A comparison of the effectiveness of level 3 provision in 25 post-16 providers

How well do students achieve on level 3 courses in different post-16 providers and what factors contribute to their achievement?

This small-scale survey investigated the effectiveness of level 3 provision in school sixth forms, general further education colleges and sixth form colleges. Inspectors visited 25 institutions which provided level 3 qualifications for students aged 16 to 19. The survey found the overall quality of provision and outcomes was good or outstanding in nearly three quarters of the providers visited. Against this background of generally strong level 3 provision in all types of provider, the most effective group of providers among the sample visited was sixth form colleges. The report compares different aspects of provision and identifies the factors which led to good or outstanding achievement.

Contents

Executive summary

The findings of this small-scale survey contribute to the long-running debate about which type of post-16 provider is most effective. The small sample size means that generalisations about the effectiveness of different providers should not be drawn from this particular survey. The survey investigated the effectiveness of level 3 provision in different types of post-16 provider.[1]

Between June and December 2007, inspectors visited 25 institutions which provided level 3 qualifications for students aged 16 to 19. These included nine school sixth forms, seven general further education colleges and nine sixth form colleges. These providers represented a range of contexts nationally, including those in urban and rural locations.

Currently, no single unified system exists to measure achievement across all three types of post-16 provider for all types of level 3 provision. Consequently, no direct comparison is possible between the value-added or progress indices used for some types of provision and the success rates used for others.[2] Inspectors used their professional judgement, together with providers' own analyses, to evaluate the available performance data and make an overall assessment of students' achievement. The survey found that achievement overall, was strongest in the sixth form colleges visited. Variations in progress and attainment within providers, however, were as great as those between them.

Leadership and management, including self-evaluation and the monitoring and tracking of students' progress, were good or outstanding in 22 of the providers visited. Similarly, teaching, learning and academic guidance, and the quality of the curriculum were also generally good. The use of robust performance management and quality assurance systems, together with highly effective professional development, were particular, but not exclusive, strengths of the leadership and management of sixth form colleges. Their focus almost entirely on level 3 provision made a strong contribution to the highly effective teaching, learning and academic guidance found in most of those visited.

In almost all of the providers visited, good academic guidance ensured students understood how well they were achieving and the steps needed to bring about further improvement. Sixth form colleges in particular used highly effective target-

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[1] Level 3 provision includes A and AS levels and a wide range of vocational programmes. A full range of level 3 qualifications can be found at the National Database of Accredited Qualifications; http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/index.aspx
[2] The success rate is the number of students gaining a pass in a qualification compared to the number who started the course, expressed as a percentage.

setting and specific guidance for individual students. Sixth form colleges also showed high levels of expertise in working with more vulnerable level 3 students.

General further education colleges and sixth form colleges, because of their larger size, provided much greater choice than school sixth forms, even where sixth form provision was enhanced effectively through collaboration with other institutions. In over half the school sixth forms visited, collaborative activities to improve curriculum provision were either limited or at an early stage of development.

Key findings

- The overall quality of provision and outcomes was good or outstanding in nearly three quarters of the providers visited in the survey.

- Standards of attainment varied, with those in sixth form colleges generally higher than those in the schools and further education colleges visited. Similarly, progress overall was greatest in the sixth form colleges. The most variation, from outstanding to satisfactory, was between school sixth forms visited.

- Progress was often inconsistent between students studying different subjects or different aspects of level 3 provision, and between groups of students with different prior attainment, in the same institution. There was least inconsistency in the most effective providers.

- Target-setting was most effective in the sixth form colleges visited and made a strong contribution to students' progress.

- Teaching, learning and academic guidance were good or outstanding in 21 of the 25 providers. All the institutions visited had well-qualified teachers, with good subject knowledge and awareness of syllabus requirements, who developed good relationships with their students.

- Common weaknesses in teaching and learning were the lack of planning to meet individual students' needs and the lack of opportunities for students to work independently of their teachers. These weaknesses were more prevalent in the schools visited than in the other providers.

- All the providers visited reviewed students' progress effectively. In most cases, underachievement was identified and tackled quickly so that in all providers achievement overall was at least satisfactory.

- The quality of the curriculum was good or outstanding in 21 of the providers visited, taking appropriate account of students' prior attainments, aptitudes and career aspirations.

- Seven of the school sixth forms visited collaborated with other providers to broaden their level 3 curriculum, but some of this collaboration was limited in scope and not always well implemented.

- All the providers had a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses through effective use of performance data and other information. The use of

performance data to drive improvement was established best in the sixth form colleges.

- The absence of a single operational measure of the progress made by students on different types of level 3 course, in different types of provider, makes it difficult to make valid comparisons of achievement across institutions.[3]

Recommendations

Providers of level 3 courses should:

- improve attainment and progress in weaker subjects and aspects of level 3 provision by ensuring that target-setting and performance review are rigorous for all subjects
- prioritise staff development activities for teachers of level 3 courses to ensure that teaching meets the needs of all students and develops students' independent learning skills
- ensure collaborative activities involving school sixth forms fully extend students' choice and are well implemented in order to improve the efficiency of level 3 provision
- make use of the Learner Achievement Tracker (LAT) system from September 2008 in all level 3 provision, as well as other value-added measures in evaluating students' progress.

