



Department  
for Education

# **Pre-census (42-day) retention strategies for 16-19 full time learners**

**Based on case study examples of  
approaches used by colleges**

**January 2023**

# Contents

List of tables	4
List of figures	5
Introduction and background	6
Research Methodology	7
Outputs	8
Dataset 1 - Summary	9
Dataset 2 - Learner Profile A	10
Dataset 2 - Learner Profile B	11
Dataset 3 - College Profile	12
Dataset 4 - Provision Profile - Level	13
Dataset 5 - Provision Profile – Subject	14
Case Studies	15
Key Retention Strategies and Techniques	15
Summary	15
Strategic Techniques	15
1. Collaborative relationships	15
2. College Ready Programmes	16
3. Effective tracking	16
4. Investment in Early Personal Support – Tailored Support	16
5. Investment in Early Personal Support – Risk Assessing	17
6. Investment in Early Personal Support – Individual guidance	18
7. Culture	18
8. Curriculum Design	19
Operational Techniques	20
9. Frequent monitoring of student behaviours during the first 42 days	20
10. Simple models work best	20
11. Continuous reinforcement of expectations	20
12. Teaching and Learning	20
13. Assessment	20
14. Personalised Induction	21
15. Involvement of employers	21
Acknowledgments	22

Case Study Colleges	22
FE Commissioner Research Team	22
Data source	22

## List of tables

Table 1: Early Drop Out Rates.....	9
Table 2: Number of pre-census withdrawals by age .....	10
Table 3: Number of pre-census withdrawals by gender .....	10
Table 4: Number of pre-census withdrawals by ethnicity .....	11
Table 5: Number of pre-census withdrawals by provider type .....	12
Table 6: Number of pre-census withdrawals by year .....	12
Table 7: Number of withdrawals by level of course.....	13
Table 8: Number of withdrawals by level and provider type.....	13
Table 9: Number of withdrawals by sector subject area tier 1.....	14
Table 10: Case study colleges.....	22

## List of figures

Figure 1: Early Drop Out Rates.....	9
Figure 2: Number of pre-census withdrawals by level of deprivation .....	11

## Introduction and background

During the Curriculum Efficiency and Financial Sustainability Support (CEFSS) pilot, 7 key themes were identified that would enhance the CEFSS programme as it transitioned from pilot into established support activity. These were:

1. Improving annual planning cycles
2. Review of sector benchmarking tools
3. Standardising contribution analysis
4. Strategies for pre-census (42 days) FT learner retention
5. Accounting for commercial income
6. A short adaptable training PPT to engage governors in the curriculum planning cycle.
7. Sharing effective practice of integrated curriculum and financial planning.

### **'Curriculum Planning Guide'**

This is a summary of the research findings for theme 4 – strategies and techniques to improve pre-census (42 day) full time (FT) learner retention

## Research Methodology

To support colleges in improving early (pre-census) retention, the Further Education Commissioner (FEC) team explored the following key sources of information:

- National data for the 2021/22 academic year (*source: RCU & AOC*)\*
- A review of retention strategies from 10 colleges across the sector to capture techniques used to improve pre-census retention.
- Analysis of specific strategies and techniques used by the case study organisations to improve pre-census (42-day) retention.

*\*The data is all 16-19 study FT enrolments based on the following filters:*

- *Learners with active courses in the academic year*
- *16-19 Funded Learners*
- *Core Aim Only*
- *Learners starting in the relevant academic year*
- *Exclude colleges with small numbers of 16-19 funded learners*
- *Exclude transfers*
- *Learners on long courses (24+ weeks)*

*The RCU & AOC dataset offers a national perspective of 16-19 FT learner attrition, college-based data gathered in this study includes both 16-18 and 19+ FT learner attrition and cannot be assumed as a direct comparison. Our thanks to the colleges involved.*

## Outputs

Based on the data available, together with a series of college case studies, the research carried out has provided a set of effective techniques and strategies that could be adopted by colleges to improve early (pre-census) FT retention.

