

# Improving attendance and punctuality

Strategies, approaches and lessons learned from London colleges: an AoC/Ofsted action learning project

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**Age group:** 16+

**Published:** October 2013

**Reference no:** 130212



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## Introduction

This project forms part of Ofsted's improvement activity in conjunction with the Association of Colleges' (AoC) professional engagement with the further education (FE) sector. It aims to promote learning and improve performance through jointly agreeing a focus and pooling the experience of both Ofsted's inspectors and college practitioners. Action learning does not purport to be inspection in any form.

The project's theme of attendance and punctuality arose from a similar Ofsted/AoC project called 'Urban Colleges'. This current, London-based project on learners' attendance and punctuality involved visits to eight colleges by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). These colleges also provided data on attendance. A consultative workshop enabled a wider group of London colleges to challenge and contribute. Data from a further 25 FE and sixth form colleges in London also fed into the findings. The annex lists the colleges involved.

The project's focus was to identify strategies for, and approaches to, improving attendance and punctuality. The objectives, developed jointly by the AoC and Ofsted, were to:

- describe measures being taken by the sample of colleges to improve attendance and punctuality
- evaluate the effectiveness of such measures
- report on the characteristics of the most effective approaches
- collect and use attendance data from a sample of colleges to inform the report
- evaluate how effectively colleges were using their attendance data and look for ways to improve their use
- inform Ofsted's inspectors' continuing professional development.

Five HMI visited the eight colleges during a two-week period in the summer term 2013. The colleges represented a broad cross-section – while inspectors recognised that there is no such thing as a typical London college. The inspectors explored the same themes at each college.

Outcomes of the action learning activity were:

- focused HMI visits with London colleges
- a short, unpublished summary to inform discussion at the consultative workshop and to identify critical issues and good practice themes
- attendance data from the 33 colleges involved
- this published report on the project's findings.

## Main findings

1. Currently, no national measures of attendance rates at FE colleges exist, unlike for schools, where data collected on absences allow for the calculation of national and regional averages. FE colleges, therefore, are unable to compare their attendance data with those of their statistical neighbours. Varying ways of measuring it, as well as the increasing use of remotely accessible learning (that is, learning that does not require learners' physical attendance at college), compound these difficulties. Ofsted regularly comments on low attendance and punctuality as an area for improvement in college inspections, but little is currently known about the impact of poor attendance on attainment.
2. Colleges' senior managers and staff at all levels are strongly committed to improving attendance, but all share the view that the reasons for poor attendance are likely to be wide-ranging, complex and interrelated. London colleges have long been thought to face particular challenges in terms of their learners' attendance.
3. Colleges often devote considerable resources to improving attendance, but often without understanding clearly the relative impact of the complex factors influencing it. However, understanding the reasons for poor attendance is at the heart of devising strategies to tackle it successfully. In addition, there is little evaluation of the impact of strategies, and the use of data to explore hypotheses or make links between cause and effect is under-developed.
4. Central to intervening effectively is to identify as early as possible learners who are at risk of poor attendance. Evidence in this report suggests that it might be possible to link poor participation and engagement in class activities directly to attendance problems in the future, and vice versa. This might provide a powerful tool to assess learners who might be at risk; it also indicates a strong link between the quality of teaching and attendance. Teachers who are skilled at engaging, inspiring and motivating learners during teaching sessions may well hold the key to improving attendance.
5. Strategies for improvement work best when improving attendance is seen as everyone's responsibility. Senior managers were clear about the value of 'corridor walks' in between sessions and the need to ensure that all staff challenge learners who, while they may be at college, do not seem to be in sessions or engaged in other productive work. This is particularly important since learners themselves suggest that poor attendance is often about missing sessions rather than whole days. A whole-college ethos of high expectations for learners' attendance (and other aspects of learning), directly related to employability and future life chances, was most often cited by college managers and teaching staff as the key to improvement. Motivating learners to attend, including using rewards where appropriate, was unanimously cited by the colleges as much more effective than sanctions or other punitive actions.

6. With increasing use of technology, more flexible ways of learning are likely to become increasingly important for learners, allowing them to take advantage of learning opportunities which may increase their social mobility and economic welfare. In particular, learners who face the most complex barriers to attending in person may also be those who most need to access learning in new and flexible ways. The challenge to the FE sector is to ensure that learning can be planned and provided in ways that best support these learners, and to consider how participation in learning can be measured alongside physical attendance at college.

## Review of current research

7. Very little research appears to have been done on the factors affecting learners' attendance at FE colleges. However, in 2011, Charlotte Jonasson published the results of research carried out in a Danish vocational education training (VET) school with the aim of exploring the concept of absence and the way absence behaviour develops.<sup>1</sup> This research is particularly useful since the learners involved were all studying a vocational subject (motor vehicle paint finishing) and were aged between 16 and 35. The research showed how different forms of absence are interrelated. Evaluations of both absence from class and absence in class – that is, withdrawal from active learning – were found to be important for understanding how absence can be identified and prevented.
8. The premise for Jonasson's study was that existing research had exclusively investigated physical absence from class rather than examining absence in class. She proposed that such absence, which is not registered formally, may have the same negative impact on learners' outcomes as absence that is formally registered. Absence in class can be exemplified by learners not participating in college-defined activities. Instead they spend time in class on activities unrelated to study, such as taking smoking breaks, day-dreaming, disrupting other learners or sending text messages.
9. The study concluded that behaviours around absence had the ability to 'spill over': that is, absence during class sessions could spill over into physical absence and, indeed, might be a useful predictor of absence in the future. The reverse was also true: learners who attended poorly and were behind with their studies could lose their motivation to engage with and participate in learning when they did attend. This may very well work as a vicious cycle where absence from class leads to absence in class, and vice versa. This raises questions about whether attendance should be examined more broadly with consideration given not just to external physical factors but rather to examining the whole of a learner's experience at college and how effectively that experience promotes attendance.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Jonasson (2011). 'The dynamics of absence behaviour: interrelations between absence from class and absence in class', *Educational Research*, 53:1, pp 17–32; DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2011.552233.

