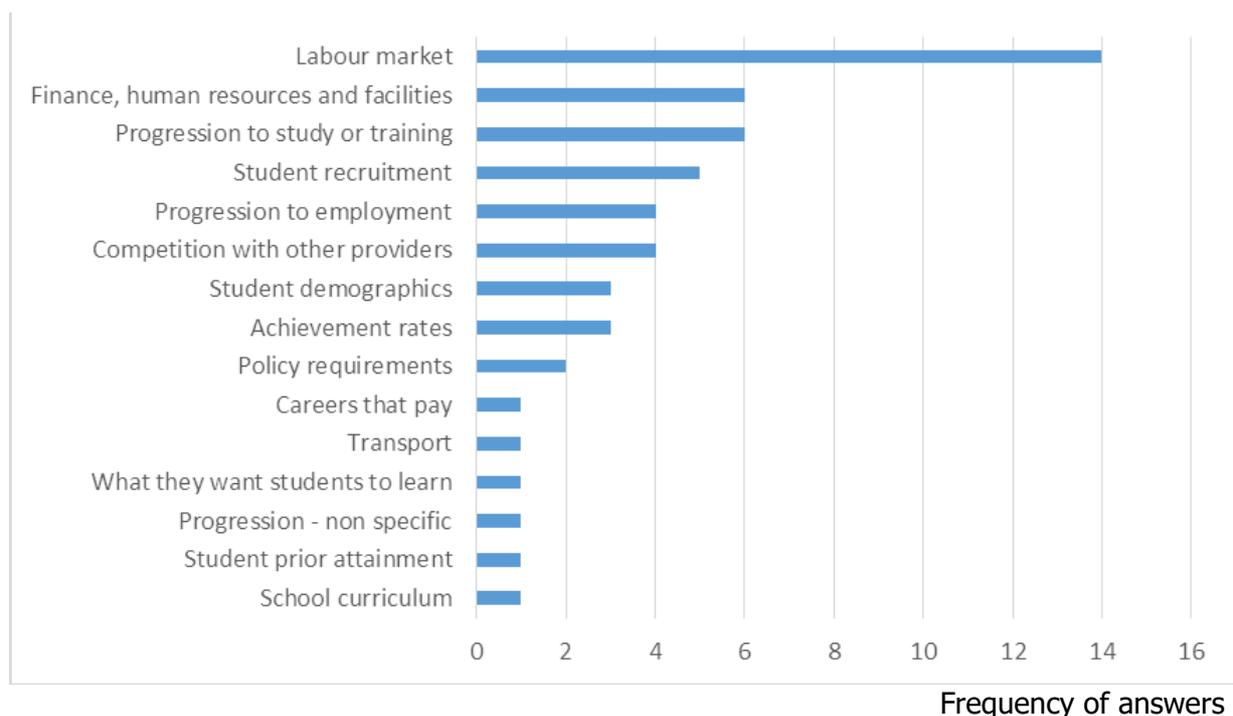
Recommendation 2: Colleges should review their current minimum requirements for level 2 and level 3 study programmes to ensure that they are appropriate, and strike the right balance between learners being able to complete courses and learners having access to those courses in the first place.

Designing a level 2 curriculum

49. We asked college leaders to tell us what factors were most influential when they designed their level 2 curriculum. Every college but one mentioned the labour market as a factor in shaping its curriculum offer. Organisational factors (ability to recruit students and make courses pay) were also dominant.
50. College leaders spoke about achievement rates and progression, but there was very little mention of what they thought students needed to know or be able to do. Staff in only one college gave a view about what knowledge and skills they wanted students to acquire while they were in the college. In two other colleges, senior leaders mentioned the knowledge and skill students were arriving with, one in the context of prior attainment. The other was in terms of the changing curriculum in local schools having an impact on what students already know and therefore do not need to be taught.