These have included:

1. Review of national datasets to analyse the 2021/22 16-19 year old national profile of withdrawals during their first 42 days of their course (**5.7%**). The participating colleges included in the case studies have a pre-census withdrawal rate ranging from **2% - 9.1%**, for both 16-18 year old and 19+ full time students. 80% of the participating colleges have pre-census retention in the upper half of the national 16-19 year old dataset, with 2 colleges being in the top 12%
2. Findings from 10 (9 x general further education, 3 with sixth-form colleges, and 1 x land based college) college case studies identifying a series of strategic and operational techniques that are believed to have a significant impact on the pre-census (42-day) retention of 16-19 year old full-time students. Key findings/techniques have been summarised under strategic and operational approaches.



# Dataset 1 - Summary

The data represents the number of withdrawals in the first 42 days of a FT course.

## Learner criteria (filters):

- Enrolled 16-19 learners in first year of course
- Learners starting in 2021/22
- Long (24+ week) courses only
- Attended at least once during first 42 days
- Core aim only
- Excludes transfers
- Based on R06 data

Early Drop Out Rate	Colleges	% of Colleges
0%	5	2.1%
>0% and <2%	24	10.1%
>=2% and <4%	43	18.1%
>=4% and <6%	60	25.2%
>=6% and <8%	64	26.9%
>=8% and <10%	32	13.4%
>=10%	10	4.2%
<b>Total Colleges</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 1: Early Drop Out Rates

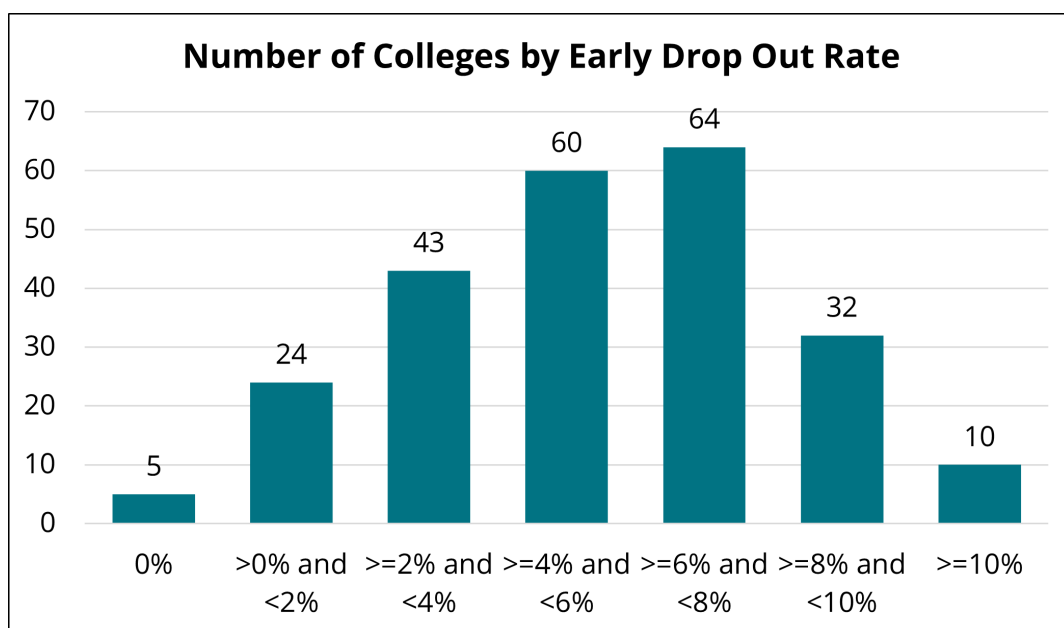


Figure 1: Early Drop Out Rates

## Dataset 2 - Learner Profile A

- Data covers 560,272 learners, of which 32,026 (5.7%) withdrew before the census date (42 days).
- Analysis by gender suggests a high percentage (5.9%/5.5%) but smaller number of female learners withdrew compared with their male peers.

