



Evaluation of Career Colleges

Final Report

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Institute of Education



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DISCLAIMER

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1 Executive summary

INTRODUCTION

The Edge Foundation and the Commercial Education Trust commissioned UCL Institute of Education to undertake an evaluation of Career Colleges between April 2018 and July 2019. Career Colleges, supported by the Career Colleges Trust, offer a choice in vocational education opportunities for 14–19-year old young people. This is an innovative model and the evaluation aims to investigate how Career Colleges fulfil their objectives from the outset.

AIMS OF THE EVALUATION

The overall aims of this research were to understand how Career Colleges are set up and operate; the perceptions of Career Colleges held by different stakeholders; how employer engagement and commercial education contributes to the experience of the young people; how Career Colleges support young people's transition to positive destinations and how the Support, Review and Development Framework, developed by the Career Colleges Trust, drives improvement.

From these overarching aims it was possible to characterise the uniqueness of the Career College model including the factors that contribute to its success, the wider applicability of the Review Framework and the identification of wider policy implications in relation to 14–19 education.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a four-stage mixed-methods approach. In strand one semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 12 Career College leads. Interviews took place by telephone and mostly lasted between 50 minutes to one hour. These interviews enabled us to establish a baseline understanding of the Career College model and how this is realised in different institutions. In strand two 30 teachers participated in an online-survey to broaden our understanding of the Career College model. Strand three involved case studies of six FE colleges accommodating Career Colleges. Data was gathered through interviews and focus groups. Together this represented ten Career Colleges since many of the FE colleges had more than one specialist Career College. In total 61 participants were involved in the case studies – 20 staff, 35 students, two governors and four employers. Strand four comprised interviews with seven central staff members of the Career Colleges Trust. A thematic approach was adopted for the analysis of qualitative data from the interviews and the open-ended survey questions.

Ethical approval was granted by UCL Institute of Education.

KEY FINDINGS

All the Career Colleges involved in this research spoke of the alignment between the orientation of each individual colleges' vision with that of the Career Colleges Trust, particularly in relation to strengthening levels of employer engagement and enhancing the employability and progression of their students. Decisions about the specialist areas were premised on the skill priorities within the locality and the

expertise of the college. Several interviewees commented that they were not following the 'standard' Career College model – this is something that the Career Colleges Trust may wish to reflect on. In capturing how the Career Colleges operate, we categorised this into four models: 1 – 14–16-year olds blended educational approach, 2 – Direct entry for full-time 14-year olds and recruitment at 16+, 3 – Additional/Top up Career College 16–18 provision and 4 – Discrete 16–18 cohorts.

The Review Framework process was appreciated by Career College leads, especially the guidance on how to develop their provision and the support provided by the educational leads from the Trust. There were tensions between the amount of work involved and the benefits of feedback and this may be something for the Trust to consider. Career College leads were appreciative of the responsiveness of the Trust in listening to feedback.

Staff working in Career Colleges have a wealth of industry and professional experience. They valued the high levels of employer engagement within the Career College model both in relation to their own professional development and the opportunity to keep up with industrial standards, and the quality of experience for young people. Where Career Colleges had 14–16-year olds, the use of existing college staff to work with these young people and support their transition into post 16 education was perceived as highly valuable. Career College leads were positive about the CPD offer from the Trust. An important element of training had been about project-based learning since this was a new concept in some colleges and is a cornerstone of the Career College model. Teachers were highly supportive of this approach to teaching and learning but less than half of respondents reported that they had received training.

Colleges worked hard to promote their Career College through a range of activities. Recruitment practice varied across the Career Colleges. Some students applied for a subject with no knowledge about the Career College and were then informed that they were in the Career College simply due to the subject they had chosen. Career Colleges followed a rigorous admission process to ensure that young people understood the challenges of what they were taking on. In many instances the Career College was an aspirational choice – this is important especially regarding recruitment at age 14+ where this unusual transition point is often associated with disengaged students. There were challenges around the branding Career Colleges in the local community and how this is understood by parents/carers and young people.

Undoubtedly the strengths of the Career College approach lie with the high levels of employer engagement that, in conjunction with the highly experienced staff in colleges, support the adoption of project-based learning as a pedagogic approach. This means that students benefit from rich, authentic experiences and through these develop a wide range of employability skills that enable them to progress to further study, apprenticeships or employment. The work of the Career College Trust through its CPD offer and the employment of educational leads supports this development.

