



Understanding specialism in different settings

Summary

Partnerships between specialist colleges and general further education colleges (GFEs) continue and are developing, as do partnerships with a range of other providers and agencies. The key findings from this current small scale project are:

1. Most commonly, students spend 1 or two days learning in the partner provider
2. Most often, students from the specialist college attend another provider, but there are more examples of movement the other way being developed
3. The benefits for students and staff are clear to both partners
4. Co-location (shared site) remains relatively rare
5. Most partnerships have a clear memorandum of understanding or service level agreement in place to clarify roles and responsibilities and to help address some of the challenges associated with partnership working
6. Partnerships increasingly have shared quality assurance processes in place
7. There is often support in principle from local authorities for partnership working, but so far little evidence that LAs are commissioning dual placements in the context of the Children and Families Act 2014
8. More joint training is taking place across partnerships

The specific training needs identified are:

1. For all providers
 - a) RARPA
 - b) Accessible and assistive technology
 - c) Working more effectively with health and social care

2. For GFE and other mainstream partners
 - a) Supporting students with complex needs, including health needs
 - b) Working with students whose behaviour is challenging

Background to partnership working

Working in partnership is nothing new for specialist colleges, as various reports and surveys over the years have demonstrated. In 1998, in response to the report of the Tomlinson committee, Natspec and FEDA undertook a small scale project for the Further Education Funding Council to look at links between specialist and general FE colleges. 18 links of one kind or another were reported, five of them long-standing partnerships. One of its conclusions was that a successful partnership was where *'two colleges collaborate to make provision that best matches a learner's requirements – inclusive learning in practice'*.

The LSC report **'Learning for Living and Work'** (2006) envisaged that *'co-location of providers and provision will enable greater access for increased numbers of learners with a variety of needs to a greater range of provision, specialism and facilities.'* The following year the Quality Improvement Agency and the Improvement Adviser Service worked with Natspec member colleges to produce **'Supporting Quality Improvement in Independent Specialist Colleges (ISCs) through Co-location and Partnership'**. This report found that although there were very few examples of co-location in a geographical sense, there were many instances of partnership working, usually in order to broaden the curriculum options for students and to enable them to make use of a wider range of facilities. In some instances, this reflected a deliberate policy focus when the specialist college was established.

A follow up Natspec/LSIS project in 2010 further explored the benefits to students from the wide range of partnerships that were then in place. The project report **'Working in Partnership for Quality Improvement'** had a particular focus on ways in which such links improved the overall programme offer for students. At the time, Ofsted included an emphasis on partnerships in the **'Common inspection framework for further education and skills'** (2009). Colleges were also beginning to anticipate a planned move to LA commissioning. An extensive survey found that 47 out of 51 respondents had some kind of partnership with a general FE college or other type of local provider.

The main purpose of these partnerships was very similar to that reported in 2007, namely an increased range of options and opportunities for ISC learners to experience main stream settings. The long-standing partnerships all remained in place. It was noted by an Ofsted speaker at the project conference that reports for

those specialist colleges graded good and outstanding contained many references to effective partnership working and collaborations.

This project took place at a time when LA commissioning was on the horizon, and a number of colleges were proactively engaging with their host LA. This included involvement in Learning Disability Partnership Boards and local 14-19 partnerships.

There was some increase in training reported in 2010, although this tended to be offered by the specialist college to the GFE staff, usually focussing on strategies to meet more complex needs. There was relatively little joint training.

In terms of challenges, these were consistent in the 2007 and 2010 reports. They were around communication – both day to day and longer term reviewing and planning – and the need for some kind of formal agreement to clarify roles and responsibilities and to put in place quality assurance procedures.

The current project

The Children & Families Act 2014, and the supporting Code of Practice, promotes partnership working at many levels; not only does it initiate joint planning and commissioning by education, health and care departments, but it also encourages sharing of expertise and dual placements. 2015/16 is the first full year of operation with students entering colleges with Education Health and Care Plans, so it is too early to see substantial changes. However, this project has provided an opportunity to explore ways in which partnership working has grown or developed since 2010, and to begin to get a sense of how colleges are responding to the expectations of the Act.

The findings are based on a small survey, some commissioned case studies, two regional meetings (attended by both specialist college and GFE staff) and a workshop at the Natspec annual conference together with general feedback from members. It does not cover links with LAs other than in relation to dual placements, nor does it cover work experience although specialist colleges have significant partnerships with employers. The survey did not ask about school or HE links, but two interesting examples are included here.

Just before the end of this work, Ofsted published its thematic survey report '**Moving forward? How well the further education and skills sector is preparing young people with high needs for adult life**' (2016). It identifies some considerable weaknesses in provision for those with more complex needs where this is a relatively new student group; this suggests that there is a real need for sharing of expertise, but done in such a way that it does not pose a threat to the specialist sector or limit the options available to young people. Ofsted also noted the need for much greater rigour in assessment, target setting and monitoring progress, something which is referenced a number of times. The survey findings, which included input from Natspec and specialist colleges, have also informed this report.

Types of partnership

There are a number of approaches to working in partnership, ranging from co-location to informal links through local projects. However, it is noticeable that in the majority of cases, whatever the nature of the partnership, it was initiated by the specialist college and only very occasionally the initial approach is made by the partner, or by the LA. There may be a number of reasons for this, including lack of knowledge on the part of other providers who may not be aware of the expertise and skills available in the specialist sector. However, the Code of Practice 7.22 is clear that *'Colleges should make sure they have access to specialist skills and expertise to support the learning of students with SEN. This can be through partnerships with other agencies such as adult social care or health services, or specialist organisations, and/or by employing practitioners directly.'*

The range of partnerships is described below:

1. **Co-location** is where a specialist college is located on the site of a partner GFE. This 'extreme partnership' model remains relatively rare as it can be time consuming and difficult to achieve, and furthermore very costly.

RNIB College Loughborough is a long established co-location on a campus shared by a number of further and higher education institutions, and was set up in this way when the college moved from its London location in 1989. Alongside their in-house programmes, they offer hybrid programmes with some study in a mainstream college and the rest of the time at RNIB College. They also support learners on full-time mainstream courses in a range of subjects at Loughborough College up to Level 3 vocational course or A Levels.

RNIB College works with Loughborough College to provide training to teachers and lecturers and advice about how best to work with people with disabilities. Dedicated learning support staff have specialist training to ensure students get the most out of their time at College; they assist students in and out of class with learning, note taking in lessons, support in reading class material and mobility support to and from lessons. RNIB College's Adaptation and Transcription team ensure that handouts and learning materials are available on time and in an accessible format, this can include large print, braille, tactile diagrams, symbols and audio.

More recently, Ambitious College has established itself on a GFE campus where its facilities, staff and programmes are all located; the approach is described in detail in **case study A**. Bridge College relocated onto a GFE campus in 2012, but retains partnerships with a number of local providers, and Orchard Hill has a number of bases around local communities. Three of these four partnerships offer day rather than residential provision, indicating perhaps that making residential provision in a co-located setting presents particular challenges.