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days</b>	<b>Total Learners</b>	<b>%</b>
16 Year Olds	15,142	282,437	5.4%
17 Year Olds	9,712	173,191	5.6%
18 Year Olds	6,319	83,134	7.6%

**Table 2: Number of pre-census withdrawals by age**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days</b>	<b>Total Learners</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	15,590	262,636	5.9%
Male	16,436	297,636	5.5%

**Table 3: Number of pre-census withdrawals by gender**

## Dataset 2 - Learner Profile B

- A clear indicator in retention is deprivation. The adjacent graph illustrates the relationship between bands of deprivation and % withdrawal rate.
- Withdrawals based on ethnic background do not appear to be so distinct. Whilst there are significant differences in the numbers of learners, the percentage of learners withdrawing – ranging between 4.6% (Asian) and 6.6% (mixed/multiple ethnicity).
- Black and white learners being around average.

Broad Ethnic Group	Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days	Total Learners	%
Asian / Asian British	2,490	54,108	4.6%
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	2,042	36,415	5.6%
Mixed / Multiple ethnic group	1,906	28,848	6.6%
White	23,749	407,536	5.8%
Other ethnic group	855	14,270	6.0%
Not Provided	984	19,095	5.2%

Table 4: Number of pre-census withdrawals by ethnicity

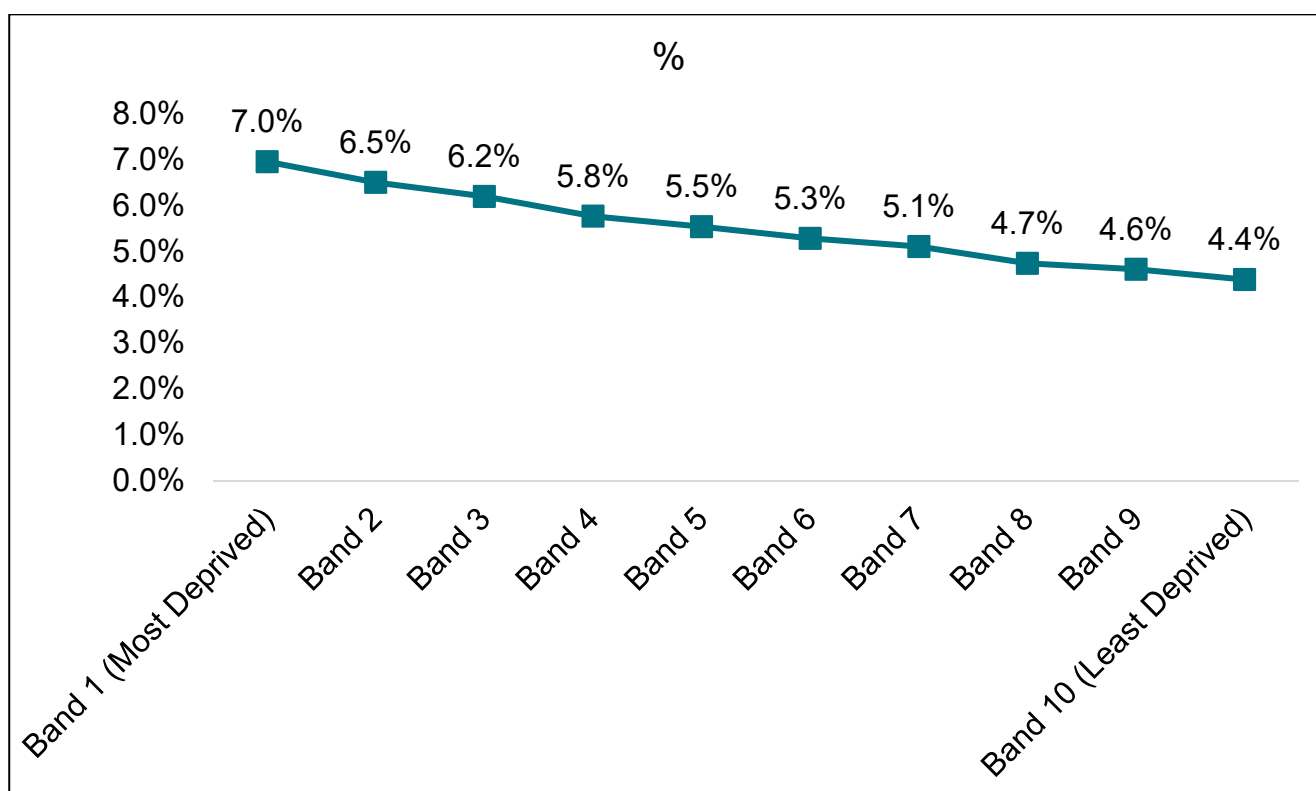


Figure 2: Percentage of pre-census withdrawals by level of deprivation

## Dataset 3 - College Profile

238 colleges (excluded colleges with very small numbers of 16-19 year olds)

Categorised by type and percentage of learners in data:

- General further education (GFE) 83%
  - Sixth-form Colleges 13%
  - Land Based Colleges 3%
  - Other 0.4%
- 3-year trend indicates learner numbers declined by 4% between 2019/20 and 2020/21, recovering by 6.5% the following year. Withdrawals followed a similar pattern, decreasing in 2020/21 and increasing marginally in 2021/22.

Provider Type	Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days	Total Learners	%