Staff valued the high level of employer input and the positive difference that this made to the experiences of the young people. All Career Colleges had an employer board and had established regular patterns of meetings throughout the year. Employer representation was high on these boards and included large companies as well as SMEs. Some Career Colleges wished to engage more, larger companies when in others this was already in evidence. Where employer engagement was working well, what was particularly striking was the authenticity of the student experience. This was seen in the involvement of employers

in the co-creation of project-based learning and involvement in assessment and feedback, the line of sight to work and progression, and in the quality of the work placement/experience. The opportunities for young people to develop their understanding of the world of work and to develop their confidence were plentiful. Students spoke enthusiastically about work placements, project-based learning and meeting with employers and how this helped them to further their aspirations for the future. The focus on project-based learning also enabled students to develop a range of skills and capabilities relating to enterprise such as team working, collaboration, planning and co-ordination and the resilience required to see a project through to completion. This in addition to distinct entrepreneurial and enterprise activities. It was apparent that Career Colleges are at different stages of development and for some more work was required to establish meaningful entrepreneurial and enterprise opportunities.

The identified challenges and strengths often reflected the local context, how long the Career College had been established, how the Career College functioned within the larger institution and the subject specialism. Challenges focused on the cost associated with the provision, the impact of Progress 8 on the breadth of the curriculum offer for 14–16-year olds, the extent to which the Career College brand was recognised in the community, and how to engage in wider school partnerships in what is a highly competitive system.

Overall, findings indicated that Career Colleges provide a motivating learning environment for young people and future pathways into work or study with high success rates; the strength of this approach is underpinned by the Career College model. The innovative nature of the model is seen especially in the centrality of employer-engagement and the authenticity of the student experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is work to be undertaken to maximise the potential of the Career Colleges concept. Some of this relates to conceptual thinking around the brand, the operation of the different Career Colleges, the affordances of the Career College network and the role of the Trust. The flexibility of the Career College approach presents challenges for the identity/brand of each Career College and how this sits within the locality. This would suggest that the different Career College ‘models’ might benefit from being conceptualised more clearly according to the extent they constitute ‘distinctive’ or ‘integrated’ approaches to curriculum, employer partnership, professional development and student support developments. Also important to consider is how the evolution of Career College strategies could be informed by ‘mutual learning’ across this national network, something requested by several Career Colleges, together with in-depth understanding of relationships within colleges and across localities. As part of this thinking the Trust would benefit from reflecting on their role in developing the Career College concept and how this is communicated clearly to participating institutions.

The sustainability of the Career Colleges Trust also suggests some actions to be taken. At a practical level it is essential that effective systems of gathering student level data are put in place so that student success and progression can be demonstrated by more robust quantitative data in addition to the individual success stories. There are questions to be asked about whether financial issues may impact on the sustainability of Career Colleges with respect to the ‘expense’ of delivering the provision (e.g. curriculum time) and the fee paid to the Trust. Local competition with schools may also impact on the sustainability of the 14–16-year old provision, as has been seen with the recent move of some UTCs

to extend their intake to 11-year olds. As would be anticipated in a relatively new initiative there is development work to be undertaken to support high quality project-based learning and entrepreneurial activities across all Career Colleges. A further point relates to the Review Framework. It is evident that the Trust had put much effort into developing this process and has continued this development since its launch. Although the framework had been of significant value in setting up each Career College there were questions about its utility after that period.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Pedagogic approaches to teaching and learning

The demands of the 21st century, in relation to the complex economic, environmental and social challenges that we face, call for different approaches to teaching and learning and assessment that enable young people to develop a wider range of skills and attributes than previous generations (e.g. Hipkins and Cameron, 2018; OECD, 2018). Within this, student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, as seen in project-based learning, can prepare young people for life and work; it also makes them engaged, motivated and keen to learn, all of which underpin life-long learning.

The emphasis on project-based learning in Career Colleges offered rich activities that promoted a deep approach to learning where young people engaged with employers and their teachers to develop new ideas, artefacts and products. Team-work and independent learning were encouraged and supported within this approach. The assessment of these tasks, including presentations to employers, encouraged critical thinking, reflection and creativity. This contrasts with the reforms to qualifications in England where the emphasis is on linearity, factual knowledge and exam-based assessment. The consequences of an exam-based system include teaching to the test, a narrowing of what is taught and the adoption of a surface approach to learning by students (Hodgson and Spours, 2003; Hamilton *et al.*, 2008; Daly *et al.*, 2012; Madaus and Russell, 2010). Without question more varied forms of assessment are needed where authentic evaluations evidence the development of non-traditional outcomes such as employability and life skills.

The 14–16-year-old curriculum offer

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc), introduced in 2011, was designed to increase the uptake of the core ‘academic’ curriculum – English, mathematics, science, history or geography and a language. It brought a shift in GCSE entry policies in schools with students ‘encouraged’ to take EBacc subjects (Weeden, 2011). The introduction of Progress 8 marked another shift in the uptake and provision of qualifications and subjects with significant changes in the proportion of young people entered for the full Progress 8 and a jump in the proportion of young people taking at least four EBacc subjects. Allied to this are concerns among secondary school teachers that the EBacc has led to a narrowing of the curriculum offer (Neumann *et al.*, 2016).

