

What is happening with 17+ participation, attainment and progression in London?

Report 2: Risk factors and strategies to support students in schools

A report by commissioned by London Councils Young People's Education & Skills

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 17+ issue in London

The ‘quality’ of 17+ participation in the English education and training system is becoming a key indicator of its ability to promote sustained educational participation up to age of 18/19 in an era of *Raising the Participation Age* (RPA). Just staying-on post-16 for a short period is not enough. As more young people continue in education and training at 16, so the duration and quality of their post-16 participation and the degree to which they can add value to their pre-16 attainment levels becomes increasingly important for them personally as well as a key measure of system success. It is vital that young Londoners are supported to stay on in a meaningful course of study not just for one year post-16, but for two or even three in order to equip them to progress to either higher study or employment.

In this regard, London appears to face some challenges. London schools perform relatively well pre-16 in terms of GCSE attainment, including with young people from different economic and social backgrounds. However, post-16 the picture appears more mixed. There are high levels of post-16 participation in full-time study, although low rates of participation in work-based learning and apprenticeship. And, while London institutions compare well nationally in terms of Level 3 completion (i.e. two A Levels or equivalent) by the age of 19, they lag behind in terms of Level 3 attainment scores, notably points per entry and points per student, which remain behind the national average. The advantage that London enjoys in terms of pre-16 general education attainment is thus largely being lost in post-16 Level 3 study.

In the light of this complex picture, London Councils commissioned the Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation at the Institute of Education, University of London (IOE) to work with London boroughs and MIME Consulting (an organisation that specialises in data analysis) to explore the dynamics of ‘17+ participation, attainment and progression’ and to suggest a range of strategies that could be pursued by London boroughs to increase the ‘quality’ of 17+ participation for young people in the Capital.

The project addressed the following questions:

1. What are the main patterns of 17+ participation, attainment, retention and progression of London learners?

2. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of London's patterns of 14 to 19 year old participation, attainment and progression compared with the rest of the country?
3. How far and in what ways does '17+ performance' vary across London boroughs and institutions?
4. What are the main factors and dynamics behind the current patterns of 17+ participation and progression of London learners?
5. Given these factors and dynamics, what strategies might be developed to improve 17+ participation and progression outcomes for London learners?

Research approach

Researching 17+ participation and progression has its challenges, not least because of the fragmented nature of our education and training system and the greater focus on other transition points. While the importance of the 17+ participation issue is becoming increasingly acknowledged, this age has not been a focus of national data gathering. Moreover, data across schools and colleges are collected by different national departments (the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)) and are not co-ordinated. At the local level across London, local authorities have variable capacity for data collection and collation and there is no common approach. Furthermore, schools are now much more autonomous organisations and may not collaborate with local authorities on certain data gathering issues. This is the context in which data analysis for this project has taken place. It has required the compilation and triangulation of different types of national and London-related data, assisted by MIME Consulting, over a longer period than anticipated and through two stages.

Stage 1 (March-August 2013)

- a. The drafting of an initial discussion paper based on national and available London data (e.g. London Skills Observatory; MIME Consulting and Learning Plus UK). MIME Consulting collated data from the National Pupil Database and Individualised Learner Record (ILR) college data (the Data Service).
- b. An initial analysis of the available data was discussed by London 14 to 19 leads at a seminar organised by London Councils in Spring 2013, which helped to refine the scope of the research.

- c. Compilation of an additional six strands of pan London data by MIME Consulting, which was delivered to the researchers in May 2013.
- d. Presentations to both 14 to 19 local authority leads in London and the Young People's Education and Skills (YPES) Board of the main analysis and findings at that point (July 2013).
- e. The drafting of an initial report on schools and the issue of 17+ in London following these presentations and further discussions with officials from London Councils (July 2013).

Stage 2 (September 2013-July 2014)

- a. Engagement with a small number of London boroughs that represented differing social and economic contexts that had significant local data and could arrange interviews with relevant school and college staff.
- b. Visits to ten schools, two sixth form colleges and two general further education colleges in London to explore the impact of institutional policies and practices.
- c. Presentation to the YPES Board, to 14 to 19 local authority leads across London and the South East and to London college principals.

Key findings

17+ participation and retention in London

- London 17+ participation rates in 2012/13 (89.8 per cent) were higher than the national average (85.2 per cent).
- 17+ retention in A Level programmes (82 per cent) is greater than in Level 3 vocational programmes (59 per cent).
- Just under a quarter of Year 12 Level 3 starters 'dropped out' of their sixth form before 18.
- 'Drop out' from Level 3 course is mainly at the end of Year 12, particularly for vocational courses.
- GCSE English and maths at grades A*-C are highly important in sustained 17+ participation.
- 8+ A*-C grades or equivalent including English and maths delivers 87 per cent chance of completing a Level 3 programme. This is marginally exceeded by the

anticipated outcomes of 8+ A*-C GCSE only grades including English and maths (91 per cent).

Level 3 attainment outcomes

- Attainment at Level 3 in London is below the national average on all measures except the percentage of students achieving at least two substantial Level 3 qualifications. While this latter measure is important in terms of inclusion, there is no doubt that the Capital's relatively poor performance at Level 3 is cause for concern given its examination success at the end of Key Stage 4. It should be noted, however, that there is considerable borough variation on all indicators, with some London boroughs performing well above the national average and others well below.
- Broader attainment at Key Stage 4 produces better outcomes post-16. London learners in 2011/12 who had at least 5 GCSE A*-C grades including English and maths scored on average 753 points at Level 3 (there is a 30 point spread between grades at Level 3 from 150 points for Grade E to 300 points for Grade A*).
- Those with 8+ GCSE A*-C grades including English and maths scored on average 795 points.
- Highest performing students at Level 3 tended to be those who stayed on in school sixth form, although those who moved at the end of Year 11 performed more highly at all the other qualifications levels.
- About 30 per cent of Level 3 learners in London schools in 2011/12 did not have A*-C grades in GCSE English and maths and scored on average 540 points. It is probably this group that brings down the overall London scores in this area.

Risk factors at 17+

The study indicated a number of **key risk factors at 17+** that can lead to AS failure, repeating study, taking fewer than three A Level subjects, changing course/institution or dropping out altogether.

Lack of preparation for post-16 study:

- Minimal GCSE scores

- Lack of progression readiness in terms of KS4 outcomes or study skills
- Permissive and competitive sixth form recruitment patterns i.e. lower entry requirements
- Poor or misleading careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG)
- The dominance of A Levels in school sixth forms and the large number of these in London

The initial experience of post-16 advanced level study

- The 'AS cliff face'
- Lack of adequate support for more marginal A level learners
- Limited subject choice in small sixth forms leading to lack of motivation
- Poor or limited 17+ CEIAG
- The 'AS cull' – selectivity at 17+ in many schools

Conclusions and strategies for supporting 17+ participation and progression

The research so far suggests that broad attainment at KS4 is the best predictor of success in post-16 study and that young people need adequate preparation prior to embarking on Level 3 programmes. However, we have also identified that there are a number of areas where schools need to improve their practice in order to reduce the risk of drop-out, drop-down and low attainment in Level 3 study post-16. Individual institutional policies and practices make a difference to learner trajectories and outcomes.

All of the schools visited were aware of the mismatch between the type of study undertaken in Key Stage 4 and what students encounter in Year 12. All were attempting to tackle the transition to post-16 study in their own way with greater or lesser effectiveness. There was less attention paid to the transition at 17+, which for many young people was also problematic.

Nevertheless the research unearthed a range of useful examples of good practice in terms of strategies to support young people's participation, retention, attainment and progression on Level 3 programmes that need to be more widely disseminated.

Strategies to support transition between Years 11 & 12 included: sixth form taster days; shared subject activities between KS4 and post 16; pitching GCSE teaching at the next level; summer booster sessions in maths and sciences; early enrolment for Year 12 for diagnosis and study skills; a staged guidance process for post-16 choices; discussion of HE in KS4; building in study skills from Year 7; careful guidance in choice of KS4 subjects; the Year 11 tutor team moving up with students into Year 12.

Strategies to support transition between Years 12 & 13 included: subject specific support for staff and students; enrichment activities (e.g. Extended Project Qualification); regular tracking and reporting of performance; mentoring/coaching; progression to HE programmes; preparation for employment (e.g. work experience); financial support.

While this study has highlighted a number of interesting patterns in relation to participation, attainment and progression in London, investigation into the '17+ issue' is far from complete. The discussion has been limited primarily to Level 3 and to schools. We need to know more about those on courses below Level 3, the role of colleges and vocational qualifications post-16 and the destinations of those who move course at the end of Year 12. A report on 17+ issues in London colleges will follow this publication.

In addition, it would be useful to examine the patterns related to certain groups (e.g. middle attainers) whom we suspect struggle to successfully engage with A Level study; the impact of the 'poverty penalty' and the possible widening gaps between different socio-economic groups post-16; and the impact of institutional effectiveness post-16.

A. Introduction

The 17+ issue in London

1. The 'quality' of 17+ participation in the English education and training system is becoming a key indicator of its ability to promote sustained educational participation up to age of 18/19 in an era of *Raising the Participation Age* (RPA). Just staying-on post-16 for a short period is not enough. As more young people continue in education and training at 16, so the duration and quality of their post-16 participation and the degree to which they can add value to their pre-16 attainment levels becomes increasingly important for them personally as well as a key measure of system success. It is vital that young Londoners are supported to stay on in a meaningful course of study not just for one year post-16, but for two or even three in order to equip them to progress to either higher study or employment.

2. In this regard, London appears to face some challenges. London schools perform relatively well pre-16 in terms of GCSE attainment, including with young people from different economic and social backgrounds¹. However, post-16 the picture appears more mixed. There are high levels of post-16 participation in full-time study but Level 3 attainment (A Levels and vocational equivalents), notably cumulative student/candidate points scores, remains significantly behind the national average. The advantage that London enjoys in terms of pre-16 general education attainment is being lost in some aspects of post-16 Level 3 study. At the same time, London institutions lift their performance with young people by the age of 19, largely as a result of the success of those who complete A Levels and, possibly more significantly, through the role of Level 3 vocational awards².

3. In the light of this complex picture, London Councils commissioned the Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation at the Institute of Education, University of London (IOE) to work with London Boroughs and MIME Consulting (an organisation that specialises in the use of data for decision-making)³ to explore the dynamics of '17+ participation, attainment and progression' and to suggest a range of strategies that could be pursued by the London boroughs to increase the 'quality' of 17+ participation for young people in the Capital.

¹ Wyness, G. (2012)

² Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2012) §

³ For more information on MIME Consulting see - <http://www.mimeconsulting.co.uk/>

Research questions and methodology

4. The key questions for this project are:
 - a. What are the main patterns of 17+ participation, attainment, retention and progression of London learners?
 - b. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of London's patterns of 14 to 19 year old participation, attainment and progression compared with the rest of the country?
 - c. How far and in what ways does '17+ performance' vary across London boroughs and institutions?
 - d. What are the main factors and dynamics behind the current patterns of 17+ participation and progression of London learners?
 - e. Given these factors and dynamics, what strategies might be developed to improve 17+ participation and progression outcomes for London learners?
5. Researching 17+ participation and progression has its challenges, not least because of the fragmented nature of our education and training system and the focus on other transition points. While the importance of the 17+ participation issue is becoming increasingly acknowledged, this age has not been a focus of national data gathering. Moreover, data across schools and colleges are collected by different national departments (DfE and BIS) and are not co-ordinated. At the local level across London, local authorities have variable capacity for data collection and collation and there is no common approach. Furthermore, as schools have become more autonomous organisations, some may not collaborate with local authorities on certain data gathering issues. This is the context in which data analysis for this project has taken place. It has required the compilation and triangulation of different types of national and London-related data, assisted by MIME Consulting, over a longer period than anticipated and through two stages⁴.