A different co-location model is one where staff from the specialist college are based at the GFE site in order to teach and support the GFE students. This is a new arrangement developed by Linkage College in response to changes in LA commissioning behaviour and described in **case study B**.

2. **Main course delivery** at the partner college, where the majority of course learning takes place at the partner college, with support and residential learning provided by the specialist college, so that students get the best of both worlds. Most of these arrangements are long-standing, such as those at Treloar, Farleigh Frome, Priory Swindon and Dorton Colleges. They allow the specialist colleges to ensure a wide range of courses at different levels for often more academically able students, whilst at the same time being able to offer significant levels of support both in the partner college and through the residential setting. However, not all students at these colleges pursue their main learning programme at the GFE, and most specialist colleges offer in-house learning to at least some of their students.

Ofsted usually comments on these partnerships, and here notes the balance of roles undertaken by each college and its staff team; *'The quality of teaching and learning by partner further education college staff is good, as is the teaching of independence and practical skills on Farleigh sites'* and in this comment, *'The highly trained learning support team works very effectively, alongside the partner college's staff, so that students participate fully in challenging learning activities and complete work at high standards.'*

There is often a base room at the GFE partner, so that students are always able to seek support or a quiet space should they need it, as noted by Ofsted, *'The learning centre at Wiltshire College is spacious, well-resourced and offers good support for learners attending courses at the college.'*

Dorton College, having had close links with two GFEs for some years, recently made the decision to relocate its residential provision to be near Bromley College. In its recent inspection report, Ofsted noted that *'The strategic decision to relocate the provision to college houses and establish a partnership with a high-performing college gives Dorton College's students a well-designed, personalised learning programme with very good access to a wide range of specialist resources, high-quality accommodation, and good teaching staff in an inclusive learning environment.'*

3. **Some course delivery** at the partner college, where students from the specialist college spend one or two days a week at the partner GFE. This arrangement still reflects the majority of partnerships, and even then not all students would be using the GFE partner. However, as noted below, it allows for a wider range of learning areas and a more levels of learning to be

available than can usually be offered through a smaller specialist college, for example Linkage college students can pursue A level options at one of their partner colleges. The survey indicated that as well as GFEs, specialist colleges also make links with training providers and community organisations, again with the aim of broadening the learning opportunities.

Specialist colleges often have partnership with a number of GFEs, as well as with other organisations.

Over the last three years, Dilston College has had partnerships with 3 GFEs, each with a different purpose. At Gateshead College, they are sub-contracted to provide 2 days of ILS teaching at the college and in the local community, so that the learners receive a five day provision.

They are also sub-contracted to Darlington College, where they have a base. They provide ILS teaching and job coaches to support work experience for Darlington College learners. It operates flexibly so that students can be with either partner for the majority of their time, depending on need.

The third partnership is with Tyne Metropolitan College. Dilston has worked with the LA to provide a residential provision for up to 4 learners; they attend Tynemet for their accredited learning, but Dilston delivers their extended curriculum and work experience. The students remain in their local North Tyneside community, but are funded as Dilston learners.

4. **Some students from the partner college** attend the specialist college, usually to make use of some of the specialist resources such as sensory rooms or hydrotherapy pools. There are also examples of GFE students being able to access vocational programmes that are offered by the specialist college at lower levels or with appropriately adapted or specialist resources.

One successful scheme has been the partnership between Thornbeck College and East Durham College, with 56 students from the partner GFE attending the specialist college for two or more days a week to make use of their resources. Their partner college is clear about the value of this link; the East Durham College website says 'A partnership with North East Autism Society (Thornbeck) has enhanced the provision for learners on the autistic spectrum. Staff expertise is shared across both organisations. The physical resources of each organisation are used to enhance the outcomes of learners'. **Case study C** outlines this partnership in more detail.

Foxes Academy in Minehead has developed a partnership with Bridgwater College that enables the GFE students to make use of Foxes facilities and expertise over the holiday periods. They offer a five day intensive, individualised course, focussing on the aspirations of each young person and giving them some of the independent living skills they will need when they leave college. This is described in **case study D**.

5. **School links** are being developed as specialist colleges increasingly offer more day provision. These can be in order to support transition or more generally to add value to the pupils' learning experience.

Hereward College has recently developed a range of partnerships with schools, one supported by Solihull LA with the specific purpose of supporting transition and with the school funding the link for one day a week. Other school links are around the support that Hereward is able to offer and these are linked to a range of individual needs identified by both special and mainstream schools.

Such links respond to 8.25 in the Code of Practice which states that '*Schools and colleges should work in partnership to provide opportunities such as taster courses, link programmes and mentoring which enable young people with SEN to familiarise themselves with the college environment and gain some experience of college life and study. This can include, for example, visits and taster days so that young people can become familiar with the size of the college, and how their studies will be structured, including how many days a week their programme covers.*'

6. **Links into higher education** are far less common, but may be important in ensuring young people are able to achieve their ambitions. ESPA College, whose students have Autism Spectrum or Asperger Syndrome and associated difficulties, has invested the time and resources to do this. Through its existing partnership with City of Sunderland College, it has identified the support requirements for students aspiring to university. The GFE provides the appropriate academic curriculum, whilst ESPA uses its specialist staff to provide the student with the emotional resilience and social skills needed to cope successfully at university. Both partners are committed to working towards this goal, even though at times it has proved challenging.

Some students then go on to study locally at Sunderland University, with ESPA continuing to offer support and providing a seamless transition from further to higher education and beyond. For example, one student returned to ESPA in a voluntary capacity after graduating, before fulfilling a life dream to work abroad.

If students go on to study further afield, they have had the best possible preparation through the local partnership and remain in touch with ESPA through their studies should they need support.

7. **Informal partnerships** come about through meetings, events, regional Natspec or AoC groups and PRD groups. These all provide opportunities for providers to find out more about what they each have to offer, their areas of specialism and their training needs.

The North East LLDD network group meets three times a year and involves practitioners from GFE and specialist colleges. External or college speakers present case studies and identify issues for discussion. Critical to the success of these groups is an open atmosphere, a spirit of sharing best practice, and external administration of the meetings (in this case, AoC North East). The most important factor, identified by one of those who attend, is “a shared ethos of genuinely working for the sake of the learners, not for ourselves or our budgets”.

Similar networks exist in most regions, with varying memberships and purposes. Partner organisations offer free venues, provide refreshments, commit staff time, or provide funds for promotion or publicity. This means that events are free or inexpensive for staff to attend, and their activity can be focussed on agreed needs and interests. Some networks are education provider specific, others bring in voluntary organisations, local authorities and other agencies.

Other more formal events, such as the recent DfE regional meetings ‘*Working together to help young people with SEND achieve good futures*’, were supported by PfA, AoC and Natspec, and were aimed at encouraging post-16 providers and LAs to work more effectively together.

Some local partnerships can be quite wide ranging and meet a variety of needs, such as those described below.

