

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

## Report 3: Colleges in London

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

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## **Paper 3. Colleges in London**

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## Executive summary

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 in an era of *Raising the Participation Age* (RPA). As more young people continue in education and training at 16, so the duration and quality of their post-16 participation becomes increasingly important for them personally as well as a key measure of system success.

In this regard, London appears to face some challenges. The advantage that London enjoys in terms of pre-16 general education attainment is being lost in some aspects of post-16 Level (L) 3 study.

### The research

In the light of this, 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 to increase the ‘quality’ of 17+ participation for young people in the capital.

The key questions for this project as a whole are:

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?

This paper focuses on the role, policies and practices of General Further Education Colleges (GFEs) and Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs) in London to complement an earlier publication on schools. Its statistical base is derived primarily from evidence contained within London

Councils' 2014 report *Young People in London: an evidence base*, but the paper also draws on data provided by MIME Consulting and on visits made to four London colleges – two GFEs and two SFCs.

## **Findings**

The findings from this research indicate that GFEs and SFCs in London play a fundamental role in ensuring that outcomes for young people at the end of the 16 to 19 phase are, in many ways, better than the national average. This applies to 16, 17 and 18+ educational participation, attainment of three A Levels and participation in higher education. However, London lags in terms of participation in apprenticeships and in the quality of L3 attainment measured in terms of A Level points per candidate. The former may be beyond the control of schools and colleges, but the latter is very much their responsibility.

In terms of institutional participation, GFEs are the largest single provider for 16 to 18 year olds, although they have been slightly losing their share to schools in the past year or so. This is particularly the case at 16, but less so at 17 and 18. SFCs, on the other hand, have slightly increased their share of 16 to 18 year olds.

Evidence from our previous report on schools, together with new data in this report, suggest that London colleges (GFE and SFC) accommodate higher proportions of students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and with lower GCSE attainments compared with 11 to 18 schools. They also tend to take students who at 17+ leave a school sixth form. That is why we suggest that many L3 learners in London's colleges could be termed 'vulnerable'. This was confirmed by our visits to four colleges.

With regards to college performance at 17+, measured in terms of retention and successful completion, the picture looks mixed and complex. According to MIME data, GFEs do significantly less well than schools sixth forms in terms of the proportion of students who, according to the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), progress from the first to the second year of L3 study (53%). But data on 16 to 18 success rates indicate London's sixth form colleges do better than both the national average and London schools. London GFEs trail, but only by a couple of points. Discussions with data analysts and with college data managers suggest that running through this complex and, at times, contradictory picture is a problem because of the way in which the ILR records and reports the data, so comparisons between sectors in London cannot be considered reliable.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Three major conclusions and six recommendations about the role of GFEs and SFCs in addressing the 17+ issue in London stand out:

### *Conclusions*

1. These organisations have a history of an inclusive approach to admission to L3 study, but they are becoming more selective due to the changes in advanced level qualifications in recent years and their increased awareness of the 17+ issue. Nevertheless, they perceive that they are still catering for the more vulnerable L3 learners compared to many 11 to 18 schools.
2. Colleges' retention and success rates remain difficult to determine accurately. Different data sources provide different stories. The main issue, therefore, does not appear to be that 17+ retention and success rates in colleges are significantly worse than in London schools, but that pressures are building on all institutions due to changes in L3 qualifications and the movement towards greater selection.
3. The four colleges in the study (which we think are broadly representative of London GFE and SFCs) lag behind national average total candidate A Level scores and in most cases behind borough averages, although far less seriously. On the other hand, these London colleges outperform the national average and borough averages in the attainment of three A Levels at A\*-E grade. London colleges also help close the free school meals (FSM) gap post-16. This would suggest that London institutions cater well for the more vulnerable learners and help them achieve L3 qualifications. However, all four colleges we visited stated that they had to do better at the 'upper end' to help students attain more A\*/A grades.

### *Recommendations*

1. The strategies being put in place by colleges to support students to attain and progress appear to be highly focused on raising the threshold for access to L3 study; keeping students on track and trying to extend their potential by a range of teaching, learning and assessment strategies and, crucially, by looking outwards to other high status providers to help them achieve this. Given the richness but unevenness of practice both in colleges and in schools, there is an overwhelming case for **a step change in the sharing of positive approaches to the 17+ issue.**

2. At the same time, progress needs to be made on the 17+ data recording issue. Our findings suggest the need for **a more common data recording approach between schools and colleges** that assists the institutions' focus on higher L3 performance, that encourages the development of 17+ progression strategies and that leads to reliable pan-London data for research, accountability and good practice exchange purposes.
3. We need to recognise that for many 'vulnerable' post-16 learners it will take three years not two to reach the goal of a L3 outcome. Since there is an overwhelming case for young people in London to attain at L3 in order to be more employable, this suggests that **adequate funding should be available for a 'three-year sixth' programme.**
4. As qualification changes are introduced and A Levels become more selective, there is a need to ensure **an adequate supply of high quality vocational (or mixed academic/vocational) provision** in London. GFEs, and to a lesser extent SFCs, have the expertise, up-to-date equipment and facilities to make a real contribution to London L3 outcomes and employment opportunities for young people.
5. It is vital that **effective Careers Education, Information Advice and Guidance** is available for all 16 to 19 year olds to avoid the problems associated with inappropriate choice of course and institution leading to wasteful turbulence at 17+.
6. Finally, the examples of good practices that we have uncovered in both schools and colleges should be shared more widely on a pan-London basis. This collaboration could be seen as the first step to a **Post-16 London Challenge** in which schools and colleges come together with employers and work-based learning providers so that a greater number of young Londoners achieve not only L3 outcomes at 19, but also have a greater opportunity to access further education and employment.

## Part 1. Introduction

### 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<sup>1</sup>. However, the post-16 picture across all London providers appears more mixed. There are high levels of post-16 participation in full-time study but L3 attainment (A Levels and vocational equivalents), notably points per entry scores and cumulative points scores (points per student), remains significantly behind the national average<sup>2</sup>. The advantage that London enjoys in terms of pre-16 general education attainment is being lost in some aspects of post-16 L3 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 L3 vocational awards<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> (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 the 32 London boroughs to increase the ‘quality’ of 17+ participation for young people in the Capital.

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<sup>1</sup> Wyness, G. (2012); Intelligent London (2014)

<sup>2</sup> Intelligent London (2014)

<sup>3</sup> Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2012)

<sup>4</sup> For more information on MIME Consulting see - <http://www.mimeconsulting.co.uk/>

## Research questions and methodology

The key questions for this project as a whole are:

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?

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, notably 16 and 18. 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 – Department for Education (DfE) and 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 (particularly those which have become Academies) and colleges are now 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<sup>5</sup>.

### *Stage 1 (March-August 2013)*

- a. The drafting of an initial discussion paper based on national and available London data (from, for example, Intelligent London; London Datastore; MIME Consulting and Learning

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<sup>5</sup> Figures that refer to 'MIME Consulting 2013' relate to a dataset produced by them specifically for this project.



Plus UK (LPUK)<sup>6</sup>). MIME Consulting collated data from the National Pupil Database (matched data) 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. The compilation of an additional six strands of pan-London data by MIME which were 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 Board (YPES) of the main analysis and findings in the first year (July 2013).
- e. The drafting of a report on schools and 17+ in London following these presentations and further discussions with officers from London Councils.<sup>7</sup>

*Stage 2 (September 2013-July 2014)*

- a. Engagement with a small number of London boroughs that represent differing social and economic contexts, that have significant local data and were in a position to arrange interviews with relevant school and college staff. These more local and qualitative data, along with information about institutional policies and practices that impact on 17+ participation and progression, were used to supplement national and pan-London data.
- b. Collection and analysis of 17+ data relating to sixth form colleges (SFCs) and general further education colleges (GFEs) in London.
- c. Visits to 10 schools and 4 colleges - two GFEs and two SFCs - to discuss policies and practices related to 17+ participation, attainment and progression.
- d. Presentations to the YPES Board, 14 to 19 Leads and college principals through London Association of Colleges (AoC) during the summer term 2014.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on LPUK see - <http://www.learningplusuk.org/who-we-are>

<sup>7</sup> See Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2013)

## **The structure of the paper and its terminology**

The paper is structured around the concepts of participation, retention and attainment so that the sequence and dynamics of factors at each stage of the learner journey through 16 to 19 education and training can be better understood. In the final part of this paper (the third in the Project) we report on relevant quantitative data and the findings from visits to two GFEs and two SFCs to discuss policies and practices related to 17+ participation, retention and attainment.

The paper uses the following terms:

- '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.
- 'Attainment' refers to summative examination and assessment outcomes.
- 'Success rates' refers to the proportion of learners who started on a course and achieved their learning outcome.
- '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.

## Part 2. Participation<sup>1</sup>

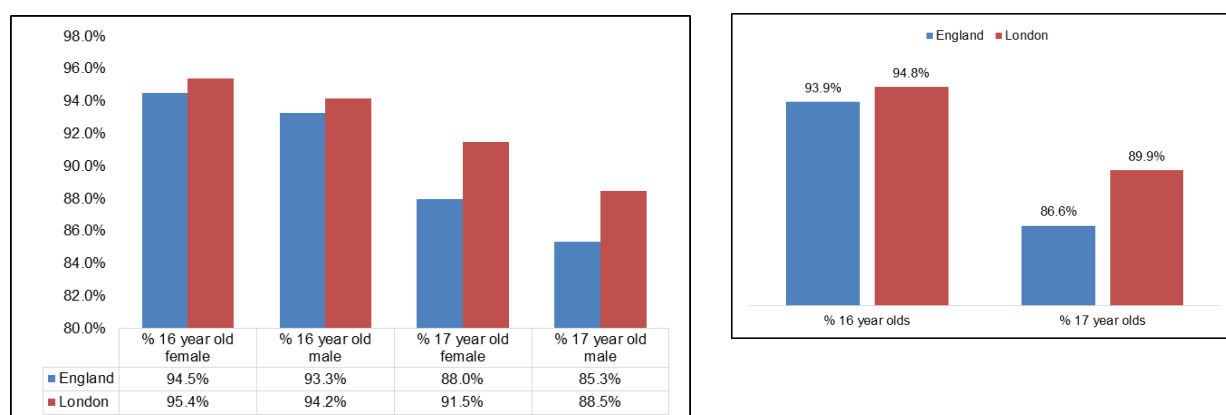
Overall participation rates for 16 and 17 year olds are higher in London than the rest of the country – 92.3 per cent compared to 90.3 per cent in 2014 and this has improved by 1.3 per cent in the last 12 months. The majority of these young people (88.7%) are in full-time education and training, which is 5.5 percentage points higher than the national figure, but with correspondingly fewer in apprenticeship and employment with training – see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Types of participation at 16 and 17 (March 2014<sup>2</sup>)

Region	Proportion of 16 and 17 year olds recorded as participating in:					
	Full time education and training	Apprenticeship	Work based learning	Part time education	Employment combined with training	Other
England	83.2%	4.2%	1.5%	0.3%	0.8%	0.3%
London	88.7%	2.1%	0.6%	0.5%	0.2%	0.2%

Participation at both 16 and 17 for both males and females is stronger in London than England as a whole, particularly at 17+ – see Figure 2.