## Overall attendance and punctuality – the headlines for London colleges

10. Across the colleges visited, the headline rate for attendance in 2012/13 ranged from just over 80% to nearly 87%. Most colleges do not include so-called 'authorised absence' in their attendance rates, recognising that to do so would inflate attendance rates and give an unrealistic picture of actual attendance. However, knowing and monitoring the reasons behind absence is essential to recognising patterns in individual learners' attendance and providing effective support. Most colleges used data on authorised absence in just this way.
11. The reasons for regarding absence as authorised are wide-ranging and vary greatly across colleges. In some cases, the term 'authorised absence' encompasses almost anything as long as advance warning is given, while one college regarded even lateness as a failure to attend. This lack of a common view within the sector contributes to the difficulties colleges face when trying to evaluate their performance and compare it with that of their statistical neighbours.

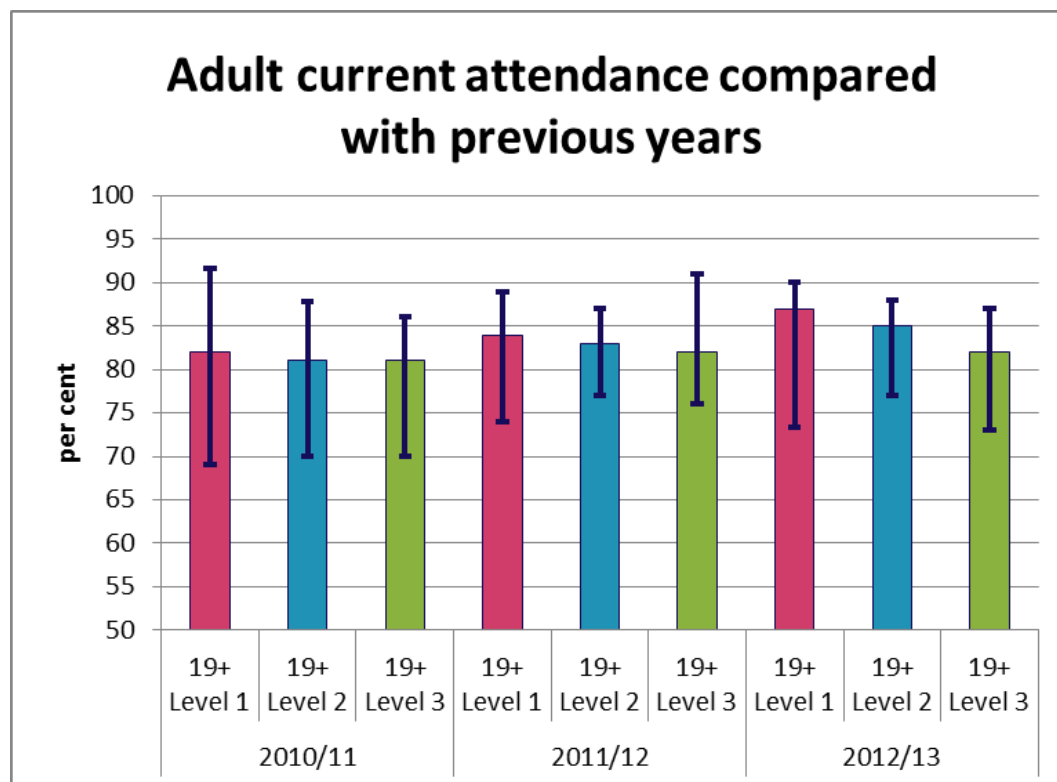
### What the data tell us

12. As part of the project, the AoC asked London colleges to fill in a simple form about attendance rates; 33 colleges returned completed forms. The aim was to look broadly at trends and establish ranges of attendance. Used in this way, the data paint an interesting picture. There are, however, caveats. Most, but not all, of the 33 colleges supplied data where authorised absences were not included. Also, only headline data were collected so that no account was taken of the type of programme being attended other than the level of study and the age category of the learners.
13. Of the eight colleges visited, only two cited the withdrawal of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) as a significant contributory factor to recent declines in attendance, although other London colleges at the seminar were strongly of the view that the loss of the EMA was a factor. One college visited had analysed the attendance of learners who had received the EMA or who now received a bursary and was able to show that their attendance rates were between three and five percentage points higher than those of learners who received no financial support. Overall, though, most of the colleges reported increasing attendance over the last three years; they also confirmed that improving attendance had been a strong focus for college leaders and managers.
14. The data collected support the view of most of the colleges visited that, in broad terms, attendance had improved over a three-year period. In the charts below, the bars represent the most common (not the average) attendance percentage reported, while the black vertical bar shows the range of the data.

It is not possible to produce an average from the data supplied, which limits their usefulness. However, using the most common (or mode) percentage allows judgements to be made about broad trends and patterns while the range shown provides additional information.

15. For example, the attendance of adult learners (Chart 1) has improved slightly over three years for those studying at levels 1 and 2 (foundation and intermediate levels). However, there appears to have been little improvement in attendance rates for adult learners at level 3. The data suggest that colleges should pay particular attention to this group of learners across all aspects of their programmes, from initial advice and guidance through to teaching strategies and support. However, it is also possible that adult learners working at this level choose to use virtual learning environments and approach learning in a more flexible way