⁴ Figures that refer to 'Mime Consulting 2013' relate to data analysis produced by them specifically for this project. Each Figure contains a brief description of the methods used to produce the data

Stage 1 (March-August 2013)

- a. The drafting of an initial discussion paper based on national and available London data (e.g. London Skills Observatory; MIME Consulting and Learning Plus UK (LPUK)⁵). MIME Consulting collated data from the National Pupil Database and ILR college data (the Data Service).
- b. An initial analysis of the available data was discussed by London 14 to 19 leads at a seminar organised by London Councils in Spring 2013, which helped to refine the scope of the research.
- c. Compilation of an additional six strands of pan London data by MIME Consulting, which was delivered to the researchers in May 2013.
- d. Presentations to both 14 to 19 local authority leads in London and the London Councils Young People's Education and Skills Board of the main analysis and findings at that point (July 2013).
- e. The drafting of an initial report⁶ on schools and the issue of 17+ in London following these presentations and further discussions with officers from London Councils (July 2013).

Stage 2 (September 2013-July 2014)

- d. Engagement with a small number of London boroughs that represent differing social and economic contexts, that have significant local data and can arrange interviews with relevant school and college staff.
- e. Visits to ten schools, two sixth form colleges and two general further education colleges in London to explore the impact of institutional policies and practices⁷.
- f. Presentation to the YPES Board, to 14 to 19 local authority Leads and to London college principals through the London Region Association of Colleges.

⁵ For more information on LPUK see - <http://www.learningplusuk.org/who-we-are>

⁶ Hodgson A. and Spours K. (2013a)

⁷ The research on general further education and sixth form colleges will be presented in a separate report

The structure of the paper and its terminology

6. The paper is structured around the processes of progression that a learner undertakes through the 14 to 19 phase so that the sequence and dynamics of factors at each stage can be better understood - pre-16 course choices and attainment; initial participation in post-16 provision, retention and progression at 17+.
7. The paper uses the following terms:
 - 'Attainment' refers to summative examination and assessment outcomes.
 - 'Participation' refers to starting and studying on a particular course.
 - 'Retention' refers to remaining on a particular course through several census points until its completion.
 - 'Progression' refers to moving from one course to another either vertically or horizontally in terms of National Qualification Framework levels.
 - 'Careers education, information, advice and guidance' (CEIAG) denotes the process of learning about education, career and employment opportunities.
 - 'Point scores' refers to the test and examination point scores used in the 2013 school and college performance tables⁸.

⁸ 2013 Test and examination point scores (RAISEonline 2013)

B. 17+ participation, attainment and progression in London

Overall 14 to 19 performance in London and the 17+ issue⁹

1. In terms of 17+ education participation, London does relatively well in national terms. In 2012/13, 89.8 per cent of young people stayed on in some form of education and training at 17 compared to 85.2 per cent nationally. At the same time, however, there is a widespread recognition (including in London Council reports¹⁰) that post-16 performance in London has not so far matched pre-16 attainment. Therefore, a question can be asked about the 'quality of participation', that is the ability of young Londoners to complete 16-19 education and training to a standard that might be legitimately expected of them given attainment pre-16 and their ability to progress to further study or employment.
2. Post-16 Level 3 attainment in London in 2012/13 presented lower than national points per entry scores (209.5 compared with the 210.5), and points per student at 682.7 were well below the national average at 706 (see para 28 for more detail).
3. A clearer positive story, however, emerges at 19+. By aged 19, London has moved above the national average in terms of Level 3 attainment. In 2011/12 a total of 61 per cent of 19 year olds attained Level 3 compared with 55 per cent nationally. Moreover, London significantly outperformed other regions in terms of the percentage of 19 year olds eligible for free school meals (FSM) gaining a Level 3 award with the FSM gap at 15 per cent compared with the national average of 24 per cent. The overall Level 3 measure includes not only A Levels, but also broad vocational qualifications such as BTEC Nationals. These data suggest that after a mixed picture at 17+, London performance begins to pick up again, with broad vocational qualifications and further education colleges playing an increasingly important role as they take learners through Level 2 and 3 courses.
4. What might be termed the '17+ issue', may be partly explained by AS/A Level failure rates. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) reported in 2009¹¹ that there were higher A Level failure rates in London (5 per cent compared with 3 per cent nationally) and particularly at AS Level (18 per cent compared with 13 per cent nationally). The LSC speculated that this could have been due in part to low prior

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated the data in this section of the report are taken from Intelligent London and Young people in London: an evidence base (London Councils 2014)

¹⁰ See for example, London Councils (2013)

¹¹ Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (2009) - these data are the latest available on AS failure rates in London

attainment on entry to A Levels. Failure rates for AS and A levels for students who attained fewer than GCSE 40 points were 30 per cent and 9 per cent respectively, suggesting that many London 16 year olds were not yet ready for Level 3 learning¹².

5. At the same time, however, some London schools enjoyed success at the upper end. In 2010/11, the most popular subject at advanced level in London was mathematics¹³, suggesting a small but significant proportion of confident learners and sufficient schools with a focus on this very important subject.

6. The basic post-16 London participation and attainment picture is therefore complex:

- slightly higher post-16 education participation rates than nationally;
- lower than national average indicators at Level 3 at 17 and 18;
- Level 3 performance at 19 above national average due to the role of broad vocational provision with a relatively strong performance, in terms of attainment, by students eligible for free school meals.

GCSE performance in London – analysing 5+ and 8+ A*-C grade attainment¹⁴

7. The level of preparedness for post-16 study is becoming a critical factor as staying-on in education or training post-16 has become the norm and is now enshrined in legislation. In this regard, London appears to start at a relative advantage compared nationally due to recent improvements in GCSE performance across the Capital (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. London GCSE performance 2012/13 compared nationally

	London	England
5 GCSE A*-C grades	84.4%	83%
Improvement 2006 to 2013	26.4 points	25.5 points
5 GCSEs A*-C grades including English and maths	65.1%	61%
Improvement 2006 to 2013	19.1 points	17 points

¹² LSC (2009)

¹³ LPUK (2012)

¹⁴ Unless otherwise indicated the data in this section of the report are taken from Intelligent London and Young people in London: an evidence base (London Councils 2014)

8. Within London, however, there is significant borough-based variation in terms of the attainment of 5 GCSE A*-C grades including English and maths. This ranges from 56 to 80 per cent.

9. A less impressive post-16 performance should lead to questions regarding the solidity of the London GCSE baseline for progression as well as issues related to Level 3 study. Here we suggest that there is an inter-related set of factors at work, both national and regional, that complicate the picture.

- There is a large gap between Level 2 and Level 3 in the English qualifications system. Level 3 qualifications (in the main A Levels) were historically designed to prepare a minority for university study, rather than acting as a progression route for the majority.
- More recently, however, increasing GCSE or equivalent attainment has raised aspirations to study A Levels at a time when these qualifications have become somewhat more difficult to attain (as a result of the 2008 reforms¹⁵).
- At the same time, there has been a growth in the number of school sixth forms (particularly in London) with increased competition for A Level learners and possible relaxations of entry requirements to A Level study.
- The institutional accountability threshold at Key Stage 4 is normally seen as 5 GCSE A*-C grades. However, statistical analysis from the Youth Cohort Studies suggests that this baseline is not sufficient to guarantee successful completion in Level 3 post-16 study¹⁶.
- Moreover, pressures on schools to meet GCSE performance criteria have resulted in institutions focusing on those students on the 'C/D borderline' in an attempt to boost the numbers gaining the main Key Stage 4 performance measure. In this context, some learners just manage to creep over the 5 A*-C grade threshold and particularly in English and maths. These learners have sometimes been referred to in further education colleges as 'shaky Level 2s' who are likely to find Level 3 study particularly challenging.

¹⁵ The planned further reform of A Levels, with a reduction in modularity, a reduction in the possibility of resits, a greater focus on synoptic assessment and external examination, is likely to continue this trend

¹⁶ Spours, K., West, J., Stanton, G. and Vesey, R. (2012)

- In addition, there has been the liberal use of vocational courses at Key Stage 4 in some schools because of the ‘equivalence’ points they afforded to boost GCSE performance¹⁷. This has provided an inflated sense of learner preparedness for study at the next level up, particularly when they embark on A Levels that require a different form of study.
- London is highly divided socially and educationally both between and within boroughs. In this sense, there is not one London GCSE performance, but several variations of performance within the accepted thresholds for progression to Level 3 study that require more textured borough-based and institutional analysis.

10. Taken together, these factors suggested that the progression implications of different types of GCSE performance should be investigated. We therefore decided, with MIME Consulting, to explore patterns of attainment and their relationship with post-16 participation, retention and attainment using eight different measures – four focused around 5+ GCSE A*-C grades and four around 8+ GCSE A*-C grades.

5+ A*-C grades or equivalent

5+ A*-C grades or equivalent with English and maths

5+ A*-C grades in GCSEs only

5+ A*-C grades with English and maths in GCSEs only

8+ A*-C grades or equivalent

8+ A*-C grades or equivalent with English and maths

8+ A*-C grades in GCSEs only

8+ A*-C grades including English and maths in GCSEs only

The attainment of 5+ and 8+ A*-C grades at GCSE (no vocational equivalents)

11. In 2011 a total of 59.8 per cent of London Year 11 students gained 5 A*-C GCSE grades, with borough variations ranging from 74.4 per cent in Sutton to 49 per cent in Islington. Slightly fewer - 53.4 per cent - gained 5 A*-C GCSE grades including English and maths. Here the inter-borough variation ranged from 71 per cent in Sutton to 42.3 per cent in Islington.

¹⁷ Wolf (2011)

12. Concerning the attainment of 8+ A*-C GCSE grades, a total of 41.5 per cent of London students reached this threshold in 2011 and marginally fewer – 40.5 per cent - including English and maths. However, the inter-borough variation was greater than the 5 A*-C GCSE grade measure, ranging from 60.3 per cent in Sutton to 28.4 per cent in Dagenham and 59.8 per cent to 28.3 per cent including English and maths.

Figure 2. Proportion of 16 year olds gaining 5 and 8 GCSEs A*-C grades (GCSE only)

i)	Total Pupils	5+ A*-C Grades	8+ A*-C Grades	5+ A*-C inc. Eng & Maths	8+ A*-C inc. Eng & Maths
Sutton	2,664	74.4%	60.3%	71.0%	59.8%
Redbridge	3,347	73.0%	56.9%	67.3%	55.5%
Kingston U. Th.	1,535	69.3%	55.0%	65.5%	54.3%
Barnet	3,336	70.9%	54.6%	64.9%	53.1%
Richmond Up. Th.	1,279	64.7%	50.9%	58.4%	49.3%
Ken & Chelsea	635	69.1%	50.7%	66.3%	50.6%
Harrow	2,192	63.2%	48.8%	57.6%	47.2%
Bromley	3,374	66.2%	48.0%	61.2%	47.3%
Westminster	1,398	69.5%	47.7%	62.9%	46.0%
Ham & Fulham	1,145	63.3%	47.7%	57.8%	46.7%
Hounslow	2,627	62.4%	44.8%	53.8%	42.8%
Bexley	3,345	60.3%	42.4%	56.6%	41.9%
Ealing	2,959	59.0%	42.1%	51.9%	40.5%
Havering	3,071	61.4%	41.4%	55.3%	40.5%
Brent	2,940	57.7%	40.5%	52.0%	39.6%
Newham	3,710	57.8%	39.2%	53.7%	38.5%
Enfield	3,782	57.3%	38.9%	49.5%	37.6%
Merton	1,579	56.6%	38.3%	50.3%	37.0%
Hackney	1,700	56.4%	37.9%	51.1%	37.2%
Hillingdon	3,009	56.9%	37.7%	51.1%	36.5%
Wandsworth	1,888	54.8%	37.6%	46.0%	34.8%
Camden	1,534	59.2%	37.2%	52.8%	36.4%
Croydon	3,753	56.9%	36.9%	52.5%	36.3%
Haringey	2,181	54.2%	35.9%	50.0%	35.4%
Tower Hamlets	2,542	56.3%	34.9%	51.9%	34.2%
Greenwich	2,284	54.9%	34.0%	50.8%	33.5%
Waltham Forest	2,705	52.9%	33.5%	45.5%	32.5%
Southwark	2,400	51.5%	33.3%	46.8%	32.6%
Lewisham	2,388	51.6%	33.0%	45.8%	32.0%
Lambeth	1,891	51.7%	30.7%	48.9%	30.3%
Islington	1,604	49.0%	29.9%	42.3%	28.7%
Barking & Dag	2,195	51.8%	28.4%	47.7%	28.3%
London Average	76,992	59.8%	41.5%	54.3%	40.5%

Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (derived from 2012 local authority aggregated KS4 data covering mainstream schools, academies, special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs))

13. What Figure 2 shows is that the proportion of London students attaining 8 GCSE A*-C grades (either with or without English and maths) is just over 40 per cent compared with those attaining 5 GCSE A*-C grades with English and maths (54per cent).