Evaluation

Achievement: the national picture

1. There is a variety of ways to measure the progress and attainment of post-16 learners in schools and colleges. Some are not available in all types of provider; some are not appropriate for all types of qualifications. At present, it is difficult to make fair, direct comparisons between providers.

2. Table 1 shows that, in 2006/07, attainment at the end of level 3 courses in terms of Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) points per candidate was highest in sixth form colleges compared with maintained school sixth forms and other further education colleges.[4] Similarly, the percentage of candidates gaining two or more passes at A level, or their equivalent in other level 3 qualifications, was highest in sixth form colleges. However, conclusions should be drawn cautiously about the effectiveness of different types of provider using

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[3] From September 2008 all post-16 institutions will be able to use the Learning Achievement Tracker to assess students' progress. The Learning Achievement Tracker has been developed by the Learning and Skills Council; for more information, see http://ffe.lsc.gov.uk/learner-achievement-tracker/

[4] See Annex 1 for details of the QCA points system for level 3 courses.

A comparison of the effectiveness of level 3 provision in 25 post-16 providers

these data. The data do not reveal the prior attainment or other contextual information about the cohorts served by the different types of provider which affect these outcomes.

Table 1: Level 3 attainment of candidates* aged 16-18† by type of provider, 2006/07

	16-18-year-old candidates entered	Average QCA point score by candidates achieving all level 3 qualifications		Percentage of candidates achieving 2 or more A-level equivalent passes
		Per candidate	Per entry	
School sixth forms**	176,671	747.3	203	95.4
Sixth form colleges	54,423	781.6	204.7	97.4
General further education colleges	86,067	607.2	203.8	92.3

Source: Department for Children, Schools and Families Statistical First Release 02/2008 (revised).
* Students entered for a GCE or VCE A level or other level 3 qualification equivalent in size to an A level.
† Age at the start of the 2006/07 academic year (31 August 2006).
** Maintained schools only.

3. In addition to comparing point scores and pass rates, it is possible to compare the performance of sixth form colleges with general further education colleges by comparing their success rates as described in note 2 on page 4. At level 3, the national average success rate for students aged 16 to 19 was higher in sixth form colleges than in general further education and tertiary colleges. Data for success rates in school sixth forms are not yet available. For the 2005/06 academic year, success rates on long level 3 courses for 16–18 year olds were 83.5% in sixth form colleges and 70.5% in general further education and tertiary colleges. A comparison of success rates at A level for 16–18 year olds which does not include other level 3 qualifications shows the national average for sixth form colleges was higher (93.1%) than for general further education and tertiary colleges (87.3%).

4. A new national system of measuring progress or 'value added', the Learner Achievement Tracker, is currently being piloted. The intention is that Ofsted will use it in post-16 inspections of schools and colleges, subject to consultation, from autumn 2008. Results from the Learner Achievement Tracker have been analysed for A-level subjects in 2005/06 in all providers funded by the Learning and Skills Council. This shows much stronger progress by students in sixth form colleges than by those in other post-16 providers. Of the sixth form colleges, 63% added more value than expected given their students' prior attainment,

compared with less than a quarter of school sixth forms and just under a fifth of further education colleges (table 2).

Table 2: Percentages of post-16 providers adding more value than expected on A-level courses, 2006/07

	Number of providers	Adding more value added than expected*	
		Number	Percentage
School sixth forms	1,689	413	24
Sixth form colleges	95	60	63
General further education colleges	213	36	17
All	1,997	509	25

Source: Ofsted analysis of 2006/07 Learner Achievement Tracker data (2008).
These providers are having a positive effect on the performance of their learners compared with the national average. In other words, their value-added scores and respective confidence intervals (range within which we can be confident a provider's true value-added score lies) are wholly above the national average.

5. Further analysis shows that larger providers generally performed better than smaller providers. For example, 61% of the 162 providers with over 600 A-level entries added more value than expected, given students' prior attainment, compared with the average of 25% for all providers. Table 3 shows the differences in performance between providers with different cohort sizes.

6. For providers with small numbers of A-level entries, the percentage adding more value than expected was low. In very small school sixth forms, where fewer than 50 students were entered for A level, only 1% of these added more value than expected.

Table 3: Percentages of post-16 providers adding more value than expected on A-level courses by size of entry, 2006/07

	Type of provider†	Number of providers	Adding more value added than expected*	
			Number	Percentage
More than 600	School sixth forms	48	29	60
	Sixth form colleges	82	54	66
	Further education colleges	32	16	50
	All providers	162	99	61
More than 400	School sixth forms	243	134	55
	Sixth form colleges	90	57	63
	Further education colleges	48	18	38
	All providers	381	209	55
More than 200	School sixth forms	808	334	41
	Sixth form colleges	94	60	64
	Further education colleges	90	26	29
	All providers	992	420	42
More than 100	School sixth forms	1,257	399	32
	Sixth form colleges	95	60	63
	Further education colleges	139	31	22
	All providers	1,491	490	33
Less than 100	School sixth forms	425	14	3
	Sixth form colleges	0	-	-
	Further education colleges	74	5	7
	All providers	499	19	4
Less than 50	School sixth forms	164	1	1
	Sixth form colleges	0	-	-
	Further education colleges	53	2	4
	All providers	217	3	1

Source: Ofsted analysis of 2006/07 Learner Achievement Tracker data (2008).