GFE Colleges	28,534	463,868	6.2%
Sixth Form Colleges	2,395	75,442	3.2%
Land Based Colleges	991	18,843	5.3%
Other	106	2,119	5.0%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>32,026</b>	<b>560,272</b>	<b>5.7%</b>

Table 5: Number of pre-census withdrawals by provider type

Provider Type	Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days	Total Learners	%
2019/20	33,170	545,457	6.1%
2020/21	27,889	523,652	5.3%
2021/22	<b>32,026</b>	<b>560,272</b>	<b>5.7%</b>

Table 6: Number of pre-census withdrawals by year

## Dataset 4 - Provision Profile - Level

Analysis by level of provision identifies a clear issue with lower level provision, particularly level 1 in both GFE and sixth-form colleges which is over double that of level 3 withdrawals, albeit fewer numbers.

Level	Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days	Total Learners	%
Entry Level	1,637	30,747	5.3%
Level 1	6,779	73,431	9.2%
Level 2	10,184	131,984	7.7%
Level 3+	13,359	322,115	4.1%
Other	67	1,995	3.4%

Table 7: Number of withdrawals by level of course

Provider Type	Levels	Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days	Total Learners	%
<b>GFE College</b>	Entry Level	1,589	29,494	5.4%
	Level 1	6,460	69,826	9.3%
	Level 2	9,496	121,601	7.8%
	Level 3+	10,924	241,129	4.5%
<b>Sixth Form College</b>	Level 1	91	929	9.8%
	Level 2	394	5,801	6.8%
	Level 3+	1,884	68,068	2.8%

Table 8: Number of withdrawals by level and provider type

## Dataset 5 - Provision Profile – Subject

When looking at pre-census retention by sector subject area (SSA), it appears that A levels have the lowest withdrawal rate. Other subject areas performed less well, which may be influenced by factors such as a relationship between deprivation, level of learning, and availability of entry level employment opportunities.

Health, Public Services and Care; Construction; Retail and Commercial Enterprise; and Arts, media and publishing all lost significant (between 4,850 and 3,215) numbers of learners during this initial period