14. The difference between highest and lowest performing boroughs can be summarised as follows:

5+ A*-C	25 points
5+ A*-C (E & M)	29 points
8+ A*-C	32 points
8+ A*-C (E & M)	32 points

The attainment of 5+ and 8+ GCSE grades (including vocational equivalents)

15. The picture differs slightly when measuring GCSE attainment including vocational equivalences (see Figure 3). Overall, 80.7 per cent of London Year 11 students attained 5+ GCSE A*-C grades including vocational equivalences. The borough variation ranged from 91.1 per cent in Sutton to 69.5 per cent in Lewisham. Considerably fewer - 59.4 per cent - gained 5 A*-C GCSE grades or equivalents including English and maths. Here the inter-borough variation ranged from 74.2 per cent in Sutton to 47.4 per cent in Islington.

16. Concerning the attainment of 8+ A*-C GCSE grades or equivalent, a total of 63.6 per cent of London students reached this threshold and 54.2 per cent including English and maths. The inter-borough variation ranged from 78.5 per cent in Sutton to 48.3 per cent in Lewisham and 70.8 per cent to 42 per cent including English and maths.

17. The difference between highest and lowest performing boroughs on 5+ and 8+ GCSE A*-C grades or equivalent can be summarised as follows:

5+ A*-C	22 points
5+ A*-C (E & M)	27 points
8+ A*-C	30 points
8+ A*-C (E & M)	29 points

Figure 3. Proportion of 16 year olds gaining 5 and 8 GCSEs A*-C grades or equivalent

i)	Total Pupils	5+ A*-C Grades	8+ A*-C Grades	5+ A*-C inc. Eng & Maths	8+ A*-C inc. Eng & Maths
Sutton	2,664	91.1%	78.5%	74.2%	70.8%
Ken & Chelsea	635	85.4%	77.0%	75.1%	71.0%
Bromley	3,374	91.4%	75.5%	67.3%	63.2%
Kingston U. Th.	1,535	87.2%	73.2%	69.4%	65.6%
Bexley	3,345	87.3%	71.5%	63.1%	60.3%
Westminster	1,398	86.0%	71.2%	67.7%	62.8%
Redbridge	3,347	85.3%	71.1%	69.2%	64.2%
Barnet	3,336	84.2%	69.2%	67.0%	61.9%
Croydon	3,753	84.6%	69.0%	59.6%	55.9%
Hillingdon	3,009	83.8%	67.3%	58.3%	53.8%
Greenwich	2,284	84.8%	66.4%	59.9%	55.6%
Hounslow	2,627	83.3%	66.3%	57.9%	53.5%
Wandsworth	1,888	82.0%	64.8%	50.1%	46.1%
Harrow	2,192	80.7%	64.0%	60.8%	55.2%
Merton	1,579	82.6%	63.8%	57.2%	52.6%
Ham & Fulham	1,145	79.0%	62.8%	61.3%	55.2%
Southwark	2,400	80.0%	62.4%	54.8%	50.2%
Tower Hamlets	2,542	80.8%	61.6%	58.9%	52.4%
Richmond Up. Th.	1,279	80.7%	61.6%	61.5%	55.6%
Lambeth	1,891	80.4%	61.6%	59.0%	52.7%
Havering	3,071	79.7%	61.5%	60.0%	54.2%
Barking & Dag	2,195	79.4%	60.1%	55.3%	49.6%
Ealing	2,959	75.5%	59.4%	55.1%	50.2%
Enfield	3,782	78.8%	58.4%	53.4%	49.0%
Newham	3,710	73.6%	57.5%	57.4%	51.3%
Brent	2,940	74.7%	57.1%	56.0%	50.4%
Haringey	2,181	76.2%	57.1%	56.8%	50.9%
Camden	1,534	74.8%	55.6%	56.9%	49.9%
Hackney	1,700	72.9%	54.0%	55.7%	47.6%
Islington	1,604	70.6%	53.4%	47.4%	42.1%
Waltham Forest	2,705	71.9%	50.6%	48.8%	43.0%
Lewisham	2,388	69.5%	48.3%	50.7%	42.0%
London Average	76,992	80.7%	63.6%	59.4%	54.2%

Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (derived from 2012 local authority aggregated KS4 data covering mainstream schools, academies, special schools and PRUs)

Different measures of GCSE attainment in London: a summary

18. The most inclusive measure of GCSE attainment is 5+ GCSE A*-C grades with vocational equivalents. This threshold was achieved by nearly 81 per cent of London 16 year olds in 2011/12. The most exclusive measure of GCSE achievement is 8+ GCSE A*-C grades including English and maths. This narrower threshold was achieved by only 54 per cent of London 16 year olds in 2011/12.

19. The gap between the highest and lowest performing boroughs, largely reflecting differences in the level of social deprivation, varied between 22 points on the most inclusive measure (5+ A*-C grades or equivalent) and 32 points on the most exclusive measure (8+ A*-C grades including English and maths). As we will see these attainment measures have an important impact on 16-19 participation, retention, attainment and progression.

17+ participation and retention

Participation at 16, 17 and 18+: London and England compared

20. The RPA legislation could be interpreted as reflecting an assumption that upper secondary education (14 to 19 education and training in England) has become a universal phase and that all young people should be in some form of education or training up to the age of 18 years by 2015.

21. London is slightly ahead of national trends in terms of post-16 participation in education and training. In 2012/13, as Figure 4 shows, 92.9 per cent of young people participated at 16, dropping to 89.8 per cent at 17. This compared well with national figures of 91.8 and 85.2 per cent respectively. However, there is considerable inter-borough variation in the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds participating ranging from 86.3 per cent in Barking and Dagenham to 97.5 per cent in Harrow. National data indicate that education participation tails off significantly at 18 and we must therefore assume that participation in London does too.

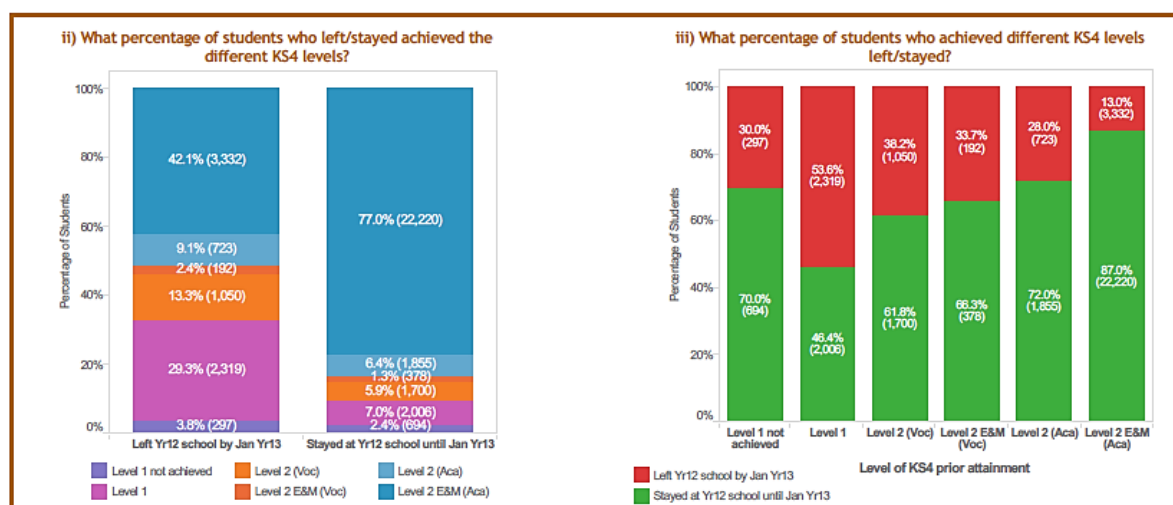
Figure 4. Participation in education and work-based learning 2012/13

Age	England	London
16	91.8%	92.9%
17	85.2%	89.8%

The relationship between Key Stage 4 attainment and 17+ participation in schools

22. This section of the report analyses the relationship between Key Stage 4 attainment and 17+ participation. More specifically it examines the impact of the attainment of 5+ and 8+ A*-C GCSE grades on the likelihood of staying within a school sixth form until Year 13. Staying within a school sixth form at 17+ is a strong indicator of continuing on Level 3 study into the second year, particularly in A Levels.

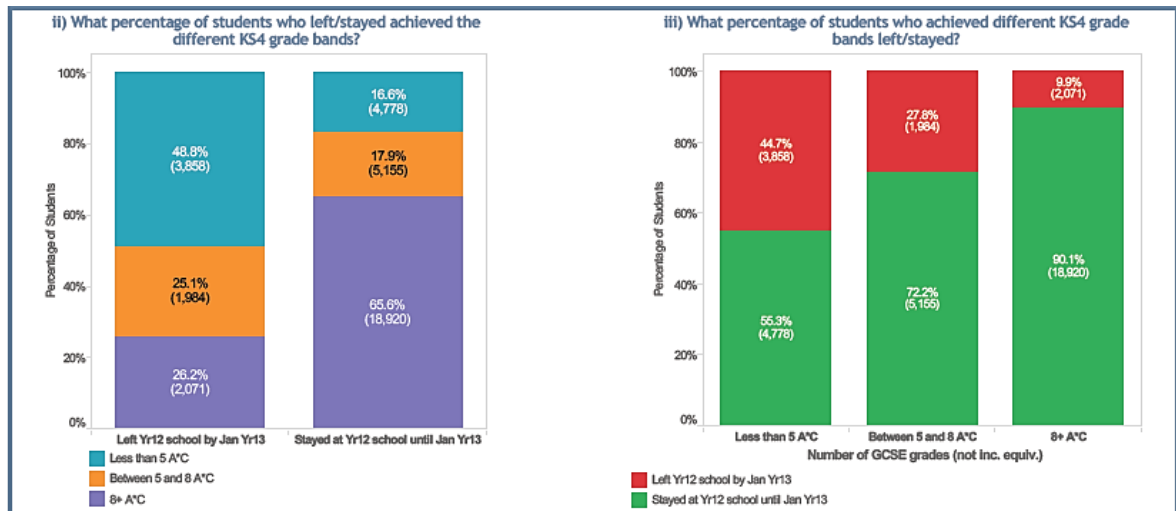
Figure 5. The impact of 5+ GCSEs with English maths and equivalents on 17+ participation in schools



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (students on roll in January Year 13 (2012) based on data from mainstream schools, academies and special schools)

23. What Figure 5 shows is that higher academic attainment at Key Stage 4 is a strong predictor of 17+ participation. A total of 87 per cent of learners with 5 A*-C GCSE only grades plus English and maths attained in 2010 were still in the school sixth form in Year 13 in January 2012. This compared with 62 per cent who attained 5 A*-C GCSE grades or vocational equivalents. Lower attaining learners were more likely to leave the sixth form before the January of Year 13 except those with below Level 1 attainment who may not have had the capacities to make a move at the end of Year 12. However, what Figure 5 also shows is that high attainers at Key Stage 4 (those with 5+ GCSE A*-C grades in GCSE only and/or with English and maths) are the single largest leavers group at 17+, over 50 per cent by volume. This, we assume, is the result of the 'weeding out' of those learners in some schools who did not attain sufficiently high AS grades in Year 12. It is clear, therefore, that attaining 5+ GCSEs including English and maths is not an absolute guarantee of remaining in a school sixth form.