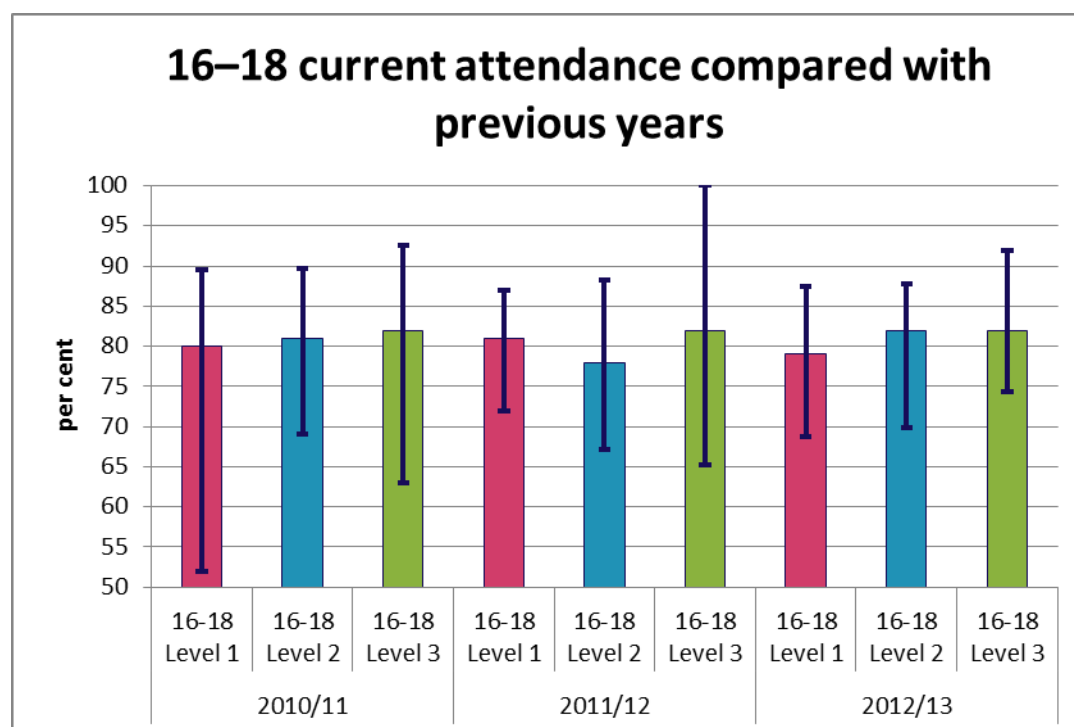
**Chart 1: attendance of adults over three years**



16. Chart 2 shows the same three years of attendance for learners aged 16–18. This chart shows a slight dip at level 2 in 2011/12 which may, indeed, be linked to the loss of the EMA. Although attendance at level 2 appears to have recovered well in 2012/13, at level 1 attendance is declining.



**Chart 2: attendance of learners aged 16–18 over three years**



### Recommendations

The data suggest very different patterns of attendance for adults compared with younger learners. Colleges might explore attendance for learners aged 16–18 studying at level 1 to identify specific factors that have an impact on attendance on these courses. In particular, teaching for learners working at level 1 and below requires skilled teachers and excellent resources.

Colleges might also explore the links between the data above and the quality of English and mathematics teaching since many of these learners are likely to attend literacy/numeracy courses.

- The data from the colleges visited showed clear patterns of changes in attendance levels, with most colleges reporting a decline over the course of the academic year. It is unclear whether this decline is linked to learners' dissatisfaction with their course, declining motivation or other external factors. However, other dips in attendance tended to coincide with periods after breaks, or bad weather and travel conditions, and occur around deadlines for return of coursework or examinations. In particular, the three-week period following the AS-level examinations in the summer was seen as especially challenging in terms of attendance. It is clear that milestone achievements are essential to keep learners motivated and on track. Colleges that took care to ensure that learners were rewarded through milestone achievements such as college

certificates, celebratory events, rewards or staged additional qualifications tended to have attendance that was much more even through the year.

### Good practice

A sociology course leader used a 'progression project' at the end of the AS course to support high attendance at the end of that year. This was linked to an understanding that one factor in agreeing that a learner could progress to A2 at the end of AS was good attendance throughout the AS year.

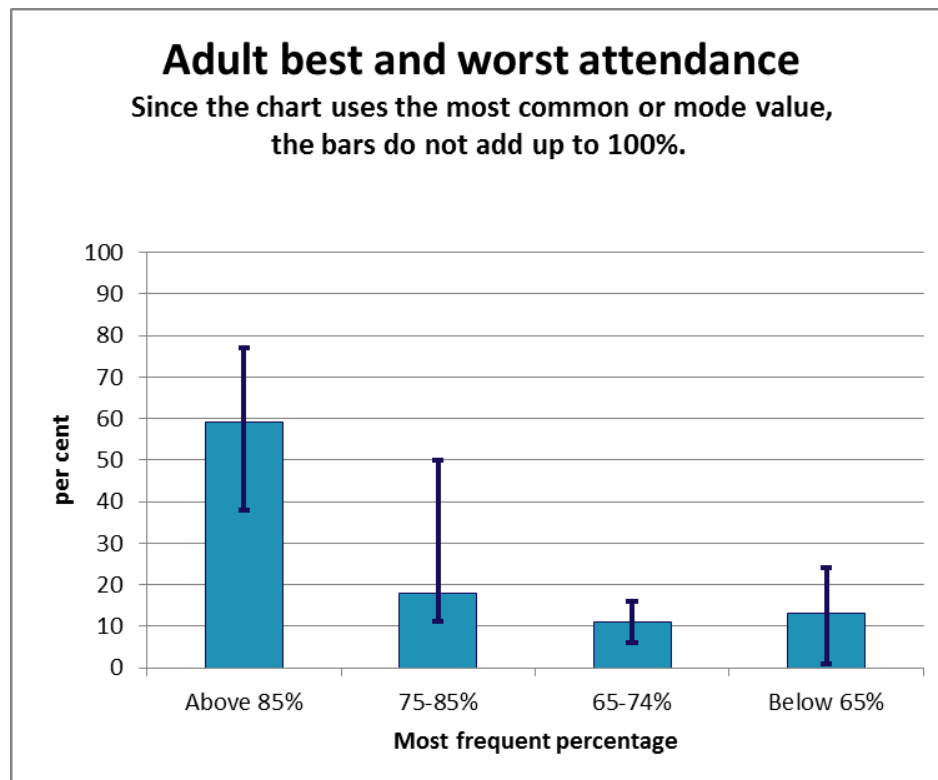
### Recommendations

Colleges should consider how to maintain learners' motivation and enthusiasm during term breaks, particularly the long Christmas break.