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Number of Withdrawals in first 42 days</b>	<b>Total Learners</b>	<b>%</b>
Health, Public Services and Care	4,757	76,030	6.3%
Science and Mathematics	1,311	23,631	5.5%
Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	1,452	25,984	5.6%
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	2,882	46,607	6.2%
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	4,850	57,557	8.4%
Information and Communication Technology	816	19,977	4.1%
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	3,215	37,548	8.6%
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	2,057	38,857	5.3%
Arts, Media and Publishing	3,259	75,938	4.3%
History, Philosophy and Theology	60	939	6.4%
Social Sciences	285	6,602	4.3%
Languages, Literature and Culture	321	2,717	11.8%
Education and Training	161	2,822	5.7%
Preparation for Life and Work	2,594	45,091	5.8%
Business, Administration and Law	2,261	36,639	6.2%
Not Applicable	33	1,199	2.8%
A Level	1,712	62,134	2.8%

**Table 9: Number of withdrawals by sector subject area tier 1**

# Case Studies

## Key Retention Strategies and Techniques

### Summary

Findings from the ten college case studies identified a series of strategic and operational techniques that are believed to have a significant impact on the pre-census (42-day) retention of full-time 16-19 year old learners. The national data identifies that the overall national average in 2021/22 for withdrawals during their first 42 days of their course is **5.7%**. The range across colleges included in the case studies is **2% - 9.1%**, Whilst some are above the national average, all bar one are at or below the national average for their type of organisation (ref. table 5) and have achieved significant improvement in this area of retention since 2018/19. Only one college is significantly above the national average, but shows an impressive improvement trend.

Other key findings/techniques can be summarised under strategic and operational approaches.

Principally, the approaches colleges are taking to improve early retention of learners fall into two categories, **systems** and **support**. Support generally focuses on the human element of the student's initial experiences and involves enhancing the level of individual support afforded to students during the first 42 days of their course.

Systems, on the other hand, tends to look at how the college manages the learner's experience, from target setting to compliance. For example, establishing corporate targets that might be implemented through the creation and ownership of a "**master target file**" containing all the college's key targets for the year, including a specific target for retaining students at day 42. This can then be agreed and signed off by the board, the senior leadership team, and each member of the college management team that has ownership of a target.

### Strategic Techniques

#### 1. Collaborative relationships

- Investment in fostering strong relationships with feeder schools for every aspect of the college offers significant benefits in ensuring the transition between school and college. In the best examples this started at year 8, with many inter-organisational activities being arranged to inform the teachers, parents and careers advisers, and to provide careers advice and options for the young people to consider. Effective taster activities were particularly highlighted.
- The development of a strong working relationship with the local authority to support those at risk of becoming NEET has proved to be very effective .

Supported by a very tightly adhered to a set of KPI's that trigger responsive intervention based on a framework of strategies. KPI's are triggered following 24 hours without contact with the learner.

- In one college, the principal/CEO was spending between 30 and 40% of their time in this type of activity. Formal relationships, with senior leadership team (SLT) members becoming board members of local feeder schools are also highly effective in understanding the challenges and needs of transitioning learners. Data sharing agreements between schools and colleges can also significantly improve the preparation for transition on a learner by learner basis.

## 2. College Ready Programmes

- The college works with feeder schools to identify young people for the programme. This is essentially a supported 2-week transition programme for year 11. This high-risk cohort are kept in touch with by the college during year 11, providing enhanced transition activities prior to the start of the college ready programme.
- In another college the investment in KIT (keepng in touch) activities had resulted in lower rates of attrition early on in their course. Senior leaders introduced a number of keep warm activities including a KIT were all new students attend on one day. The event is very much like a open day/curriculum experience day, including hands on learning, skills masterclasses, exposure to wider college services through a market place, introduction to core curriculum delivery, for example a new Living and Thriving framework (tutorial), employer talks and relationship building.

## 3. Effective tracking

- Effective tracking of learner/pupil participants in collaborative activities provides useful intelligence that can be used to further engage the potential learner. In one college, 4CAST was being used to track learners as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool. The information is then used to keep the learner/pupil engaged and tailor their transition package. Later, during the first 42 days, the information is further enhanced and used to guide the learner onto the correct course, including where a transfer might be needed.