The 14–16-year-olds in Career Colleges were receiving a different educational offer to that in many mainstream England secondary schools. Evident from the evaluation was how they valued the opportunity to follow a vocational or technical pathway and how they benefitted from employer engagement. They were aware that they would not have had these opportunities had they not been in a Career College. Important here is the issue of learner motivation and the mismatch between a restricted academic curriculum and the interests, aspirations and skills of the students (Rogers, 2016).

It is time for the Key Stage 4 curriculum to be revisited so that students have a choice in the subjects that they study, that they are engaged and motivated in their studies and have opportunities for success. This could become more important with the introduction of Technical Levels (T-Levels) especially with regard to how young people make informed decisions about occupational qualifications if they have little experience of technical and vocational education prior to age 16.

Technical Levels and employer engagement

The introduction of T-Levels as the vocational equivalent of A-levels, may help to address the perceptions that vocational qualifications are second best, and may provide a meaningful progression opportunity for 16-year-olds. The challenge here, as noted by others will be in establishing high levels of employer engagement to secure the industry placements that are required for all learners. Strong knowledge of the local community and skills shortages will be essential here – noteworthy was that in all the Career Colleges decisions about the specialist areas were premised on the skill priorities within the locality and the expertise of the college. This meant that students had strong opportunities to progress to employment, apprenticeships or further study and were not taking qualifications for their own sake.

The approach taken by the Career Colleges Trust and the Career Colleges in building sustained employer engagement might provide a fruitful avenue for others to learn from. It is also possible that the Review Framework together with the model of support provided by the educational leads could be useful starting point. Specific implications for fostering employer engagement arising from this evaluation include:

- The establishment of an employer board involving college staff and employers working in partnership, where employers inform the curriculum and contribute industry and business expertise.
- The embedding of authentic employer-led projects that enable students to engage in ‘real world’ tasks and activities so that students develop the attributes and skills needed for employability and enterprise.
- The success of employer-led projects, including entrepreneurship and enterprise activities, is further enhanced when these are integrated into the approaches to teaching and learning and the programme of study being followed. This necessitates creative approaches to assessment, such as when college staff map the activities to the learning outcomes of the qualification.
- College-wide strategies to enable all staff to continually update their professional expertise. This includes time to develop and sustain relationships with employers.

2 Introduction, aims and objectives

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Edge Foundation and the Commercial Education Trust (CET) commissioned UCL Institute of Education to undertake an evaluation of Career Colleges between April 2018 and July 2019.

The Edge Foundation is the independent education charity dedicated to shaping the future of education to meet the demands of the 21st century global economy and ensure opportunity for all. Technical and creative skills are critical to our modern digital economy. Edge believes that high quality technical and professional learning should be a key part of a coherent, unified and holistic education system to support social mobility and enable all young people to fulfil their potential.

CET is an independent charity which believes commercial education is essential to the development of young people so they can thrive both at work and within society more widely. CET seeks to embed in education the means by which people can apply their learning to work; develop commercial awareness and understanding in young people; encourage individuals to be enterprising and innovative; and make a positive contribution to the development of effective commercial education and training. CET supports programmes that deliver commercial education i.e. education that develops employability, enterprise, entrepreneurship, business and economic understanding.

2.2 THE CONTEXT: FURTHER EDUCATION AND CAREER COLLEGES

Further Education (FE) colleges in England provide high quality vocational and technical education for young people and adults. They offer a range of qualifications and training including A Levels, apprenticeships, vocational qualifications, higher education and entry level training. FE colleges have a long history of employer engagement whereby employers and colleges work in partnership. As at February 2019 there were 174 FE colleges in England (AoC, 2019). FE colleges are large organisations, increasingly so following the Area-Based Reviews, with many colleges supporting over 10,000 learners (Ofsted, 2018).

Career Colleges are usually a joint venture involving an FE college in partnership with another organisation, which could be a school or an NHS Trust or industry partners. In essence, they are a college within a college. At the time of this study there were 12 FE colleges in England accommodating 18 Career Colleges. Career Colleges vary in size with the smallest having 20 to 30 students and the largest having in excess of 400 students. Career Colleges, supported by the Career Colleges Trust, offer a choice in vocational education opportunities for 14–19-year old young people. Vocational specialisms are offered in a range of sectors and include air and defence, construction, digital and creative, engineering, health and care, hospitality and catering, professional services, and rural tourism. The Career Colleges Trust ensures the quality of provision through a five-year licence. The Trust has developed a Support, Review and Development Framework that underpins the monitoring process and aims to drive improvement. The overarching aim of a Career College is to ensure that young people are equipped with the necessary skills and hands-on experience to take the next step to a successful career.

2.3 BACKGROUND

Within England there has been a long-standing divide between technical and vocational education and the academic curriculum with vocational and technical education suffering from a lack of prestige. As Swift and Fisher (2010: 207) argued there is an ‘ambiguous status surrounding vocational education’ in England that often has the effect of discouraging young people to take vocational qualifications. Indeed, vocational qualifications, work-based learning and apprenticeships are less well understood by young people, their parents/carers and teachers (Batterham and Levesley, 2011). The lack of regard for vocational and technical education has been worsened by the increasingly narrow academic curriculum offer in schools that is hugely influenced by the high-level accountability system in operation including Attainment and Progress 8 and the interrelationship with the EBacc. Consequently, young people have few opportunities to engage in technical and vocational education until they have taken their GCSEs. The introduction of Technical Levels (T-Levels) post 16, regarded as the vocational equivalent to A-Levels has further reinforced this position (Thorley, 2017).