* These providers are having a positive effect on the performance of their learners compared with the national average. In other words, their value-added scores and respective confidence intervals (range within which we can be confident a provider's true value-added score lies) are wholly above the national average.

† Further education colleges include general further education, tertiary and specialist colleges.

7. Inspection judgements for achievement for 2006/07 (figure 1) indicate sixth form colleges performed strongly compared with school sixth forms. Comparisons between these types of provider are valid as most of their provision is at level 3. The grades for general further education colleges include achievement over a much wider range of qualifications than level 3. Consequently, in comparing the effectiveness of institutions in providing courses at level 3, these figures do not compare directly with those for sixth forms and sixth form colleges.

Figure 1: Inspection judgements for learners' achievement in post-16 providers, 2006/07 (percentage of institutions)*

Sixth form colleges (13)	38 / 23 / 38	
Further education colleges† (74)	9 / 38 / 46 / 7	
School sixth forms (654)	14 / 36 / 47 / 3	

■ Outstanding ■ Good ■ Satisfactory ■ Inadequate
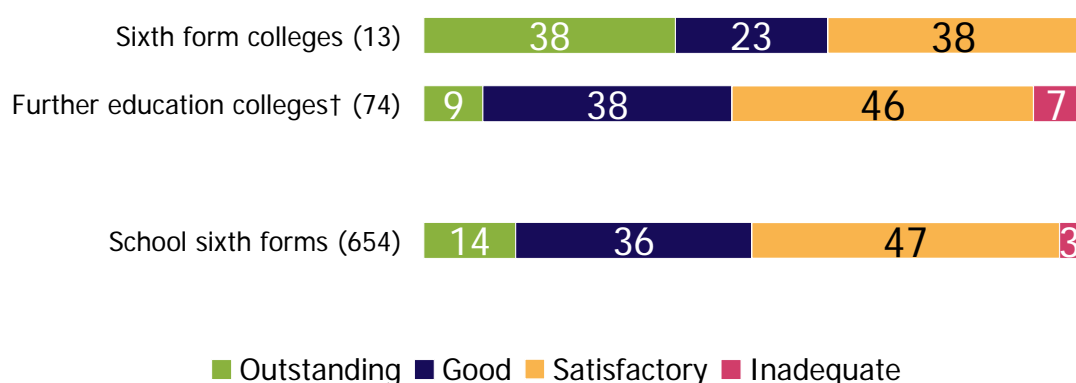
* School sixth forms are inspected using the section 5 framework; general further education and sixth form colleges are inspected to the common inspection framework. Both frameworks contain the judgement: How well do learners achieve?
† Further education colleges include general further education, tertiary and specialist colleges.
Numbers in brackets represent the number of providers inspected.
Figures should be treated with caution due to small sample sizes of sixth form colleges and further education colleges.
Please note that figures are rounded and may not add to 100.

Achievement in the institutions visited

8. Achievement was satisfactory or better in all of the providers visited, but the overall pattern of performance in the sample broadly reflected that of the national picture.

9. The school sixth forms visited had the greatest range of attainment, with three below the national average, five in line with the national average and one above the national average. Four sixth form colleges visited had attainment in line with the national average and five had attainment which were above the national average. Two further education colleges had attainment below the national average and five in line with the national average.

10. Similarly, progress, as judged by inspectors, varied, with students in the sixth form colleges visited making more progress than those in other institutions.

Progress was good or outstanding in all but one of the sixth form colleges visited. It was good in two, and satisfactory in five of the further education colleges. Variation in progress made by students was greatest in the sixth forms, with two having outstanding progress, three with good progress whilst progress was satisfactory in the remaining four.

11. The overall picture for progress and attainment in the institutions visited does not show the complexity of the pattern. Within all institutions there were variations in progress and attainment. Variations were as great within institutions as between them. These internal variations were between subjects and also between different types of provision. For example, in one of the school sixth forms, progress made by students overall was in line with the national average, but it was significantly above the national average in two A-level subjects and significantly below in another. In another school sixth form, progress in most A-level subjects was in line with the national average but results in two particularly high-performing subjects meant that the sixth form's overall value-added measure was above the national average. In a general further education college, success rates in AS and A levels were in line with the national average whereas in other level 3 qualifications they were below the national average. Where progress and attainment were good, the variations across subjects were less marked. For example, in a high-performing sixth form college where students made good progress overall, progress was below the national average in only one subject. In a further education college where progress and attainment were satisfactory, success rates on some Business and Technical Education Council (BTEC) courses were outstanding, but they were inadequate for a small number of the A-level courses.