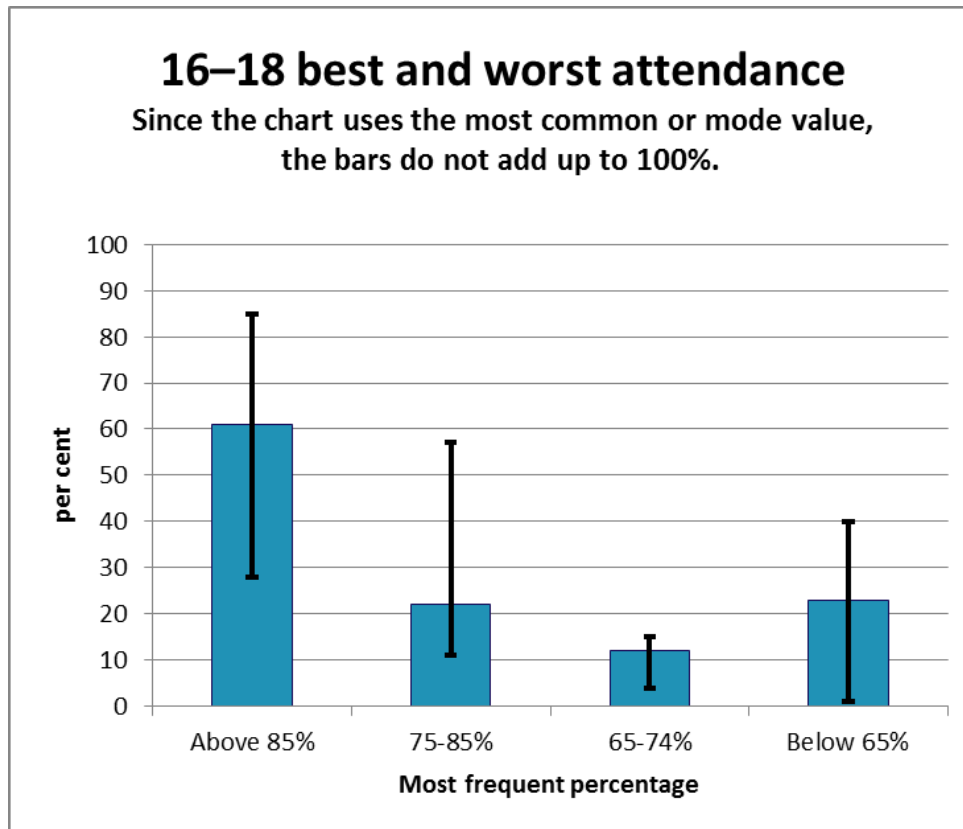
Colleges might consider if poor attendance around deadlines indicates that learners, colleges or both of these are failing to plan appropriately, so that learners become overloaded with work and need to take time off from college to complete it.

- Data were also collected on current attendance to examine the proportions of learners attending at different rates. The charts below illustrate the most common proportions of learners attending in different rate bands. For all ages, the majority of learners have attendance at 85% or above (Charts 3 and 4).

**Chart 3: proportions of adults attending in different attendance bands**



**Chart 4: proportions of learners aged 16–18 attending in different attendance bands**



19. Patterns of attendance are very similar for both adults and younger learners. Charts 3 and 4 show the proportions of learners attending at different rates and indicate that there are more learners at either end of the range, attending well or very poorly, than appear in the middle bands. However, a higher proportion of younger learners than adults commonly have only 65% or lower attendance (Chart 4). This goes against the view that adults' attendance is often worse than that of younger learners. Even given the limitations of the data, the charts do not suggest adults' attendance is poorer. This might be because adult learners, although likely to have more complex and challenging lives, are also mature enough to balance competing priorities. The younger learners seem to have a higher proportion of consistently very low attendance.

### Recommendations

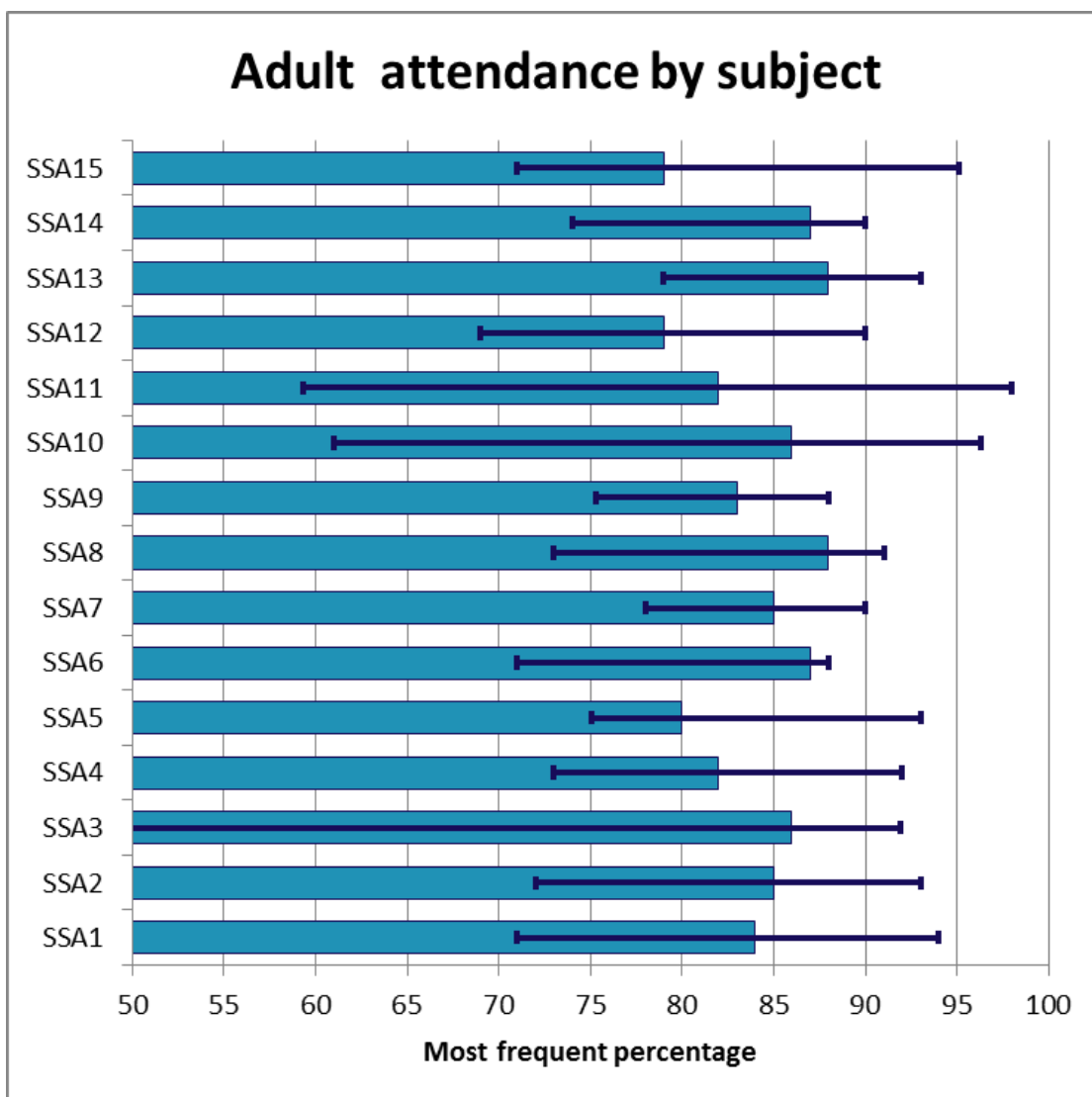
Colleges should consider exploring why learners aged 16–18 have a higher proportion of very poor attendance. Looking more closely at this group of learners might reveal particular factors which result in their very poor attendance and strategies might then be directed more specifically at these learners.