A further challenge exists in the relatively low level of employer engagement in the education of 14–19-year-olds in comparison with other countries that compounds the weak vocational system (Clarke and Winch, 2007). This despite research that has demonstrated how employer engagement can impact on the learning and progression of young people through influencing their thinking and behaviour; how it can challenge the assumptions developed by young people; how it can enhance motivation, and how it can support informed decision-making at ages 14, 16 and 18 based on the understanding of employment opportunities (Knight, 2015; Mann and Dawkins, 2014). Furthermore, frequent opportunities for students to engage with employers and career-focused interventions boost school-to-work transitions (Mann *et al.*, 2016; Baker Dearing Educational Trust, 2017).

Changes in the labour market, seen internationally, mean that there are more complex careers for young people to consider, more options in work and learning and hence potentially new opportunities (OECD, 2010). Young people therefore need more support than previously to navigate through these various educational and career pathways (Cedefop, 2016). The provision of high quality, impartial, accessible, and personalized advice is key to supporting transitions into education, training and employment (Hooley *et al.*, 2012).

The centrality of employer engagement and the focus on the transition to work in policy terms began with the Wolf Review (2011) and the requirement that young people’s programmes of study must include work experience. Most recently the Sainsbury Review, (2016) and the Post-16 Skills Plan (DBIS/ DfE, 2016), have focused on the increased involvement of employers in the design of qualifications, their contribution to industry placements for students and in how skills are developed in line with the needs of the local economy. This is not without its challenges. The most common types of activity reported by businesses in their engagement with schools and colleges (CBI/Pearson, 2018) were providing work experience/site visits (83%), giving information about apprenticeships and traineeships (70%) and offering careers advice and talks (68%). While this is laudable, it is somewhat off the concept of employers contributing to the design and assessment of the curriculum. More worrying is that the reported links with businesses and schools and colleges, dropped in 2018, to 72 per cent, down from 81 per cent in 2017 (*ibid*).

Against this backdrop, since 2010, new 14–19 institutions have emerged in England that seek to provide young people with high-quality technical and vocational education before the age of 16 alongside an academic curriculum. These include University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and studio schools. In these institutions students have greater access to technical and vocational qualifications than in most mainstream secondary schools. They also differ from many mainstream secondary schools in the focus on problem-based learning as the main pedagogical approach to teaching and learning and in the emphasis given to high levels of employer engagement.

Launched five years ago, Career Colleges provide an alternative 14–19-year old education model that promotes technical and vocational education through the establishment of a Career College within a large FE college and seeks to address the growing skills shortages in the UK. To date Career Colleges have received little independent attention, perhaps in part because they are not standalone institutions.

2.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

Research aims

The overall aims of this research were to understand how:

- Career Colleges are set up and operate;
- the specialist curriculum is identified, developed and delivered;
- Career Colleges are perceived by different stakeholders;
- employer engagement and commercial education contributes to the experience of the young people;
- Career Colleges support young people's transition to positive destinations, and
- the support, review and development tool and monitoring process that the Career Colleges Trust has developed drives improvement.

By addressing these aims it has been possible to understand the uniqueness of the Career College model and to consider the wider implications of the Review Framework and how this might assist other organisations to prepare for the transition to T Levels, apprenticeships and other technical routes. It has also enabled the identification of wider policy implications in relation to 14–19 education, early specialisation in a vocational field and transitions to a new educational establishment, employer engagement, skills development and social mobility. The findings from this independent evaluation provide an evidence base from which Career Colleges can publicise their work and thereby influence the 14–19 landscape.

3 Methodology

3.1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The evaluation adopted a four-strand, mixed-methods approach that was shaped to build a carefully constructed, triangulated evidence base, adding strength to the overall findings. Strands were interconnected and fed into each other.

Strand one

Stage one comprised conceptual interviews with twelve Career College leads. Interviews took place by telephone and mostly lasted between 50 minutes and one hour. The interviews explored the following:

- how the sector specialism was identified, and the curriculum developed;
- arrangements in place to deliver the curriculum;
- approaches to teaching and learning;
- the embedding of vocational specialisms and academic subjects;
- the set-up and operation of each college in its FE context and locality;
- the nature of employer engagement; student recruitment; progression pathways;
- how the Review Framework operates and its impact, and institutional, local or national challenges.

These interviews enabled us to establish a baseline understanding of the Career College model and how this is realised in different institutions.