## 4. Investment in Early Personal Support – Tailored Support

- **Understanding why students might leave early** gave many colleges the knowledge to be able to address the issue before it became a reality. In most cases the reasons for leaving stemmed from three main challenges: Change of personal circumstances, transport concerns including costs, and employment or an alternative provider. In each case, the successful colleges had put in place processes that supported the learner to stay in college. The most effective was the



use of personal tutors/champions/ambassadors, or something similar to have a direct contact with the learner.

- One college felt that the length of time needed to process **bursaries** seriously undermined learner attendance and retention. It set a target of 14 days for checking and approval of learner bursaries on the 'pay my student' online portal . The faster turnaround provided much needed **financial support** during the early stages of their course.
- **Super Tutors**: to ensure effective support is always available colleges are investing more resource in personal tutors, with a ratios of circa 140:1.

## 5. Investment in Early Personal Support – Risk Assessing

- **Risk red/amber green (RAG) rating** features in many colleges. In one college the current process is to RAG rate all students at 5 weeks under the following categories:
  - doing very well should pass the course
  - doing fine but may need support
  - concerns and maybe on the wrong course/level

A weekly case conference for all students rated 3 at course level including input from maths and English led to learners being reviewed and, where appropriate, considered for transfer between courses.

- The use of sophisticated tools to risk assess students and provide support is becoming a more well-established procedure. In one college, a **RONI** (Risk Of NEET Indicator) uses a series of risk related categories to score the risk of the learner not staying and signposts actions to support the student. RONI uses indicators such as: travel to learn, young carer, home schooled, young parent, in-residence, looked after child, late starter, free school meals, EHCP, SEND, known mental and/or physical health issues. The tracker has a point score for each field, some are weighted, learners are then RAG rated according to risk. This enables leaders at the college to plan effective support for learners as soon as possible and prioritise the deployment of staff, including a team of Progress Coaches, who have a case load of approximately 150 learners each.
- Enhanced interview process: In this case the college overhauled its interviewing process to offer a taster experience and provide IAG around college support services. The process has a clear emphasis on making any necessary adjustments and support applications at the stage of interview. The college also pro-actively encourages those students who have made multiple applications for different courses to interview for each course so that they get a well-rounded understanding of their options and the support available to them.

## 6. Investment in Early Personal Support – Individual guidance

- Swap, Don't Drop: a college-wide promotional campaign, signposting learners to a dedicated named contact for support to transfer programmes. This applies to all FT students and enables movement between study programmes and apprenticeships at all levels. The process considers 5 categories of learners from those who enrol but never attend following phone, email, text and letter, and if the learner is under 18 a call to the parents, right through to learners who wish to transfer just before the threshold. The 5 categories are:
  - Learner with no register marks
  - Learners requesting to be withdrawn who have attended
  - Learners being withdrawn due to behaviour
  - Learners who are not attending sufficiently
  - Learners who express a wish to transfer.
- Under each of these headings the system provides a comprehensive set of criteria and processes to be followed and recorded to support the learner.

## 7. Culture

- A philosophical belief that learners have chosen the college as their preferred learning organisation so would want to stay. A withdrawal is a failure to meet the learner's expectations.
- Using college values as the basis of induction. The college has made a conscious decision to use the values of the organisation to drive conversations and activities for learners during recruitment and induction. Various activities focus on the meaning and implementation of the values. For example, rather than discuss attendance with students, they discuss the importance of punctuality and respect for others and resilience (that is, making sure you can always get here) and make the use of these values a common college language.
- Right Learner, Right Course: during the critical 42-day period, learners are not kept on courses that do not meet their needs – instead a strategy for pre-census retention is based on extended careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) and support to effectively place applicants on the right programmes and, on a curriculum that is personalised.
- Recruiting with Integrity: learners are not asked about the course they wish to study but what their aims and aspirations are, and then they are matched to most appropriate course both in terms of curriculum and level.