12. There were no major variations in achievement between different minority ethnic groups in the providers visited. The gap between male and female students' achievement varied, although in most cases there was little difference. Where overall achievement was good or outstanding, students with different levels of prior attainment made good progress. For example, in one of the sixth form colleges in 2007, 40% of students completing AS courses made outstanding progress, including those with different levels of prior attainment at GCSE. Others made good progress. As a result, progress overall was outstanding.

13. There were a number of reasons why students with different levels of prior attainment did not always make good progress. In one school, for example, sixth form students with low prior attainment were placed on courses which did not meet their needs. Consequently, they fared badly in the subsequent examinations. In another school, the main group of learners not completing courses were those whose prior attainment was below average. In a further education college, students with high prior attainment were underperforming as the college was not challenging them enough. There were even more complex patterns, such as those in a further education college where the retention of

students with low prior attainment was poor, but those who remained made exceptional progress.

14. All the institutions visited set target grades for individual students in each of their subjects. For students, these were a powerful incentive when related to the grades they needed to access the higher education courses of their choice. In the institutions where achievement was good or outstanding, setting targets was highly effective and included these features.

   ■ Targets were based on overall GCSE prior attainment with an element of challenge added which helped students' motivation, but was not so challenging as to be demotivating.
   ■ Targets produced centrally by the institution were adjusted by individual subject teachers according to students' prior attainment and aptitude in specific subjects.
   ■ Targets were reviewed and adjusted regularly in discussion with individual students in the light of their progress, which helped motivate them as they were involved in re-setting targets.

15. Setting targets did not always contribute to students' progress. In one institution targets were unrealistically high compared with students' prior attainment. As a result, few students achieved these. In another institution, targets were set based on prior attainment but individual subjects did not add further challenge and so targets led to satisfactory rather than good progress. In another institution, targets were set as an administrative exercise and did not involve students or help them to make good progress.

16. All the institutions visited used performance data to identify how much progress students made. All except one further education college and one school made use of commercial systems to help with their analysis of attainment and progress and to support their target setting.[5] Most of the institutions also carried out their own in-house analyses, which compared students' attainment on entry with their attainment at the end of the level 3 courses. Three of the sixth form colleges used performance data shared between local colleges to gauge students' achievement on vocational courses. None of the institutions used only a single index to measure the overall progress made by their level 3 cohort. Where an institution provided different types of courses, these were compared with achievement on similar courses nationally. The measures available did not enable all institutions to compare directly the attainment and progress between different types of courses. For example, one further education college with a wide range of level 3 provision:

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[5] These include the Advanced Level Information System (Alis) and the Advanced Level Performance System (Alps). Please see Further information on page 22 for an overview of these and other systems.

- used commercial systems to analyse progress on A and AS courses and compared this progress against national benchmarks

- was beginning to use the Learning Achievement Tracker to analyse progress on some vocational courses

- used success rates compared with national averages for similar colleges as a key indicator of achievement and standards.

The quality of teaching and learning, including academic guidance

17. Table 4 shows that teaching and learning, including academic guidance, was outstanding in four institutions, good in 17 and satisfactory in the remaining four.

Table 4: The quality of teaching and learning, including academic guidance in the institutions visited

	Number			
	Total	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
School sixth forms	9	0	8	1	0
Sixth form colleges	9	4	4	1	0
General further education colleges	7	0	5	2	0
All institutions	25	4	17	4	0

18. Strengths in almost all the providers visited included high-quality academic guidance; teaching by well-qualified subject specialists and excellent relationships between students and teachers. These strengths outweighed the weaknesses in developing students' independent learning skills and planning to meet individual students' needs, and enabled students to make at least satisfactory progress in all the providers visited.

19. Outstanding teaching and learning were based on teachers' good knowledge of students' prior attainment; regular assessment of their performance, informally within lessons and through marked test and assignments; and an understanding of students' personal circumstances which might affect their learning. Teaching met the needs of groups and individuals in a variety of ways including:

- the use of different text books and other resources, including reference to virtual learning environments, to meet students' differing needs[6]

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[6] A virtual learning environment is a system allowing students to access specific learning resources electronically.

- well-structured questioning, with open questions suitably targeted at students of different abilities

- students working in pairs and small groups based on ability

- planned independent work, including research, tailored to meet the needs of individual students

- the use of learning support assistants, both in lessons and for support outside the classroom

- a range of activities which engaged students' interest

- high levels of support for individual students both within and outside the classroom; teachers were generous with their time, which students valued

- modifying and adapting lesson plans in the light of informal assessment of students' progress and understanding during the lesson

- setting short and longer term learning goals for individual students.

20. For example, in one school sixth form, A-level teaching was adapted in many subjects so that potential A/B grade students worked with more challenging activities and extended independent learning whereas work for potential D/E students was more structured. In another school sixth form, there was a good variety of activities: paired work, groups organised by ability and assigned different tasks, independent research followed by presentations, good use of questioning at different levels both to assess students' understanding and to develop learning points, and challenging extension tasks.