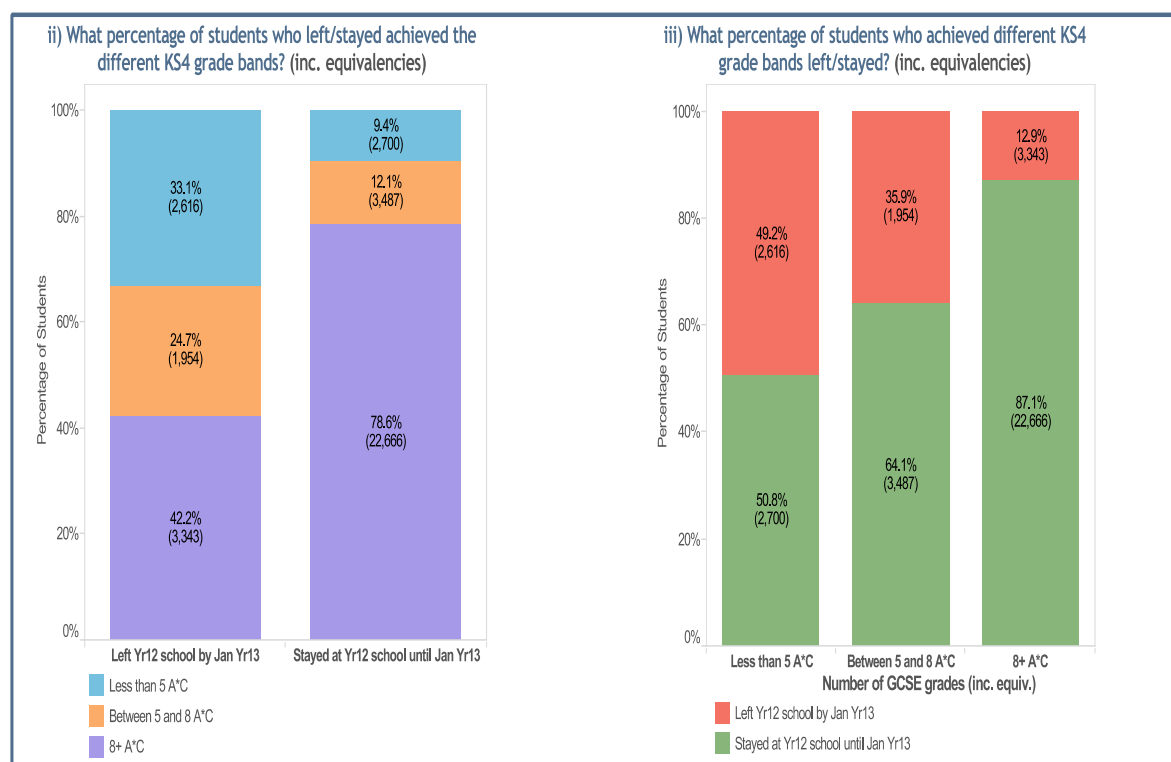
Figure 6. The impact of 8+ GCSE A*-C only compared with 5+ on 17+ participation in schools



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (students on roll in January Year 13 (2012) based on data from mainstream schools, academies and special schools)

24. Figure 6 reports the impact of the attainment of 8+ GCSE A*-C grades compared with 5+ and fewer than 5 A*-C grades at GCSE. Over 90 per cent of those learners who had attained 8+ GCSE only A*-C grades were still in the school sixth form in Year 13 compared with just over 70 per cent who had attained above the 5+ GCSE threshold, but fell short of the 8+ benchmark. This finding is in line with the Youth Cohort Study that showed that the attainment of the minimum 5+ GCSE threshold was not a guarantee of retention or successful completion in post-16 Level 3 study. High achievers at GCSE (8+ and 5+ GCSEs A*-C) still constitute the largest group of leavers during or at the end of Year 12 by volume.

Figure 7. The impact of 8+ GCSE A*-C grades or equivalent compared with 5+ on 17+ participation in schools



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (students on roll in January Year 13 (2012) based on data from mainstream schools, academies and special schools)

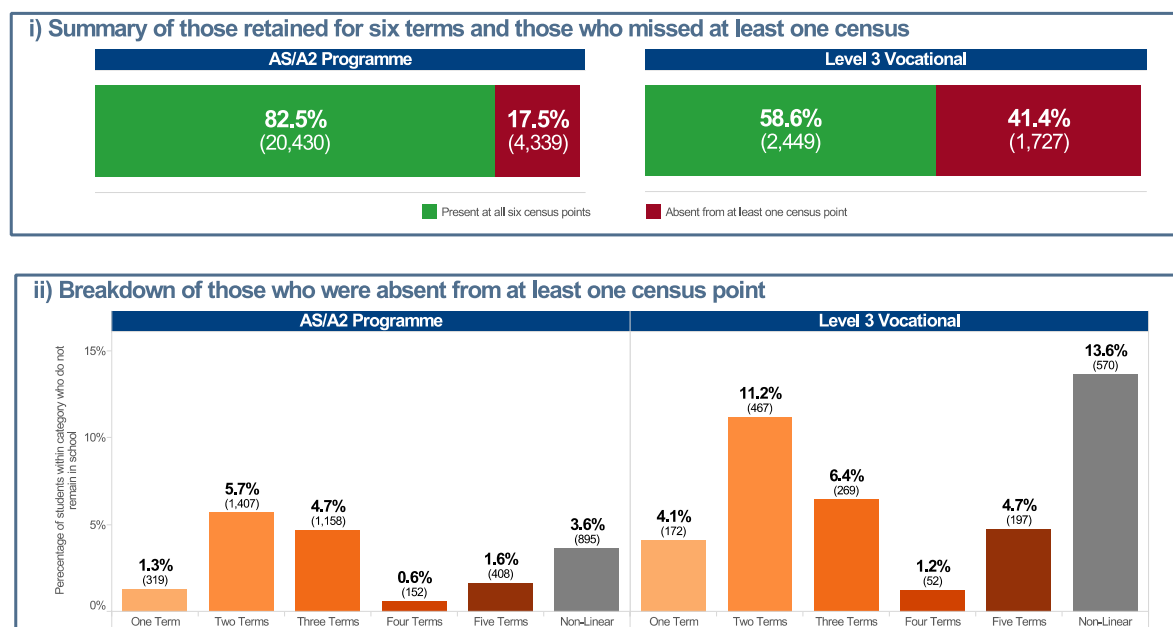
25. Taken together, Figures 5, 6 and 7 suggest that the attainment of 5 or more A*-C grades in GCSE only, inclusive of English and maths or 8+ or more A*-C grades in GCSEs or vocational equivalents, are influential in reducing the chances of leaving school or dropping out of a two-year post-16 programme in the same school. Both dimensions of attainment deliver well over 80 per cent chance of sustained post-16 participation compared with 62 per cent for those with only five or more GCSE A*-C grades or equivalent. However, high attainers at GCSE (5-8+ GCSE A*-C or equivalent) remain the largest group of Year 12 leavers.

17+ retention in Level 3 academic and vocational programmes in schools

26. Data reported in Figure 8 suggest that Level 3 vocational programmes have much lower retention rates than A Levels. Just under 60 per cent of learners on vocational programmes in schools were present at all six census points compared with over 80 per cent in AS/A2 programmes. Moreover, there appears to be a particular difference in dropping out part way through the first year. The reasons for this may be because those learners on Level 3 vocational programmes have a lower GCSE attainment profile and are therefore more likely to find Level 3 study a

challenge than those on A Levels. They may also be more prone to the lure of the labour market or wish to take a vocational course at a further education college. Overall, a total of 78 per cent of learners in school sixth forms from both types of courses stayed on for the full two years.

Figure 8. Retention in A Level and Level 3 vocational programmes schools in 2011



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (data covers those students who finished KS4 in summer 2009 and then appeared with post-16 learning aims in October 2009)

17+ participation and retention in London: summary

27. The main conclusions arising from an analysis of 17+ participation and retention in London are:

- London 17+ participation rates are slightly higher than the national average.
- 17+ retention in London schools' A Level programmes (82 per cent) is considerably greater than in their Level 3 vocational programmes (59 per cent).
- Just under a quarter of Year 12 Level 3 starters 'dropped out' of sixth form before 18.
- Drop out from Level 3 programmes in schools was primarily at the end of Year 12, particularly for vocational courses. This also includes those students with high Key Stage 4 attainment.
- The attainment of GCSE English and maths at grades A*-C is highly important in sustained 17+ participation.

- Broad attainment at Key Stage 4 (i.e. 8+ A*-C grades or equivalent including English and maths) delivers 87 per cent chance of completing a Level 3 programme. This is marginally exceeded by the anticipated outcomes of 8+ A*-C GCSE only grades including English and maths (91 per cent).

London Level 3 attainment outcomes

Level 3 performance: London compared nationally¹⁸

28. This section of the report discusses the important issue of Level 3 attainment.

In 2012/13 London was below the national average on all Level 3 indicators except one, with considerable variation between boroughs.

- In terms of Level 3 points per student, London (682.7) was below the national average (706), with considerable borough variation from 592.2 to 834.5.
- London was also below the national average in Level 3 points per entry – 209.5 compared with 210.5. Again there was significant variation between boroughs ranging from 192.4 to 230.5.
- The percentage of students attaining three A*-A grades or better at A Level or applied equivalent was 9.7 per cent across London as a whole compared with 9.8 per cent nationally with considerable inter-borough differences, ranging from 3.1 per cent to 22.8 per cent.
- A new measure introduced in 2012 was the percentage of students achieving AAB or better in A Level or equivalent awards. These grades play an important role in access to research-intensive universities. Here London was again marginally below the national average at 16.6 compared to 16.7 per cent. As might be expected from the previous figures, there was strong inter-borough variation – from 6.1 per cent to 31.9 per cent¹⁹.

The only Level 3 attainment indicator on which London (92 per cent) was marginally above the national average (91.7 per cent) was in relation to the percentage of students achieving at least two substantial Level 3 qualifications.

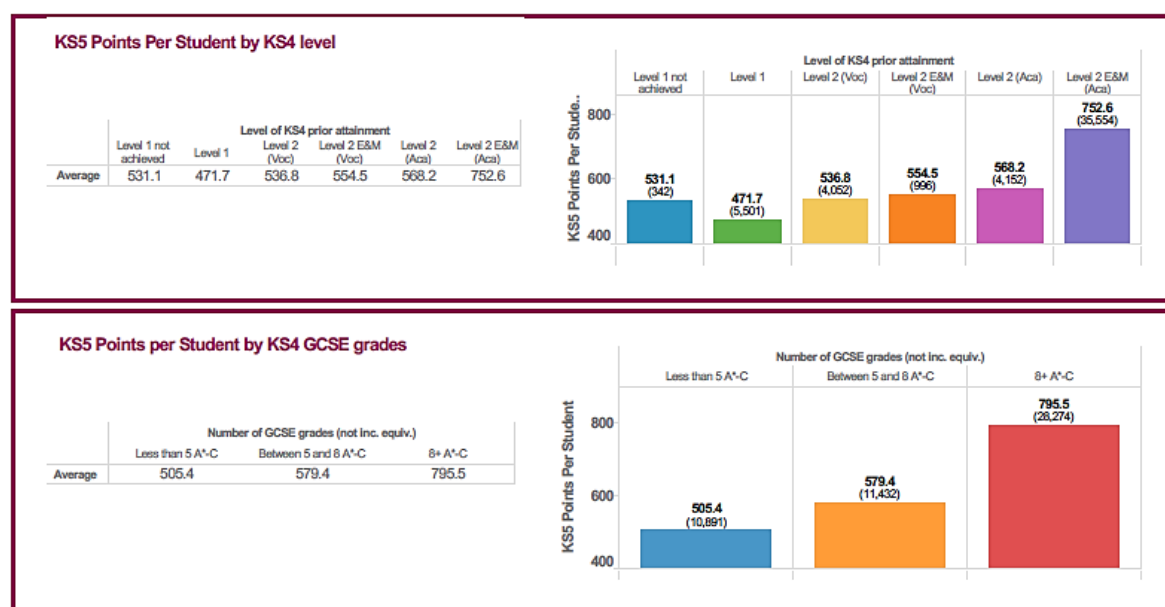
¹⁸ Unless otherwise indicated the data in this section of the report are taken from Intelligent London and Young people in London: an evidence base (London Councils 2014)

¹⁹ The source for the data in these three bullet points is DfE (2014)

The impact of Key Stage 4 attainment on Level 3 outcomes in schools

29. In the previous section, we analysed the impact of Key Stage 4 attainment on 17+ participation. Here we analyse its impact on Level 3 outcomes. Data reported in Figure 9 suggest that the effects of high levels of Key Stage 4 attainment have an even more dramatic impact on Level 3 attainment than they do in relation to 17+ participation. The attainment of five GCSE only A*-C grades inclusive of English and maths resulted in the average attainment of 752 Level 3 points (about 30 above the national average), while those without GCSE English and maths and a mixed programme of 5+ GCSEs were 200+ points behind. The attainment of 8+ GCSE only A*-C grades including English and maths resulted in an even higher average score of 795 points.

