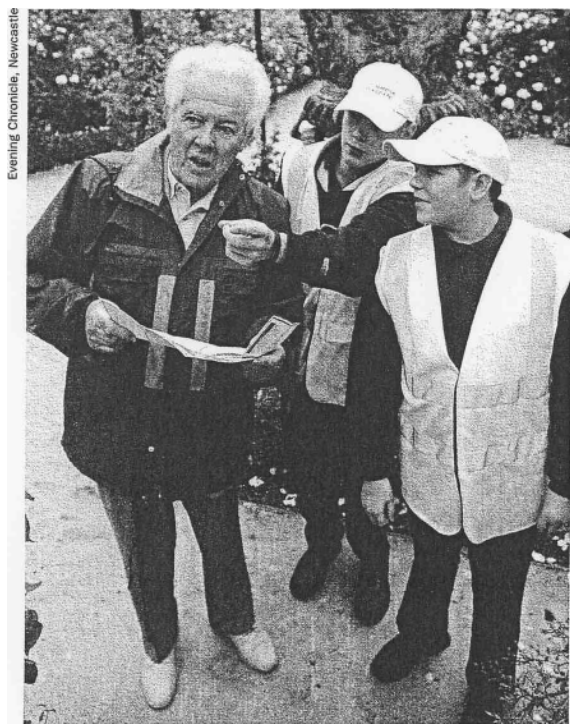


Colleges widen horizons for 14-16 year olds



Evening Chronicle, Newcastle

Key stage 4 pupils attending work experience at the Alnick garden in Northumberland - an example of a successful LSDA school-college link programme.

In the past two years there has been an expansion of schemes that offer young people at school a wider range of vocational options through further education. Finding out what these youngsters think of college education and whether it is meeting their needs was the stimulus for a research project led by LSDA's London and South east regions. But the research also set out to address anxieties from college lecturers about how to cope with 14-16 year olds and their perceived behavioural problems.

Ten focus groups of 78 young people at Key stage 4 (aged 14-16) were set up. Although many of the young people didn't have strong views about attending college and found it difficult to express their opinions, most were positive about more adult working relationships with teachers. They liked the opportunity to take practical

subjects and appreciated the 'second chance' that colleges offered.

One said: 'The way teachers speak to you [in college] is different, what they say and how they say it' and another commented: 'You don't just sit there and work; you can get up and move and there are more ways of doing things than at school.'

Although many of these young people reacted strongly against authority figures who appeared to threaten their burgeoning sense of independence, underneath the bravado was a need for support and some degree of teacher control. Many felt they were learning more at college (although there is no hard evidence for that in this study) and some believed that the more vocational nature of the college curriculum was helping them to achieve more.

Strangely, few young people seemed to have taken any part in the decision to send them to college. Most said that such decisions were made by the teachers and that they felt that those selected were 'under-performers' - those unlikely to do well academically at school. This was not generally seen to be a problem - most pupils accepted this or were apathetic about it. 'I was happy for school to decide because it's a new experience,' said one. But some

felt they had been sent to college because teachers thought they would 'fail' at school. 'I would have had a chance to get more GCSEs if I had stayed at school,' said another, and this was echoed by other students.

Joe Harkin, project leader at Oxford Brookes University, says: 'Most young people found it very difficult to express any strong opinions as they were not used to talking about their education, which raises the issue of how to give them a role in decision-making about their futures ... Schools and colleges may need to explore ways of improving advice and guidance to parents and young people to ensure that their interests are taken into account more effectively when planning their education.'

Mike Cooper, LSDA regional director, points out that more and more schools are forming partnerships with FE colleges as a way of offering a wider choice for their pupils at Key stage 4. 'But, despite genuine fears amongst lecturers and others in colleges, this study confirms there may be potentially very positive relationships and benefits available to everyone involved in working with 14-16s in college settings - the learners, the colleges and the schools,' he says.

The second phase of the project, now in progress, will listen to the views of college lecturers and school teachers on the same topics. Statistical data about actual student attainment will be gathered to begin to explore whether college attendance has any effect upon attainment in both settings.

Meeting the needs of younger learners in further education can be obtained from LSDA Information Services. Contact details are on page 12. The research (ongoing) is a collaboration between LSDA, Oxford Brookes University and four partner FE colleges - Hackney Community College, Tower Hamlets College, East Surrey College and Newbury College (Berkshire).