Strand two

In stage two, Career College staff were asked to complete an online questionnaire to broaden our understanding of the Career College model. Using Likert rating scales, categorical and open responses, we probed: organisational arrangements; teaching experience; teaching strategies; student support and progression mechanisms; the local context; employer engagement and factors contributing to success of the Career College model. Responses were received from 30 Career College staff.

In addition to the interviews and the survey, a review of college websites was undertaken to understand the level of visibility of each Career College within its partner institution and to see what information was provided for parents and young people in thinking about applying to a Career College.

Strand three

Strand three involved case studies that focused on six FE colleges encompassing 10 Career Colleges. These took place in spring and summer 2019. The intention had been to include focus groups with students and interviews with Career College leads, staff, governors and employers. This was not possible

in all case studies owing to the high-level demands in FE, in part arising from the Area-Based Reviews and subsequent restructuring and staff changes. It was disappointing that only two of the FE colleges granted access to students. In many of the Career Colleges, the Career College lead changed during the evaluation. Following a request from staff in Career Colleges, the employer interview schedule was transposed to an online form for ease of completion. The total number of participants included 20 staff, four employers, two governors and 35 students.

Strand four

To provide a holistic perspective of Career Colleges, interviews were also undertaken with seven central members of the Career Colleges Trust including educational and specialist leads and the joint CEO. Interviews were undertaken face-to-face and by telephone and generally lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. They were asked about their background, their role in relation to the Career College Trust, the development of Career Colleges, teaching and learning, the review process and the way they worked. They were also asked about benefits and challenges of Career Colleges, and what advice they would give to a college thinking of becoming a Career College.

The Career Colleges Trust also provided support in gathering management information data to understand the cohorts of students at Career Colleges and to contribute to the evidence base on progression.

3.2 ANALYSIS

The process of analysis of the focus groups and interviews was guided by the phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This iterative process of categorisation seeks to continually refine and test the description as it unfolds. Interview transcripts were fully transcribed. A selection of transcripts was coded independently by members of the research team before agreeing a final coding schedule. The use of codes enabled the data to be chunked into themes and sub-themes. In identifying the quotations and illustrations for the report, care has been taken to anonymise individuals and individual colleges as much as possible.

The questionnaire data were analysed using Social Science Statistical Package (SPSS).

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research was undertaken within the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and approved by the ethics committee of UCL Institute of Education. Career College leads were provided with a briefing sheet about the research and a consent form prior to agreeing to be interviewed. In this way they were able to make an informed decision about participation. Following transcription, the full text was offered to each Career College lead for review. Participants were able to make changes to the interview transcript that they felt were necessary.

For the online surveys, the opening page of the questionnaire explained that by filling in the questionnaire participants would be giving permission for their responses to be analysed as part of the project data. Completion of the questionnaire implied consent to participate: this is standard practice with online surveys. All responses were anonymous.

As part of the face-to face interviews and focus groups, all participants were given an information sheet about the research and a consent form. The interviewers talked through the information sheet and all aspects of consent before asking if participants were willing take part in the research. Consent forms were signed by participants before interviews and focus groups began.

All participants were informed of the right to withdraw and given contact details of the lead researcher in case they wished to withdraw after the interviews and focus groups had taken place.

4 Findings

Contextual data about the background to Career Colleges is provided first followed by the findings from the thematic analysis. The latter are grouped into seven main themes and associated sub-themes (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Themes and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-themes
Operationalization of the Career College model	Establishment of the Career College
	Identification of specialist curriculum
	Implementation of the Career College model
Staffing for the Career College	Staff profile
	Perceptions of the Career College
Support, staff development and the review framework	Continuing Professional Development
	Educational leads
	The Review Framework
Recruitment of students	Marketing
	Recruitment process
	Wider awareness of Career Colleges
Experience of young people	Curriculum offer
	Student support and development
	Student progression
Employer engagement	Embedding of employer engagement
	Employer engagement
	Employer-led activities
	Employers and project-based learning
	Entrepreneurial and enterprise activities
Challenges and strengths of the Career College model	

4.1 BACKGROUND TO CAREER COLLEGES

Career Colleges were launched five years ago and had grown to 12 Further Education colleges in England accommodating 18 Career Colleges at the start of this evaluation. Some FE colleges have more than one specialist Career College within them. There is also one FE college in Wales that hosts two Career Colleges and another Career College will open in Scotland later in 2019.

Currently three of the FE colleges offer Career College pathways for 14 to 16-year-old students in addition to the provision for students aged between 16 and 18. The total enrolments as at 1st October 2018 were 1,280 of which 101 were 14–16-year olds. Career Colleges vary in size with the smallest having between 20 to 30 students and the largest having in excess of 400 students.

Most Career Colleges have been running for two to three years although there are two that have been in existence for five years.

Where Career Colleges have been running for over two years progression for 14–16-year-olds is strong. In one of the Career Colleges it was reported that over the last two years 95 per cent of 14–16-year-olds have progressed into higher level pathways or employment. In another Career College all students had progressed into either further study at an FE college (N=10), securing an apprenticeship (N=8) or gaining employment (N=1).