Chart 3: The factors that college teachers identified as the most influential for the level 2 curriculum design

(*N=15 college visits)



51. We asked college leaders how much choice of module or unit students had. The majority (11 of 15) offered little to no choice. The primary reason for this was because what students learned was structured entirely around English, mathematics and a main qualification (including work experience). Within the main qualification, the choice of units was largely decided by staff and was based on resources, staff expertise and their judgement about what learners might need at level 3.
52. While there was very little evidence of colleges shaping the curriculum to do anything other than progress to level 3, colleges provided a lot of evidence about how they selected which qualifications to offer. The best colleges gave attention to the local economy in this. Several colleges gave examples of tangible actions they had taken to shape their curriculum in response to local employment need. One college started a refrigeration and air-conditioning programme to respond to a shortage of engineers in the region. The same college had plans to offer a media course in 'media post-production' because there was an increasing industry demand for film-editing skills in the area.
53. According to some of the colleges we visited, one of the aims in delivering industry knowledge within the level 2 curriculum was to help students to make good choices about their next steps. An inspector-researcher described one college as follows:

All staff have relevant industry expertise. The college rightly sees this as a positive point. Staff use this industry expertise well to both help learners develop skills and knowledge, and to inform them about the industry they are working towards, to help them make sound choices.

54. The most common next step from a level 2 study programme is to study at level 3 rather than leave education and training. Only a very small proportion of students go into apprenticeships. In many colleges, progression was discussed in very general terms, without clarity about how the curriculum needs to vary depending on the intended destination for each student. The knowledge and skills needed to go directly into employment, potentially never to return to education, may be markedly different to those needed to move onto further learning.
55. In most colleges, senior leaders were able to describe or provide a strategy to focus their level 2 curriculum on local employment needs. However, inspectors found that, too often, these strategies bore little relation to the students' actual destinations. Students' progression to apprenticeships and employment was low. In some colleges, with well-meaning intentions to meet local employment needs, only 2% of students progressed to an apprenticeship. In others, it was up to 86% progression to apprenticeship. One college that did have high proportions of students going onto apprenticeships had achieved this because it had set progression to apprenticeships as a strategic goal. It had used data on destinations to track whether its re-designed curriculum had been successful in steering more students towards this route. Other colleges had the data to be

able to track this, but did not have the clear goal, had not set the same the internal targets and had not seen the same results.

56. The colleges we visited varied considerably in the extent to which employers were playing a direct role in curriculum development or delivery. Recommendation 27 from the Wolf review is clear that employers should be regularly involved in the assessment and awarding processes used for vocational awards in schools and colleges. This commitment is also evident in the 'Technical guidance for level 2 technical certificates', which states that providers must ensure that 'students undertake meaningful activity involving employers during their level 2 technical certificate'.¹⁵
57. College leaders told us that in some of their strongest programmes, employers play a crucial role in shaping the strategic focus. They are then involved in designing and contributing to how colleges deliver the curriculum. Examples of this included giving talks, hosting visits to the workplace and advising on the programme content to reflect current industry practice.
58. While most colleges reported that they have increased employers' involvement in their programmes, this did not appear to fulfil the recommendations of the Wolf review. For instance, only a small number of colleges gave examples of employers being involved in assessment. This included things like music industry practitioners providing feedback to music students on their performance. College leaders reported that employers' involvement in vocational programmes has increased in recent years as the demand for better work experience in study programmes has become embedded.
59. Some of the colleges we visited were able to give a very comprehensive account of the tangible and convincing role that employers played in the curriculum:

Newham College has a history of working with employers and aligning its curriculum to meet the local and national need. The large majority of employers the college works with are small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). However, the college has forged strong working relationships with large employers, especially those that are based in the East London area. These include: West Ham, TfL, the Financial Conduct Authority, Royal Opera House, Tate and Lyle, London City Airport, Thomas Cook, City Cruises, and Samsung. The college monitors and tracks engagement with employers. It holds contact information for 4,000 employers. It uses this to support curriculum development, work experience opportunities and progression.

¹⁵ 'Technical guidance 16-19 vocational qualifications', Department for Education March 2015 p. 33; www.gov.uk/government/publications/14-to-19-technical-and-applied-qualifications-technical-guidance.

Digital Skills Solutions (DSS) is the college's in-house company specialising in digital media. It works in partnership with the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), which works closely with large construction and engineering employers on the Olympic site. This work has led to DSS delivering a level 1 and level 2 diploma in design engineering and construct (DEC). This has planned progression onto a level 3 diploma in design engineering and construction or an apprenticeship. Additionally, students do work experience with employers such as Mace, Balfour Beatty, Arup, Lendlease and Buro Happold.