Figure 9. The impact of KS4 attainment Level 3 outcomes (schools)



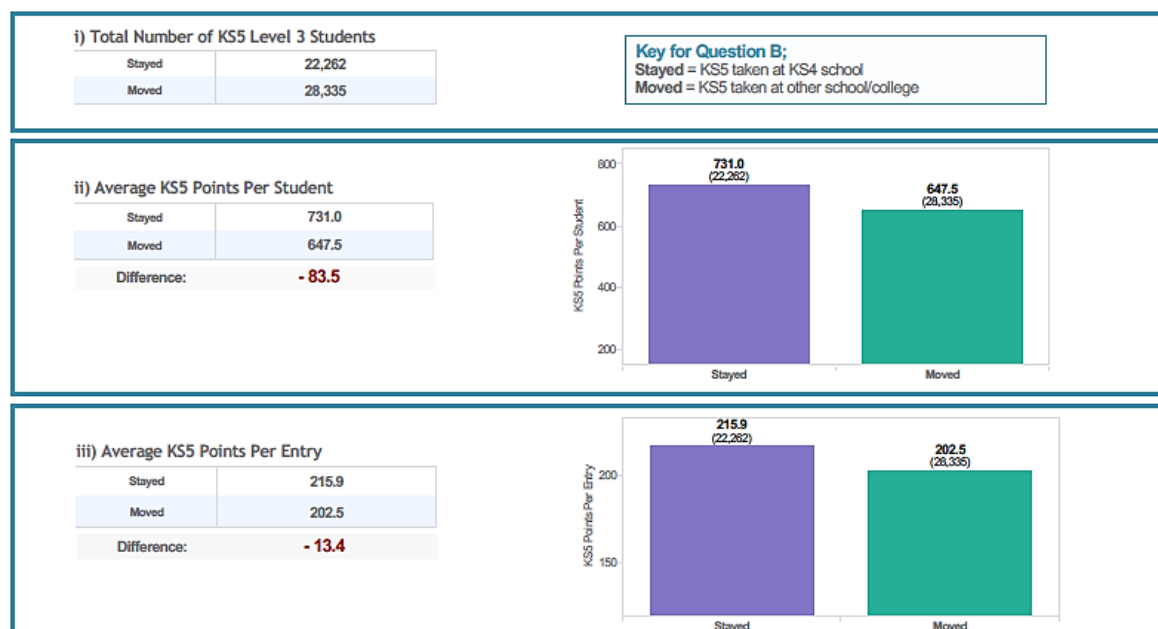
Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (Data covers level 3 qualifications at mainstream schools, academies, special schools and colleges. Data is non-validated and analysis may, therefore, differ to published sources)

A comparison of 'stayers' and 'movers'

30. In collaboration with MIME Consulting, we also collected and analysed data on those who stayed on at school and those who decided to move on. Figure 10 suggests that those who stay in a school sixth form attain more highly at Level 3 post-16 than those who leave (731 points) compared with 675 for those who move at the end of Year 11. Furthermore, stayers outperform movers for those who attain more highly at Key Stage 4 (i.e. 5 A*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths) – 785 points compared to 720 points. However, as Figure 11 shows, stayers'

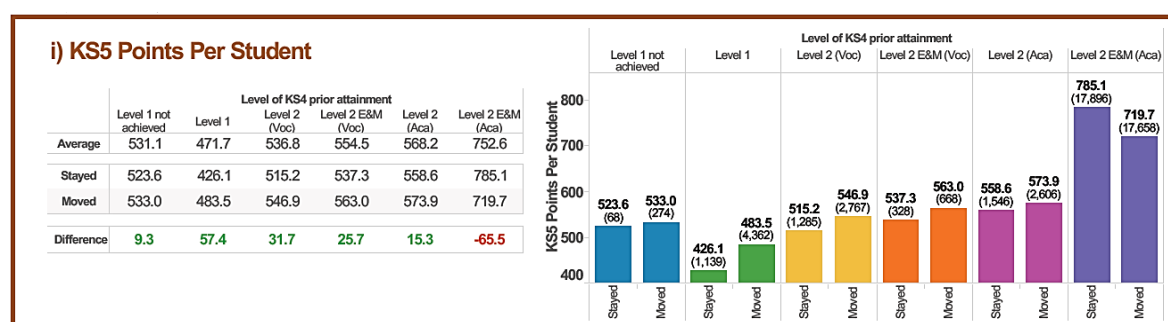
performance lags behind movers' performance in all the other prior attainment categories.

Figure 10. A comparison of 'stayers' and 'movers' - the effects of Key Stage 4 attainment on Level 3 outcomes



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (Summary tables show Level 3 KS5 performance of students who stay at the same school that they attended for KS4, compared with those who move to a different school or college (for students finishing KS4 in 2009. Data covers level 3 qualifications at mainstream schools, academies, special schools and colleges. Data is unvalidated and analysis may therefore differ to published sources)

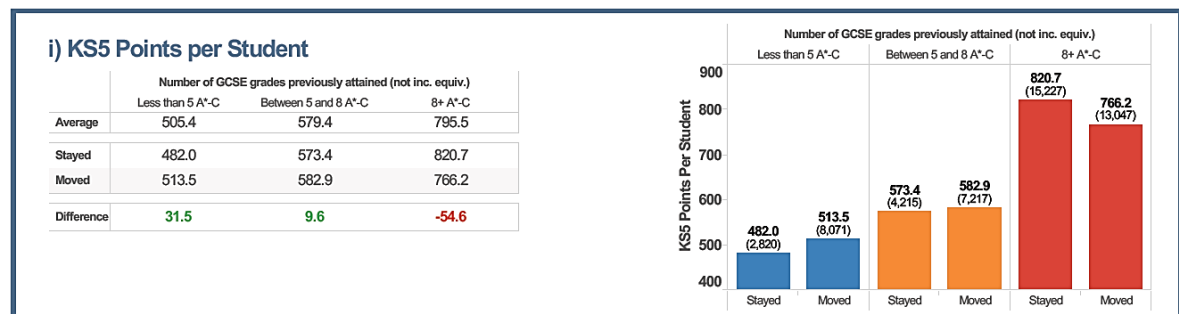
Figure 11. A comparison of 'stayers' and 'movers' - the effects of Key Stage 4 attainment on a range of qualifications outcomes



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (Level 3 KS5 performance of students who stay at the same school that they attended for KS4, compared with those who move to a different school or college (for students finishing KS4 in 2009). Split based on their level of prior attainment at KS4)

31. Figure 12 indicates that stayers with 8+ GCSE only A*-C grades attain more highly than movers (821 compared with 766) and reveals a dramatic gap between these students and those with between 5 and 8 GCSEs without English and maths (573 and 583 respectively).

Figure 12. A comparison of 'stayers' & 'movers' – the effects of 8+ GCSE A*-C grades



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (Level 3 KS5 performance of students who stay at the same school that they attended for KS4, compared with those who move to a different school or college (for students finishing KS4 in 2009). Split based on the number of A*-C GCSE grades achieved (not including equivalencies, irrespective of English and maths)

London Level 3 attainment outcomes: summary

32. Attainment at Level 3 in London is below the national average on all measures except the percentage of students achieving at least two substantial Level 3 qualifications. While this latter measure is important in terms of inclusion, there is no doubt that the capital's relatively poor performance at Level 3 is cause for concern given its examination success at the end of Key Stage 4. It should be noted, however, that there is considerable borough variation on all indicators, with some London boroughs performing well above the national average and others well below.

33. Attainment in a broader range of subjects (including English and maths) at Key Stage 4 produces better outcomes post-16. The majority of London learners in 2012/13 (65 per cent) had at least five GCSE A*-C grades including English and maths and they scored on average 753 points at Level 3. Those with 8+ GCSE A*-C grades including English and maths scored on average 795 points. Highest performing students at Level 3 tended to be 'school stayers', although 'movers' performed more highly at all the other qualifications levels. However, in 2011/12 about 30 per cent of Level 3 learners in London schools did not have A*-C grades in GCSE English and maths. The MIME data in Figure 9 suggests that these students attain about 540 points and that it may this group, in particular, that accounts for the overall London lag in in terms of cumulative Level 3 performance.

17+ participation – progression from Level 2 to Level 3 post-16 in schools

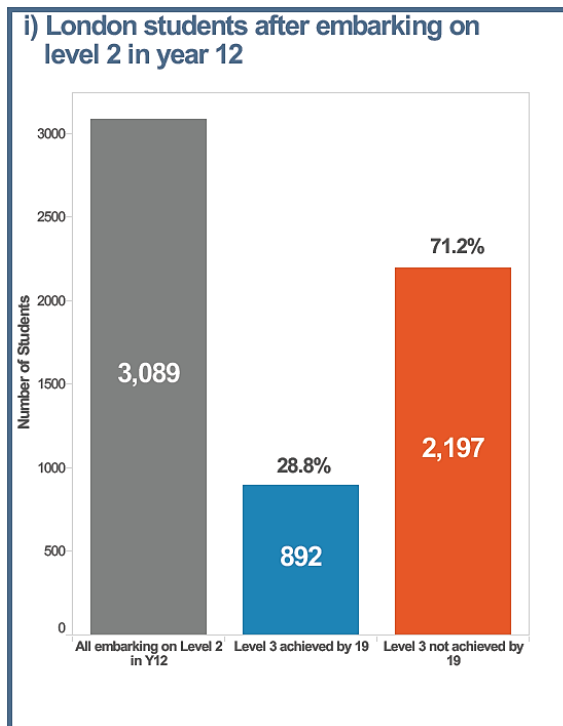
34. While the preceding analysis has focused on progression from Key Stage 4 to post-16 Level 3 study, the 17+ participation issue also includes that of Level 2 to Level 3 progression. As Figure 13 shows, less than 30 per cent of students embarking on Level 2 in Year 12 achieved Level 3 by 19. This finding, while concerning, does not come as a surprise. A previous study²⁰, suggested that this attrition is due to the cumulative effects of three factors:

- Drop-out during the Level 2 course (about 30 per cent).
- Non-achievement of Merit or Distinction grades that facilitate progress to Level 3 (50 per cent).
- The pull of the casualised labour market and caring responsibilities at home.

35. However, there is a very noticeable borough based variation -14 per cent to 56 per cent - (see Figure 14). Not surprisingly, there are higher proportions of Level 2 learners in boroughs with higher levels of deprivation, but higher performing boroughs in post-16 Level 2 vocational qualifications are not the same as those with high performance in academic qualifications at Level 3. This might suggest that institutions in local authorities that work well with socially disadvantaged students pre-16 are often the same as those that work well with Level 2 students post-16.