Among 16 to 18-year-olds progression rates are also promising with high overall vocational success rates ranging between 79 to 100 per cent in Career Colleges. In one of the construction Career Colleges eight students had secured an apprenticeship, 14 progressed to further study, four had gained employment and for two students the destinations were unknown. Among a cohort of 12 engineering students in another Career College, five had secured an apprenticeship, seven progressed to further study and one entered university. The destination of one student was unknown.

The business model

Career Colleges are run by FE colleges and learners are funded through the standard public funding mechanisms available for 14 to 19-year-olds. Each Career College pays a fee to the Career Colleges Trust to become a Career College. There is no minimum or ‘set’ fee. When the Trust launched although they had considered a fixed fee, for transparency, this was not well received by prospective Career Colleges, who ‘*all pointed out that they had different requirements, served different sectors and therefore had different needs. We have therefore developed a bespoke service, tailored to the needs of each individual Career College*’ (Joint CEO Career Colleges Trust). The Trust works through a due diligence audit and business plan with each prospective Career College sponsor to determine their requirements: this is used to agree the fee structure. A cost reduction model operates with fees reducing annually over the five-year licence period. The five-year period is to enable Career Colleges to develop. The Trust has an option to revoke the licence.

The Career Colleges Trust is not for profit. It provides a range of training and support to its’ Career College and regularly bids for project work which will impact on the Career Colleges as well as the wider education sector and uses available funding to provide a range of specialist services and support to operating and prospective Career Colleges.

The vision of the Career College Trust

Each Career College is defined by an employer-led curriculum, with clear pathways to careers in the industry it serves. As the Joint CEO stated:

It is more than a qualification. Each college delivers a curriculum which should be shaped by the Employer Board which they are required to have. It is about training young people for employment.

Key elements of the model include:

- Development of digital literacy skills
- Embedding or providing opportunities for good Careers Advice Information and Guidance
- High quality work experience that is about the sector that the young people are going to enter
- High levels of employer engagement
- Opportunities to develop enterprise skills and entrepreneurship so that students understand about business
- * facilitate this Career Colleges are required to have an employer board and should offer students an extended day that matches the working pattern of the sector.

Vision for the future

Since the inception of the Career College concept in October 2013, the government policy and educational landscape have changed. The devolution of adult skills budgets will result in a greater focus on meeting sub-regional skills needs of young people and adults. The Trust is committed to ensuring that it remains fit for purpose and with this in mind the Career College Trust will be reviewing and re-aligning the Career College concept with these priorities, ensuring that they work with employers and providers to collectively tackle skills shortages and ensure young people and adults have skills employers need.

The Career Colleges Trust recognises that alignment now with Department for Education Technical Education, the government's Careers Strategy and Industrial Strategy, provide an exciting opportunity to galvanise the charity's work, with government imperatives that support young people's progression to exciting careers. This will include approaches to

- *Ensure students are inspired into ambitious careers in growth sectors*
- *Share great practice across the national network*
- *Continue to engage business ambassadors/employers in the design/delivery of education and learners' work experience, mentoring and insight to careers*
- *National and regional PR campaigns to highlight great opportunities for young people in Career Colleges (Joint CEO Career Colleges Trust)*

Future initiatives include working with employers and an international training provider to develop Career Colleges in digital construction, port logistics and cyber security.

4.2 OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE CAREER COLLEGE MODEL

Establishment of the Career College

The origins of all the Career Colleges involved in this research related to the orientation of the colleges' vision with that of the Career Colleges Trust, particularly in strengthening levels of employer engagement:

The reason we went with Career Colleges was that ethos, the vision of the Career College, we felt that it aligned with what we were already doing. (Career College Lead)

Fundamentally underpinning this was the colleges commitment to employer engagement and specifically looking at how we can generate a more employer-led curriculum. So that was the origins of it. That's where we started the dialogue with Career College Trust. (Career College Lead)

The local importance was echoed by employers when reflecting on the Career Colleges in their community:

Quite important as the area is undergoing significant regeneration – mainly house building but also some commercial regeneration - engineering and construction are key skills. (Employer)

In many instances, the decision to launch a Career College was a way to further develop the expertise the college had. This could be in relationship to developing approaches to teaching and learning:

So when we came on board with the Career College two years ago it was a natural development: we had a structure in place, we had a vision. We used this to inform the Career College ethos and the vision we wanted to do and we used the same Employer Board... It was felt that Career Colleges would take Professional Services to the next stage: we weren't doing as much of the project-based learning, we were doing work-experience, mentoring and internships. (Career College Lead)

or to enhance employability:

Really it was kind of an extension of our employability stuff in the first place, also to do with our strategic aims to develop specialist, niche areas for here, directly related to the labour market. (Career College Lead)

Identification of specialist curriculum

In all cases the selection of the specialist curriculum area(s) delivered by the Career Colleges related to sector skills priorities and employment opportunities in the locality.