A study programme on software development at level 2 has given the learners the opportunity to work on a wide variety of practical activities. This gives them the practical skills to programme android devices. Students have learned to programme phones, tablets, smart TVs, computers and smart watches. They will also learn programming for drones and virtual reality. Guest speakers include a software company that supports the live data from Formula One racing and broadcasts this on the web. They explained the concepts of the system and how their website interacts with live streaming data linked to the physical device in real time.

60. In another college, there was a similarly reflective approach:

Industry expertise in **Tyne Metropolitan College** comes in two main shapes.

Internally, teachers draw on their recent industrial and vocational experience and expertise to make their teaching relevant and current for students. For example, in sports, teachers have switched their focus towards coaching for activities that are less focused on elite sports. This is because they have taken into account the increasing influence of the public health agenda and the role of local authorities in funding and as employers of public health projects.

Externally, employers make demands on the college to design programmes in specific ways to meet their requirements. In engineering, for example, Northern Power Grid contributed to selecting the units that students would need to achieve if they wanted to work in utilities. Utilities replaced the offshore oil and gas industry as one of the main progression destinations for students.

61. In some of the colleges we visited, close relationships with local industry had led to the college receiving donations of specialist equipment. These helped students gain knowledge that was directly relevant to employment in that industry and sometimes with a particular employer. For example, one college received regular donations of stage lighting equipment from an events management company. The company had a track record of employing students from that college. This meant that students from that college were of more

value to that employer than those from other colleges trained on different equipment.

62. However, on balance, the positive examples were in the minority. We found little evidence of this in-depth engagement between colleges and employers. Instead, we found that collaboration between colleges and employers is, in practice, more often focused on providing work placements. While colleges mostly state that the curriculum design is driven by local employers' needs, their methods of evaluating quality do not include whether they are successful in meeting these needs. Too often, they rely on comparisons with the achievement rates in other providers, evaluating courses using the Ofsted framework and the outcomes of observations of teaching and learning. Very few have effective ways of evaluating employer feedback, the impact of their level 2 courses on employment and the value of the level 2 programme on the learners' personal, social and employability skills and personal well-being.

Recommendation 3: All colleges should engage actively with employers. This should include greater use of employers to co-design and implement aspects of the curriculum and assess learners, as outlined in the Wolf report.

Recommendation 4: College teachers should be fully up to date with the practices and jobs available in their industry. They should ensure that resources and the curriculum reflect current industry standards and practices.

Work experience

63. Work-related learning is a requirement of all study programmes. As noted above, college leaders told us that one benefit of their increased collaboration with employers in recent years is a rise in the proportion of learners attending a work placement. Ofsted, college leaders¹⁶ and learners agree that high-quality and meaningful work experience is effective at developing learners' personal and social skills, as well as the sector-specific skills required to improve employability. The value of good and meaningful work experience placements has been further echoed by the CIPD,¹⁷ The Prince's Trust and the FE Association. Clearly, employers' support is essential to make sure work placements are meaningful and of a high enough quality to benefit individual learners.
64. Staff in each of the colleges we visited were clear that work experience was a fundamental part of their most successful level 2 study programmes. Inspector-researchers also agreed that work experience was on the whole very well integrated into these programmes and had greatly improved over recent years.

¹⁶ How to be good or better, Further Education and Skills, FE Association (May, 2017): www.fea.co.uk/news?title=being-good-or-better-%252d-update-2

¹⁷ CIPD (2012) Work Experience Placements that Work; www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/routes-work/placements-guide

65. Learners place a very high value on the work experience they complete. Nine out of 10 learners who participated in our survey reported that their work experience had been of value and relevant to their course. Furthermore, more than half of respondents reported that their work experience had taught them a lot about the skills related to their course and the personal and behavioural attributes valued by employers (such as confidence, communication and listening skills, being organised and meeting deadlines).
66. College staff and learners also reported that work experience helped to develop more realistic expectations of the day-to-day demands of working life. This is particularly important given that colleges reported how some learners had unrealistic expectations about the conditions and pay associated with some jobs. For example, some learners had chosen a plumbing study programme with an inflated expectation of the income they would be likely to achieve as a qualified plumber.
67. Our visits to colleges and learner surveys identified a number of features that are important in promoting high-quality work experience. These are:
- the study programme and work experience placement are in the same sector
 - knowledge and skills taught on the programme are applied and practised during a work placement
 - learners' experiences in a work placement are evaluated by the learner, the employer and a teacher
 - college staff use work-related activities well to prepare learners for a work placement that takes place at an appropriate time in the learner's development. For example:
 - learners on a catering study programme may gain some insight into working in a kitchen by working in the college's restaurant under the supervision of a teacher before experiencing the pressures of a busy commercial kitchen on a work placement
 - design students may carry out commissions from external clients under the supervision of their teacher before doing a work placement with a commercial design team
 - colleges take responsibility for organising the work placement and help learners secure placements that are relevant to their interests and aspirations
 - part-time work, while valuable to young people, is not a substitute for relevant, organised work experience.
68. In a small number of colleges, teachers assessed the employability skills students showed on their work placement. However, this practice was rare. Given the strong emphasis providers place on their role in developing these