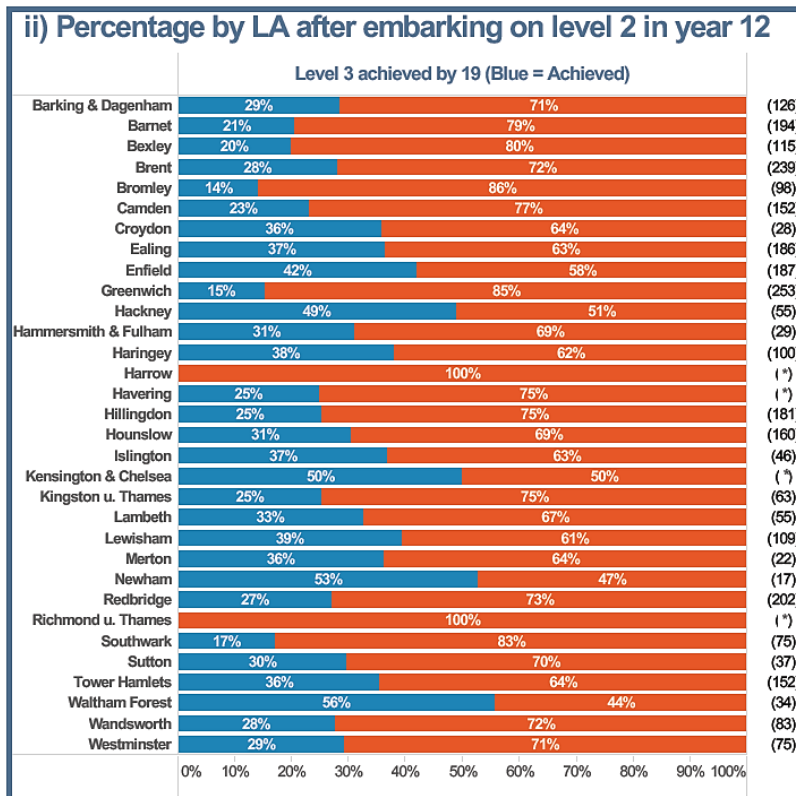
²⁰ Spours, K., Hodgson, A., Brewer, J. and Barker, P. (2009)

Figure 13. Level 2 to Level 3 progression in London



Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (Data covers those students who finished KS4 in summer 2009 that were then were classified as following a Level 2 programme in school via their post-16 learning aims in the School Census in October 2009)

Figure 14. Level 2 to Level 3 progression by borough

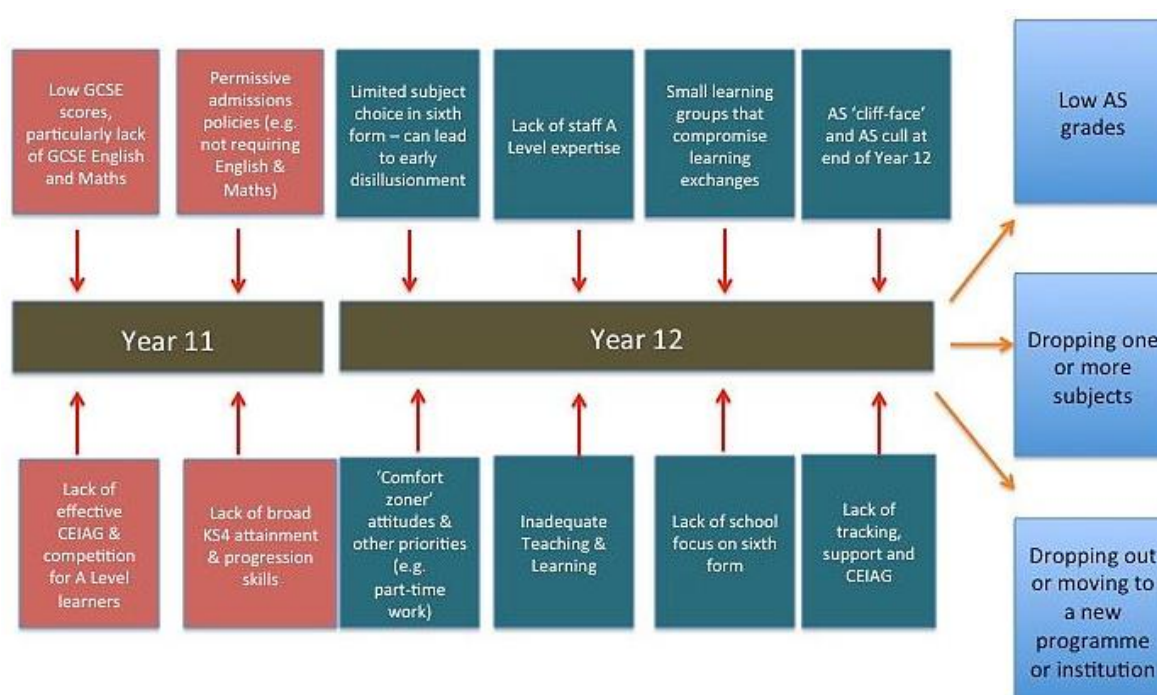


Source: *MIME Consulting, 2013* (Data covers those students who finished KS4 in summer 2009 that were then were classified as following a Level 2 programme in school via their post-16 learning aims in the School Census in October 2009)

C. The 17+ issue – factors and dynamics

1. As the previous data suggest, progression through the 14 to 19 phase is a process comprising a number of steps that reflect the complex relationship between learner course choices and motivation; levels of attainment; institutional policies and practices regarding admission, teaching, learning and progression and the nature of the qualifications themselves. For a minority of high performing learners 14 to 19 progression is a relatively simple process of moving between Key Stage 4 and post-16 study in a single institution. For others it is more akin to a set of steps or hurdles, each of which has to be negotiated.
2. Based on the data discussed earlier in this report, discussions with 14 to 19 local authority leads in London and previous studies on the 14 to 19 phase²¹, we devised an initial framework for analysing the various factors that lead to less than optimum outcomes at 17+ - low grades; dropping one or more subjects at Level 3 or dropping out of the programme altogether. Figure 14 below focuses on the 17+ issue in relation to A Levels both because this is the majority form of participation and because this is the area that holds the most data. The two major categories of factors are 'pre-16 readiness for post-16 study' in Year 11 and the 'initial experience of advanced level study' in Year 12.

Figure 15 – an initial analytical framework of 'risk factors' leading to lower performance at 17+



²¹ Hodgson and Spours (2013a)

Key Stage 4 and readiness for post-16 study

3. Reading Figure 15 from left to right, the first group of factors relate to Key Stage 4 and GCSE study. The Figure lists four major risk factors affecting readiness for Level 3 study post-16. The level of preparedness for post-16 study is becoming a critical factor as staying-on in education and training post-16 has become the norm and is now enshrined in legislation. Moreover, rising levels of GCSE or equivalent attainment have raised student aspirations to study A Levels at a time when these qualifications have become somewhat more difficult to attain (as a result of the 2008 reforms). The planned further reform of A Levels, with a reduction in modularity, a greater focus on synoptic assessment and external examination, is likely to continue this trend. At the same time, there has been the growth in the number of school sixth forms in London with increased competition for A Level learners. In this context, while GCSE performance in London has improved significantly in recent years and London outperformed the other regions in 2013, it may not be as strong as it appears on the surface in terms of the preparedness of students for post-16 study.

4. *Minimal GCSE scores* – the data suggest a dramatically differing attainment prognosis for learners who just ‘creep over’ the GCSE 5 A*-C threshold, particularly those who have low scores in English and maths, compared with those who have attained more highly at Key Stage 4. Factors contributing to this phenomenon of just getting students to the main national benchmark at 16 include schools targeting the GCSE A*-C borderline and a potential tension between these previous institutional performance targets and the level of attainment, knowledge and skills required for effective participation in and progression to post-16 Level 3 courses, A Levels in particular. In addition, there has been the liberal use of vocational courses as alternatives to GCSEs at Key Stage 4 in some schools because of the ‘equivalences’ points they afforded to boost GCSE performance²². This too has provided an inflated sense of learner preparedness for study at the next level up.

5. *Lack of progression readiness* - one of the reasons for the problems of 17+ participation is the degree of ‘preparedness for progression’ that Key Stage 4 has afforded students aiming for Level 3 study post-16. One way of calculating ‘preparedness for progression’ is by the ‘breadth’, ‘type’ and ‘volume’ of Level 2 attainment – i.e. whether a learner has attained GCSE English and maths (*breadth*); whether the student has attained the five GCSE benchmark with or without

²² This will no longer be the case because vocational/applied qualifications at Key Stage 4 will now only count as one GCSE regardless of their size

vocational equivalent qualifications (*depth*); and whether Level 2 has been attained across a high *volume* of subjects (i.e. grades of A*-C in 8+ subjects rather than the commonly accepted institutional benchmark for admission to Level 3 post-16 study of five subjects at GCSE at grades A*-C or equivalent). The data discussed in this report indicate that the 2010 cohort of London students were more likely to remain in the same school until the January of Year 13 if their KS4 attainment profile had breadth, depth and volume.

6. *Permissive recruitment practices* - school sixth forms play an important role at 16+ and are on the increase in London. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many of the new or small sixth forms are tempted to boost numbers by recruiting learners without strong GCSE profiles to a limited range of A Level courses. In London, which is culturally diverse, there are relatively high and traditional parental and learner aspirations, particularly in black and minority ethnic communities²³. It is likely that these attitudes would lead to a preference for their children to study A Levels than vocational qualification or entry to an apprenticeship.

7. *Careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG)* - is not always as impartial or as informative as it should be²⁴, leading learners to opt for the most familiar qualifications and environment and to take on courses for which they are not adequately prepared. Previous research (suggests that a particularly vulnerable group are 'middle attainers', who elect to continue into the school sixth form to take A Levels because of its familiarity and traditional offer – known as 'comfort zoners'. These relatively unmotivated learners, who take the line of least resistance by applying only to their own school sixth form may exhibit what has been termed 'comfort zoner' attitudes that compromise their commitment to the hard work and intellectual climb required for Level 3 study²⁵.

8. *Policy changes may be leading to a narrower school sixth form curriculum* - the demise of Diploma provision, new policy levers that encourage the take-up of academic subjects and a reversion to more traditional A Levels in school sixth forms means that there is less Level 3 broad vocational provision (e.g. BTECs) available. While, as indicated above, these qualifications are not necessarily the first choice for learners and their parents, they may well lead to more successful outcomes at both 17+ and 18+.

²³ Butler and Hamnett, (2011)

²⁴ Ofsted (2013)

²⁵ Hodgson and Spours (2013b)

The initial experience of post-16 advanced level study

9. Given the gap between Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications in the English system, it is not surprising that advanced level study is seen as challenging by many learners.
10. Data from a local study outside London suggested that the major decline in A Level participation takes place at the end of Year 12 (i.e. at 17+)²⁶. It also indicated that many of the learners who leave at the end of Year 12 attempt to restart Level 3 study in broad vocational courses in a general further education college.
11. The dynamic of factors affecting the quality of 17+ participation and progression in relation to Level 3 qualifications includes:
- a. *The AS cliff-face* - AS Level comes as a shock to some students – many are not well prepared in terms of knowledge, skills or attitudes to study.
 - b. *Part-time work* - some take up part-time work, which may clash with a more demanding curriculum and the time required to study outside the classroom. Moreover, this type of employment may appear more appealing than study when jobs are scarce and learners' successful attainment is not assured.
 - c. *Lack of adequate support for the more marginal A Level learners* – successful A Level teaching requires a particular kind of expertise and experience that is not the same as teaching for GCSE or at Key Stage 3. In new sixth forms this expertise and experience is not always present and there may be a small number of staff who engage in this activity, providing little peer support. Until recently in relation to school inspections Ofsted has tended to focus less on the sixth form than on other aspects of the school and this has resulted in a concentration on Key Stage 4 rather than post-16. The situation for teachers who teach A level in the sixth form has not been helped by constant revisions to specifications/syllabuses and changes in the type of students who are entering A Level study with a wider range of attainment levels than in the past. According to 14 to 19 local authority leads in London, there is often an issue with teachers not being able to adequately differentiate their teaching to meet the needs of these more diverse student groups. Moreover, in some institutions, performance data are not used adequately and monitoring and tracking of students is not

²⁶ Hodgson and Spours (2013b)

carried out sufficiently rigorously. In this context it is perhaps not surprising that the more marginal A Level learners do not attain highly at AS Level and are thus at risk of being excluded from A2 or decide for themselves to drop out at the end of Year 12.

- d. *Limited subject choice* – small sixth forms, unless they work in partnership with others, cannot provide the full range of A Level subjects and students in these institutions may well not have been able to take the three or four subjects that they would ideally like to study. Furthermore, as reported earlier, there is a very big step up from GCSE to AS Level and the type of learning is very different. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that some students in Year 12 become disillusioned with their AS choices (often having received inappropriate advice in Year 11). In many smaller institutions there is little opportunity for mixed general and vocational study at Level 3 post-16 or for a Level 2/Level 3 mix of study to help with the AS gradient.
- e. *Relatively poor 17+ CEIAG* - those young Londoners who continue to study A Levels in Year 12 and experience disappointing AS examination results then face a difficult decision about what to do at 17+, often with less CEIAG available to them than they received at 16+.
- f. *AS 'cull'* - at this point learner actions can be influenced by school policy - some weed out the 17+ students who have low AS grades²⁷ while others allow them to continue, albeit with a modified or entirely different programme. In the latter case this may represent a scaling down of student ambitions and leads eventually to the lower cumulative point scores at A level discussed earlier in this paper.