Beaumont College has developed a range of partnership initiatives with surrounding mainstream and special schools with sixth forms. This has included holding events for school staff at the college so that professionals from different settings can share knowledge and expertise and discuss various issues relating to transition to college and adult life. The topics have included

- how to support reluctant parents,
- making the best use of assistive technology and
- how to prepare students earlier for transition to independent living, encouraging them to take responsibility and make their own decisions for everyday tasks such as what to wear, or longer term decisions regarding their future aspirations.

The college is establishing a web forum for staff from different providers, enabling them to share expertise on-line, and will be holding showcase arts and dance events which will include students from all the settings. Beaumont provides staff time for specific projects with each school; for example one school has asked for help

baselining pupils for assistive technology, while another sixth form has requested partnership work to look at supported internships for a group of students who attend college for work placements.

Beaumont has also worked with students from mainstream school sixth forms, which gives the staff from the mainstream provider extra support and knowledge about managing various individual needs. One student attended Beaumont one day a week for a year. The staff member from the mainstream school came with her and took part in the sessions, which led to very positive outcomes for the student and the staff member, who learnt how to manage her needs more fully. This culminated in the student taking part in a theatre group and performing at the local theatre to a wide audience.

8. **Being involved in collaborative projects**, locally, regionally and nationally, provides opportunities for close working and the development and sharing of new ideas and expertise.

Derwen College has a number of partnerships with colleges in the West Midlands that are linked to [inclusive skills competitions](#). These competitions, initiated by Natspec and Derwen some years ago, are designed to be fair and accessible to young people with a range of abilities, allowing extra time and support, mentoring and adapted facilities and communication tools. They have rapidly spread and now involve a number of GFEs which take the same approach. In 2015, some of the finals for inclusive skills competitions took place at the Skills Show and were featured during the closing celebrations. Inclusive skills competitions also do a lot to promote positive links with employers.

Specialist colleges, GFEs and training providers worked closely together on a Natspec led ETF funded national project to develop a quality assured approach to non-accredited learning, based on Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA). The project ran over 3 years and enabled providers to work together locally and regionally with experienced champions to develop resources - available on the Excellence Gateway - and to peer review their RARPA approaches and QA systems. Participants at the regional meetings who had been involved in the project felt it promoted good practice and said they had valued the regional co-ordination, the expertise and the central hub of information and support.

9. **Working with LAs and dual placement commissioning** The Children and Families Act and Code outline the importance of developing packages of provision for young people with EHC plans across five days a week, and 8.42 states that '*Five-day packages of provision and support do not have to be at one provider and could involve amounts of time at different providers and in different settings.*' However, despite this, there are still relatively few examples

of jointly commissioned placements in any of the models above, although there is growing support from LAs to begin the discussion about dual placement options. Feedback from colleges such as Hereward, Linkage and Dilston suggests that it is often the providers who initiate this approach; furthermore, many of the examples of positive links with LAs, such as Durham's initiation of the Thornbeck model, have been going for some years and are not linked to the legislation.

There is growing pressure on GFEs to take students with more complex needs with specialist college support. As these types of arrangement become more common, it will be important to check the ability of the partner organisation to meet those needs, especially if the specialist college might also be held to account for the outcomes. Asking the right questions early on about staff qualifications, their experience in working with learners with complex needs and the peer group the learner will be involved with can avoid difficulties later on. It is also important to develop the study programme jointly, to ensure it supports students to achieve their outcomes.

Such placements will only work where all three parties – the local authority and both partners – are confident that it is in the best interests of the young person. If there are doubts, perhaps because of the complexity of needs, it is unlikely the placement will flourish. Currently it seems that the level of confidence about this approach is not there and that LA commissioned dual placements are very rare.

The quote below from Darlington local authority outlines the benefits it has experienced as a result of the partnership between Dilston and Darlington Colleges.

Darlington Borough Council, Dilston College and Darlington College have worked in partnership for the last 3 years developing bespoke provision for young people with special educational needs. This has increased the number of young people with SEN participating in education and greatly improved the local offer with Dilston providing Independent living skills, Independent travel training, work experience etc. from their base house in Darlington.

DBC have been able to tailor provision, in line with SEN reforms and preparing for adulthood for young people with more complex needs. Through the partnership we have been able to offer programmes delivered jointly by Dilston/Darlington college. This has enabled young people to make the transition and progress into full time education at Darlington College. We have also commissioned Dilston to provide programmes for complex young people requiring a more specialised package, this has allowed young people with complex needs to live and learn and develop their skills in the community. Darlington BC has benefited greatly by having a broader range of provision available in the community.

Bev Dewar, Special Educational Needs (SEN) Manager, 16-19 Manager (Learning and Skills), Children Families and Learning, Darlington Borough Council

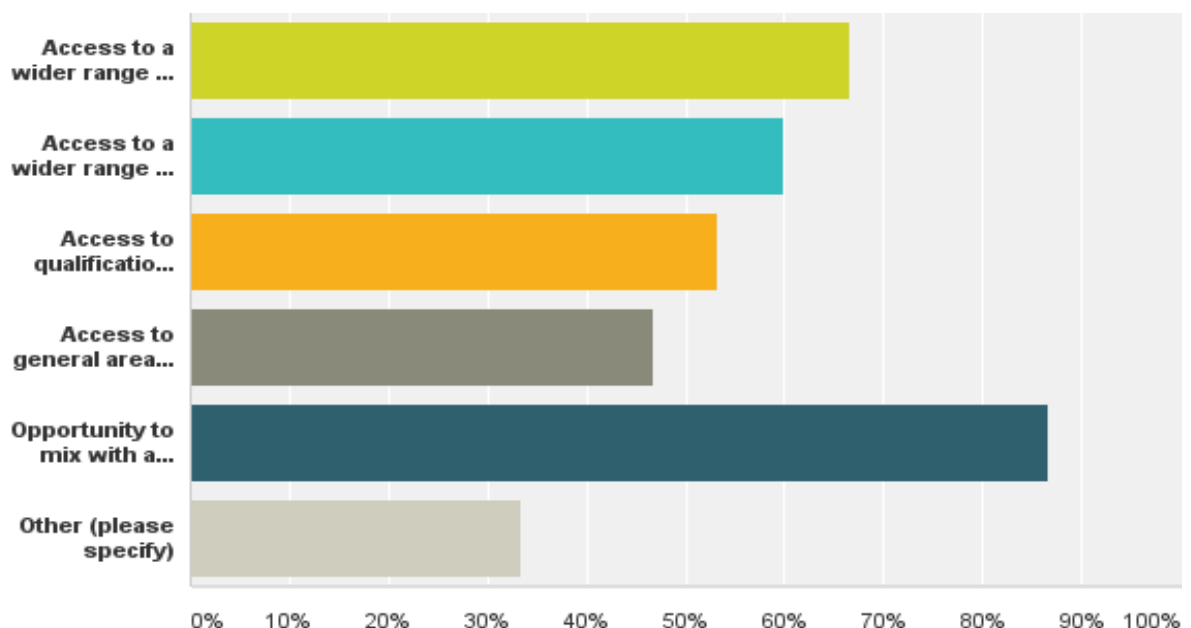
Aspects of partnership

Partnerships are characterised by a number of benefits and challenges, and in order to be effective the benefits for both partners must outweigh the challenges. Partnerships take a lot of work to set up and sustain; each partnership requires good business management, including establishing clear goals, developing and implementing an operational plan and reviewing the partnership with a view to continuing, revising or ending it. It is therefore important that colleges are clear when the partnership is not beneficial or is going nowhere. For instance, one college reported that having tried to put some work related provision in place with a partner GFE, they realised after a year's pilot that they were actually better able to deliver it themselves, and developed their own offer to include some higher level qualifications.