skills in level 2 students, it is surprising that more colleges did not assess how well their students apply these in the workplace.

Recommendation 5: Work experience placements should be relevant to the learners' programme of study. Teachers should make sure that learners reflect on the knowledge and skills they develop during these. Employers should give feedback on learners' performance on the work placement.

English and mathematics

69. We know that both literacy and numeracy are vital for future success. The CBI's recent survey of employers again identified a need for young applicants to have better standards of basic literacy and basic numeracy.¹⁸ In our survey of employers, we asked them to identify the skills they felt young people lacked. Communication, spoken English and basic numeracy/literacy are the areas came up most frequently.
70. Government policy requires ongoing study of English and mathematics in all study programmes for students without a GCSE grade 4 or above at the end of key stage 4. This has been contentious because putting it into practice has been challenging for some providers. Compliance with this policy is high, but we know from our routine inspection of colleges that some have found it difficult to find qualified English and mathematics teachers and to motivate learners to retake exams.
71. In this study, we found that many colleges were working hard and spending a considerable amount of money to deliver these subjects in ways that met students' needs. Senior leaders in the colleges we visited told us that they have increased considerably the resources, staffing and professional development allocated to these subjects over recent years. This focus and effort, however, has had little effect on the proportions of students getting good passes in these subjects.
72. Delivering a good English and mathematics curriculum at college is possible. Four senior leaders in the colleges visited described how they built expertise by using specialist English and mathematics teachers to train vocational teachers in how to teach these subjects. This reflects the fact that many colleges have struggled to recruit teachers in these subjects. We have frequently identified this in inspections of colleges in recent years.¹⁹
73. Some colleges described students who had suffered negative experiences of these subjects at school. This was reflected in our own survey of students. Students have often been reluctant to study these subjects if they have not

¹⁸ Confederation of British Industry (2017) Helping the UK thrive; www.cbi.org.uk/news/skills-needs-must-now-drive-reforms-cbi-pearson-education-and-skills-survey/

¹⁹ Annual Report 2015/16, Ofsted; www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-201516-education-early-years-and-skills.

enjoyed them at school and have not been able to get a good pass in the exam.

74. To overcome this, teachers of vocational subjects told us that they were explicitly teaching the contextualised English and mathematics skills their students needed for employment. Importantly, they emphasised teaching the subject curriculum, not simply attempting to teach learners to pass the exam. This approach is supported by research on the benefits of situated learning and problem-based learning approaches.²⁰ Situated learning can, for example, involve using work-based scenarios to perform calculations, such as measuring chemicals in hairdressing or completing quotations for motor vehicle. In five colleges, these teachers described how they have tried to integrate English and mathematics into their vocational lessons more broadly. One college described how learners on one course now use notebooks rather than word processors with autocorrect facilities. This is to emphasise the importance of grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Contextualised learning

The case for providing English and mathematics within a vocational context for some students is well rehearsed. We have previously reported on how outstanding colleges did it (Ofsted, 2014²¹).

There is evidence that knowledge gained in conjunction with an occupational skill is more likely to be retained (Kuczera et al., 2016²²). Providing a tangible context can engage students who have negative feelings about classroom numeracy and literacy, positively change attitudes towards FE and training, improve self-confidence, and enable them to achieve numeracy and/or vocational qualifications (Brooks et al., 1997²³; Vorhaus et al., 2011²⁴).

The US Accelerating Opportunity initiative saw positive results in integrating basic skills alongside technical education courses at local community colleges for adult learners. This included a more positive attitude to learning among students and improved satisfaction (Anderson, et al., 2014²⁵).