All of the qualifications that we offer in the college should be linked to the city areas of demand. We have a huge growth in engineering and construction, a huge growth in hospitality and catering and travel and tourism. (Career College Lead)

It was a conversation we had with them [the local hospital] around not being able to fill their vacancies. There was a skills shortage and they were having to spend a lot of money bringing people in from Spain and Italy and Ireland and related places. And I said surely, we ought to be able to align, fill that demand and get the supply chain right. (Career College Lead)

It sits within the whole college agenda, working with the LEP in relation to the main priority areas of professional services, rail, advanced manufacturing, food and drink, and health. (Career College Lead)

Healthcare and creative media we've put in first because they're two of our strategic areas that we're going to develop T levels in. (Career College Lead)

Underpinning this was the idea of developing a talent pipeline in conjunction with employers.

Local business should be encouraged to engage with the Career College to appeal to local young people and encourage into their business. Long term benefits to community for economy with more young people encouraged into work. (Employer)

Where there were multiple priority sectors in a locality, the capacity and/or aspirations of the college were influential in deciding on which specialist areas to offer.

We looked at the skills priority sectors. Of the five one was far more directly relevant to another [geographical] area – financial and professional services. That left four priority areas – construction, advanced manufacturing and engineering, health and care and ICT and digital. We looked at those four and we took a decision based on what was the college's current situation. So, the Health and Care we landed on because this is the largest area in college in terms of volume of student numbers and we had emerging links with the Health Board. The Digital/ICT was more aspirational since we had targeted development in this area and for some time had wanted to improve employer engagement in this sector and to improve the way in which we respond to this sector. (Career College Lead)

Implementation of the Career College model

Several participants commented that they were not following the 'standard' Career College approach:

It's a slightly different model from the rest of the country. (Career College Lead)

The college model doesn't exactly match the Career College preferred model. (Career College Lead)

We're not particularly typical in terms of Career Colleges. (Career College Lead)

Inclusion of 14–16 Career College students

The impact of Progress 8 and the competitive nature of schools was commented on by interviewees and how this had impacted on their approach to engaging 14–16-year olds. One college had recently withdrawn its 14–16 provision and others had taken a strategic decision not to compete with schools.

We originally set out to deliver 14–19 provision after the Career Colleges' ethos... When we trialled and started to advertise our intent, we found that secondary schools turned very, I wouldn't say nasty with us, but very selective about who we could engage with and who we couldn't. As a result of that, senior leadership teams here made a decision to stick with 16–19 to not conflict with UTCs and our feeder schools. (Career College Lead)

Where Career Colleges only recruited 16 to 18-year olds, there was evidence of outreach work with 14 to 16-year olds in line with the Career College model. For instance, one college ran taster sessions on Saturdays for school pupils in the area. The Saturday Engineering School had 8–10 learners, most of whom had progressed to apprenticeships or other training. Owing to the success of the programme, some employers were keen to sponsor this. Another college attended Year 10 and 11 assemblies and careers fairs. Not all responses from the local schools were positive. In one instance a taster brochure had been sent to students in Year 7 to 11 to try out different skills, for example, coding and construction opportunities, but no responses had been received.

Career Colleges are all part of large FE organisations. Within these institutions the infrastructure of the Career College varied in relation to the age of the students, partnership arrangements, whether students were taught in a separate area or as a cohort or were integrated with the rest of the college. This variation was also reflected in the different conceptions of the, or a, Career College in relation to the college in general: a network of employers and industry partners, the Career College pathway, absorbed into existing structure, two subjects housed on the same campus with Career College lanyards, nested within the main college, not separate but part of the main college.

Given the variation in the implementation of the Career College approach, we classified these into four different models.

Model 1 – 14–16-year olds blended educational approach

Two Career Colleges had set up local arrangements, sharing responsibility with schools, whereby students spent part of the time at college and part at school. In one of these a partnership agreement was in place with two local schools. Students attended the Career College for one day each week for their vocational specialism. College lecturers collected the students from school on the designated day and transported them to the construction site. They returned the students to school at the end of the day. The school took responsibility for academic and pastoral matters and delivered English and maths. The latter meant that the embedding of the specialist area in English and maths was problematic.

This was a strategic approach given the importance of maintaining overall relationships with schools in the area:

We are not a tertiary authority, so a blend of schools who have sixth forms and those who don't. Lots of competition in schools. So it was a strategic choice not to go into this market. We

didn't think it was appropriate... We have tried to work in partnership with schools to provide a blended educational model with young people. We are doing this for free at the moment.
(Career College Lead)

The model in the other college operated in a different way with a formal partnership with one school, but it accepted students from another eight schools in the locality. They had established a governing body that sits underneath the college's board. This comprised three senior managers from the school, three senior managers from the college and then sixty per cent made up from employers. Pastoral support was shared between the college and the school.