The benefits

There has been consistent identification of benefits over a number of years, and they are all related to enhancing the learning experience for students. Table 1 below shows that there are clear benefits about the breadth of learning opportunities, but that the greatest benefit is mixing with other students.

Table 1 What are the benefits to students at your college?



- a) Partnerships give students access to a **wider curriculum**, in terms of areas of vocational learning, levels of learning and qualifications, enabling partners to better meet individual needs. This is becoming increasingly important as students' aspirations and learning outcomes are specified on their EHCPs. It is not always possible for one provider to meet all the requirements in the plan, so partnerships benefit both students and partner organisations.

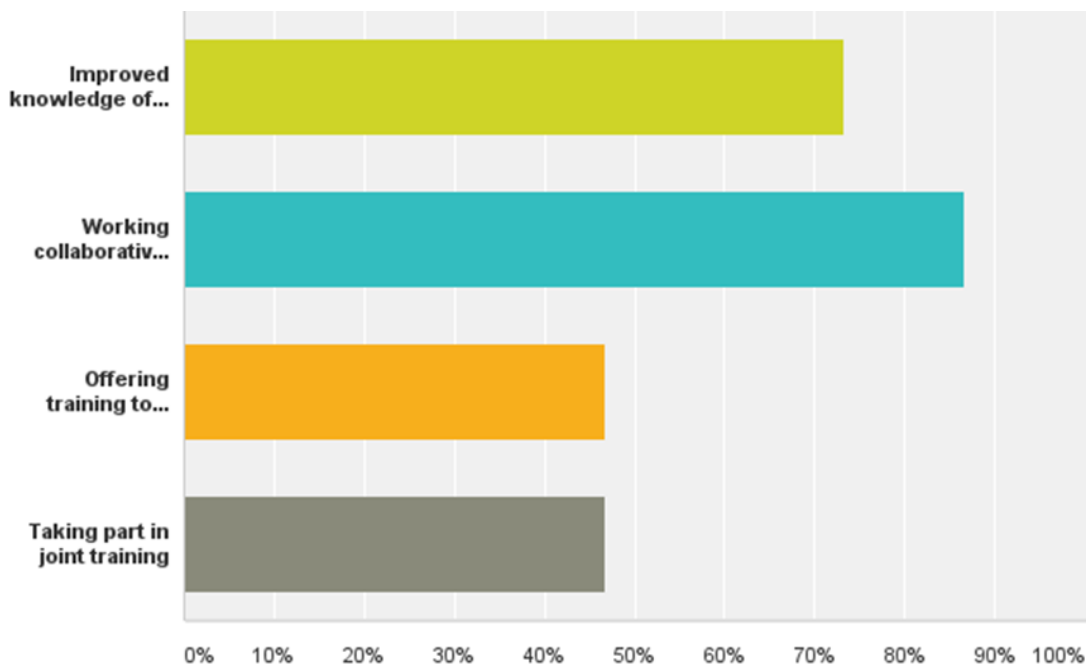
When students learn at more than one venue, it is important to ensure that the resulting package has coherence and continuity and that they have sufficient time to adjust to the various settings. An example of one student's timetable at a joint Dilston and Darlington College placement is below:

Day	AM	PM
Monday	Enterprise (Dilston)	Enterprise (Dilston)
Tuesday	Catering (Darlington)	Catering (Darlington)
Wednesday	Functional Skills (Darlington)	Functional Skills (Darlington)
Thursday	Commercial Work Experience (Dilston)	Independent Living Skills (Dilston)
Friday	Independent Living Skills (Dilston)	Independent Living Skills (Dilston)

- b) Partnerships also give students access to a range of **additional facilities**. These include use of a learning centre, canteen, sports hall or gym; students also use Student Union facilities and attend events. However, as noted above, specialist colleges can also offer resources that would otherwise be unavailable to GFEs and other providers, such as therapies and vocational learning options, plus the chance to practise skills in a real setting.
- c) A more recently reported benefit is the chance to mix with a **wider range of students**. This has probably always been the case, but has not been specified to the same extent in previous reports. As well as extending opportunities for friendship, it also gives students the chance to practice their social skills and behaviour management skills in a different setting, as noted for example in Ambitious College **case study A**. For some students who have previously had a poor experience of further education or been unable to cope, this could be especially positive. They can enjoy a successful experience of a further education college and may give them the confidence to make the transition into another college or university.

Table 2

What are the benefits to your staff?



d) Finally all colleges report a range of **benefits for staff**, noted in Table 2 above. The most frequently mentioned are an improved knowledge of developments and issues in other parts of the post-16 sector, and the opportunity to work collaboratively with other staff groups. This better understanding can be valuable in supporting specialist college students who might eventually move into GFE or other mainstream settings. There are also perceived benefits linked to training which are further discussed below.

The Challenges

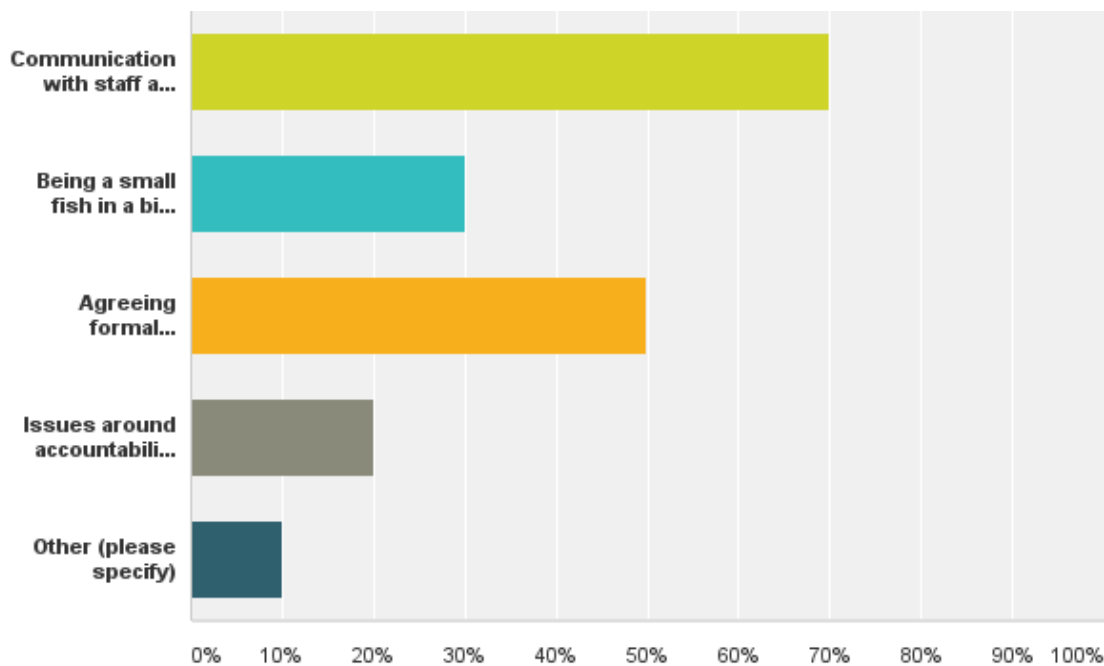
However, in spite of obvious benefits to students and staff, obstacles remain in establishing and sustaining partnerships. Table 3 below shows that communication persists as the biggest challenge and that there are continuing issues about getting formal agreements in place.