²⁰ Making the case for collaborative problem-solving Nesta (2017); www.nesta.org.uk/publications/solved-making-case-collaborative-problem-solving.

²¹ Annual Report 2013/14 Further Education and Skills, Ofsted; www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-201314-further-education-and-skills-report

²² Building Skills for All: A Review of England; www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/bytopic/education/

²³ Trends in Standards of Literacy. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458604>

²⁴ Review of research and evaluation on improving adult literacy and numeracy; www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:49602

²⁵ The First Year of Accelerating Opportunity: Implementation Findings from the States and Colleges; <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED559305>

75. All of the colleges visited also provided their students with discrete lessons in these subjects. However, attendance at English and mathematics lessons was often considerably lower than at other lessons. Colleges had to be tactical to secure attendance. One inspector-researcher noted that a college had missed an opportunity to boost attendance by allowing some English and mathematics lessons to be scheduled on a day without other more appealing classes to bring students into the college. Other colleges were more tactical and timetabled English and mathematics lessons in the middle of the day to maximise attendance. Another college split the study of English and mathematics to be over two years but students did only one subject at a time.
76. In our survey, we asked students about their study of English and mathematics. Even though achievement was low and disengagement high, students still thought that by studying English and mathematics they were gaining important knowledge they did not have before.
77. We asked those who were still completing their level 2 study programme if they felt their English and maths skills had improved. Their responses were encouraging. In total, for both subjects:
- nearly eight out of 10 (77% for mathematics and 79% for English) students indicated that their skills had improved a fair amount
 - around one in four (23% for mathematics and 28% for English) believed they had improved a lot.
78. However, a 2016 study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that 16- to 19-year-olds in England were much more likely to have low basic skills than in other high performing countries.²⁶ More than one in five 16- to 19-year-olds had low literacy. Nearly one in four had low numeracy. This is more than three times higher than in the highest performing countries, such as Korea and Japan. But the OECD report ranks the UK above both the EU and OECD average for the proportion of students reaching level 2. So young people in England are more likely to be better qualified but have lower levels of literacy and numeracy than in other countries.
79. Despite colleges' best efforts, national data on pass rates for resits of English and mathematics at GCSE remains very discouraging.²⁷ Just 24% of those who did not already have a good pass in English got one; this was only 19% for mathematics. While students never attempt to resit the GCSE exam, research by Cambridge Assessment (2018)²⁸ showed that 53% of the students taking

²⁶ Building Skills for All: A Review of England; www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/bytopic/education/

²⁷ A level and other 16 to 18 results: 2017 to 2018 (provisional), National Statistics, October 2018, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results-2017-to-2018-provisional.

²⁸ Cambridge Assessment (2018). Research Matters, Issue 25; www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/our-research/all-published-resources/research-matters/rm-25/

GCSE English and 60% of those taking GCSE mathematics did not improve their grade, despite one or more attempts. If a good pass at GCSE is considered a critical benchmark in employment terms, these marginal gains are problematic.

80. In our Annual Report in 2016, we highlighted that while we believe the government's policy on GCSE retakes is well intentioned, it is not having the desired impact. These results suggest that this may still be the case. The examination requirements for this policy remain focused on a wide range of English and mathematical content rather than the literacy and numeracy knowledge that employers and learners can see being of benefit to them. This remains a daunting challenge for the FE sector.

Recommendation 6: The DfE should consider our evidence that the majority of learners feel they are making progress with English and mathematics, though only a quarter are getting a good GCSE pass when they re-sit the exam. They should evaluate the impact of the policy of requiring students to continue to study English and mathematics and take a GCSE.

Habits and attitudes

81. For many level 2 students, not reaching a good pass in any GCSEs results in a sense of failure and dents their self-belief and confidence. A relatively high proportion of these students are likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds. Continuing into FE offers them a 'second chance' as they attempt to rectify their school outcomes.²⁹
82. As above, college leaders emphasised their focus on employers, local employment need and getting students into employment. Teachers' priorities were to improve students' habits and attitudes to secure a positive next step. In one example, the inspector-researcher noted a clear disconnect between the views of college leaders and teachers. Leaders felt that the focus was on meeting local employment need. Teachers felt that their role was to 'address the gaps left by schools'.
83. In the interviews, teachers emphasised that their role in delivering level 2 study programmes was to develop students' confidence, self-esteem, employability skills and work-readiness. One college described it as 'recalibrating attitudes and behaviours'. Some of the ways that teachers did this included:
- providing regular feedback on the progress learners made and what they needed to do to further improve
 - modelling the behaviours and attitudes teachers wanted to see