20. Finally, data were collected against different sector subject areas to explore whether the subject studied was likely to have an impact on attendance. Charts

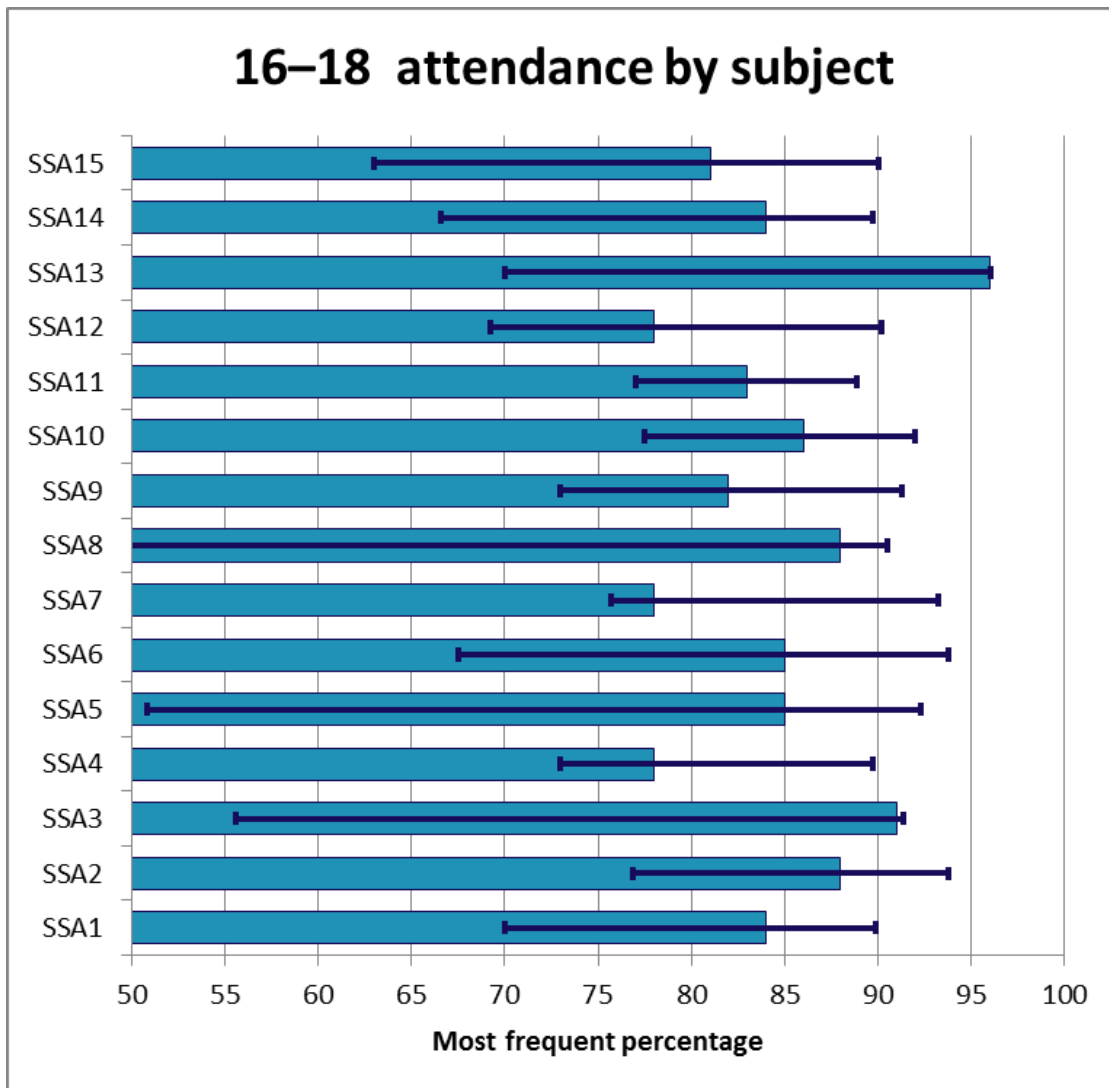
5 and 6 show the most common attendance rate and the range for each different subject area. The data show marked differences between attendance rates for different subjects. While these data do not allow us to measure the impact of other factors such as the type of programme, the level studied or the age of the learners, it seems likely that links between attendance and vocational subjects should be explored further. Inspectors' discussions with college managers supported this view: the managers often cited examples of markedly differing attendance patterns between subject areas within colleges.

21. Overall, the data suggest that the level of study in conjunction with the subject is more influential in terms of attendance than the age of the learner.

**Chart 5: effect of subject studied on attendance for adult learners**



**Chart 6: effect of subject studied on attendance for learners aged 16–18**



### Recommendations

Colleges should consider exploring the links between attendance and different vocational subjects. Different strategies to improve attendance might need to be employed in different subject areas. For example, colleges could determine whether there are particular points in the year when attendance falls, or whether there are similarities in the teaching strategies used in the subjects with the highest and poorest attendance.

