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Issue 5

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Including 14-16 year olds in FE colleges

How can we enhance the experience for everyone involved?

With the advent of Diplomas and the national roll out of 14-19 prospectuses, FE colleges are set to become increasingly involved in providing for the 14-16 year old age group. How will the increase in the number of 14-16 year olds affect college life and how can we meet their needs effectively? A recent study by the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) set out to explore the impact 14-16 year olds had on the staff and the older learners at five FE colleges. It also looked at how the young learners were successfully integrated into their institutions.

Contrary to what we might have expected, the researchers found that the presence of 14-16 year olds affected older learners and lecturers very little. On the whole, older learners were either unaware that there were younger students around, didn't mind or were positive about their presence. A small minority were less enthusiastic, mostly because they found the younger students too boisterous at times in corridors and canteens, and occasionally in lessons.

Staff felt that having 14-16 year olds in college benefitted both the students concerned and the community. The benefits included young people making a more informed choice over their choice of pre-16 courses, better preparation for post-16 courses and greater awareness of future career paths. Most of the staff felt that attending college had improved the self-worth and behaviour of many of the young people.

How was this achieved?

Crucial to the success of the 14-16 programmes in these colleges was the 'selection' process they used. But it was not a case of turning undesirable students away. Rather, it was about ensuring that the right student was on the right course. This meant informing the young people accurately and carefully about the course content and the skills required.

The colleges worked closely with schools to achieve this. Whilst the schools provided important information for the colleges about pupils' prior learning and aptitude, colleges provided plenty of information for school staff, parents and pupils about the courses on offer.

Before they were accepted onto a course at some of the colleges, the Year 9 pupils were expected to complete an application form and write a letter explaining why they wanted to do their chosen course. They were also interviewed to see if they understood what would be involved and whether they were genuinely interested. The result was that students enrolled onto college courses they were interested in and for which they had an aptitude – a far cry from the 'dumping ground' for disaffected students, the colleges felt they had been in the past.

What else helped?

Lecturers with experience of teaching 14–16 students all stressed that it was necessary to adapt their teaching style to the younger age group. It paid to:

- set clear expectations and objectives
- rotate activities
- break tasks down into smaller chunks
- set out clear ground rules for discipline, and
- always be on time for lectures.

Pastoral support, such as contacting the students' homes if they did not arrive, was important too. But what really mattered was that lecturers were enthusiastic about the challenge of teaching the younger age group.

Take action

Could you:

- get more involved in your college's efforts to inform schools, parents and pupils about the courses and their requirements, by for example, attending Year 9 option evenings and running taster sessions?
- work with a colleague on ways you could both adapt your current teaching style to the younger age group?

Evidence source

McCrone, T., Wade, P. and Golden, S. (2007). *The Impact of 14-16 Year Olds on Further Education Colleges*. Slough: NFER. www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/downloadable/ICL.pdf