²⁹ Anderson, N. and Peart, S., (2016). Back on track: exploring how a Further Education college re-motivates learners to re-sit previously failed qualifications at GCSE. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 21 (3), pp. 196-213; <http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/27955/>

- personalising one-to-one tutorials
 - offering support services and group sessions.
84. Students appreciated this level of support. They saw it as one of the features of colleges that led them to prefer it to school. Three colleges also described how some of their learners face particular difficulties that need to be addressed before they can cope with the demands of level 2. To do so, the colleges had developed a pre-level 2 curriculum. This served the same purpose for study programmes as that of a traineeship programme for an apprenticeship.
85. Teachers supported learners in changing their attitudes and habits. However, we found that colleges rarely had any method of systematically monitoring and assessing the extent to which learners succeeded in these changes.
86. There were exceptions. Some travel and tourism students explained how making a presentation to their peers improved their confidence. Hairdressing students told us how they practised conversations to become more adept at putting customers at ease. In these colleges, teachers and learners did assess learners' progress in developing these personal characteristics and abilities. They did so in much the same way as they assessed technical skills.

Recommendation 7: Colleges should give learners clear feedback on their progress through their study programme, to help build confidence and self-esteem. They should also emphasise to learners the personal, social and employability skills they develop during their level 2 study programme.

Characteristics of a high-quality study programme

87. Based on the 15 colleges visited, inspectors identified the following as some of the best features of the level 2 study programmes:
- The **curriculum is specifically designed to provide the knowledge, habits and attitudes** needed for the next stage of education or training, in an industry-specific context.
 - **Students receive good and realistic IAG** about the programme while they are still at school.
 - **Ongoing careers guidance** and advice reflect the realities of the job market and help students make choices about routes that are based on a genuine understanding of what would be required for them to be competitive in the job market.
 - The college has good methods of **getting to know each student** before, or early in, the programme in order to understand what knowledge they have and where they have gaps (especially in English and maths), and where they might need to develop their habits or attitudes.
 - Assessment is designed to **test progress in knowledge and skill** but also how the **student's personal development** is progressing.

- The college has **worked with local employers** to create links between what the student is learning and how that learning would be applied in that local workplace (using the same kit or software, for example, so no re-training would be required).
 - **Work-related learning has been specifically designed** to help students develop those things that are valued by employers: health and safety; listening; team work; punctuality, time-keeping and completing work on time.
88. However, in our visits to these good and outstanding colleges, we were surprised by how many lack a comprehensive strategy for monitoring the quality of their level 2 study programmes.
89. Inspector-researchers spoke to staff about the criteria used in colleges' quality assurance systems to evaluate study programmes. These discussions consistently highlighted the importance of qualification achievement rates on the main vocational qualification as the primary measure. In some instances, achievement rates appear to have been used as the sole indicator of quality.
90. As highlighted earlier in this report, qualifications are important but they are only one component of a study programme. Over-reliance on achievement rates when evaluating the quality of the programme is therefore unlikely to provide a true picture of its quality. In contrast, only one college identified 'developing learners' work skills and behaviours for employment' as the most important measure of quality.

Recommendation 8: The curriculum for study programmes should not be restricted by an excessive focus on qualification outcomes. Evaluation of the quality of the study programmes should take into account a broad range of measures, including destinations.