### Is poor punctuality a precursor to poor attendance?

- College managers and teachers had mixed views about the links between poor punctuality and subsequent poor attendance. Many staff felt that the factors which lead to poor punctuality for adult learners are very different from those

that lead to poor attendance. Adult learners might face difficulties such as childcare, travel or transport which hinder their punctuality, but they might still be highly committed and attend regularly. This might explain, in part, the earlier data suggesting that most adult learners attend at least reasonably well, and a smaller proportion attend very poorly compared with younger learners. Difficulties with travel in and around London were often cited by college staff as a factor in poor punctuality. Interestingly, college teachers felt a stronger link might exist between punctuality and attendance for younger learners, where poor punctuality often heralds the beginning of poor attendance. However, there is little data to support this hypothesis.

23. College managers also reported difficulties with recording punctuality accurately. Again, the difficulty was compounded by different views (even within colleges) of what constituted lateness. Definitions ranged from a zero tolerance approach to definitions of varying degrees of lateness. None of this is helpful in compiling a secure picture of punctuality, although all college staff and learners with whom discussions were held agreed that lateness was disruptive and unfair to the rest of the class who had arrived on time. Agreement among colleges on common definitions of lateness could assist future analysis and support improvement.

### Recommendations

Better collection and use of data would enable testing of the hypothesis that punctuality and attendance are linked for younger learners. It would be helpful if colleges could work together to agree a set of common definitions for attendance and punctuality. The use of swipe cards can ensure that attendance is recorded accurately.

### Good practice

One college had improved punctuality by making the first five or 10 minutes of the lesson particularly appealing to learners. Teachers use this time to give learners valuable information about assessments, make announcements and provide news and up-dates on job opportunities, so that learners feel they are missing something critical by being late. The first activity in a session then rewards punctuality.

24. The research referred to earlier in this report (see page 6), which uses the concept of 'spill-over' to make connections between behaviours might be of more value here in understanding the factors influencing attendance. The implication that in-class absences are linked to subsequent absence *from* class has not yet been explored effectively in FE.
25. This underlines the importance of high-quality teaching and its association with attendance. Teachers who are skilled at maintaining their learners' interest and participation so that they maintain high levels of active learning are likely also to be regarded as high-performing teachers. The vital focus on whether

learning is actually taking place during observations of teaching and learning gains even greater significance when it appears that it may also illuminate the critical issue of participation and attendance. Thus the most significant factor may well be participation levels in learning during sessions. It may be that identifying learners whose levels of participation are low would be a better indicator of future low attendance than other factors such as poor punctuality.

### Recommendations

Focusing on and evaluating learners' participation in learning during teaching sessions may be a powerful way to identify 'at risk' learners. Finding ways to measure and capture this information may well prove helpful in allowing colleges to put support in place early to prevent the slide to poor attendance.

## Colleges' use of attendance data

26. Surprisingly, few colleges carry out any specific analysis of attendance to compare it with their success rates or the quality of teaching. Despite this, most teachers and managers with whom discussions were held supported the view that a link existed between attendance and attainment. Anecdotal evidence and evidence from learners suggest a strong link between attendance and the quality of teaching. This is certainly also supported by the 'spill-over' research referred to on page 6. It seems logical that better teaching leads to better participation in learning, leading to both better attendance and higher attainment. Colleges that had carried out such analysis also suggested that the highest attendance was linked to higher-performing teachers. None of this should surprise us since our own intuition, and inspection evidence, tells us that dull, uninspiring or poor teaching is unlikely to encourage learners to attend or help them to reach their potential.
27. While good support is essential to learners' success, it is also apparent that where colleges go to great lengths to provide catch-up sessions, workshops and other resources for learners who miss sessions, this sometimes creates a culture where learners feel it is acceptable to attend poorly and catch up later. There is a fine line between ensuring that unavoidable absence does not hinder a learner's progress and providing an environment where they can pick and choose how and when they attend. Good monitoring of the reasons for poor attendance and rigorous planning to meet individual needs for those who genuinely cannot attend are both essential to ensure that learning is accessible; at the same time, employability skills (including the need to attend and be punctual) must not be neglected.
28. Most commonly, college staff used attendance and punctuality data on an on-going basis, either in weekly meetings or at regular high-level meetings with governors and senior leaders. Senior managers frequently used data, key performance indicators and targets to raise expectations for high attendance

and punctuality. While this on-going monitoring is undoubtedly useful and important, too often managers and leaders missed the opportunity, at the end of the year, to link the data to the bigger picture of the overall performance of courses and the quality of teaching.

### Recommendations

Colleges could make better use of the data they collect on attendance, as many do not routinely link attendance data to success rates, value added data or the quality of teaching and learning.

## Do London learners face particular challenges?

29. College managers reported that London does present some particular challenges for learners. High transport costs and the generally high cost of living mean that many learners take on part-time employment to support themselves at college. This was frequently mentioned as hindering attendance. Colleges reported that employers often put pressure on learners to work extra or different hours which impinged on college attendance; learners, anxious about losing income they depended on, were then forced to choose work over college. Additional challenges include the fear of gangs, such as the so-called 'post-code gangs', which may inhibit learners from travelling outside their local areas; the lack of role models; low aspirations; and, in some cases, parents whose own low aspirations and poor experience of school has not helped them to encourage and support their children. However, many of these challenges are also faced by learners in city or rural locations with high levels of deprivation.
30. Most of the colleges involved in this project cited the pressures from Jobcentre Plus as a key issue affecting attendance. College staff reported that learners had to attend myriad appointments with no regard for their study timetable. Sometimes learners were sent on one- or two-week courses which interrupted their studies but appeared to deliver little benefit. Many colleges had made efforts to liaise and build relationships with Jobcentre Plus staff but most of the colleges reported that their efforts had brought little reward.
31. Transport problems were a common cause of poor attendance. Learners in London have considerable choice when it comes to deciding where to study and this can result in them committing themselves to lengthy or complicated journeys on public transport. One college reported that 60% of its full-time learners travelled from outside the borough. In some cases, free buses were chosen over the quicker and often more reliable Underground or rail services. For some learners, using buses doubled their journey time but was still preferable to incurring the relatively high costs of train travel. In other cases, learners deliberately chose to learn outside their home environment to avoid pressure from gangs or to make a fresh start in areas where they were not known and had no connections. These choices can mean that learners take on



impractical and onerous journeys which, over time, become wearing and ultimately affect their attendance.