## 8. Curriculum Design

- Differentiated by individual need and historical experience, colleges enhance the early experiences of learners by front-loading their courses with enrichment activities designed to settle, build confidence, create friendship groups and develop resilience in the new learners. The additional 40 hours and tuition fund are key sources of resourcing.
- In one example the curriculum had been reviewed to recognise that exposing learners too early in their experience to difficult tasks and situational scenarios can be too daunting and lead to learners being put off the course before support can be implemented. Investing in the learner before the course was a key to addressing this particular concern.
- Alternative learning options are in place in some colleges, including in one, a Positive Intervention Programme (PIP), where more specific and targeted interventions are planned and an Alternative Learning Programme (ALP), which is designed to support those who find the rigor of the study programme a challenge and require learning at a differentiated pace.

## Operational Techniques

### 9. Frequent monitoring of student behaviours during the first 42 days

- The detail that is known and understood about all students, but particularly those assessed as being high-risk, provides the basis for responding to their individual need in a timely fashion, almost predicting what their behaviour will be to facilitate preventative interventions.

### 10. Simple models work best

- Many colleges have built highly sophisticated systems through which to monitor and manage learner behaviours. However, in the diverse and complex landscape of the further education college, it appears that the simplest systems are those that gain traction, are widely understood by all parties and corporately adhered to. Reviewing systems to improve all parties experience is critical to a successful outcome.

### 11. Continuous reinforcement of expectations

- The first 6 weeks of a course are when learners are at their most receptive, and most vulnerable. Things are new and they are seeking structure through which to explore their new environment. This is the time to establish expectations of the learner to influence their behaviours including confirming what is expected of them. This establishes their feeling of being a part of the college and what they need to do to succeed, for example attendance, assessment deadlines, respect, ambition.

### 12. Teaching and Learning

- An emphasis on teaching and tutorial staff investing the necessary time to get to know their learners, understanding their aspirations and using the principles of trauma informed teaching, and 'connect before correct'.
- The time taken to understand learner needs as early as possible is attributed as a key strategy to retaining beyond day 42.
- To help with lost learning and aid retention, one college has established a new internal 'School of Academic and Vocational Support', using trained and specialist teachers to provide interventions and additional delivery of learning, through timetabled acceleration classes.

### 13. Assessment

- In several organisations, assessment processes are used to enhance the learners' feeling of achievement and self-worth. Assessments are set for between 2 and 4 weeks to review and assess how the learner is coping with their course. It provides

valuable intelligence to the support services, but is primarily used to celebrate achievement and guide next steps.

- 20% Curriculum: in one college, curriculum teams have a target to complete 20% of the learner's programme (around 1 unit) by the 4-6 week point, which motivates learners as they can see early progress

#### **14. Personalised Induction**

- Where learners need enhanced personal support, many colleges have Personal Progress Tutors or similar roles in place. In one college they provide tours with very anxious applicants and their parents at quiet times over the summer, they meet learners at a side gate when they start, go to first lessons with them and coach them until they feel more confident.
- Another offered a minimum of 2 keeping warm summer activities to include information about learner life, sports clubs, debating society and community activities.

#### **15. Involvement of employers**

- Involving employers in project activities at an early stage in specific vocational areas and levels that have a history of early attrition can sharpen learner engagement and commitment – construction, engineering, hairdressing etc. (weekly visits, guest lectures, site visits).

# Acknowledgments

## Case Study Colleges

Our grateful thanks to those colleges that participated in our case studies:

College	Type	Region
Bradford College	General further education	North
Cambridge Regional College	General further education	Midlands and East
Eastern Colleges Group	General further education (including sixth-form college)	Midlands and East
Hartlepool College	General further education	North East
Newham College	General further education	London and South East
Northampton College	General further education	Midlands and East
Hull College	General further education	North East
Riverside College	General further education/ sixth-form college	North West
Sparsholt College	Land Based	South and South West
Trafford College Group	General further education (including sixth-form college)	North West
Walsall College	General further education	Midlands and East

Table 10: Case study colleges

## FE Commissioner Research Team

- Nigel Duncan
- Amanda Exley
- Jo Pretty

## Data source

RCU on behalf of Association of Colleges



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