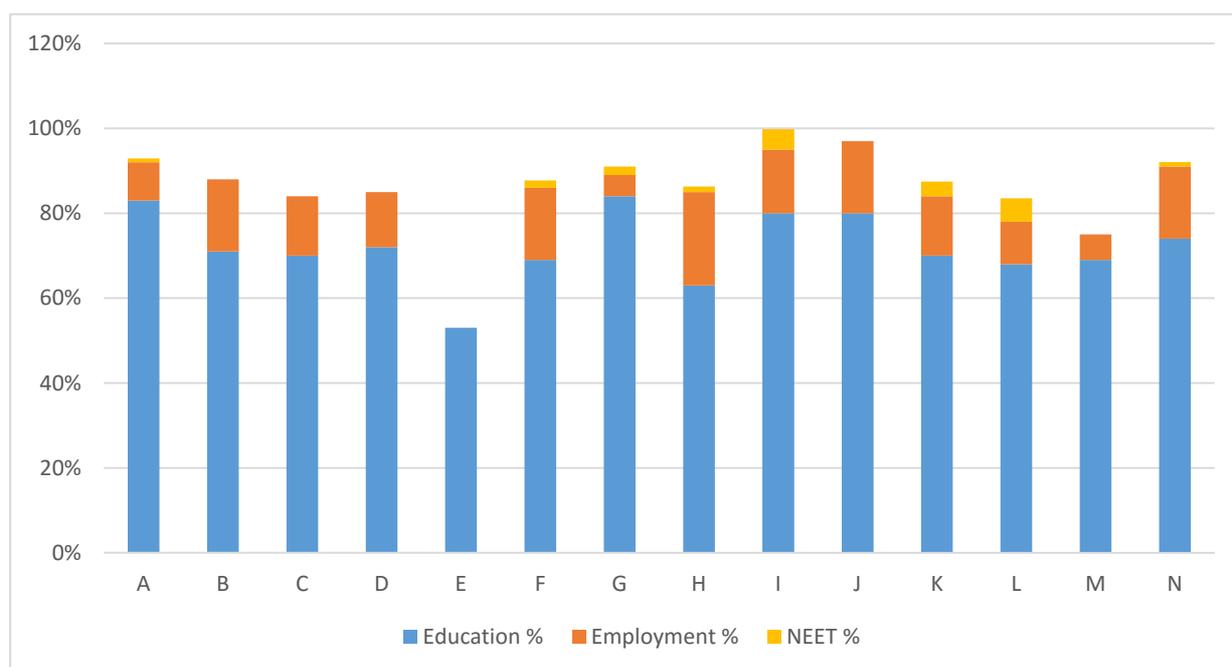
What happens after level 2 programmes?

91. In our visits to colleges, we collected each college's destination data for their students on level 2 study programmes. This was so that we could see the impact of their programmes. All colleges used the government's codes as set out in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) specification 2016 to 2017. Most colleges were also going beyond this. However, there is no guidance for this voluntary recording. All the colleges coded and recorded this information differently.
92. While the variation in data collected was very wide, all colleges did record the number of students on level 2 study programmes who went on to an education destination. Across the colleges we looked at, destinations were recorded for around 6,700 students. Education was the most common destination by some margin, at 70% of all students.

93. The proportion of students who went on to employment was small. It represented 15% of all students with known destinations. All but two colleges recorded whether the employment destination was an apprenticeship. In around half of these cases, the destination was an apprenticeship. This represented just 8% of all known destinations in those colleges. If this is accurate, it is extremely low. It should be of considerable concern to the government in the context of the aspirational target to create millions of new apprenticeships, although continuing education might be the right path for the learners themselves.
94. These proportions were reflected in the survey responses from students currently on courses. In our poll, 70% of respondents saw their next step as going on to a higher level course. Fifteen per cent expected to leave the college when their course was finished. Thirteen per cent were not confident that they would progress to a higher level course.