32. London colleges tend to have high proportions of learners from families who speak languages other than English but few colleges had explored whether this, or additional religious or family responsibilities (such as acting as an interpreter for family members or carrying out family duties), might have an impact on attendance.

### **Recommendations**

Colleges should ensure that transport arrangements and costs are properly discussed and evaluated during interviews with prospective learners.

Colleges could use data more effectively to match attendance rates to travel distances in order to identify the impact of long or complicated journeys and provide initial advice and guidance.

### **Is the structure of qualifications a factor?**

33. There was almost no support for the hypothesis that the structure of qualifications had an impact on attendance. However, colleges that had explored ideas around structure and planning were clear that learners preferred their course to be intensively timetabled over fewer consecutive days, as this helped them to attend. Learners said that they were more likely to miss sessions if they were held on alternate days.
34. There was also a difference between learners on individual programmes of study, such as A levels, and those on full-time vocational courses. Being in a stable group helped learners build social relationships, fostering peer support and better attendance, whereas learners on A-level programmes joined different groups for different subjects, which reduced their cohesion with peers.

### **Good practice**

An intensive timetable, delivered over three consecutive days, appears to be the best model for improving attendance. However, for part-time courses, such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), spreading courses out over more weeks is more effective, since short, intensive courses require a level of commitment that many learners cannot make.

## Colleges' knowledge of the factors behind good and poor attendance

35. College staff were very clear about the importance of effective tutoring, well-planned and excellent lessons, establishing good habits early on and, where appropriate, good parental involvement in supporting attendance. All agreed that consistency, both in the methods used to tackle poor attendance and punctuality and in the ways that staff relayed their importance, was vital, but that it was challenging to achieve this across large, complex college sites.
36. Colleges that had consulted learners found, unsurprisingly, that poor teaching was one of the biggest factors influencing attendance. In fact, the learners to whom inspectors spoke were clearer about the impact of teaching on their attendance than many of the college staff, with the latter tending to emphasise external factors that the colleges themselves could not control. Learners increasingly made informed decisions about attending. As many travelled long distances, they weighed up whether to spend the time travelling or whether to study at home, particularly if they did not enjoy the teaching offered. One learner summed this up as follows: 'At school you skip the subjects you don't like; at college you skip the teachers you don't like.' It is therefore critical to get the teaching right for learners.

### Good practice

Linking attendance to employability is particularly effective. One college ensures that construction jobs are advertised openly within the construction department, but learners know that they will get the reference they need to apply only if their attendance is good. Making this clear from the start of the programme fosters a real desire to attend and be punctual.

37. However, external factors are undoubtedly also important and many colleges reported increasing numbers of learners with social and health difficulties, such as mental health problems, which impacted the extent to which they were able to attend regularly.

## Improving attendance – what works and what does not

### What works

38. The following section describes strategies which the colleges reported to be the most effective:
  - policies, procedures and targets
  - rewards and incentives
  - providing effective support

- effective monitoring and planning
- making the link to employment.

### **Policies, procedures and targets**

- an overall attendance policy with aspirational but realistic targets at college-wide and local centre levels, and planned action to achieve them
- individual, timely discussions between learners and teacher and with tutors/managers, where actions are taken forward with personalised targets and support
- a real focus by senior managers on raising expectations for high attendance.

#### **Critical issues – policies, procedures and targets**

This works best when the whole college applies the policies consistently and fairly, and a range of targets are used for individual subjects or courses and for individual learners. A prime driver for improving attendance rates is setting and monitoring realistic targets for individual learners and providing effective support to help learners achieve them.

#### **Good practice**

One college used short-term attendance contracts to good effect with poorly performing learners on vocational courses. These were negotiated between the learner, tutor and course team leader or manager; parents were involved where appropriate.

### **Rewards and incentives**

- rewards – sometimes financial and sometimes in the form of opportunities
- celebrating and promoting high attendance
- incentives to attend, related to learners well-being, for example through breakfast clubs at college
- competition for attendance records between groups of learners
- opportunities for job interviews linked to attendance.

### **Critical issues – rewards and incentives**

These work best where learners have a fair chance of obtaining the reward. If some in a group have responsibilities which prevent attendance, seeing other learners achieve rewards may actually be demotivating.

Breakfast clubs can be very successful in supporting learning but must be carefully planned and monitored so that learners do not arrive late for sessions as a result of staying at the club.

### **Providing effective support**

- use of welfare staff, for example in contacting parents about learners' absence
- careful and targeted use of bursary funds to support learners
- engagement with parents/carers
- mentoring, including using support staff, buddies and ex-learners.

### **Critical issues – providing effective support**

Financial need has a marked impact on learners' attendance. For example, needing to work often brings pressure from employers and conflicting priorities. Mentoring can be a powerful tool to help learners develop strategies to juggle commitments.

### **Effective monitoring and planning**

- effective electronic systems for recording and evaluating attendance and punctuality
- effective use of swipe cards to track learners' attendance in college and in classrooms
- systems such as text messaging for alerting learners to concerns about attendance
- effective timetabling to avoid isolated sessions and long gaps in learners' days
- later starts for adults with childcare responsibilities
- closing recreational facilities during class times.

### **Critical issues – effective monitoring and planning**

Colleges can support good attendance by making it clear that attendance is monitored all through the day and, where possible, by contacting learners immediately when they fail to attend. Contacting learners in this way is much more

effective when carried out by vocational staff rather than by administrators whom the learner might not know.

### **Making the link to employment**

- linking attendance and punctuality to a real-life vocational setting, such as attendance rates for hospitality learners who contribute to running college-based commercial catering operations
- inviting employers to talk to learners about the attributes employers seek when recruiting
- including assignments and other activities which encourage learners to think about the skills they need to sustain employment.

### **Critical issues – making the link to employment**

This works best when colleges build strong relationships with local employers. Learners are often more open to messages about attendance from employers because they can make the link between attendance at college and employability skills in a credible way.