12. The accumulation of the Year 11 and Year 12 risk factors for a proportion of London learners can lead to three outcomes at 17+ – low AS grades; dropping to fewer than three subjects at A2; dropping out or moving to a new programme or institution. The first two outcomes compromise final cumulative A Level scores. The third outcome leads to a disrupted and lengthened post-16 experience.

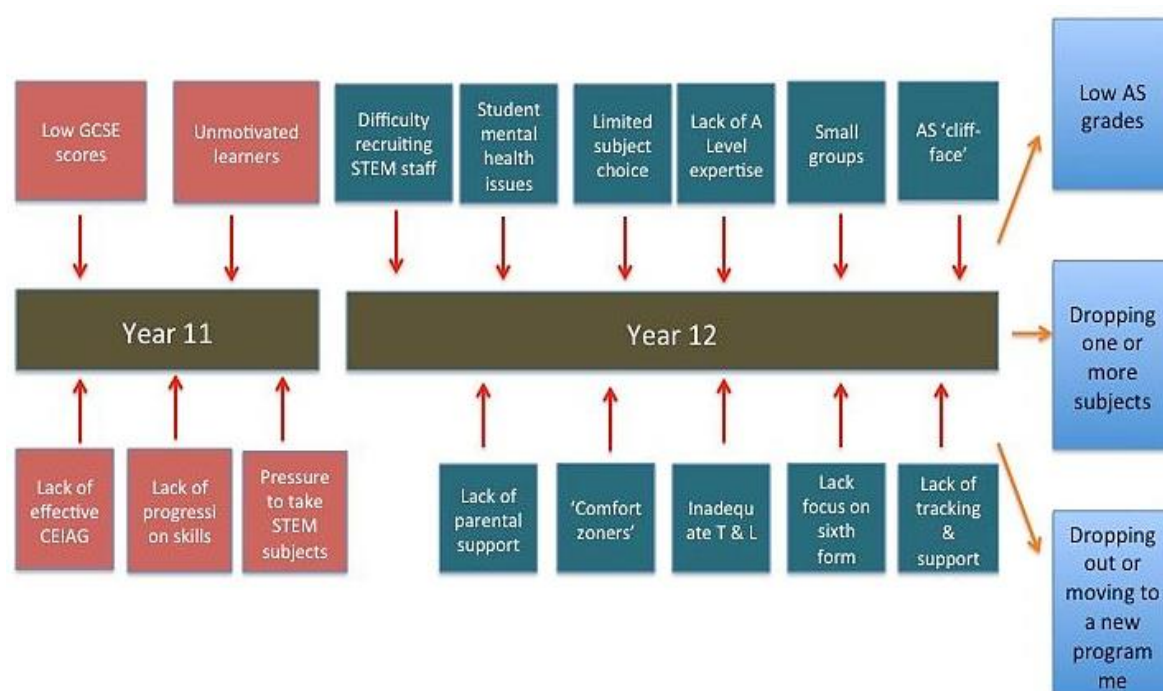
²⁷ Rowley (2013) reviewed the selective practices of independent and state schools at the end of Year 12

D. The role of institutional policies and practices in schools

Introduction

1. Having brought together some statistics in this area, it was felt that the issue of what happens to 17 year olds in London schools and colleges required qualitative work at the individual school and college level to illuminate some of the broad patterns that the participation, attainment and progression data had highlighted. In particular, we wanted to understand what role institutional policies and practices play in students' learning journeys. Here we focus on schools only; a later paper will examine the issue in relation to general further education and sixth form colleges.
2. The data reported on were taken from individual interviews with heads of school sixth forms and/or senior managers in 10 schools located in three London boroughs. We are very grateful for the time they spent with us discussing these issues and for the three borough officers who helped to provide us with access to these institutions. On each occasion participants were asked a series of broad questions and then invited to comment on Figure 14; an initial analytical framework of 'risk factors' leading to lower performance at 17+. As a result of these discussions the framework was developed further – see Figure 16.

Figure 16. Revised analytical framework of 'risk factors' leading to lower performance at 17+



3. A major aim of the interviews was to capture strategies that schools were using with students to support them throughout the 14 to 19 phase. These are highlighted in the findings below.

4. Following the interviews, the researchers sent the notes they had taken back to the interviewees to check whether they had accurately captured what had been said. Any amendments made to these notes were taken on board and form part of the findings. Anonymity has been preserved throughout this report as was promised to those taking part in the research.

Preparation for the sixth form

5. A common theme in discussions was the problem of students' lack of preparedness for Level 3 study, particularly A Levels. Several Heads of Sixth (HoS) commented on the significant intervention and support given to students in Key Stage 4 in order to get them up to the 5 A*-C GCSE benchmarks that currently drives institutional actions at this point. One described this as schools 'dragging' students over the five A*-C threshold. Another talked about students being 'over supported' in Years 10 and 11. While this was seen as understandable given the pressures from performance tables and Ofsted in the increasingly competitive climate of 'academisation', it resulted in a lack of focus on building in the progression skills required to succeed in the sixth form. These included: time-management; independent learning and wider reading; the ability to undertake more extended writing; a solid grasp of key concepts in the sciences and grammar for the study of modern foreign languages. Also for certain students there was inadequate 'academic support from home' and a misconception by students of what sixth form study would demand or simply a lack of clear sense of purpose about sixth form study. One interviewee said she thought some students saw the sixth form as a 'social club'. All of this was set against a background of national qualifications where the gap between GCSEs and AS was described as 'huge'.

Strategies to support the transition between Year 11 and Year 12

6. For this reason most of the schools we visited talked about strategies they had put in place to try to tackle this mismatch in perceptions and the lack of student readiness for the AS hurdle.

Figure 17. Strategies to support the transition between Year 11 and Year 12



7. As Figure 17 illustrates, these included:
- Shared activities in certain subject areas between Years 10 and 11 students designated as 'gifted and talented' and sixth formers.
 - A Sixth Form Taster Day(s), which one interviewee commented led to 'less chopping and changing of subjects' and lower levels of drop out in Year 12.
 - HoS in two high-performing schools suggested that KS4 teachers 'pitched the teaching in GCSE at the next level with the sixth form in mind' so that students were more prepared for Level 3 study. However, he said, for those who came into the sixth form from outside had not necessarily had this type of preparation so needed extra support.
 - Two-day 'booster sessions' in maths and the sciences in the summer before entry to the sixth form.
 - A one-week bridging course in one school with AS preparation projects to be completed over the summer break followed by a two-day 'resilience programme' at the beginning of Year 12 to ensure students can cope with a four AS programme.

- f. Early enrolment and study skills provision before the beginning of the school term in Year 12. In one school, this also provided the opportunity for diagnosis and the identification of those who would need on-going support in the sixth form.
- g. Several stages of guidance in Year 11 for students preparing to enter the sixth form. In one school, for example, in December the students and their parents were given prospectuses and a talk about the sixth form; in February students were invited in on a Saturday for a 1:1 guidance interview; there was a two-day induction programme at the end of June before entry to Year 12 and enrolment began at the end of August, with the option for students to make changes to their subjects in the first two to three weeks of Year 12.
- h. Talking about HE in Years 10 and 11 to get students motivated to succeed early on.
- i. Building in study skills from Year 7.
- j. Making sure students took the right subjects at KS4 so that they were not reducing their options for post-16 study.
- k. In one school the Head of Year 11 and her/his team moved up with the students so there was more incentive to support them and they had better knowledge of their support needs when they entered Year 12.

The school context – the effects of the ‘local learning ecology’

8. It was clear from discussions in all 10 schools that the context for the school, not surprisingly, makes a big difference to its intake and the size of its sixth form. The institutional arrangements in any given locality (e.g. the existence of one or more selective schools or a college), the social mix within the school and the area, the degree of institutional competition or collaboration and whether extensive ‘academisation’ has taken place, all make a real difference to the popularity or otherwise of certain school sixth forms. A couple of the schools we visited spoke about ‘losing the top end’ at the end of Year 11. This not only determines the nature of the student intake to the sixth form, but also has a strong impact on admission policies - ‘inclusive’ or ‘selective’ – on the curriculum offer, the type and amount of student support required, performance in examinations and how confident or

otherwise the school feels about recent and imminent national 14 to 19 reforms. Each of these issues is discussed in more detail below.

Admission to the sixth form

Year 12

9. Among the 10 schools we visited, the most common official requirement for entry to a full A Level programme in the sixth form was five GCSEs A*-C including English and maths, with a higher grade expected in the subjects to be taken at A Level, often a B grade. Entry to a Level 3 BTEC or a mixed A Level and BTEC programme was usually less stringent with no demand for A*-C grades in English or/and maths. However, in our sample there were also schools at both the selective and inclusive ends of this, with one demanding six A Grades at GCSE plus A in the subjects to be studied (A* for further maths) and one only asking for four GCSEs at A*-C with a C in the chosen A Level subjects. With the exception of the one highly selective sixth form, the other institutions, while they wished to hold the line on the entry requirements, admitted that exceptions could be made in some cases and, as one HoS put it, 'the door is open'. Entry to Level 2 programmes, which only existed in some schools and always in small numbers, was usually done on a case-by-case basis.

Year 13

10. Similarly, the minimum requirements for entry to the second year of an A Level varied according to the selectivity/inclusivity of the school sixth. The most selective demanded at least a C grade at AS in the subjects to be continued to A Level, while others asked for Ds, Es or 'anything above a U'. A minority of schools offered students who had not reached these thresholds the opportunity to repeat Year 12 taking different subjects, but the rest asked students to leave at this point.

The sixth form curriculum

11. As discussed above, the size and popularity of the sixth form determines the nature of the curriculum it can offer. The large numbers of students in some of the sixth forms we visited (700 in one case) meant that it was possible for these schools to offer well over 20 different A Level subjects, as well as BTECs and a small amount of Level 2 provision where it was felt necessary. At the other end of the scale, some

school sixth forms were offering considerably less choice; with only 12 A Level subjects in one school. The existence of AS or A Level size BTECs appears to have increased the popularity of mixed programmes of study in several of the schools we visited and there is some evidence that Level 2 programmes will increase as a result of RPA. All the school sixth forms we visited also offer a range of extra-curricular activities, which are discussed in point 6 below.

12. Choice is vital at this stage and becomes a 'chicken and egg' situation for schools, where not having a large number of subjects risks students going elsewhere to study and reducing the size of the sixth form, but having a large number of subjects and not attracting enough students (e.g. when building up a new sixth form or competing with a local sixth form college) can mean small group sizes and lack of financial viability.

13. Most schools try to start all or the majority of students off on four (or more in the most selective schools) subjects in Year 12, but this usually drops to three A levels in Year 13 and for some students to two A Levels. HoS saw this latter programme as problematic and undesirable but, unfortunately, sometimes necessary. In a couple of schools they had been tightening up on the numbers that were allowed to take low volume study programmes because they realised the impact this had had on their average total point scores. However, these low volume programmes in Year 13 clearly still exist and the alternative of increasing the numbers being asked to leave in Year 12 also impacts negatively on students.

Performance issues

14. All interviewees were asked to talk about examination performance in the sixth form and to comment in particular on why some had low average total point scores. A number of reasons were offered.