Chart 4: Progression data for level 2 learners in colleges

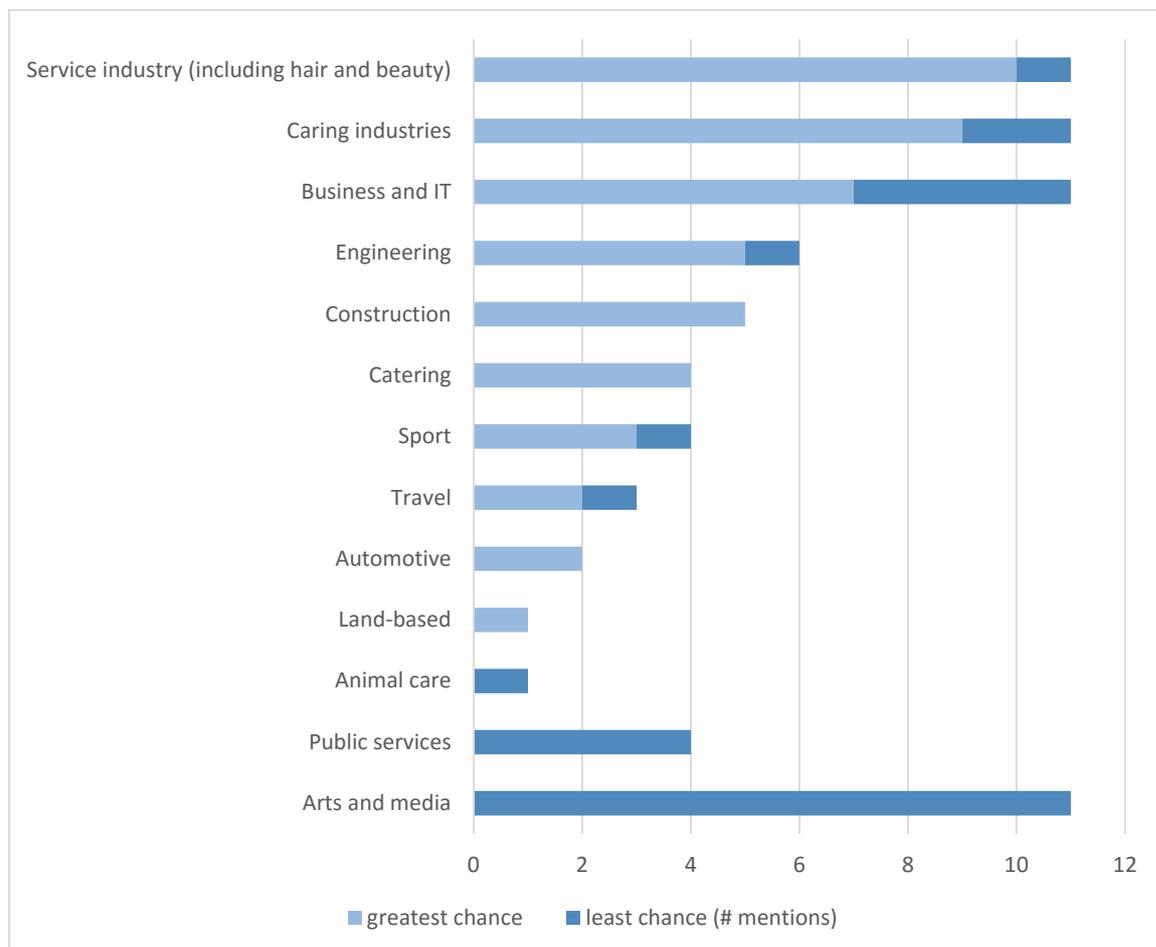
(*N = 15 interviewed colleges, 7248 student data points)



95. While all colleges had some statistics about students’ progression to FE and/or employment, only a few captured a more detailed analysis of the students’ progression between levels and qualifications. Very few colleges used the data on destinations when evaluating the quality of their study programmes. Most did not collect data that would help them to do this.
96. From the available data, 67% of level 2 students progressed to level 3 within the college or another provider. Nevertheless, the data on progression to level 3 should be treated with considerable caution. This is because the analysis was based on only four out of 16 colleges (around 1,300 students) where the college had chosen to track destinations to this level of detail.

97. We asked colleges to identify the programmes that gave the 'greatest or the least chance of progressing to employment in a relevant industry'. While some of the responses were common across a number of colleges, others reflected differences in the local employment market. For example, 'sport' and 'travel' were identified as having good prospects for employment in some local areas and poor prospects in others.
98. 'Service industry' and 'caring industry' were the most frequent cited as programmes leading to employment. 'Art and media' courses, however, were perceived to give the least chance. The range of courses identified included art and design, performing arts and fine art. None of the colleges reported these courses as having good prospects locally.
99. Some of the courses cited by colleges were very specific, again reflecting the importance of the local labour market. One college identified 'marine engineering' specifically as having good progression to employment. Two colleges identified carpentry and joinery, respectively.

Chart 5: Programmes that colleges have identified as giving the 'greatest or the least chance of progressing to employment in a relevant industry'



Recommendation 9: The DfE should help students understand the value of study programmes by developing and publishing comprehensive data on the proportions of students who progress into different industries from each type of programme.

Recommendation 10: Colleges should evaluate whether level 2 learners improve their progression into careers by progressing to a level 3 study programme. Colleges should align the level 2 study programme curricula to relevant apprenticeships where available. They should promote the apprenticeships to learners.



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
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