a) **Effective Communication** is essential to any good partnership working, but remains a challenge as it always has been. Sometimes this is about day to day communication over relatively small issues which because staff are busy can take time to resolve. It can also be linked to understanding a different culture or organisational ethos – in a small college, senior staff may be readily accessible, but decisions may be taken at different levels in a large GFE.

Although day to day communication is central to effective partnerships, it is also important that there is proper discussion about long term planning and monitoring and review of the partnership itself.

Table 3

What are the challenges from your partnership working?



b) **Formal Service Level Agreements or Memorandums of Understanding** are important to put in place wherever there is shared delivery to students. GFEs often have a lot of experience of these types of agreement, but it is important that they reflect the nature of the student group. They should cover areas such as each partner’s roles and responsibilities, protocols for communication and meetings, accountability, safeguarding, the need for monitoring and evaluation, and clarity on financial matters. Whilst partnership agreements will not prevent problems from occurring, they minimise opportunities for things to go wrong, put in place procedures for resolving issues and contribute to long term effectiveness. As the Thornbeck case study states, ‘*A clear written agreement clarified expectations.*’

Partnerships are often instigated by enthusiastic and motivated individuals who feel strongly about the potential benefits. A formal agreement ensures that the partnership is rooted in the organisational structures rather than the people, and also confirms senior leadership support.

If communication is considered to be an issue, then an effective agreement can go a long way to resolving this and ensuring that clear and readily understood lines of communication are in place at all levels. However, as Dilston College observes, a good partnership is based on both partners trying to make it work rather than having an ‘it’s not my job’ approach.

Table 3 shows that getting a formal agreement in place remains a challenge in 50% of the partnerships. However, this survey notes an increase in agreements in place from 50% in 2010 to 67% now, which is encouraging.

These figures suggest that although it is not always easy, partners do understand the importance of such agreements and are making an increased effort to secure them.

- c) The third most common challenge was the notion of the specialist college being a **small fish in big pond**; the concern is that small colleges will get lost in a larger establishment and potentially risk losing their specialism and expertise. This risk is potentially even greater now, when LAs are seeking 'local' placements and are positively encouraging GFEs to expand their provision and take a wider range of students with more complex needs. The formal agreement and the shared values, outlined below, are therefore essential to safeguard the smaller partner. Despite the obvious difference, partnerships must be based on mutual respect for the skills each party brings, and an understanding that each partner gains equally.

This approach is reflected in the case studies; for example, it was important for Thornbeck that partners should recognise the unique skills and experience of each college which could support quality provision for the learners. The level of trust is such that both colleges now refer new and prospective students to the other. The Foxes case study also notes '*a willingness to work in partnership on both sides, with someone at the GFE college understanding the importance of the different setting for independent living skills and staff on both sides with the drive and ambition to make it work Foxes*'.

Other examples where there is a clear understanding of the particular expertise of different partners include one specialist college managing transition onwards, and another supporting the emotional needs of a student at an independent training provider. Equally importantly, from the Ambitious College case study, co-location also requires '*a shared understanding of when provision can and cannot be integrated successfully*'.

So anxiety about losing specialism, or 'handing over expertise' to GFEs, is something specialist colleges must be aware of when entering into partnerships. Ensuring that partners, and in particular LAs, understand both the benefits and the limits of partnerships is therefore crucial. As the principal at Dilston College says, '*we have been really careful that partnerships complement our core provision and do not replace a full time specialist college placement if this is what a learner needs. The LA education leads have been really supportive and involved in getting these programmes up and running*'. The LA sees them as flexible and willing to work in partnership, so direct referrals have not suffered.

Linkage College faced the challenge from GFEs head on in setting up the partnership with South Staffordshire and becoming an integral part of its new provision, offering expertise that would not otherwise have been available.

d) **Accountability for student progress** is now less of an issue than in earlier partnerships, with only 20% of respondents citing this as a concern. In fact Table 4 below shows that 74% of colleges have Quality Assurance arrangements in place, enabling both partners to have some confidence in being able to monitor that students are on relevant programmes and that they are making expected progress.

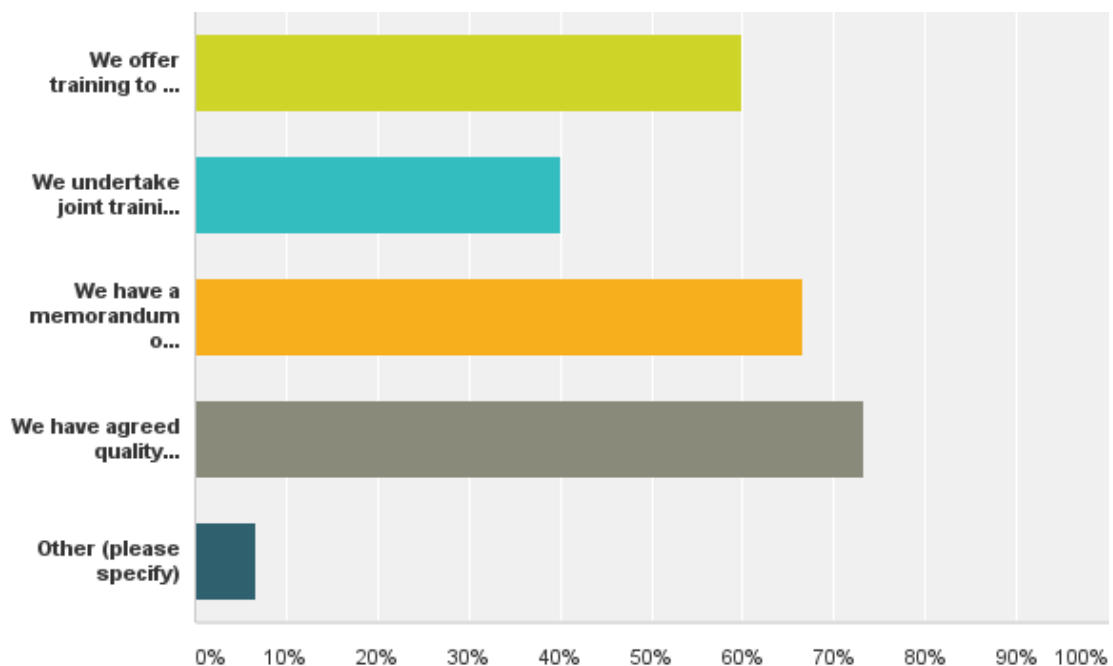
Joint observations, peer review, learning walks and mentoring all contribute to quality improvement alongside formal arrangements included in MoUs.