21. In six of the nine school sixth forms visited, the opportunities for students to develop independent learning skills were limited. In one school this meant that the knowledge of potentially high-attaining students was not fully extended. In two of the schools, information and learning technology facilities were insufficient to meet demand from students. In another, the underdeveloped virtual learning environment restricted students' access to online resources.

22. In five school sixth forms, planning to meet the needs of individuals was weak in some subjects. For example, in one school sixth form, not all subject leaders recognised the value of using students' prior attainment data to help plan activities to support students' learning. This contributed to the inconsistent progress made by students in different subjects. In another school, teaching was not adapted to meet the needs of students with lower prior attainment than usually accepted for level 3 courses and so these students did not make sufficient progress.

23. In four of the sixth form colleges, three of the further education colleges and one of the schools, additional support for students with learning difficulties was an important part of the provision. In the sixth form colleges this support made a strong contribution to the good or outstanding progress students made. This was because specialist additional support staff focused on the specific needs of

level 3 students. For example, in one sixth form college, the study skills department provided high-quality support for students with a range of needs including dyslexia, other specific learning difficulties and social and emotional barriers to learning. Interventions from well-qualified specialist teachers were rapid, effective and personalised for each student. In another sixth form college, students identified as having low prior attainment had an extra lesson each week in a subject where their progress was slow. Weaker students also received extra lessons in study organisation and basic skills such as reading and writing. As a result, students made good progress. However, in one sixth form college there were few effective strategies in lessons to help a number of students who were advanced bilingual learners improve their reading and analytical skills in order to overcome literacy and language difficulties in their written work.

24. In all the institutions visited, professional development had prepared the teachers for the assessment and syllabus requirements of their subjects. Professional development in sixth form colleges was focused mainly on teaching level 3 students, both within subject areas and through whole-college development programmes. This professional development contributed to the high quality of the teaching found in the sixth form colleges. In schools, sixth form teachers for most subjects also taught courses in Key Stages 3 and 4 and so only a proportion of their professional development time focused on sixth form teaching. For example, only one of the schools visited had a specific professional development programme focused on sixth form teaching. In further education colleges, because much of their provision was for level 1 and 2 learners, proportionately less professional development time was given to level 3 work.

25. Strong features of professional development programmes drawn from all types of institutions included:

■ professional development focused specifically on level 3 teaching and learning, linked closely to institutional and subject improvement plans and performance management arrangements

■ teachers' improved understanding of how to use performance and assessment data in setting targets and monitoring the performance of individuals and groups

■ teachers' improved understanding of syllabus and assessment requirements, through moderating students' work at level 3, attending awarding body training and taking on responsibilities as examiners and chief examiners

■ shared and improved practice through:
    – analysing lesson observations
    – mentoring weaker teachers
    – peer observation
    – joint planning

- coaching by expert teachers
- action research schemes to evaluate particular teaching and learning methods
- networking with teachers in other institutions
- working with colleagues for extended periods in 'in-house' conferences.

■ induction schemes for new staff, including those new to post-16 teaching, as well as extensive support for newly qualified teachers

■ links with industry and employers, particularly where institutions had a large number of vocational programmes.

26. Academic guidance was good or outstanding in all but one of the institutions visited. This was based on effective systems for assessing and tracking students' progress. In all the institutions visited, students explained to inspectors that they knew how well they were doing and how to improve their work. Their progress was reviewed regularly in each subject and personal tutors monitored their overall progress. Interventions to tackle underachievement took place quickly and effectively in most of the providers. For example, in one school sixth form, guidance was highly effective and made a strong contribution to students' good progress. There was systematic monitoring of academic performance across all subjects once each term. Targets were renegotiated according to progress made in each subject. Students were given clear information on how well they had done and how their work could be improved following each major piece of assessed work in each subject. Tutors monitored progress overall, as did the senior member of staff with responsibility for the sixth form. Support strategies were set in train according to the assessed needs of individuals in order to tackle any underachievement. Parents were closely involved in the monitoring process through formal reports and informal contact where necessary.

27. Two of the sixth form colleges had particularly efficient electronic systems for capturing student data, which enhanced the quality of academic guidance. In one of these, the electronic system for managing student data enabled tutors, teachers, students and parents to access current grades, target grades, assessment results and teachers' comments as well as records of attendance and punctuality. This enabled tutors and teachers to monitor progress closely and intervene quickly at any sign of underachievement. Tutors held meetings with individual students fortnightly. As all the necessary information was available, there was no time wasted in disputing grades or for students to give a misleading impression about how well they were doing. Staff were able to plan effective, supportive actions based on this shared and up-to-date information. The system was helping to improve retention rates and reduce underachievement. In one of the school sixth forms, students considered the support of their teachers, their individual academic reviews and the detailed feedback on their work extremely valuable in helping them to make good progress.