Figure 2. Participation at 16 and 17 by gender<sup>3</sup>



However, the participation rates for 16 and 17 year olds between London boroughs vary from 86.3 per cent to 97.5 per cent, with higher participation levels in West London and in those boroughs with less deprivation<sup>4</sup>.

The percentage of young people designated as not in employment, education or training (NEET) in London has remained below the national average at 3.8 per cent (8,580 young people) but again there is considerable borough variation (from 2% to 6%). There was also a

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated the figures in this section of the report are taken from Intelligent London (2014)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-in-education-and-training-by-local-authority>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/participation-in-education-and-training-by-local-authority>

<sup>4</sup> DfE, 2013a

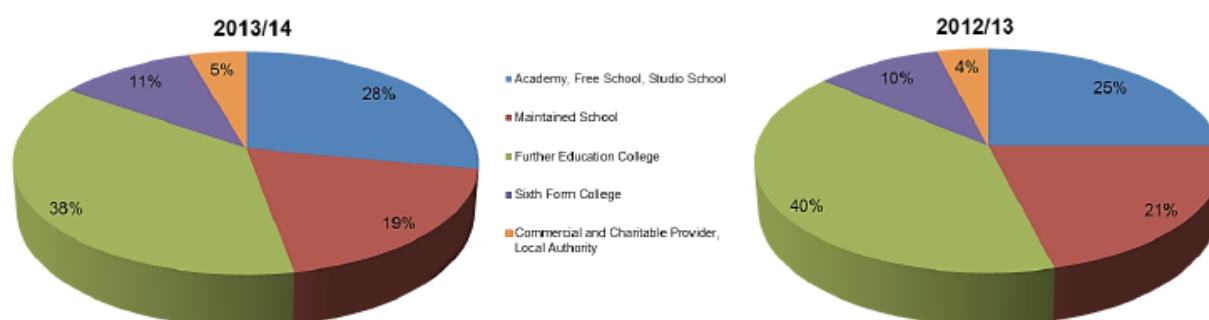
high proportion of young people whose participation status is unknown (12.7%, representing 32,177 young people), with even greater variations between boroughs (2% to 28%).<sup>12</sup>

There are 45 GFE, SFC and Specialist Colleges in London<sup>13</sup> with at least one in every borough, although their catchment area is much wider than this and there is a greater concentration in inner London. They offer a wide range of courses from Entry Level to Masters Degrees.

Participation levels for 16 to 18 year olds increased slightly in SFCs between 2012/13 and 2013/14 from 10 per cent to 11 per cent, but decreased from 40 per cent to 38 per cent for GFEs and from 21 per cent to 19 per cent for local authority maintained schools.

Academies, Studio Schools and Free Schools, however, increased their proportion of the 16 to 18 year old cohort from 25 to 28 per cent (see Figure 3). This reflects the changes in national policy, which have encouraged the conversion of schools to Academy status and the opening of Free Schools. Nevertheless, GFEs still take the largest proportion of 16 to 18 year olds. According to AoC London in 2012/13, over 100,000 16 to 18 year-olds chose to study in London Colleges, along with 3,200 14 to 15-year-olds. A total of 49 per cent of these learners were from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to 40 per cent of the population of London<sup>14</sup>.

*Figure 3. 16 to 18 participation by type of institution<sup>15</sup>*



Participation in apprenticeship in London is low. While there has been an increase in apprenticeship starts between 2008/9 and 2011/12, there was a drop in the numbers of those entering an apprenticeship under the age of 19 between 2011/12 and 2012/13 (see Figure 4). In fact, at 9,490, London has the second lowest number of apprenticeship starts for

<sup>12</sup> DfE, 2013b

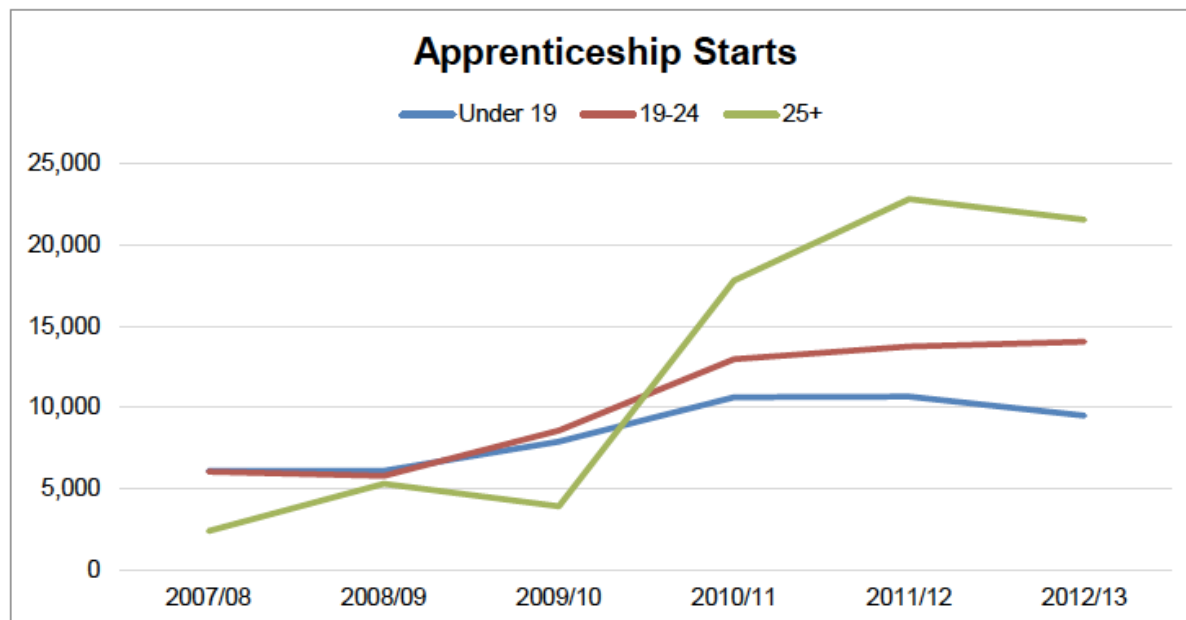
<sup>13</sup> Ofsted, 2013

<sup>14</sup> AoC London Region, 2014

<sup>15</sup> EFA, 2013

under 19s (see Appendix 1). Moreover the discrepancy between boroughs in London is great with some having as few as 100 and others as high as 500 starts.<sup>16</sup>

*Figure 4. Apprenticeship starts in London<sup>17</sup>*



<sup>16</sup> The Data Service, 2013

<sup>17</sup> The Data Service, 2013

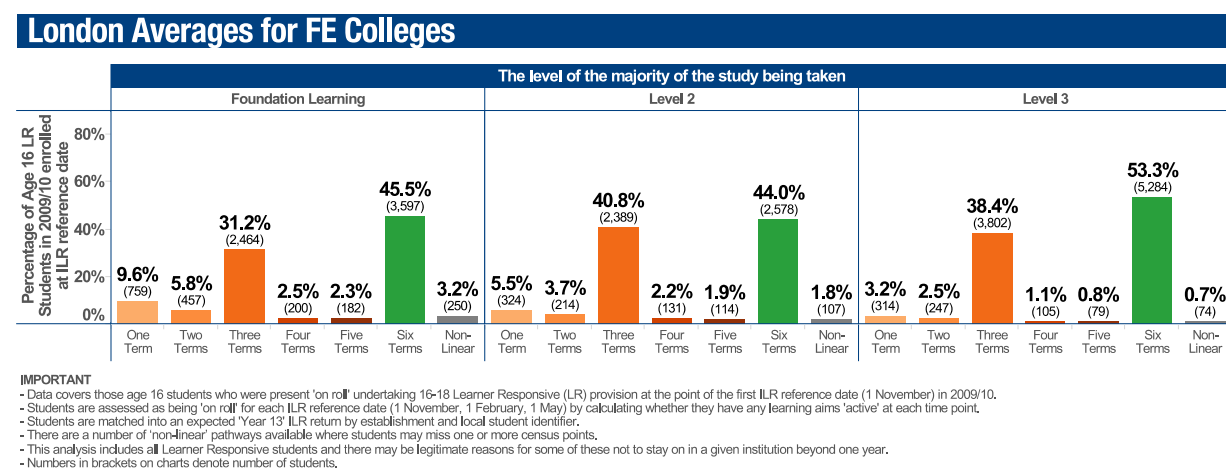
### Part 3. Retention in 16 to 19 programmes of study

Student retention at 17+ on L3 courses is a key indicator for this project because it signals whether a learner is progressing from the first to the second year of a two-year award. However, there are several statistical difficulties to be addressed when analysing data from schools and colleges. First, the method of data collection and organisation is different for each of these institutions.

Schools data are organized by way of a 'census' in which the student is tracked at certain points within and between each academic year. In the case of L3 courses, the key indicator of retention is whether the student is present at the first census point of the second year of study. The census process appears fairly straightforward. It records whether the student is present in the institution at various points, but does not indicate the course being studied or the volume of study. It is possible, therefore, that the school census approach over-records retention on L3 courses because some students may have switched from one form of provision to another or have reduced the size of their programme of study.