In its report on Dorton College, Ofsted noted that *‘Quality assurance arrangements between Dorton College and the partner college are generally good. The arrangements identify how well teaching and learning help students progress, develop new skills and become more confident in a general further education environment, as well as what further improvements are required.’ The joint observations of learning carried out by managers from Dorton College and the partner college contribute to improved standards across the provision for students. Observers identify key strengths and areas for improvement clearly, and staff requiring additional training or guidance to improve their practice receive prompt and practical help.’*

It is encouraging to note the increased confidence about quality assurance that is now integral to partnerships; this should reassure LAs that dual placements can be achieved successfully without compromising on quality.

Table 4

Features of the partnership



- e) In previous reports, there was some concern about whether or not GFEs would share the same **values** as specialist colleges, partly because of their size and also in some cases lack of experience of working with students with more complex learning difficulties or disabilities. However, the messages this time are far more positive, and there is a much stronger focus on person centred learning as being essential to any successful partnership. This may also reflect the strong focus on this in the legislation.

The case studies in particular demonstrate how important the shared values are. Linkage College is clear that *'all involved have to possess the same learner focussed values, and believe that the partnership is necessary for the benefit of learners'* and a *'shared vision for the outcomes for learners'*, which is almost identical to the Ambitious College requirement for *'A shared vision of the type of provision that will benefit learners.'*

- f) Although the survey did not ask about **funding**, this is a continuing issue across the post-16 sector with some specific concerns in relation to high needs funding. It is important for partners to clarify their funding arrangements and understand who pays for which element of the provision so as to ensure there is no double funding or that one or other is not out of pocket. This will be increasingly important with further changes to the high needs system on the horizon and with the likely involvement of LAs in commissioning more joint placements.

For example, Hereward College is currently discussing options with local LAs, but knows that it can only make it work with LA support in the long term, especially for colleges that rely on high needs funding as their primary, or sole, income stream.

Training and CPD

In previous reports, there was some training given by specialist colleges to their partner and relatively little joint training reported. Table 4 above indicates that this picture has changed considerably, with 60% of colleges offering training to their partner and 40% participating in joint training. This is confirmed in the case studies, which all outline the training they undertake and why this benefits partners, their students and staff.

At regional meetings and in general discussions, even where staff are not involved in specific partnerships, colleges increasingly communicate with other providers, visit and learning from each other. Informal support, mentoring, and learning walks are all techniques identified as successful methods of increasing staff knowledge.

Through those meeting a number of training and CPD requirements were identified, as follows:

- 1) **Developing assessment, recording and measurement of progress through the RARPA process**, something which was also identified as a significant need in Ofsted's thematic report '**Moving Forward**'. There is a good opportunity here to build on previous work undertaken about RARPA and to use the existing expertise in a number of providers.
- 2) **Employer partnerships** are essential if colleges are to provide high quality work experience for all students on study programmes and if the employment outcomes for these young people are to improve in line with government targets and the Disability Confident agenda. Natspec is working closely with both the DfE and DWP to support this agenda and identify successful approaches. These will build on existing good practice in specialist colleges and it would be useful to explore approaches to sharing and disseminating this more widely. The inclusive skills competitions also have a part to play in developing good employer links.
- 3) **Use of and development of assistive technology**. This can make a huge difference to young people with learning difficulties or disabilities, as it can give them access to the curriculum, enable them to become more autonomous learners and give them greater independence through the use of environmental controls. Natspec recently supported a project called DART, which was about developing the role of assistive technologists. There are now a number of colleges with significant levels of skill in assistive technology which could readily be shared and disseminated.
- 4) **Developing GFE skills in working with students with challenging behaviour and more complex needs, including health needs**. This will become increasingly important as LAs commission additional places in GFES for these groups of students and staff will have to acquire new tools and techniques to meet their needs. Many specialist colleges have expertise in these areas, but it will be necessary to consider approaches to sharing this expertise which do not potentially damage the sector or the sustainability of the colleges. Building on some of the practice identified in the examples above may help to understand effective strategies.
- 5) **Working with health and social care** is increasingly important in the context of the legislation. It is however particularly challenging to offer training in this area as it is so varied from one LA to another, and difficult to identify appropriate health colleagues. Currently this is an issue that has to be managed at a national level to push the engagement of health and social care, though regionally there may be some scope for sharing emerging practice and working together to make joint approaches. This links in part to **personal budgets**; these are poorly understood in education, but also rarely used, so not a priority. Information can be found on the PFA website and is probably sufficient at this stage.

Ambitious College

Model: Co-location - Specialist College on mainstream campus

College context

Ambitious College is a specialist further education day college for learners with complex autism. It is currently located on the Grahame Park and Southall campuses of Barnet and Southgate College, and will be moving to two new sites in autumn 2016. The college provides specialist support to enable young people with autism to access further education in their local community. The aim of the college is to enable its learners to gain the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to make a successful transition to adulthood and to live, work and contribute as part of their community.

Ambitious College provides individualised study programmes including communication, vocational and independent living skills so that learners can make a successful transition to adult life and gain confidence to progress to their chosen destination.



College key facts:

Number of learners: up to 65

Learner profile:

- Young people with complex autism, sometimes with additional learning difficulties or disabilities

Local authority area: Barnet (moving to Haringey)

Number of LAs who commission places: 15

Description of partnership

The co-location model that exists at Ambitious College means that the college does not have a separate site of its own; its facilities, staff and programmes are all located at GFE colleges. In 2015-16 the College had temporary sites at Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College and Barnet and Southgate College. For 2016-17, Ambitious College will be moving to permanently co-locate with the College of North East London (CONEL), in Tottenham, and West Thames College, in Isleworth.

Background and drivers for the partnership: why it is important

The ethos of Ambitious College is one of providing specialist education whilst moving learners onto new provision either at a mainstream FE college or in the community. College leaders and governors felt it was essential to locate the college within a mainstream environment within local communities, whilst also providing separate specialist expertise, facilities and dedicated programmes for young people who initially might not be able to participate in a busy, mainstream environment.

Programmes for Ambitious College learners are outcome focussed, whether that be to move onto a mainstream FE programme, on to higher study, employment, community based learning, or supported or independent living.

It is important that the GFE colleges involved in the partnership have the same learner-centred aims and reasons for getting involved. Meanwhile, local authority commissioners are able to commission places at Ambitious College knowing that the provision is integrated on a mainstream site.

Success Factors – why it works

The factors that are critical to the success of this model are:

- A shared vision of the type of provision that will benefit learners.
- An understanding on the part of the GFE college leaders, managers and staff that the learners at Ambitious College have highly complex needs and behavioural issues that the GFE college would not be able to provide for without the specialist college on site.
- A shared understanding of when provision can and cannot be integrated successfully, and a shared understanding of complementary, rather than competing, provision.
- Patience to ensure the partnership is strong – for example the agreement with CONEL was signed four years after the first discussions.
- An understanding on the part of commissioners that the staff at Ambitious College work differently from the staff at the GFE college.