The quality of the curriculum

Table 5: The quality of the level 3 curriculum in the institutions visited

	Number				
	Total	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
School sixth forms	9	1	7	1	0
Sixth form colleges	9	6	2	1	0
General further education colleges	7	4	1	2	0
All institutions	25	11	10	4	0

28. The sixth form colleges and general further education colleges visited were able to offer a wider range of subjects than the school sixth forms, including those extending their provision through collaboration.[7] For example, one school sixth form with fewer than 100 students was able to offer only 14 level 3 courses. Schools with larger sixth forms of over 200 and those with some extension of their curriculum through collaboration offered up to 35 level 3 courses. One sixth form college, where the curriculum was outstanding, offered over 60 courses at level 3. As a result, it catered highly effectively for students with widely differing needs, abilities and aspirations.

29. The contexts of the general further education colleges visited affected the level 3 curricula they offered. For example, one did not offer AS or A levels, as part of an agreement with local schools. Another, as result of recent mergers with a land-based college and a small sixth form college, provided a very wide range of courses.

30. Good curricula were reflected in a broad choice of courses that met the needs and career aspirations of students well. Most providers had introduced new courses to respond to student demand, such as a vocational course in music technology in one school sixth form. Students' first choices of subject were generally met as a result of effective curriculum planning. Where the curriculum was satisfactory rather than good, gaps in provision meant that students did not always have a wide choice of courses.

31. Five of the school sixth forms had extended their curriculum through collaborating with other providers. Collaboration did not always make a substantial difference to the range of curricular provision. For example, two school sixth forms which collaborated with other local institutions still did not

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[7] Examples of the range of level 3 provision found in different types of institution are shown in Annex 2.

offer sufficient vocational courses to fully meet students' needs. Two school sixth forms had plans for collaboration which had not been implemented at the time of the survey. Two schools did not extend their curriculum through partnership with other providers, nor planned to do so. None of the sixth form colleges or general further education colleges used other providers to extend their level 3 curriculum as most were large enough to provide highly effective provision in their own right.

32. Most of the providers planned the level 3 curriculum effectively to accommodate students' prior attainment and aptitudes. Such planning led to the following strengths.

■ Students followed different combinations of courses. For example, in one sixth form college, programmes ranged from five AS levels continuing to four A levels through to combinations of level 3 and level 2 courses.

■ Activities were provided which improved the achievement of students with low prior attainment. For example, a successful sixth form college introduced a programme which enabled students with lower attainment to acquire study skills to support their level 3 courses. In another sixth form college, students with low prior attainment had additional subject lessons in their weaker subjects which consolidated their learning.

■ Activities challenged students identified as gifted and talented. For example, a sixth form college provided an extension programme where students worked towards an Advanced Extension Award and additional AS or other qualifications. In a school sixth form, gifted and talented students attended national summer schools and programmes; one student enjoyed studying further mathematics at a local university.

■ Activities enhanced and complemented mainstream courses. For example, in a sixth form college, students took part in flexible provision to prepare them for specific higher education courses and careers, including the medical and legal professions. In another sixth form college, extra courses included speed typing, using and applying statistics, and first aid for sports.

■ Clear progression routes to level 3 were provided. For example, a school introduced a vocational business qualification at Key Stage 4 in order to provide a better transition to the popular level 3 vocational business qualification in the sixth form. A general further education college's good progression routes enabled students to move from level 2 to level 3 courses and from level 1 through level 2 to level 3.

■ Flexible approaches to the curriculum were implemented within subjects. For example, a school sixth form reviewed its A-level science course to enable students to follow their own areas of interest within the syllabus. In a sixth form college, the A-level psychology course was planned according to students' prior attainment and career aspirations.

33. Students settled on to their courses well. Strong contributory features in all the institutions visited included:

- clear and careful guidance about course selection, ensuring that students were placed on appropriate courses
- accurate information about content and arrangements for assessment so that courses met students' expectations
- thorough induction, including an early introduction to the coursework and study requirements at level 3
- close monitoring which provided early warning of any dissatisfaction from students, poor or declining attendance, or inadequate progress, followed by timely support appropriate to the students' needs
- in the case of sixth form colleges and general further education colleges, strong links with partner 11 to 16 schools.

The quality of leadership and management

34. Table 6 below shows that leadership and management were outstanding in seven providers, good in 15 and satisfactory in three.

Table 6: The quality of leadership and management in the institutions visited

	Number				
	Total	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
School sixth forms	9	2	6	1	0
Sixth form colleges	9	5	3	1	0
General further education colleges	7	0	6	1	0
All institutions	25	7	15	3	0

35. Self-evaluation was strong in all the institutions visited. They had an accurate understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, based on robust and systematic monitoring, and those with good leadership and management tackled their weaknesses effectively. For example, a general further education college noted that the retention of students on AS courses had declined. It identified the causes of the problem and acted to improve the quality of induction for students, strengthen its monitoring of performance and attendance, and improve the quality of teaching. Retention rates began to rise.

36. Monitoring of students' performance through analysing data and observation of lessons, together with collecting students' views, was at the heart of institutional self-evaluation. Self-evaluation was strongest in the sixth form colleges visited, where it was excellent in five of the nine. For example, one of the sixth form colleges based its excellent self-evaluation on a comprehensive, interactive, electronic system for monitoring and tracking students' progress and a robust lesson observation schedule. Lesson observations for all staff took

place three times a year with a clear focus on students' learning and progress. College leaders at all levels had a well-honed understanding of strengths and weaknesses in their area of responsibility. Improvement plans for students, subjects or individual teachers were implemented and monitored rigorously where weaknesses were revealed.