Retention in colleges, on the other hand, is recorded through the Individualised Student Record (ILR). This shows whether a student has achieved her/his primary learning goal. In the case of students on L3 courses, this can be an AS Level or a BTEC award or certificate. Because the ILR focuses on the completion of a qualification (in the case of AS/A2 it records the completion of the AS), it does not automatically record progression from the first to the second year of a two-year course. It is possible, therefore, that the ILR under-records retention in two-year programmes, although in the case of the Figures 5-9 listed below, an attempt has been made to track the individual student by way of a local student identifier. Normally, measuring retention on a two-year programme has to be done within the FE institution by recording the rate of progression from one year to the next (see next section on the four case-study institutions). It is with these caveats in mind that the following data from MIME Consulting have been analysed.

Figure 5. Retention on Level 1, 2 and 3 courses (2009/10)



What Figure 6 shows, as might be expected, is that student retention is higher on Level 3 courses than at Levels 1 or 2 because the latter normally last one year and learners progress to either provision at the same level or the level above within the institution. With regards to the FE London average L3 retention rate, 53 per cent appears low compared with schools and the case study FE institutions reported later. The very high spike of leaving after three terms (38.4%), suggests that some of this may be down to the ILR approach to recording. Moreover, these data are now four years old and changes may have occurred in the interim.

However, as Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9 indicate, there are significant variations between different FE institutions, with the most marked being between GFEs and SFCs. This might be explained by differences in retention between general and vocational courses, with the former having higher retention rates and with these being more prevalent in SFCs.

Figure 6. College A (GFE)

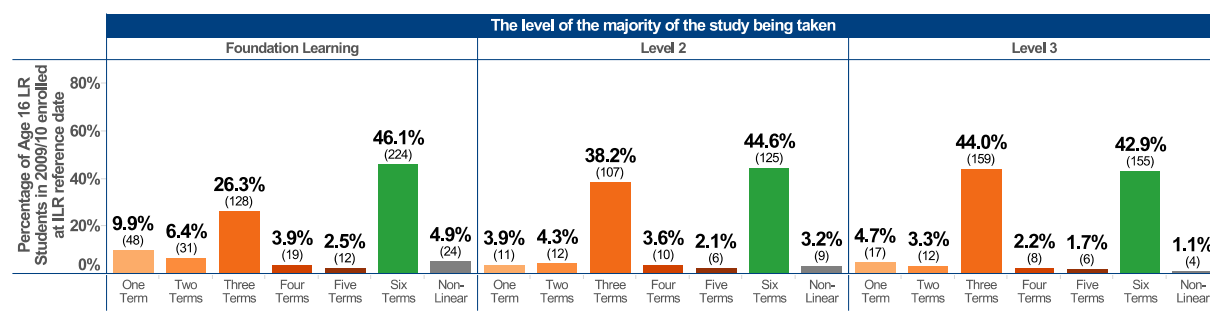


Figure 7. College B (GFE)

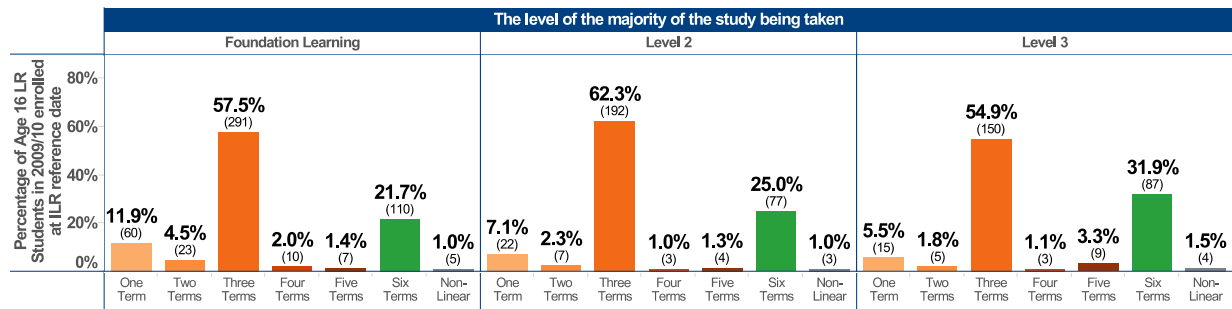


Figure 8. College C. (SFC)

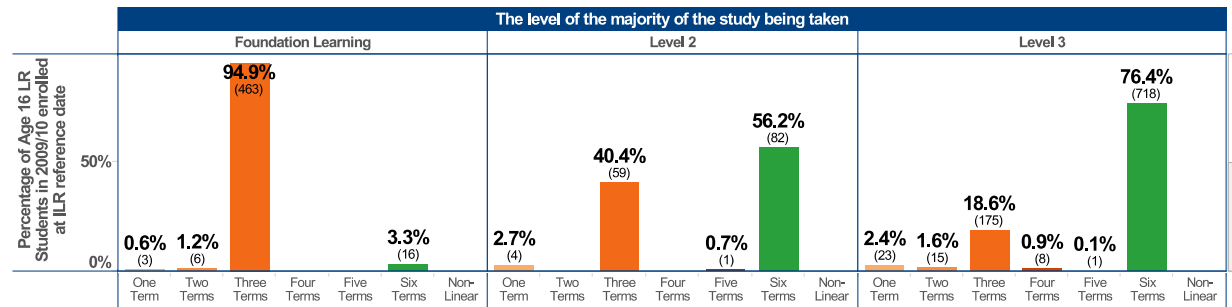
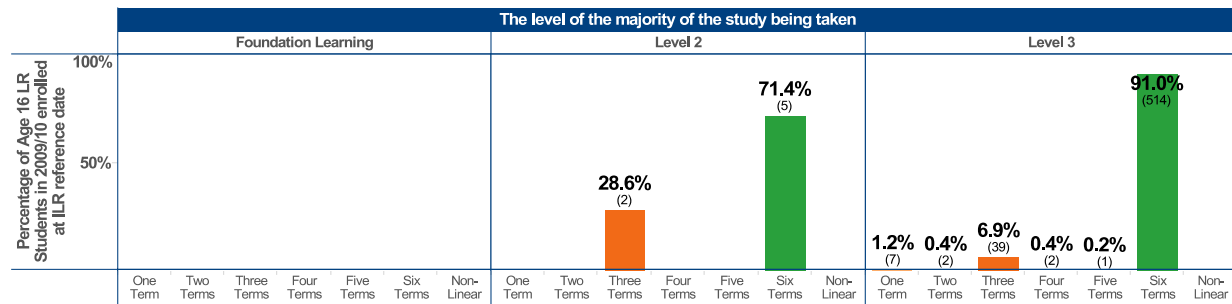


Figure 9. College D. (SFC)





## Part 4. 16 to 19 attainment<sup>18</sup>

Since 2011, London has seen a decline in its points per entry score at L3, although it rose slightly to 209.5 in 2013 (see Figure 10)<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, this is below the national average of 210.5.

Figure 10. Level 3 points per entry – London and England over time<sup>20</sup>



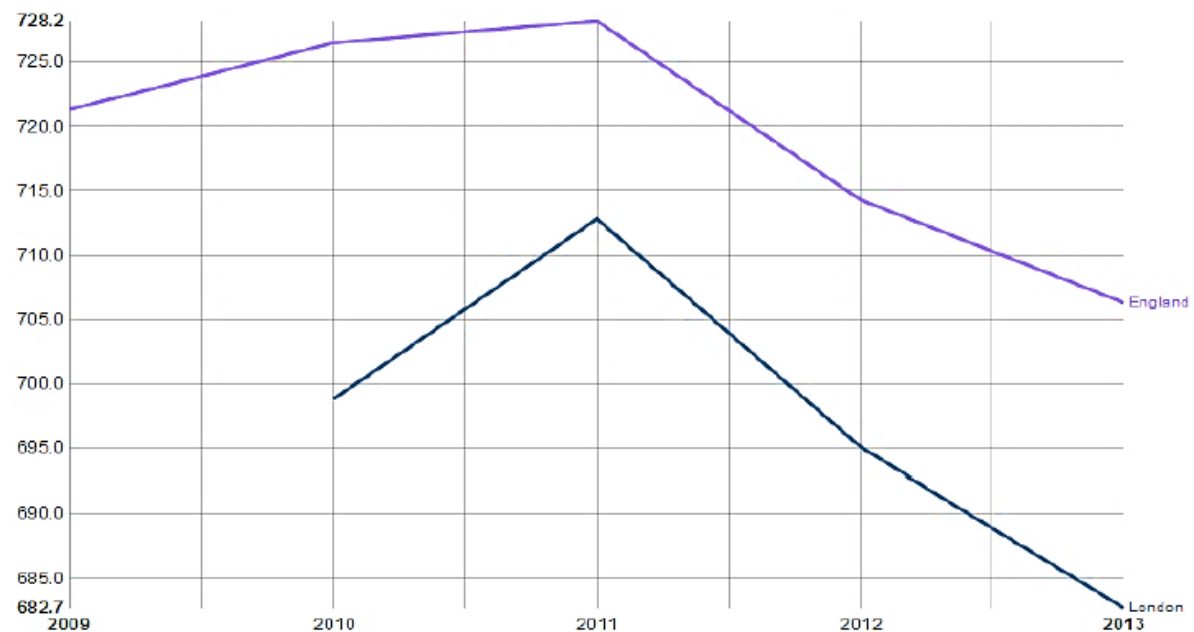
Borough scores vary from 192.4 to 230.5 and outer London boroughs tend to do better than inner London boroughs (see Appendix 2). However, London fares very badly in relation to points per student when compared nationally (see Figure 11). In 2013 London scored an average of 682.7 points while the England figure was 706. Moreover this figure has declined since 2011, most likely as a result of A Level qualifications changes introduced in 2008/9.