Benefits to students

The students enrolled at Ambitious College benefit from being able to test their skills that they have learnt in the specialist college in different parts of the GFE site. They can choose to socialise or eat either separately or within the GFE facilities, dependent on their individual needs. They can progress onto a GFE course or integrate aspects of learning from the GFE within their study programme at Ambitious College. Learners also benefit from being able to access study centres, IT suites, gyms, and sports facilities. Ambitious College also hire vocational spaces for learners to access such as vocational kitchens, horticultural areas, dance studios. The mainstream partner providers have also offered work experience placements for Ambitious College learners.

Benefits for staff training and development

Key benefits to staff include:

- Staff from the GFE can access Ambitious about Autism's AET training programme.
- The staff at Ambitious College can help the GFE colleges develop their offer, and therefore increase numbers, to 'fill the gap' between the learners with very high

needs that Ambitious work with, and the learners that the GFE college would usually take, who have much more moderate conditions.

- Staff from Ambitious College can be trained in the GFE specialist teacher training programmes.
- Staff from both colleges learn from the procedures, processes and systems practiced at each other's college.
- Being based at the same site gives all staff a broader experience than they would otherwise have had.

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Linkage College

Model: Co-location - joint provision on GFE campus

College context

Linkage College provides specialist further education for students aged between 16 and 25, catering for a wide range of learning difficulties and / or disabilities.

The college has two campuses, one in Lincolnshire and the other in North East Lincolnshire; both offer personalised study programmes integrating maths, English and IT, enabling students to develop their employability and independence skills.

The employability curriculum includes media, business administration, catering and food service, customer service, woodwork, retail and horticulture. Real work environments and an extensive range of quality external work experience placements are available. Linkage's Independence curriculum includes a range of opportunities for personal and social development, and independent living skills are taught and embedded in real living environments.

College key facts:

Number of learners: 70

Learner profile: Moderate through to Complex Learning Difficulties & Disabilities

Local authority area: Lincolnshire

Number of LAs who commission places: 14

Description of partnership

Linkage College has initiated partnerships with three general FE colleges: South Staffordshire College, Franklin College and Grimsby Institute. The partnerships with Franklin and Grimsby involve students from Linkage receiving part of their learning programme at the GFE colleges; this provides them with additional qualifications and new experiences whilst still accessing the specialist services and facilities available at Linkage.

At South Staffordshire College, dedicated facilities were built in 2014 to provide specialist education to learners with learning difficulties. Linkage College staff work at the Rodbaston Campus of South Staffordshire College, providing specialist expertise that would not otherwise be available for students. Now in its second year, the facility has reached its capacity of 50 learners. The arrangement gives staff from both colleges the benefit of working with each other, and students at the GFE college receive specialist support that would not otherwise have been available.

Background and drivers for the partnership: why it is important

The partnership came about in part due to the move towards more students being placed in mainstream colleges as a result of commissioning practices of local authorities. Linkage College was receiving fewer directly funded places and initiated the partnership as one of many new ways of working to respond to the Children and Families Act reforms. The college also saw that there was an opportunity to fill gaps in provision outside of its own area of Lincolnshire.

For the GFE colleges involved in the partnership, the work with Linkage was important because they all wanted to expand their provision and offer more specialist and higher quality support to more learners with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Success Factors – why it works

The key success factors necessary for the partnership with the GFEs to work are highlighted below.

1. Joint buy in and commitment from senior and operational staff: all involved have to possess the same learner focussed values, and believe that the partnership is necessary for the benefit of learners.
2. It is essential for there to be a shared vision for the outcomes for learners - creating the “best of both worlds” between expert support and care provided by specialist colleges, and quality vocational learning provided by GFE colleges.
3. There needs to be a recognition on the part of the specialist college that the needs of the LA can be met through the partnership, and the LA need to be brought on board early in the negotiations.
4. During the set up stage, practitioners and teachers from both colleges need to meet regularly to build a relationship and set expectations. Progress can be hampered if staff from either college believe that staff from the other college are not adding value to the work. Early joint working will also set the parameters of how learners are assessed.
5. There needs to be an understanding on both sides as to the desired transition or destination for the learners following the interventions.
6. A written partnership agreement and joint quality assurance procedures help to cement and formalise the partnership, ensuring that it becomes a relationship between the organisations rather than individuals.

Benefits to students

The key benefit to students from the specialist college attending the mainstream colleges was the opportunity to access a wider curriculum in a different setting. It also provided opportunities to integrate with a larger cohort of students enabling them to use the skills they were learning at Linkage in a mainstream environment.

For South Staffordshire students accessing the specialist unit at the Rodbaston Campus, the benefits include being able to access expert staff and purpose built facilities in their own area, within the campus of their local GFE college.

Benefits for staff training and development

The staff working at the specialist unit at South Staffordshire college are employed by Linkage College, receive the same induction and training programme as Linkage staff, and have access to all the same systems and tools. This means it is easier for them to feel part of the expert team at Linkage even though they are over 100 miles away. They also benefit from the internal training provided by the GFE college, and meanwhile South Staffordshire staff can develop their expertise about working with students with complex learning difficulties, or learn more about particular conditions. Linkage provide autism training and behaviour management training for staff in all the GFE colleges they work with.

Contact for further information

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Thornbeck College

Model: GFE partnership – shared programmes of study

College context

Thornbeck College works with individuals with autism, learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college ethos is one that is built on the principle of working in sustainable partnerships with schools, colleges, local authorities, housing associations, employers and local communities.

The practical nature and relevance of the curriculum increases learners' motivation and they make progress in functional, vocational, personal and social skills as well as their main learning goal, enabling increased social and economic inclusion.

Thornbeck College has been graded as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted and has been awarded Beacon Status. The college has a shop in the City Centre, a range of community based workshops and a 77 acre working farm with eight vocational workshops. The college has also formed partnerships with general FE colleges throughout the North East Region to improve choice of quality learning opportunities and further develop innovative and collaborative learning routes for individuals.

College key facts:

Number of learners: 16

Number of learners that attend from partner organisations: 56

Learner profile: Individuals with autism, learning difficulties and, or disabilities.

Local authority area: Durham

Number of LAs who commission places: 7

Number of partnerships with GFE ..

Description of partnership

Thornbeck College have initiated and developed sustainable partnerships with schools, colleges, local authorities, housing associations, employers, prisons and the health sector. The college believes that the partnership working leads to tangible benefits, improving outcomes for learners and promoting social and economic inclusion and well-being, enriching lives and demonstrating value for money.

Thornbeck College's partnership with East Durham College (EDC) and Durham County Council is one of its most successful ventures, and has now been going for five years. Starting with 8 learners, and now involving over 50 per year, the scheme enables students from EDC to come to Thornbeck to access the vocational environments, receive advice and guidance and tutorial support. Students attend Thornbeck for up to three days per week and staff from both colleges learn from each other.