37. The use of performance data to set targets and drive improvement in individual subject areas was mixed. In the sixth form colleges, almost all performance targets were focused on improving attainment and progress at level 3. This contributed to the high levels of achievement found in these providers. In the schools and general further education colleges, performance targets for individual teachers did not always include level 3 work because of other priorities, such as having a high proportion of their teaching on courses other than at level 3.

38. Almost all of the sixth form colleges had highly robust, systematic approaches to reviewing each subject's performance through performance management arrangements or other systems of quality assurance. For example, one sixth form college supplemented regular subject reviews with mid-year reviews if performance was not up to scratch. Effective improvement planning for each subject was rooted firmly in evaluating the impact of previous action plans. This resulted in effective longer term planning and short-term, sharply monitored interventions. Leaders at all levels focused on raising achievement. The college's system for performance management and effective planning for professional development maintained this focus on improvement.

39. Using performance data to set subject targets or targets for different aspects of level 3 provision was not fully exploited in five of the school sixth forms visited. For example, in one of them, senior managers did not set targets for different subjects nor monitor the individual targets set for students in each subject. As a result, the performance in subjects was inconsistent and rarely better than satisfactory. In the two schools where subject targets for level 3 attainment were effective achievement was better than in the other schools visited.

40. Collaboration with other schools and colleges to improve level 3 provision was limited in the institutions visited. In one case, a general further education college ceased providing A and AS levels in agreement with local schools in order to make the most efficient use of resources in the area. One sixth form college and, in another part of the country, one general further education college regarded themselves in competition with other nearby post-16 providers. One school had begun to expand its level 3 curriculum, but this was to combat what it saw as competition from a college in a nearby town rather than responding to meet the needs of post-16 students in the local area.

41. The numbers on roll in the school sixth forms ranged from 90 to 240 level 3 students. Three of the schools were using funding from their 11–16 provision to support their sixth forms. None of these three schools was in an established

consortium to provide level 3 courses. One was committed to join six other schools and a further education college to provide level 3 courses, and expected that sixth form courses would become financially self-supporting through these arrangements. Another had a limited arrangement with two other 11–18 schools.

42. Problems which reduced the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements included:

- the mismatch of timetables between institutions resulting in limited opportunities for collaboration and students missing lessons or other activities

- travelling distance between institutions which put students off opting for courses involving travel to other schools or colleges

- inefficient transport arrangements leading to students' lateness or missed lessons

- lack of time for teachers and subject leaders in collaborating organisations to plan together

- poorly developed quality assurance systems between institutions

- reluctance of institutions to collaborate in areas where joint working had not been established and where institutions competed for post-16 students.

43. Staffing, resources and accommodation were generally well deployed. Most providers had plans, at various stages of development, for improving their accommodation.

Notes

The survey was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors and Additional Inspectors between June and December 2007. They visited nine school sixth forms, nine sixth form colleges and seven general further education colleges. The number of learners ranged from a small school sixth form of 90 students to a large college with over 2,000 students enrolled on level 3 courses. Geographical contexts ranged from rural to inner city. Inspectors analysed performance data nationally and from individual institutions, analysed documentation, met students and staff, and observed teaching and learning by making short visits to a range of lessons in each institution. In total, 140 lessons were visited.

The survey sought to answer the following questions.

- How effectively do institutions use performance data to identify how much progress students on level 3 courses have made?

- Do different methods of assessing progress enable valid comparisons to be made of the effectiveness of different types of post-16 institutions in providing level 3 courses?

- What features of different institutions contribute to good or outstanding progress?

- How effective is the review of students' academic progress?

- How effectively are progress data used to improve the quality of teaching and learning?

Further information

Alps: Advanced Level Performance System

This value-added system is available to most sixth form colleges in England and a large number of general further education colleges and school sixth forms. National benchmarks have been established, at both institutional and subject level, covering most GCE A levels and VCE A levels. The benchmarks take account of both the difficulty of subjects taken and the abilities of the students as measured by their GCSE scores. For each college or school, subjects receive a grade that compares their results with all other institutions in the dataset.

Alis: Advanced Level Information System

Alis provides performance indicators for post-16 learners across all sectors of education and includes analysis of A-level, AS-level and Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) examinations. It covers around a third of all A-level entries in the UK and international schools sitting UK examinations in this present year. Alis compares the progress made by learners at an institution with the large sample of similar learners in the Alis project. All learners are measured against a common baseline representing their attainment before starting their post-16 courses. The average GCSE score is the baseline for Alis. For learners with no GCSE results, Alis provides an alternative baseline, the International Test of Developed Ability (ITDA). This system does not take into account the difficulty of the subject.

New Measures of Success (NMoS) Learner Achievement Tracker value added measure

This is being piloted for graded level 3 qualifications, such as A levels and BTEC national awards. Latest data show a good degree of correlation with commercially available systems. Data are currently being made available to institutions through the sixth form PANDA (progress and achievement) report, the summary interactive college performance report (iCPR) and online interactively via the Learning and Skills Council provider quality gateway.