<sup>18</sup> Unless otherwise state the figures in this section of the report are taken from Intelligent London (2014)

<sup>19</sup> L3 points scores form part of performance table system in England (e.g. A\* at A Level = 300 points and AS Grade A = 168). See following source for complete score system  
([http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/secondary\\_11/PointsScoreAllocation2011.pdf](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/secondary_11/PointsScoreAllocation2011.pdf))

<sup>20</sup> Intelligent London, 2014

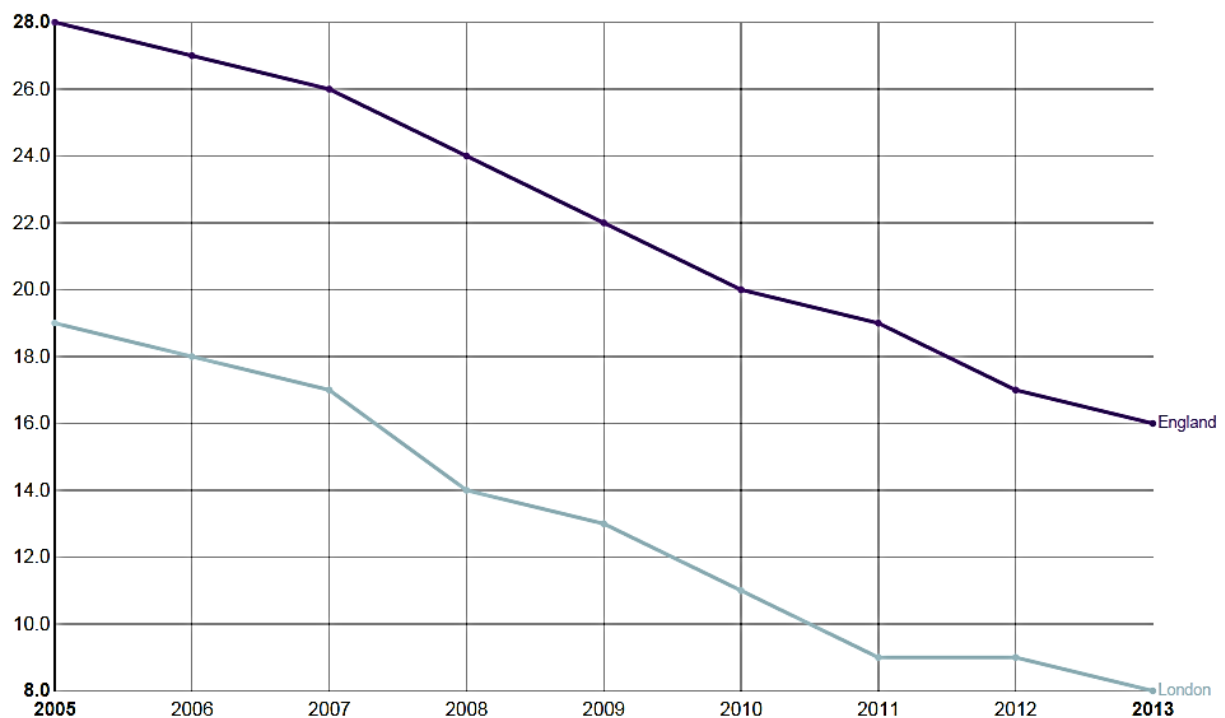
Figure 11. Total Level 3 points per candidate over time<sup>21</sup>



As Appendix 3 shows, London is the worst performing region in relation to this indicator and there is a very large difference between the results of different London boroughs, ranging from 592.2 to 844.5, with the lower points scores tending to be those in the centre or east of the Capital. At the same time, however, L2 attainment by 19 in London has risen over the past few years to 87 per cent in 2013, which is two percentage points above the national average. Moreover, the gap between the attainment of those young people on free school meals (FSM) and the rest of the cohort stands at eight per cent which compares well with the national average of 16 per cent (see Figure 12).

<sup>21</sup> Intelligent London, 2014

Figure 12. Level 2 by 19 - FSM attainment gap London and England 2013<sup>22</sup>



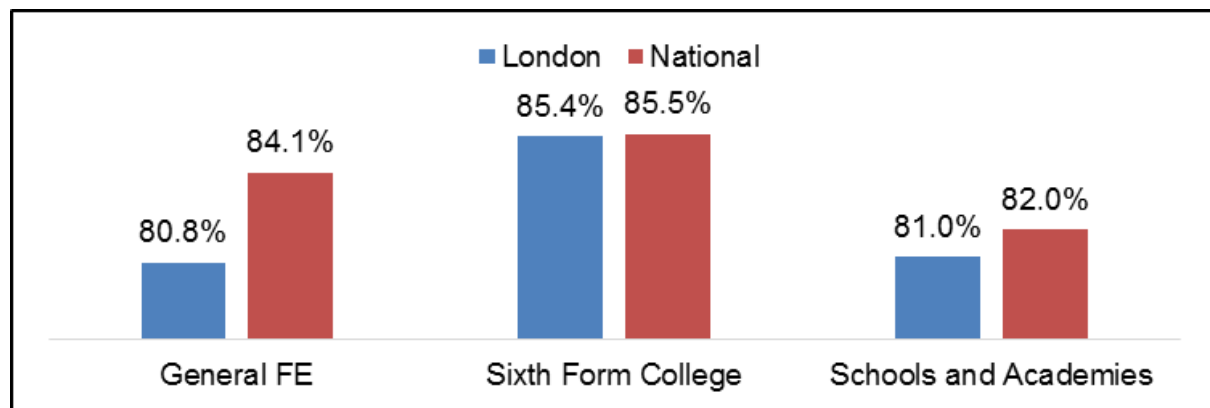
Much of this difference can be attributed to the efforts of some of the London boroughs. The FSM gap is narrower in inner London boroughs (as low as 2%) when compared to outer London boroughs (as high as 21%) – see Appendix 4.

London also does well in relation to L3 attainment by 19 with a strong upward trend over the past seven years. In 2012, 61 per cent of Londoners achieved a L3 qualification by 19, which was six per cent above the national average. However, there is wide variation in borough performance, ranging from 53 to 74 per cent (see Appendix 5). Again the FSM gap is lower in London (15%) than nationally (24%) and in inner London boroughs (as low as 4%) compared with outer London boroughs (as high as 35%).

However, in 2011/12 London's GFE success rate of 80.8 per cent was below the national average of 84.1 per cent. Success rates for SFCs and schools and Academies in London were broadly comparable with national averages – see Figure 13.

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.intelligentlondon.org.uk/borough\\_insight#line](http://www.intelligentlondon.org.uk/borough_insight#line)

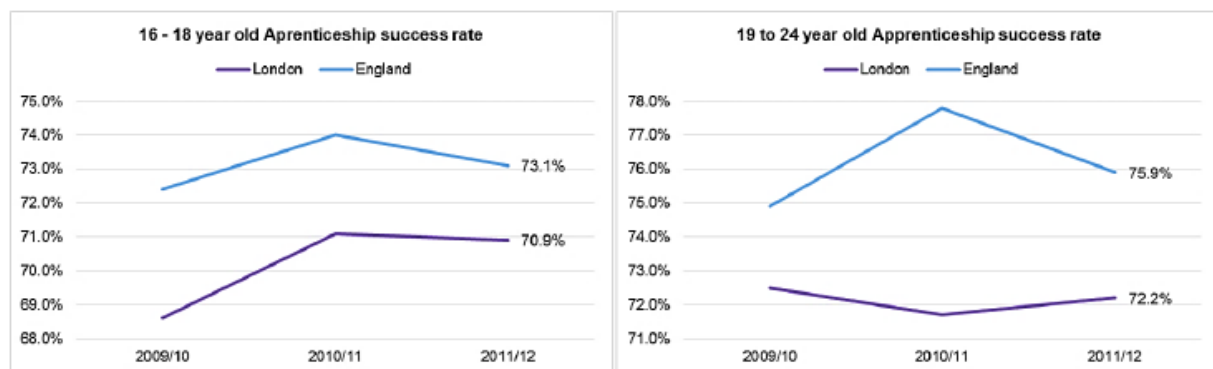
Figure 13. 16 to 18 success rates by institutional type (2011/12)<sup>23</sup>



Success rates for GFEs ranged from 70.4 per cent to 86.5 per cent, with outer London boroughs generally having higher rates; SFCs success rates ranged from 76.1 per cent to 96.3 per cent and those for schools and Academies from 33 per cent to 99 per cent.

Success rates in apprenticeships in London in 2012 were lower than the national average (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Apprenticeship success rates 2012<sup>24</sup>



<sup>23</sup> <http://data.gov.uk/dataset/education-and-training-success-rates-in-england-2011-12>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/qualification-success-rates-for-school-sixth-forms-2011-to-2012>