15. Students taking subjects to which they are not fully committed is unlikely to lead to successful outcomes. In addition, it was suggested by several HoS that differences in student outcomes could be the result of taking certain subjects (e.g. the sciences and chemistry in particular were seen as 'hard') or combinations of subjects. One HoS commented that students appeared to do better with a combination of 'facilitating subjects' rather than a mix of non-facilitating subjects or mixed academic and vocational subjects. Students being coerced into studying

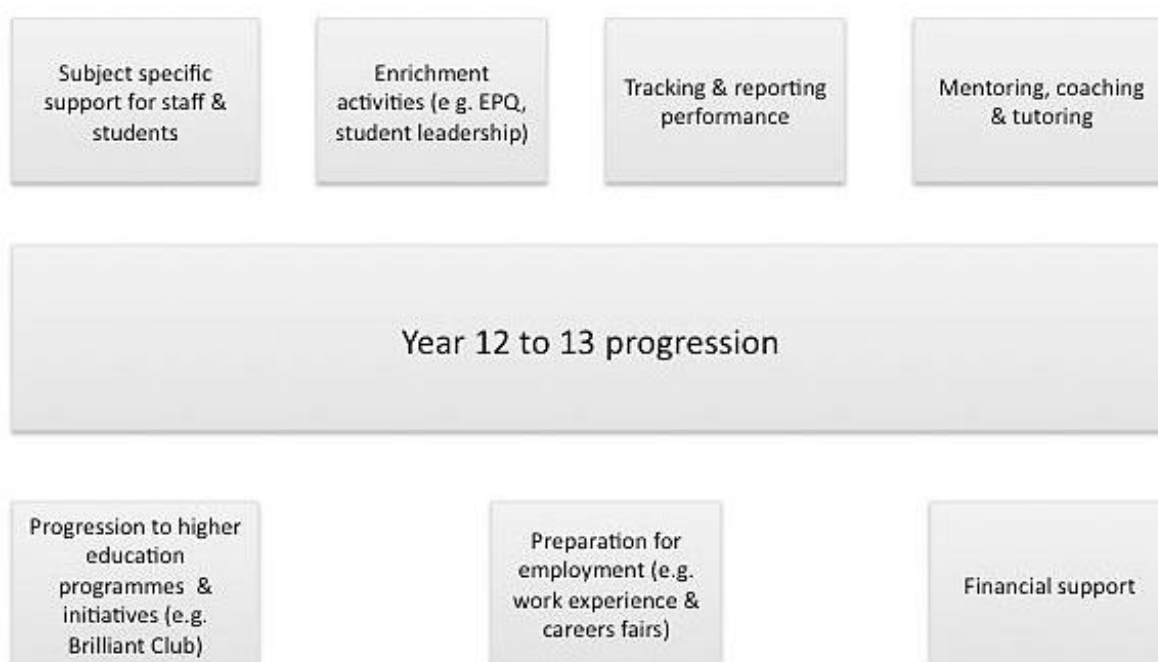
certain subjects (usually maths and the sciences) because of parental pressure also often led to problems with performance.

16. It was suggested that most sixth form staff were more familiar with scores and percentages in single A Level subjects than with average total point scores, despite the importance of the latter to students wishing to enter higher education. Low average total point scores, they said, were usually the result of both low grades and low volume programmes. In addition to the strategies discussed below, they were trying to tackle the first of these by raising the admissions criteria for A Level programmes, although in 'inclusive' sixth forms HoS were concerned not to exclude students who were very keen to study A Levels and might be supported to pass. The issue of volume of study was something that all said they were attempting to address by being much firmer in their demand for a four-AS programme and no less than three A Levels in Year 13, but this was a line they were finding difficult to hold. Other strategies that were mentioned were additional support for mathematics and sciences, often the culprits in terms of low grades, ensuring that students developed 'good working habits' and building 'an ethos of high aspirations'. The idea of a planned 'three-year sixth' was seen as a good idea, and happens to some extent with vocational programmes, such as Health and Social Care, where students take a Level 2 course in Year 12 and continue onto a Level 3 course in Years 13 and 14. However, there were concerns about the effect that this approach would have on funding and performance tables.

Strategies for supporting students in the sixth form

17. The interviews with HoS revealed an impressive range of strategies for supporting students both to be successful in their chosen qualifications and also to prepare them for further study, work and adult life. Not all of the following seven types of support/extension were offered in all ten of the schools we visited (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Supporting Year 12 to Year 13 progression



Subject specific support

18. A couple of the schools mentioned the importance of having a greater focus on the knowledge and skills required for teaching Level 3 programmes and involving more staff in these activities so that there was more of a shared sense of responsibility for sixth form teaching across the institution. In some cases, staff had overly high expectations of students' ability to cope immediately with AS Level study. They noted in particular the need for more differentiation, especially in subjects where students struggled (e.g. chemistry) and more overt support of the type used in Key Stage 4. One school mentioned supervised study periods and the importance of students having 'a full timetable'. Another talked about the efficacy of subject-specific societies.

Enrichment activities

19. All schools had some form of enrichment on offer for sixth formers. This might take the form of an additional qualification (e.g. Extended Project Qualification, Global Perspectives); broader awards, such as Duke of Edinburgh or Sports Leadership or more informal leadership/volunteering activities to develop 'self confidence' and 'a service ethos' (e.g. Student Leadership programme, Student Ambassadors, a Catholic Retreat, mentoring of younger students). In one school students are encouraged to use MOOCs and the Khan Academy (a non-profit organisation with materials available on-line, particularly in school mathematics).

Tracking and reporting performance

20. All schools use data on student performance to feedback to students and parents on a regular basis. A couple stressed the vital importance of working with parents to tackle low performance or behaviour/attendance issues and noted the difficulties of getting parents/carers involved in this part of their child's education in comparison with lower down the school. Parents/carers sometimes assume, we were told, that their child does not need as much support at this stage because they are becoming independent adults. However, according to some of the HoS this is not a helpful stance to take and for both academic and also pastoral reasons parents are just as important to their child's education in the sixth form as they had been lower down in the school. Several of those interviewed noted the fragility of some of the young people they had in their sixth form and suggested that mental health issues could become more acute at the ages of 16 and 17.

Mentoring, coaching and tutoring

21. A related support mechanism is the tutoring that takes place in all of the sixth forms we visited. The form this takes varies (e.g. vertical versus horizontal tutor groups; group versus individual tutorials or a mix of both). In most cases the main focus is on academic issues, with mentoring and coaching being used as a way of praising and encouraging those doing well and supporting those who are struggling. However, tutors also play a front-line role in the pastoral and progression activities discussed in paragraph 25 e. f. and g. below.

Progression to higher education

22. All school sixth forms see supporting students to progress into higher education as a major responsibility and will provide help with the UCAS application process. A couple of the HoS who either had a new or expanding sixth form mentioned the difficulties of getting places for their students in top universities, even when students' A Level grades were high. They put this partly down to the fact that the universities did not have a strong relationship with their institution, but also to the quality of UCAS forms. They realised the importance of training staff more carefully in how to write school statements and to support the completion of UCAS forms and of matching students carefully to universities and courses. In addition, most have developed more active mechanisms for promoting degree level study through visits to universities, talks from alumni and university staff and initiatives such as 'The Brilliant Club', which has the aim of widening access to research-intensive universities. In

some cases there are strong links with a particular university/universities that bring benefits, such as library use or mentoring by undergraduate students.

Preparation for employment

23. Preparing A Level students for application to higher education has been a major focus for sixth form tutors for a long time. A newer aspect of the role is supporting students to enter the labour market. Three institutions noted the importance of offering internships and work experience and others mentioned the work that was done in CEIAG programmes both in class and through careers fairs/conventions. However, there was perhaps less confidence in the quality of this type of support than that provided for progression to higher education.

Financial support

24. Several HoS bemoaned the loss of the Education Maintenance Allowance, which had financially supported students from lower socio-economic groups to access all aspects of sixth form study. They were using the smaller amounts they currently received to provide bursaries or grants for study trips for certain groups of students – those with special educational needs, looked after children and those on free school meals.

The future

25. In looking to the future there were a number of issues raised by those responsible for sixth forms in schools, most of which relate to national reforms but others of which are more local.

- a. The impact of the new linear A Level syllabuses was seen as being considerable - this reform is likely to mean raising the bar for entry to A Level programmes (it is possible for students to 'waste' two years rather than one) and because of the different teaching and learning strategies the new syllabuses would require.
- b. HoS were almost equally worried about whether the introduction of more external testing in BTECs would make these awards less accessible for students and would prevent them from using these qualifications as alternatives to A Levels for students with lower GCSE scores.

- c. The implications of 16-19 study programmes were only just being taken on board by some of those we interviewed, but in those schools that accepted students without an A*-C grade in GCSE English and maths, there were concerns about offering this type of provision in the sixth form. Study programmes also demand work experience, which only a minority of school sixth forms currently offer. One or two schools were also worried about funding study programmes at a time of shrinking resources and the pending reduction in the unit of resource for 18 year olds.
- d. HoS commented that they were unsure about what was going to happen to the number and availability of HE places in a more complex market that was highly competitive at the top end.
- e. A few complained about the difficulties of recruiting good teachers that were able to ensure success in advanced level study.
- f. Finally, in most cases, there was a desire for more institutional collaboration (e.g. for updating staff subject expertise, improving teaching and learning, sharing information about policy changes and developing a system for 'swapping' students who had not done well enough in Year 12 to continue into Year 13). At the same time, those we interviewed recognised the difficulties of making this happen in the very competitive post-16 environment in London. It is clear that the opportunities that are provided by the various networks in the capital, including those sponsored by local authorities and London Councils, are highly valued and provide a 'safe' space in which to explore ideas for improving sixth form provision in London.

E. Conclusion

1. In the era of Raising the Participation Age it is vital that young Londoners participate, attain and progress between the ages of 14 to 19 and in particular that they add significantly to their knowledge and skills after the age of 16 because this will give them a greater opportunity to enter the highly competitive London labour market or progress to higher education. The main reason for this study is to understand why London does not perform better than the rest of the country in Level 3 study post-16 given its strong attainment profile pre-16.
2. While participation in full-time education and training in London is higher than the national average, attainment at Level 3 is below the national figure on all measures except the percentage of students achieving at least two substantial Level 3 qualifications. While this latter measure is important in terms of inclusion, there is no doubt that the capital's relatively poor performance at Level 3 is cause for concern given its examination success at the end of Key Stage 4. It should be noted, however, that there is considerable borough variation on all indicators, with some London authority areas performing well above the national average and others well below. This variability suggests the need for strategies to be targeted on particular boroughs and schools within a framework of sharing information and expertise on a pan-London basis.
3. The research so far suggests that a broad range of attainment at Key Stage 4 (up to 8 subjects A*-C grade including English and maths and that can also include a vocational subject) is the best predictor of success in post-16 study and that young people need adequate preparation in Key Stage 4 prior to embarking on Level 3 programmes. However, we have also identified that there are a number of areas where school sixth forms need to improve their practice in order to reduce the risk of drop-out, drop-down and low attainment in Level 3 study post-16. Individual institutional policies and practices make a difference to learner trajectories and outcomes.
4. All of the schools visited were aware of the mismatch between the type of study undertaken in Key Stage 4 and what students encounter in Year 12. All were attempting to tackle the transition to post-16 study in their own way with greater or lesser effectiveness. There was less attention paid to the transition at 17+, which for some young people was also problematic.

5. Nevertheless, we found a range of useful examples of good practice in terms of strategies to support young people's participation, retention, attainment and progression on Level 3 programmes that need to be more widely disseminated.
6. While the research has highlighted a number of interesting patterns in relation to participation, attainment and progression in London, investigation into the '17+ issue' is far from complete. The discussion has been limited primarily to Level 3 study and to schools. We need to know more about the role of colleges and vocational qualifications post-16 and the destinations of those who move course at the end of Year 12.
7. In addition, the research so far has suggested that it would be useful to examine the patterns related to certain groups (e.g. middle attainers) whom we suspect struggle to successfully engage with A Level study; the impact of the 'poverty penalty'²⁸ and the possible widening gaps between different socio-economic groups post-16; and the impact of institutional effectiveness post-16.
8. During the period of the research, alongside the practical strategies that schools are already actively pursuing, a number of possible more general developments for improving 14+ participation, progression and attainment arose in our discussions. These included:
 - a. A greater focus on building in progression skills at Key Stage 4 (e.g. encouraging breadth and volume of study and attainment pre-16; the possible introduction of a Level 2 Extended Project Qualification which supports the development of independent learning for progression to Level 3 study).
 - b. Reviewing progression thresholds to post-16 study and improving CEIAG for Years 10 and 11, using destinations data.
 - c. The possibility of introducing planned three-year study programmes for 'marginal' Level 3 students; mixing of general and vocational study post-16 and the introduction of level 2.5 programmes (a mix of Level 2 and 3 qualifications) for those students who struggle with the gradient between Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications at the end of Year 11.

²⁸ Hodgson and Spours (2012)

- d. A focus on A Level teaching and learning and underpinning support systems, including improved CEIAG at 17+ and more rigorous monitoring and tracking of students in Years 12 and 13.
- e. Schools using the findings of this research to raise awareness about the 17+ issue and to try out some of the highlighted strategies for improving the 'quality' of students' post-16 participation.
- f. Raising performance through partnership working to provide greater student choice of programmes of study, to increase teacher expertise, to improve access to specialist facilities and to provide a community of practice for professional development.

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