### **What does not work**

39. Overly complex and bureaucratic systems are self-defeating. In some cases, learners even compete to see who can obtain the most late-slips. Sanctions are demotivating and tend to reinforce poor self-esteem and low aspirations. Many learners have already experienced disciplinary approaches at school and have a poor regard for such measures. Not allowing those who are late to join sessions prevents learning and also leads to concerns about safeguarding. A 'one size fits all' approach is also unlikely to be successful. For example, rewards and incentives do not work when learners have external barriers that prevent them from attending. Younger learners who are caring for family members such as younger siblings and have to take them to or from school or look after them during school holidays face particular challenges, especially as school holidays may not match the college's holidays and may vary across boroughs. Learners' circumstances must be considered carefully when using rewards as motivators for attendance. Exploring learners' aspirations and supporting their development as young adults is much more likely to lead to improvement in attendance.

### **Will raising the participation age help to improve attendance?**

40. This question led to interesting discussion at the workshop that was held. Some colleges believed it might worsen attendance if learners felt they had not freely chosen to study. Colleges did not feel that simply raising the participation age would have any effect on those who are in danger of not being in employment,

education or training (NEET). Instead, specific programmes are required which use a hook, such as sport, to attract learners and then provide them with an occupational qualification.

### **Good practice**

One college had formed a very successful partnership with Charlton Athletic FC, which used sport as a motivation to attend training. Learners achieved a sports coaching qualification which leads to job opportunities, but the qualification was delivered in a context that attracted learners. The importance of good attendance was stressed by trainers and led to high attendance rates.

### **What could the government do to improve attendance?**

41. There was much support for the return of some kind of educational bursary or financial support, including schemes with payments linked to attendance and help with transport costs. Colleges were keen to point out the disparity between the support available in schools and colleges, citing the example of free school meals which were available to needy students in school sixth forms but not to those in FE or sixth form colleges. (The government has subsequently announced the removal of this distinction from September 2014.) Colleges also supported the notion of collecting and publishing national college attendance data. A lack of information about learners was felt to be unhelpful. For example, although some colleges had local arrangements to share information, most reported being unable to easily identify learners who had previously been eligible for free school meals or had been looked after children. This made it difficult to provide vital early support to help them make the transition from school to college. There was much support for more joined-up thinking about the role of Jobcentre Plus and the role of colleges in improving the employability of benefit claimants.

### **What could funding bodies do?**

42. Colleges cited the lack of funding for bursaries and individual support as a factor leading to economic disadvantage for FE learners compared to the funding available to schools. Colleges felt that better encouragement from funding bodies and the government to employers to take on apprentices would also be helpful. A lack of apprenticeship places was thought to lead to some young people joining full-time college courses that did not really suit their needs.

### **What could Ofsted do?**

43. The idea of good practice studies was warmly welcomed. Colleges spoke highly of the increased commitment to provide support through improvement activities. Colleges placed much value on looking at the bigger picture of attainment rather than focusing too strongly on attendance. They reported that the lack of 'distance travelled' or 'progress' data penalises colleges that make

good progress with young people who have multiple challenges and are unlikely to have high attendance. Ofsted should take more account of the context of these 'hard to help' learners and data should be used that allow their progress to be measured.

## Physical attendance or learning attendance – what is the future?

44. Many college staff recognised the importance of learning taking place at college. Skills development, the social aspects of learning, social integration and work readiness were all cited as requiring learners' attendance in person. Teachers gave examples of learners accessing virtual learning environment (VLE) materials instead of coming to class, but then struggling to grasp concepts without the support of their peers and the teacher. Increasingly, however, learners use college VLEs as an integral part of their learning. There was much support for the idea of measuring engagement or participation in learning rather than, or as well as, learners' physical attendance. Although college staff recognised the difficulties this brought, there was also a real desire to find effective ways of evaluating participation and engagement.
45. Most of the colleges recognised that education is changing rapidly and that it is essential to make learning as accessible as possible. If barriers to attendance are complex and wide-ranging, then taking the learning to the learner becomes more attractive as a way of resolving attendance problems. It is clear that such programmes need careful planning rather than ad hoc decisions by learners, since without a regular timetable learners would need to be self-motivated and organised to study – something many of them struggle to achieve. College provides organisation, structure and support; any virtual elements, therefore, would need to include these as principles for ways of working. It is clear, too, that this mode of learning should not be used to compensate for poor-quality teaching. Most senior leaders could foresee a time, however, when programmes of learning might involve a mixture of college attendance and other innovative forms of learning.

## Future action learning developments

- Support colleges to evaluate all aspects of learning fully and explore ways of measuring learners' involvement and engagement in all types of learning activities.
- Explore the use of evaluation of in-class participation and the concept of 'spill-over' as a mechanism for identifying learners at risk of poor attendance.
- Provide standard definitions of attendance and punctuality, so that all providers are judged in a similar way; this should include defining how alternative ways of learning, including e-learning, will be measured.





## Annex: Providers visited

Visits were made to the following colleges, which also provided data.

Bexley College  
Croydon College  
Richmond upon Thames College  
Sir George Monoux Sixth Form College  
South Thames College  
The College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London  
Uxbridge College  
Westminster Kingsway College

The workshop was attended by the following colleges.

Barking and Dagenham College  
Bexley College  
Capel Manor College  
City and Islington College  
Croydon College  
Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College  
Hackney Community College  
Newham College of Further Education  
Richmond upon Thames College  
Sir George Monoux Sixth Form College  
South Thames College  
The College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London  
Uxbridge College  
Westminster Kingsway College

In addition, the following colleges provided data.

Barking and Dagenham College  
Barnet and Southgate College  
Bromley College  
City and Islington College

College of North West London  
Greenwich Community College  
Hackney Community College  
Harrow College  
Hillcroft College  
John Ruskin Sixth Form College  
Kensington and Chelsea College  
Kingston College  
Lambeth College  
LeSoCo (Lewisham College incorporating Southwark College)  
Morley College  
Newham Sixth Form College  
Redbridge College  
Richmond Adult Community College  
St Charles Catholic Sixth Form College  
Stanmore College  
Tower Hamlets College  
Waltham Forest College  
West Thames College  
Woodhouse Sixth Form College  
Working Men's College