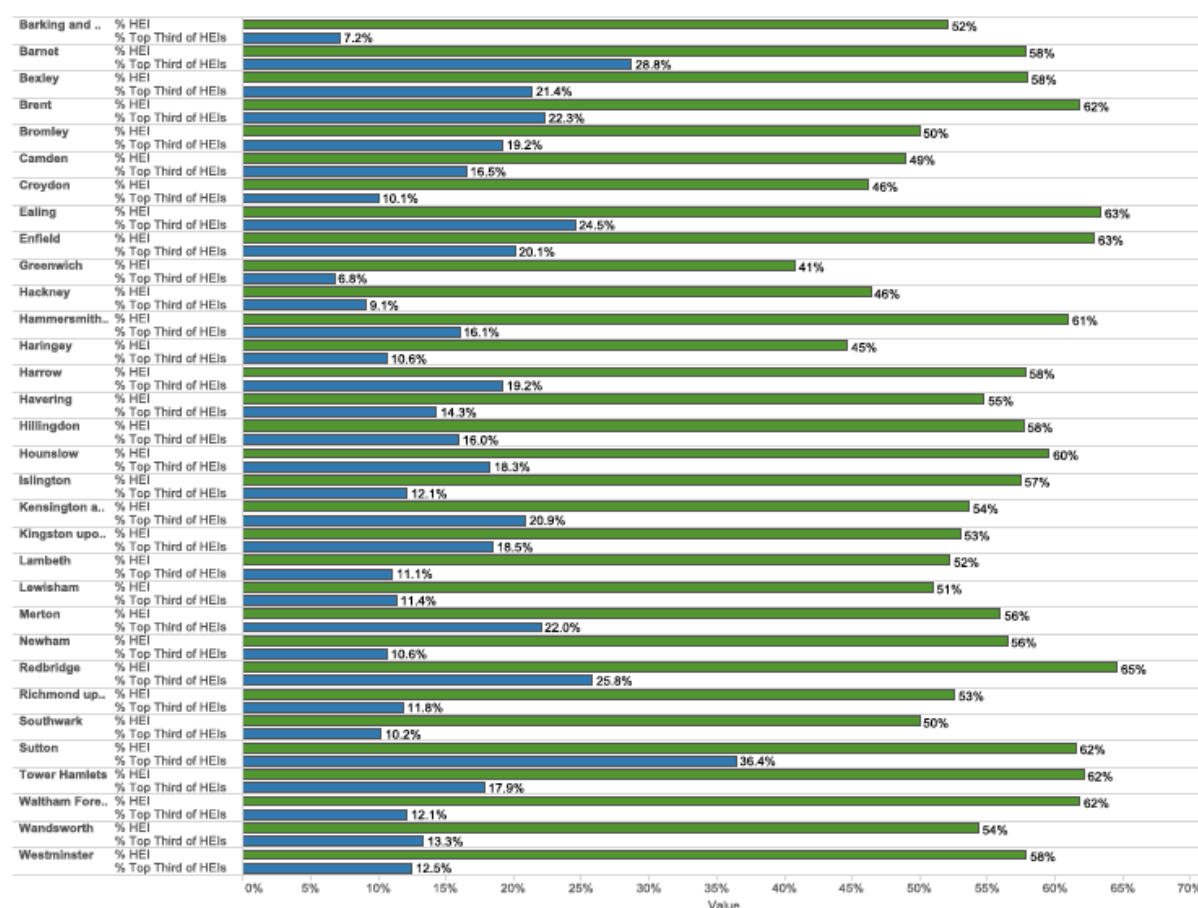
<sup>24</sup> The Data Service, 2013

## Part 5. Destinations at 18+<sup>25</sup>

A total of 71 per cent of young people in London in 2011 were recorded as being in a sustained education or employment/training destination in the year after they took their L3 qualifications. This compares favourably with the national figure of 69 per cent. Fifty-six per cent of young Londoners went to a higher education institution (HEI), which is five per cent lower than the figure for 2010, but is higher than the national figure of 48 per cent.

Seventeen per cent progressed to the top third of HEIs, compared with 14 per cent nationally and of these one per cent entered Oxford or Cambridge and eight per cent went to Russell Group universities, which is the same as the national figures. The proportion of young people progressing to HEIs varied significantly between London boroughs, ranging from 41 to 65 per cent as did the percentage of those progressing to the top third of HEIs – from seven per cent to 36 per cent (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. HE destination 2011 by borough<sup>26</sup>



<sup>25</sup> Unless otherwise stated the figures in this section of the report are taken from Intelligent London (2014)

<sup>26</sup> Conentra, 2013

Linking London research into progression into HE from FE colleges<sup>27</sup> found that among the 17 to 19 year old age group, there was a decrease from 50 per cent in 2008/9 to 45 per cent in 2009/10. The proportion of those from the 2005/6 FE L3 cohort entering HEIs was highest among those students who had taken A Levels (86%), while Access to HE learners had a progression rate of 66 per cent and full-time BTEC learners 53 per cent. Black and minority ethnic groups, who make up over half the total L3 learners in London FE colleges, have higher HE progression rates than their white counterpart. Universities provided the progression routes for 89 per cent of the HE entrants, with 11 per cent undertaking higher education studies in an FE college. The most popular HE institutions in 2011/12 were London Metropolitan, University of East London, Greenwich, Middlesex and Kingston and the most popular subjects were Business Studies, Psychology and Economics. Over 76 per cent of young London residents achieved an honours degree in 2011/12. Of those completing degrees, 43 per cent were employed in full-time paid work six months after graduation.

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<sup>27</sup> Linking London/London Councils (2013)

## **Part 6. Discussions with four London colleges**

### **The colleges – background**

Four London colleges were chosen for the institutional visits – two GFEs and two SFCs – that broadly represent the diversity of further education provision in London. These institutions were visited between February to April 2014. The two GFEs are large by national standards and take 16 to 19 year old students not only from their home and surrounding boroughs, but also from a wide range of localities across London. Both have mixed ethnic intakes and also have high numbers of repeat learners at L3 on both A Level and BTEC programmes, many of whom want a fresh start. The two SFCs also have large catchment areas (stretching beyond London boroughs) and also cater for a very high proportion of black and minority ethnic students. They differ from the GFEs insofar as most of their provision is at L3 and focused mainly on A Levels. All four colleges have repeat L3 students in varying proportions.

### **Provision for 16 to 19 year olds**

The four colleges all offer extensive L3 provision for 16 to 19 year olds. The GFEs offer a wide range of qualifications (e.g. between 26 and 40 A Level subjects, 20 to 50 vocational subjects available at various levels and apprenticeships). The SFCs are more focused on academic provision, offering largely A Levels (e.g. 35+ AS/A2s) and a modest number of L3 vocational courses – between five and eight BTECs (e.g. Extended Diploma Engineering; Business; Sport; Health; Science; Art), but fewer vocational L2 courses. They have noticed a sharp swing towards vocational L3 and away from L2.

### **Admission requirements for Level 3 courses**

Three of the four colleges have broadly similar approaches – requiring a baseline in five or six GCSEs at A\*-C grades and including English and maths, although an insistence on the latter is more recent. It is common in all the colleges to require a B in the chosen A Levels and particularly for those wanting to study STEM subjects. GCSE achievement in the specific subject is often seen as a more reliable indicator than aggregate GCSE scores. One of the SFCs now requires six GCSE B grades including English and maths as the minimum baseline, although in all cases the required threshold for BTEC National is lower.

Gradual changes to admissions thresholds are the result of seeing students struggle with AS Levels as they have grown more difficult following qualifications changes a few years ago. In addition, there is a recognition that the relationship between GCSE achievement and A Levels is variable, depending which subjects are chosen. Colleges also keep a close eye on

the admission practices of other FE providers. Overall, the trend appears to be a gradual hiking of requirements in recent years.

### **Retention on Level 3 programmes**

Retention rates (defined as being present in the second year of study in a full L3 programme) appear variable across the four institutions – ranging from 70 to 92 per cent. The colleges at the lower end (one GFE and one SFC) realize they have a challenge and have set in motion strategies to address the issue, while the colleges at the upper end (one GFE and one SFC) maintain that their retention rates are the result of focus and hard work to keep students on track.

Retention patterns are, in practice, more complex than the headline data would suggest. Students can change subjects, drop subjects, pick up new qualifications or be counselled onto another type of programme. Differing retention rates are also the result of college policies towards examination attainment at the end of the first year of study.

### **Level 3 attainment<sup>28</sup>**

#### *Average points scores per A Level student*

The four colleges performed significantly below the national average in state funded schools and colleges in terms of 'average points scores per A Level student'. The national average in May 2013 was 782. Three also performed below the borough averages, although less so. Two of the colleges were well below the borough average, one was slightly below and one a little above.

GFE college 1	682	(compared with local authority average of 674)
GFE college 2	638	(compared with local authority average of 710)
Sixth form college 1	678	(compared with local authority average of 688)
Sixth form college 2	701	(compared with local authority average of 735)

In terms of the attainment of three A Levels (A\*-E grade), the picture is quite different. Three out of the four colleges are above the national average of 79 per cent and also above their borough averages.

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<sup>28</sup> DfE, 2014



GFE college 1	83%	(compared with local authority average of 77%)
GFE college 2	78%	(compared with local authority average of 78%)
Sixth form college 1	88%	(compared with local authority average of 78%)
Sixth form college 2	85%	(compared with local authority average of 79%)

On the other hand, all four colleges sit below national averages by a factor of several to one in terms of the attainment of two facilitating subjects at AAB. The issue, therefore, does not appear to be that of study volume, but one of grade attainment.

The focus overall appears to be on ensuring that students take full A Level programmes given the difficulties that many face at this level. All four institutions thought that their students did quite well considering their previous level of preparedness, but not so well at the upper end. The SFCs, in particular, were conscious that they have not been able to achieve the highest grades (A\*/A) and there is a greater focus on this now.

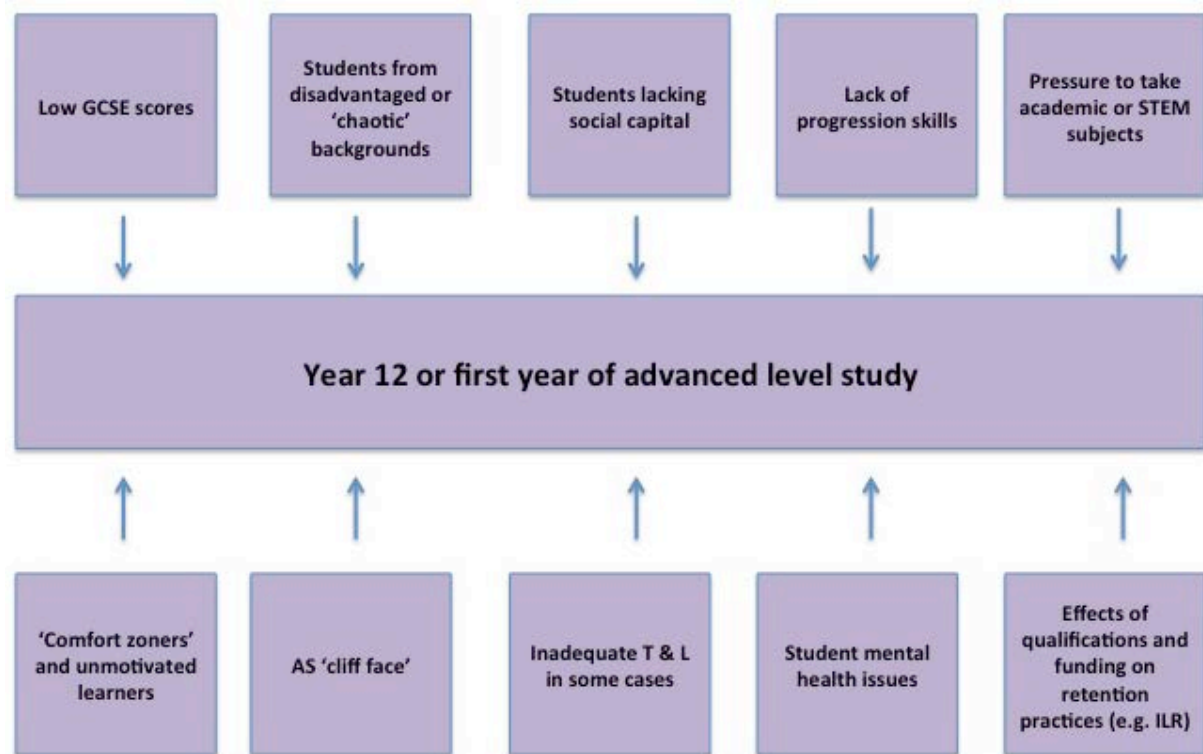
### **College views on 17+ participation, retention and attainment risk factors**