Thornbeck provides training to EDC staff in autism awareness and specialist training in the principles of communication and sensory support for students. In return, EDC delivers vocational teaching qualifications and training to Thornbeck staff in horticulture, floristry, and leadership and management.

Around 100 staff from EDC have benefited from training from Thornbeck College, ranging from support staff to teaching staff to curriculum managers.

Background and drivers for the partnership: why it is important

The overall aim of the partnership is to strengthen the capacity and capability of providers in the North East region to meet the needs of learners with autism, learning difficulties and / or disabilities. The partnership seeks to support the most vulnerable people in the community to achieve their aspirations and achieve better outcomes, providing the resources, including specialist staff, to meet the growth in demand for education and training.

The partnership was initiated by the Society's Director of Education, with all parties recognising that each college possessed unique skills and experience that could be of mutual benefit and support quality provision for the learners. It was important to create the partnership because:

- EDC did not have the same level of specialist staff and expertise and could not offer them the same level of support as that provided by Thornbeck College staff.
- The learners needed specific vocational opportunities in a real work environment – this could be provided in the Thornbeck facilities but not at EDC.
- The staff at Thornbeck needed more experience of teaching specific vocational qualifications and the partnership enabled staff at Thornbeck to gain dual specialisms.

Success Factors – why it works

The key elements that make the Thornbeck – EDC partnership a success are as follows:

- There is a common understanding between all the parties that the individual needs of the learners themselves are central and a commitment to high quality provision.
- Each partner believes in the arrangement and is willing to contribute their own time and expertise; one organisation does not gain more than the other.
- The staff involved are all committed to the learners and have the same dedicated mind set.
- The student attends both colleges for a significant portion of their time, giving them a good experience of each.
- Joint or shared assessments and observations mean that each college has the same understanding of the needs of individual students.
- A clear written agreement clarified expectations.
- There is trust on both sides, with each college referring new and prospective students to the other.

Benefits to students

The most significant benefit to students is a much broader experience and improved choice of quality learning opportunities. Through the partnerships they are able to access Thornbeck's vocational offer in retail, floristry, textiles, car, catering, woodwork and hairdressing, and take part in real work experience in the shop and at the farm. The increased provision as a result of the partnership also reduces the need for learners to travel long distances.

Chris Surtees, College Principal, summarises the benefits as follows: “We believe that no standalone provider will fully meet the complex needs of all learners. Our partnerships enable providers to improve choice of quality learning opportunities and further develop innovative and collaborative learning routes for individuals.”

Benefits for staff training and development

Thornbeck's 14 full time members of staff now have dual specialisms, with the partnership leading to them gaining new qualifications in particular vocational areas.

Members of staff of both colleges have broadened their experience and have benefitted from sharing knowledge of assessing learners. Staff at EDC have learnt new strategies, tools and techniques in working with learners with complex needs.

Thornbeck College also provide training to other organisations as part of their commitment to partnership working: for example, the college have provided training to 60 nurses and medical staff at Sunderland Annual Nursing Conference and 50 third year dental students at Newcastle University School of Dental Sciences. College tutors have also trained 78 prison staff, including HMYOI Deerbolt senior management team. Training evaluation data show that this has had a positive impact within the prison. A best practice case study was compiled and published by the Education and Training Foundation for their Offender Learning newsletter in spring 2015, promoting the collaborative work of both providers.

Contact for further information

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Foxes Academy

Model: GFE partnership - holiday provision

College context

Foxes Academy is situated in the seaside town of Minehead, Somerset. Courses are holistic, offering training in independent life skills in residential learner houses with tuition in hospitality and catering skills in a working hotel. Foxes Academy has residential houses, bedsits and flats, with learners carefully matched to each house depending on their ability and the progress that they make.

The college achieves outstanding outcomes: over 95% of Foxes Academy's leavers from 2015 moved on to meaningful employment.

Learners work towards accredited qualifications in in Literacy, Numeracy and ICT, communication Skills, and Level 1 National Vocational Qualifications in Hospitality & Catering.

Foxes provide specialist support including highly experienced vocational tutors, in-house therapists – speech and language, cognitive behaviour and occupational therapy. There is also holistic support through relaxation sessions, an enrichment programme of extra curricular sessions, and the use of a variety of e-learning tools.

Description of partnership

Foxes Academy initiated the partnership with Bridgwater FE College in 2015. The FE college had a number of students with learning difficulties who, although they were working at a high level academically, did not have the life skills or confidence to live or work independently. Students from Bridgwater stay in the Foxes Academy residential facilities for five days of intensive learning during the holidays, providing them with a range of independent living skills and personalised learning programmes, based on their individual aims that they would not otherwise have received.

The arrangement involves:

- meetings between the GFE college and Foxes in advance to ensure that the learning aims for the individual students are clear
- a meeting with parents and students to explain what is involved in the week at Foxes and set expectations
- personalised learning plans so that each student gains what they need from the week – this could be learning to wash up, to travel independently, to improve their personal care, or to go shopping
- the local authority agrees the additional costs for each learner which is directed through Bridgwater College to Foxes Academy

College key facts:

Number of learners: 64

Learner profile: Severe/ Moderate learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Local authority area: West Somerset

Number of LAs who commission places: 39

Background and drivers for the partnership: why it is important

The partnership was created to address a number of issues:

- Bridgwater did not have the time, facilities or staff expertise to teach the independent living skills
- The facilities at Foxes are under-utilised when the full time residential students are away during holiday periods.
- The GFE college was taking on greater numbers of students who required independent living skills, but their time at college was restricted.

Success Factors – why it works

The key success factor is the combination of students living on site, which means that they can learn continuously throughout their stay, and the expertise of the specialist staff at Foxes, who have the skills and experience to understand the needs of the students involved and create an environment that supports learning in a variety of real life situations.

Other success factors include:

- the quality of the facilities
- ensuring that each student achieves what they want through the identification of clear individualised aims
- the location of Foxes Academy, which means that students have easy access to a range of community facilities, shops and a busy tourist town
- a willingness to work in partnership on both sides, with someone at the GFE college understanding the importance of the different setting for independent living skills and staff on both sides with the drive and ambition to make it work.

Benefits to students

Students gain a number of benefits: often it is the first time that students have stayed away from home and they realise they are able to achieve more than they had previously thought. Most of the students from the GFE college are working towards level 3 qualifications, and may have aspirations to go to university, so the experience that Foxes is able to provide gives a good introduction to independent living and provides them with skills they will need when they leave college.

Benefits for staff training and development

Staff from Foxes and Bridgwater have benefitted from the partnership. Bridgwater staff have realised what is necessary to teach students the life skills they will need in the future, whilst staff at Foxes are now working with a different cohort of students which has broadened their experience.

Principal Tracey Clare-Grey says “staff here have been able to fine tune the processes and procedures they use with our own students, so working with Bridgwater students has helped us to improve our own provision, for example relating to setting goals and embedding English and maths. In future we’d like to extend the arrangement to 3 or 4 week placements which will enable us to achieve far more than we can with just a short 5-day stay.”

Contact for further information

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