Department of Children, Schools and Families contextual value added (CVA) pilot

This tracks valued added per student from the end of Key Stage 4 to the end of their level 3 study. It includes all graded level 3 qualifications and provides a score for the institution as a whole. The measure takes into account contextual factors including prior attainment from Key Stage 4; the number and size[8] of A-level equivalent qualifications taken; GCSE English grade; gender. None of the institutions visited in this survey was part of this pilot.

References

Framework for excellence: raising standards and informing choice (LSC-P-NAT-070013), Learning and Skills Council, 2007; http://ffe.lsc.gov.uk/

Piloting new measures of success: the quality improvement pack (LSC-P-NAT-060023), Learning and Skills Council, 2006; http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/2006/quality/performanceachievement/piloting-new-measures-success-quality-improvement-pack-january-2006-update.pdf

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority www.qca.org.uk

The National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) contains details of qualifications that are accredited by QCA. www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk

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[8] The 'size' of a qualification is an index based on the expected number of hours required to complete a course leading to that qualification. One GCE A level is given a size '1' and other qualifications are compared to this benchmark. A full, detailed explanation of the points and qualifications system can be found at the QCA website listed above.

Annex 1: The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority points system

In order to report all approved qualifications, the QCA assigns figures to all qualifications. These performance measurement figures are based on the relative challenge and size of a qualification. At level 3, A level is the baseline comparator.

Grade	Size	Points	Grade	Size	Points	Grade	Size	Points
GCE/aGCE/VCE A level			GCE/aGCE/ VCE AS			GCE/aGCE/VCE Double Award		
A	1	270	A	0.5	135	AA	2	540
B	1	240	B	0.5	120	AB	2	510
C	1	210	C	0.5	105	BB	2	480
D	1	180	D	0.5	90	BC	2	450
E	1	150	E	0.5	75	CC	2	420
						CD	2	390
						DD	2	360
						DE	2	330
						EE	2	300
BTEC National Award			BTEC National Certificate			BTEC National Diploma		
D	1	270	DD	2	540	DDD	3	810
M	1	225	DM	2	480	DDM	3	757.5
P	1	165	MM	2	420	DMM	3	705
			MP	2	360	MMM	3	652.5
			PP	2	300	MMP	3	600
						MPP	3	547.5
						PPP	3	495
Advanced Free Standing Maths			Advanced Extension Award			Level 3 Key Skill		
A	0.1667	45	D	0	27	P	0.3	63
B	0.1667	40	M	0	23			
C	0.1667	35						
D	0.1667	30						
E	0.1667	25						

International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma passes (no points are assigned to pupils achieving IB certificates)					
Grade	Size	Points	Grade	Size	Points
45	5	1380	34	5	1050
44	5	1350	33	5	1020
43	5	1320	32	5	990
42	5	1290	31	5	960
41	5	1260	30	5	930
40	5	1230	29	5	900
39	5	1200	28	5	870

38	5	1170	27	5	840
37	5	1140	26	5	810
36	5	1110	25	5	780
35	5	1080	24	5	750

Please note that National Vocational Qualification points and contributions will vary depending on the type of qualification.

Annex 2: Examples of the range of level 3 qualifications available in different types of post-16 provider

The following examples illustrate the range of the level 3 qualifications available in different types of post-16 provider.

Example 1: a sixth form college
- A and AS levels
- Applied A and AS levels
- BTEC National Diplomas and Awards
- Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations National Diplomas

Example 2: a school sixth form
- A and AS levels
- Applied A and AS levels

Example 3: a general further education college
- A and AS levels
- BTEC National Diplomas and Awards
- Council for Awards in Children's Education (CACHE) Diplomas
- National Vocational Qualifications

Annex 3: Institutions visited for this survey

Institution	Local Learning and Skills Council
School sixth forms	
Baxter Business and Enterprise College	Hereford and Worcestershire
Beckfoot School	West Yorkshire
Maghull High School	Greater Merseyside
North Bromsgrove High School	Hereford and Worcestershire
Okehampton College	Devon and Cornwall
Paget High School	Staffordshire
Pershore High School	Hereford and Worcestershire
Redruth School: a Technology College	Devon and Cornwall
Weston Road High School	Staffordshire
Sixth form colleges	
Aquinas College	Greater Manchester
Gateway Sixth Form College	Leicestershire
Hartlepool Sixth Form College	Tees Valley
Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College	Birmingham and Solihull
Loreto College	Greater Manchester
Queen Mary's College	Hampshire and the Isle of Wight
Brook House Sixth Form College (BSix)	London East
Totton College	Hampshire and the Isle of Wight
Worcester Sixth Form College	Hereford and Worcestershire
General further education colleges	
Cannock Chase Technical College	Staffordshire
City of Bristol College	West of England
Guildford College of Further and Higher Education	Surrey
Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology	Shropshire
Stockton Riverside College	Tees Valley
Tower Hamlets College	London East
West Cheshire College	Cheshire and Warrington