The college responses were overwhelmingly related to the type of students they receive and their social and ethnic background, rather than the limitations of college provision or choice of subjects on offer (see Figure 16). This marks them out from responses from schools<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Hodgson, A and Spours., K (2014)

Figure 16: Further education and sixth form colleges: 17+ risk factors



Those interviewed in all four colleges maintained that students, by and large, did not arrive well prepared for advanced level programmes. They commented on poor levels of academic literacy, notably lacking skills at extended writing, grammar and punctuation; students being used to spoon-feeding at GCSE; and lacking analytical and independent study skills beyond the classroom, thus finding advanced level study culture a shock. In the case of the GFEs, staff thought that there was not much difference between the capacities of A Level and BTEC students. There were also more subject-specific issues, for example students opting for the sciences as a result of parental pressure and finding these A Level subjects challenging. It was quite common for these learners to switch to humanities subjects at the end of the first year.

All colleges talked about a significant proportion of students arriving with mental health issues, although they did not necessarily see this as an excuse for not attaining. There was a recognition that they have 'comfort zoners' who, despite electing to come to college, still lack direction and motivation. There was mention by one college of students coming from 'chaotic families' that compromised their ability to study and maintain participation. At the other end of the scale, more than one college commented on the 'snobbery value' of A Levels and the pressures from parents to take academic qualifications rather than vocational courses. These pressures can result in students struggling with courses that might not necessarily have been their first choice.

## **How these colleges measure 17+ participation, retention, attainment and progression**

The retention data presented by the four colleges overall appears higher than presented in London-wide data. During interviews with senior managers and data managers, we asked them about what might be viewed as data anomalies at 17+. We received a diverse set of responses, which can be broadly summarized as follows. The AS/A2 is seen by the ILR as two linked but separate courses and, therefore, breaks up the retention and colleges have year-on-year enrolment. On the other hand, BTEC National is seen as a two-year programme and the retention rate can be very high (e.g. 90%). In the light of this, individual colleges keep their own records of how many students progress to the second year of advanced level study. These data are internal and tend not to be shared on a cross-college or pan-London basis. Finally, the ILR approach to data gathering is accompanied by particular recruitment and selection patterns. In the case of AS/A2, new students may be entering into the A2 year to make up for some of the students who left after AS Level. Thresholds for progression to the second year differ across colleges with some being more permissive than others. Moreover, the ILR approach that breaks up the AS/A2 may encourage staff to 'cull' at end of AS because of starting a new qualification and new success rate in the second year. The effects of FE accountability measures around successful completion of individual qualifications and the ways in which the ILR functioned meant that there was less understanding of cumulative L3 points scores even though these feature in DfE performance tables.

## **Strategies for improving retention and attainment**

The 17+ dynamic for FE colleges is, therefore, somewhat different from that of many school sixth forms, particularly those with high performing intakes. The data in our previous report<sup>30</sup> suggest that, by and large, colleges will receive students with lower GCSE profiles, who have made a deliberate decision to leave their secondary school or have been encouraged or even compelled to move to another institution and who may be seeking to repeat advanced level programmes at 17+, either in terms of taking new A Level subjects or moving into vocational learning. Internal progression from L2 within the colleges accounts for only a minority of their L3 learners.

London is a well-served, post-compulsory marketplace and young people 'shop around' for learning opportunities. In this open and highly competitive system, those seeking advanced level study are often perceived to be ill-prepared for the rigours of this type of study.

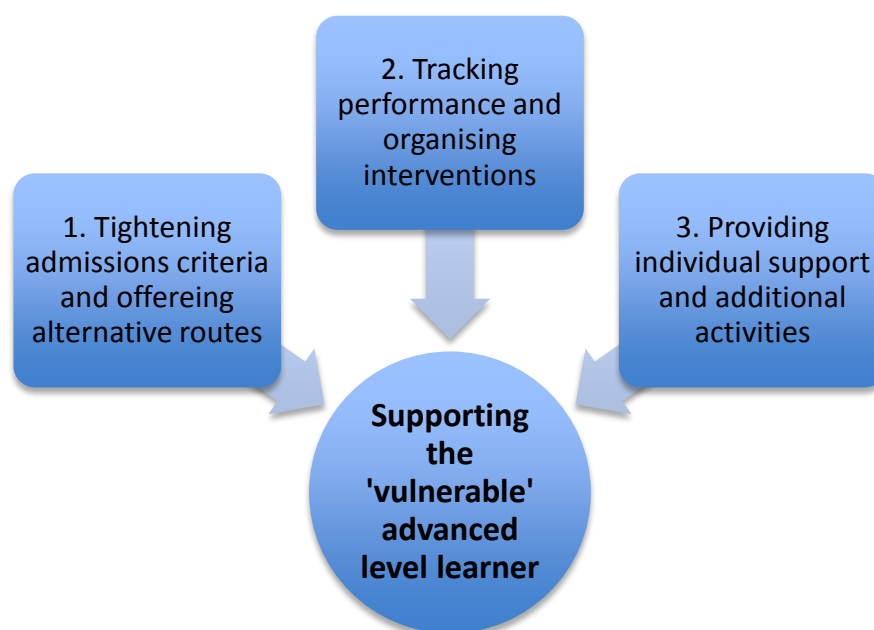
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<sup>30</sup> Hodgson, A and Spours, K., 2013

Furthermore, colleges also reported an increasing incidence of mental health issues, the impact of caring responsibilities in low-income families and perceived problems of safety in travelling to and from college.

All four colleges have large-scale A Level provision with many hundreds of students. The GFEs, in particular, also have a great many parallel vocational courses such as BTEC Diplomas. Therefore, many of the issues that schools face around small-scale advanced level provision and lack of A Level expertise is not really the problem in colleges. The overriding issue is how GFEs and SFCs cope with students with relatively low GCSE profiles and often a lack of cultural and social capital. The support systems in colleges would appear, therefore, to be tailored to these conditions. Three major strategies stand out (see Figure 17).

*Figure 17. Supporting the vulnerable advanced level learner*



#### *1. Tightening up of admissions criteria*

All four institutions had tightened their admissions criteria, albeit in different ways, both for admission to L3 courses and for progression to the second year of study. This may have the potential to reduce 'drop-out' in the first year of study but increase it at the end of the AS year and to pass the 'problem' on to another college if the student has to move at the end of Year 1. The tightening of admissions criteria is then linked to offering advice.

## *2. Tracking attendance, punctuality and work completion*

All four colleges maintained that they devoted significant attention to tracking and intervention procedures. These systems include:

- An 'at risk' register which is regularly reviewed by the Senior Tutor and the student engagement team. Students can be referred for various types of support e.g. financial help with transport.
- Regular progress reporting with grades summarized three times per year.
- Engagement and intervention with parents (even though this is less common with post-16 students).

## *3. Providing individual support and additional activities*

Over and beyond scheduled lessons, colleges arrange a great many additional or extension activities to develop student skills, attitudes and confidence. Some of these were provided in partnership with higher education and the independent school sector. Activities and support included:

- The organization of homework clubs and university mentors who do group work, mainly with AS students.
- Additional revision and subject specialist workshops.
- Enrichment programmes, some subject related.
- Outside expertise brought in to assist with Computing and Science and, in particular, Biology.
- Providing additional staff time for mathematics workshops.
- Shifting assessment patterns and more internal assessment.
- Working with university departments
- Specific support for those opting for research-based project work in order to complete an Extended Project Qualification.
- Focusing on getting more A\* and A grades, sometimes working with independent schools (e.g. Wellington, Eton and St Paul's).

## Part 7. Conclusions and recommendations

GFEs and SFCs in London play a fundamental role in ensuring that outcomes for young people at the end of the 16 to 19 phase are, in many ways, better than the national average. This applies to 16, 17 and 18+ educational participation, attainment of L3 qualifications and participation in higher education. However, London lags in terms of participation in apprenticeships and in the quality of L3 attainment measured in terms of A Level points per candidate. The former may be beyond the control of schools and colleges, but the latter is very much their responsibility.

In terms of institutional participation, GFEs are the largest single provider for 16 to 18 year olds, although they have been slightly losing their share to schools in the past year or so. This is particularly the case at 16, but less so at 17 and 18. SFCs, on the other hand, have slightly increased their share of 16 to 18 year olds.

Data from our previous report on schools, together with new data in this report, suggest that London colleges (GFE and SFC) accommodate higher proportions of students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and with lower GCSE attainments compared with 11 to 18 schools. They also tend to take students who at 17+ choose to leave a school sixth form or are compelled to do so. That is why we suggest that many L3 learners in London's colleges could be termed 'vulnerable'. This is certainly a conclusion we reached following visits to the four case-study colleges.

With regards to college performance at 17+ measured in terms of retention and successful completion, the picture looks mixed and complex. According to MIME data, GFEs do significantly less well than schools sixth forms in terms of the proportion of students who, according to the ILR, progress from the first to the second year of L3 study (53%). But according to the data on 16 to 18 success rates discussed earlier, London's sixth form colleges appear to do better than both the national average and London schools. London FE colleges trail, but only by a couple of points.

Discussions with data analysts and with college data managers suggest that running through this complex and, at times, contradictory picture is a problem because of the way in which the ILR records and reports the relationship between AS and A2 participation. Because it sees an A Level comprising two separate qualifications (and has a threshold of two AS Levels being carried forward), it operates in a more discriminatory way than the school census approach. The latter, on the other hand, may actually under-record the amount of churn and change between Year 12 and Year 13 because a learner counts as present if they turn up in a L3 course in their second year regardless of its nature. It would also appear that

the way in which the ILR records success may not only under-record 17+ progression, but it may influence some FE college tutors to 'cull' their weaker AS students at the end of Year 1. Moreover, colleges have a great deal of parallel vocational provision or choice of subjects that can provide an alternative to learners who have not attained so well at their mid-way point.

Taking into account this complex picture, what sense can we make of the role of London colleges in relation to the 17+ issue? Three major conclusions and six recommendations about the role of GFEs and SFCs in addressing the 17+ issue in London stand out:

### ***Conclusions***

1. These organisations have a history of an inclusive approach to admission to L3 study, but they are becoming more selective due to the changes in advanced level qualifications in recent years and their increased awareness of the 17+ issue. Nevertheless, they perceive that they are still catering for the more vulnerable L3 learners compared to many 11 to 18 schools.
2. Their retention and success rates in advanced level qualifications remain difficult to determine accurately. Different data sources provide different stories. The main issue, therefore, does not appear to be that 17+ retention and success rates in colleges are significantly worse than in London schools, but that pressures are building on all institutions due to changes in L3 qualifications and the movement towards greater selection.
3. The four colleges in the study (which we think are broadly representative of London GFE and SFCs) lag behind national average total candidate A Level scores and in most cases behind borough averages, although far less seriously. On the other hand, these London colleges outperform the national average and borough averages in the attainment of three A Levels at A\*-E grade. London colleges also help close the free school meals (FSM) gap post-16. This would suggest that London institutions cater well for the more vulnerable learners and help them achieve L3 qualifications. However, all four colleges we visited stated that they had to do better at the 'upper end' to help students attain more A\*/A grades.

### ***Recommendations***

1. The strategies being put in place by colleges to support students to attain and progress appear to be highly focused on raising the threshold for access to L3 study; keeping students on track and trying to extend their potential by a range of teaching,

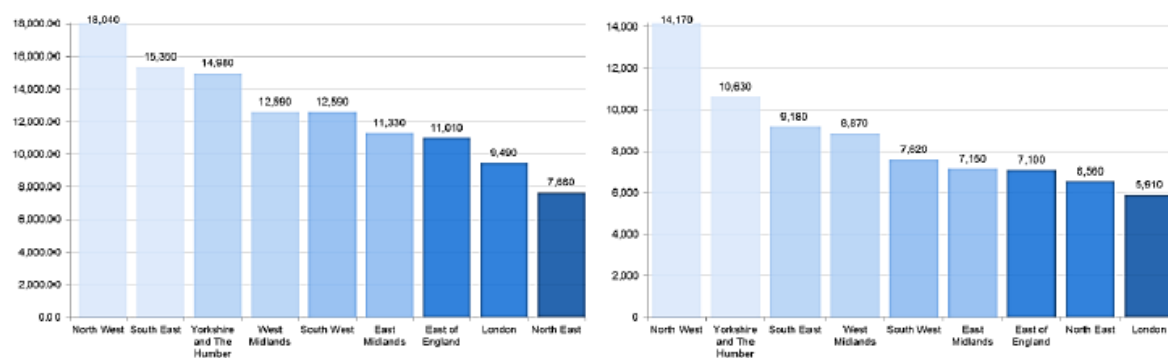
learning and assessment strategies and, crucially, by looking outwards to other high status providers to help them achieve this. Given the richness but unevenness of practice both in colleges and in schools, there is an overwhelming case for **a step change in the sharing of positive approaches to the 17+ issue.**

2. At the same time, progress needs to be made on the 17+ data recording issue. Our findings suggest the need for **a more common data recording approach between schools and colleges** that assists the institutions' focus on higher L3 performance, that encourages the development of 17+ progression strategies and that leads to reliable pan-London data for research, accountability and good practice exchange purposes.
3. We need to recognise that for many 'vulnerable' post-16 learners it will take three years not two to reach the goal of a L3 outcome. Since there is an overwhelming case for young people in London to attain at L3 in order to be more employable, this suggests that **adequate funding should be available for a 'three-year sixth' programme.**
4. As qualification changes are introduced and A Levels become more selective, there is a need to ensure **an adequate supply of high quality vocational (or mixed academic/vocational) provision** in London. GFEs, and to a lesser extent SFCs, have the expertise, up-to-date equipment and facilities to make a real contribution to London L3 outcomes and employment opportunities for young people.
5. It is vital that **effective Careers Education, Information Advice and Guidance** is available for all 16 to 19 year olds to avoid the problems associated with inappropriate choice of course and institution leading to wasteful turbulence at 17+.
6. Finally, the examples of good practices that we have uncovered in both schools and colleges should be shared more widely on a pan-London basis. This collaboration could be seen as the first step to a **Post-16 London Challenge** in which schools and colleges come together with employers and work-based learning providers so that a greater number of young Londoners achieve not only L3 outcomes at 19, but also have a greater opportunity to access further education and employment.

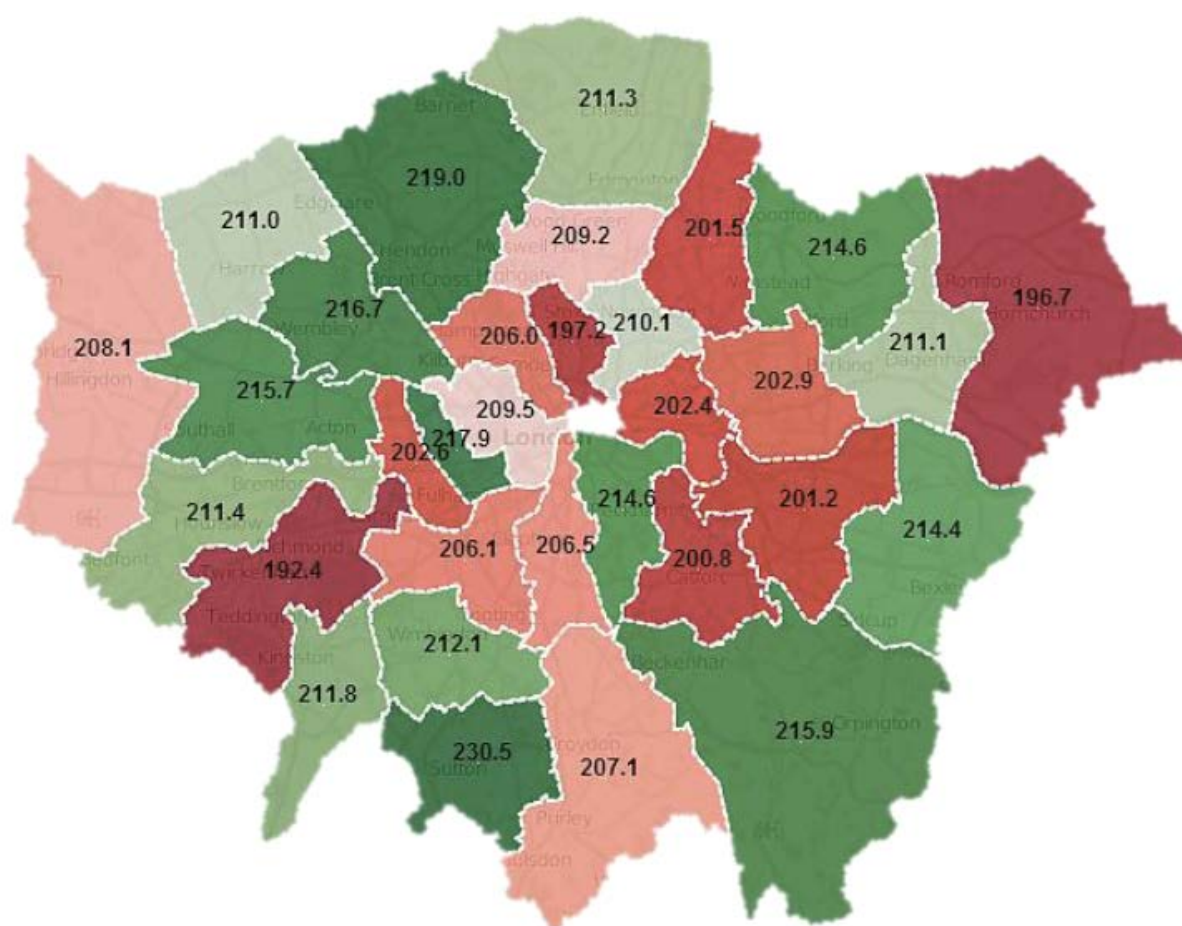


## Appendices

Appendix 1. Under 19 Apprenticeships starts 2013 (left) and 2012 achievements (right) by region<sup>31</sup>



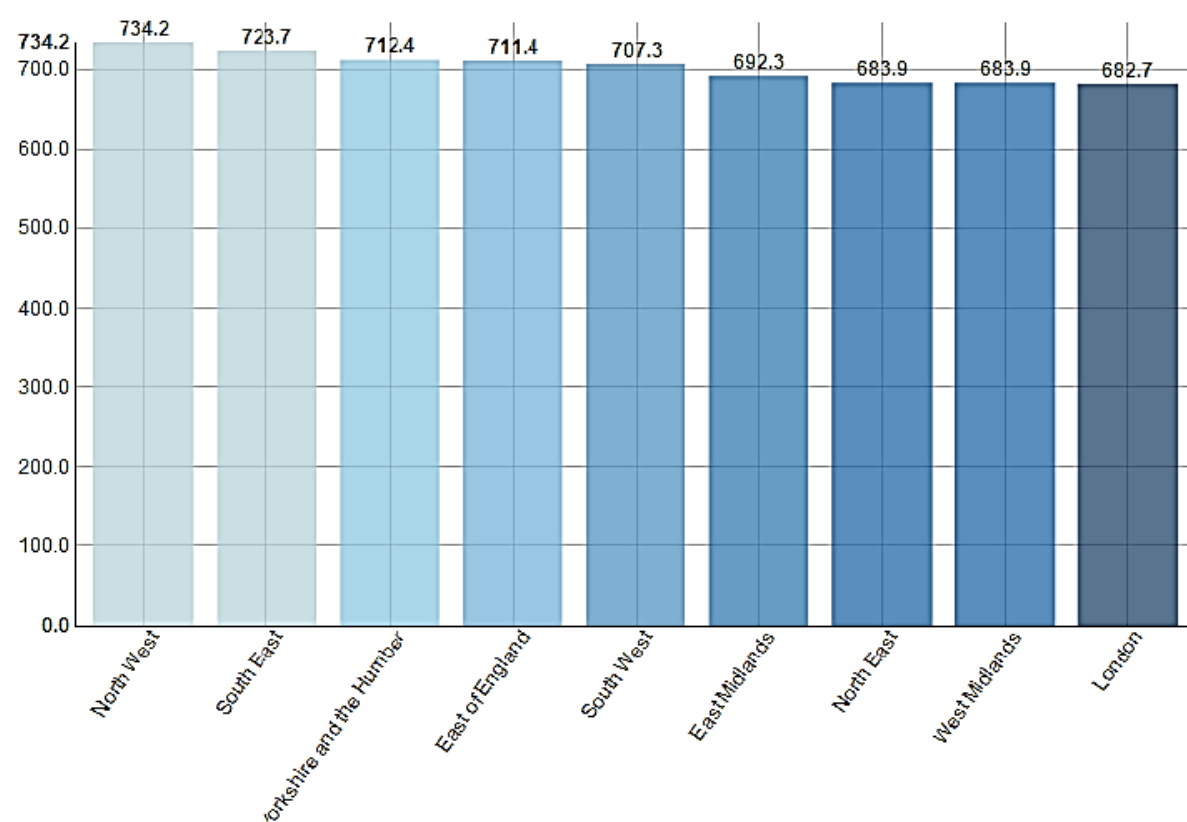
Appendix 2. L3 points per entry by London borough<sup>32</sup>



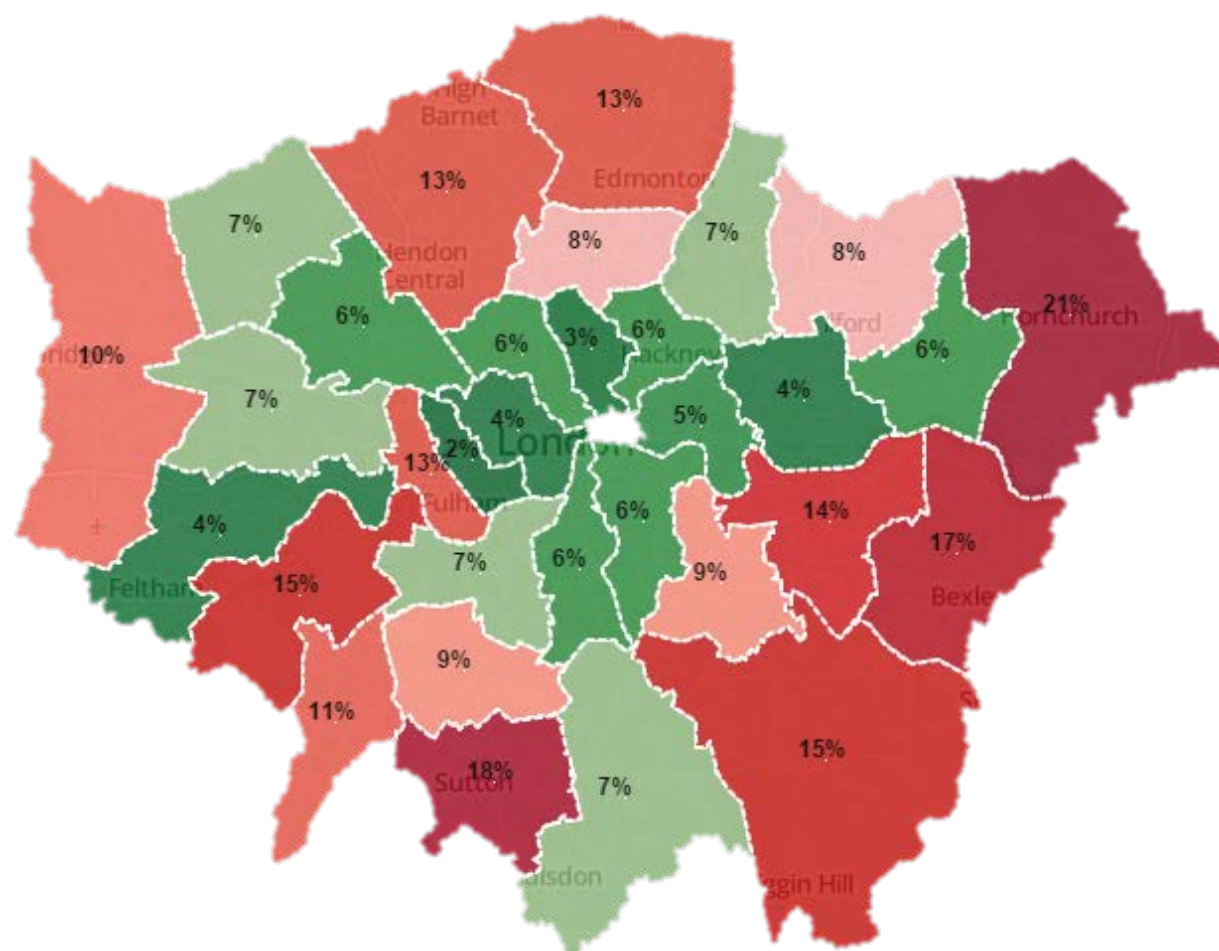
<sup>31</sup> Skills Funding Agency (SFA), 2014

<sup>32</sup> Intelligent London 2014

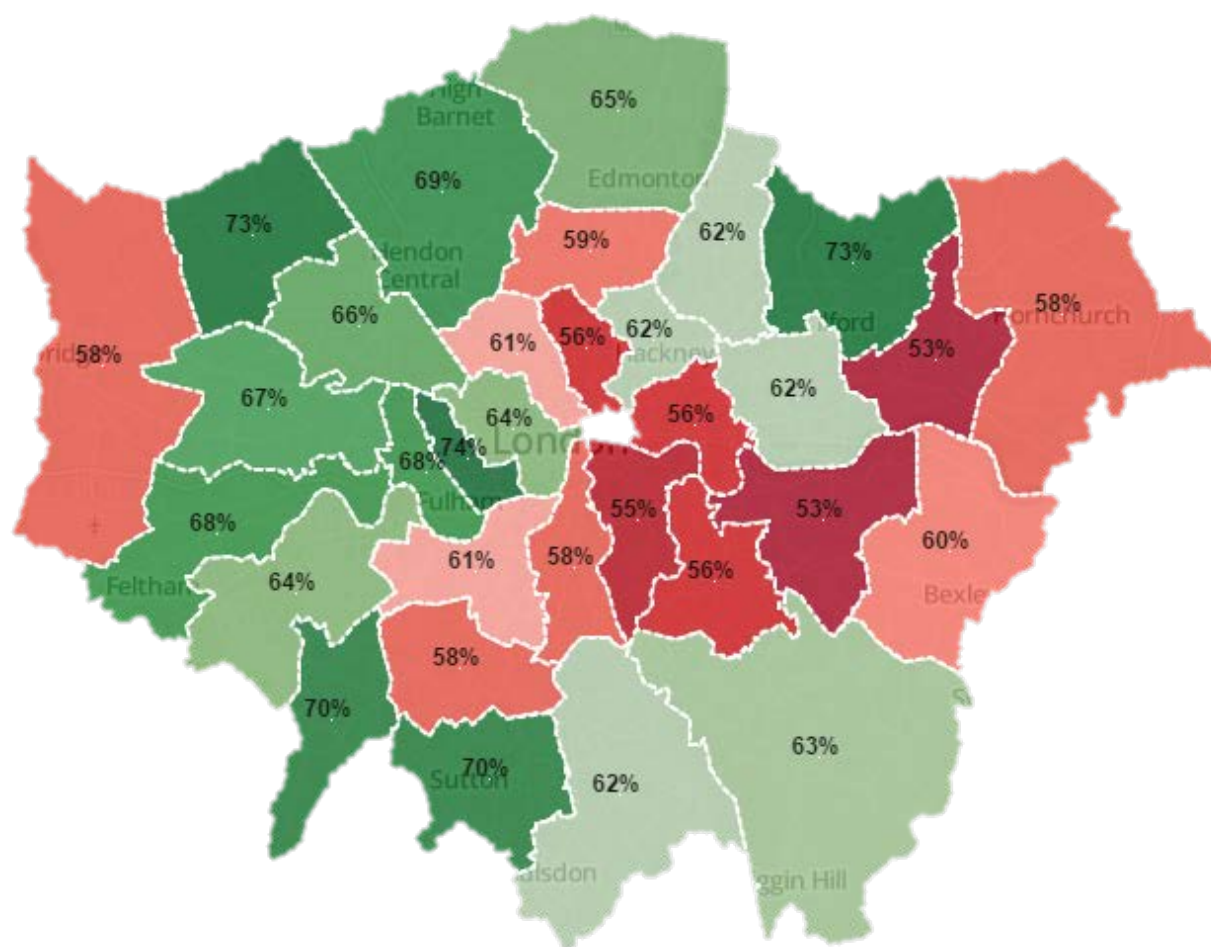
Appendix 3. Total Level 3 points per candidate 2013 compared by region<sup>33</sup>



<sup>33</sup> Intelligent London, 2014

Appendix 4. Level 2 attainment by 19 - FSM attainment gap by borough, 2013<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.intelligentlondon.org.uk/borough\\_insight#maps](http://www.intelligentlondon.org.uk/borough_insight#maps)



<sup>35</sup> [http://www.intelligentlondon.org.uk/borough\\_insight#maps](http://www.intelligentlondon.org.uk/borough_insight#maps)

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