Another college reported considering a similar model in the future:

For 14–16 we are exploring options; this would involve working with local schools. My long-term vision is perhaps where schools did the academic and the students spend one day in college and we can give them a flavour of construction and engineering. (Career College Lead)

Model 2 – Direct entry for full-time 14-year olds and recruitment at 16+

One college offered direct entry provision for full-time 14–16-year-old students in a range of subjects. Students enter the Career College if they are studying the two specialist areas.

The Career College includes all the students on these two subject pathways.

My job has been to liaise with the people who deliver and manage those programmes in the 16–18 area to make sure that, when we are working with the Career College team, we have all the information they need across the board. It's like an invisible stamp on the students' head. In terms of the students' life in the college, even though they know they are on the Career College pathway, they are college students. (Career College Lead)

For English and maths, the 14–16-year olds from across the college are taught together – i.e. Career College students and non-Career College 14–16-year olds. Everything was contextualised to their specialist pathways.

Another career college, who were looking to introduce a third specialist area, commented:

Now if we've got all three Career Colleges, then maybe for the 14–16 Progress 8 part of their delivery, perhaps we could look at merging the students... into one 14–16 delivery centre, which might make it viable. (Career College Lead)

Model 3 – Additional/ Top up Career College 16–18 provision

In this model Career College students completed their study programme within the mainstream provision with other students who were doing the same specialist areas. For example, Level 2 Engineering Career College students were mixed with other engineering students. The Career College students, though, had a longer timetable in comparison to other students. They had longer periods, extra sessions and longer work placement opportunities. The college was focusing very much on employment for the Career College students and had tailored additional sessions relating to employment. The Career

College additionality was all done through projects. In construction, for instance, students designed a float for the local borough for the mayors New Year's Day Parade and undertook extended project-based placements at local and national companies. As part of the college's awards ceremony, there were separate Career College awards. The students themselves were aware that they were Career College students as part of the rigorous admission procedure, (see Box 4.2) and knew that if they weren't committed to the programme they would be asked to switch to another course.

In another college, it seemed that additionality was mainly through engagement with the Amazon project organised by the Career Colleges Trust. So although there were approximately 60 students studying digital and therefore theoretically part of the Career College, not all of them engaged with the Amazon project and hence were not regarded as Career College students.

Basically, they were all linked to the Career College, but they could not be part of the project for reasons like they couldn't put some time aside, so I would say approximately 30 students [in the Career College]. (Course Leader)

For 2019–20 one college was changing their deliver model from one of additionality to recruiting learners specifically to a Careers College course where they would work as one cohort – the same as model 4. The reasoning behind this was to *use it as a flagship so that learners who are not in the Careers College will aspire to be in it* (Career College Lead). There was also a perception that by having a clearer identity for the Career College students that they would be able promote the Career College more effectively.

Model 4 – Discrete 16–18 cohorts

In model four Career College students are taught as a distinctive group and the pathway they follow is different from students following mainstream college provision. One college, with two Career Colleges, had adopted a two-stage recruitment process to ensure that the Career College provision was most appropriate for students following construction as a specialist area (see Box 4.3). They had found that some potential construction students, on learning that the commitment was five days a week and that *the ethos is that they'll be treated like they are at work*, (Career College Lead) were not ready for this intensity. Where students dropped out at this point, they were offered another construction programme at a different campus. This college had an extensive array of enrichment activities built into the study programme offer.

In the specialist Air and Defence Career College, the Career College students spent two and a half days a week on their chosen vocational strand, computing, engineering or hospitality and catering, delivered by wider college staff and the remaining 2½ days and the Air and Defence curriculum giving a five day a week employability model. Vocational strands were offered in and each year the Career College was allocated a set number of places on these vocational courses in the wider college. The Air and Defence curriculum entailed enrichment days and basic recruit training. Enrichment days included extensive visits to RAF based in the locality, leadership tasks and skills, STEM-based activities e.g. cyber, exposure to what recruitment/training would be like in the RAF and a full week of adventure training which was the same as the second week of the RAF training course for a recruit. Basic recruit training course lessons comprised the history of the RAF and different employment routes; units on leadership and team skills and communication skills in addition to health and fitness and well-being training. Students also undertook 30 hours of work experience.

Summary

All the Career Colleges involved in this evaluation spoke of the strong alignment between the orientation of the colleges' vision with that of the Career Colleges Trust, particularly in relation to strengthening levels of employer engagement and enhancing the employability and progression of their students. Decisions about the specialist vocational areas were premised on the skill priorities within the locality and the expertise of the college. It was noteworthy that several interviewees commented that they were not following the 'standard' Career College model – this is something that the Career Colleges Trust may wish to reflect on. However, Career College leads did appreciate the flexibility of the Trust. In capturing how the Career Colleges operate, we categorised this into four models: 1 – 14–16-year olds blended educational approach, 2 – Direct entry for full-time 14-year olds and recruitment at 16+, 3 – Additional/ Top up Career College 16–18 provision and Model 4 – Discrete 16–18 cohorts.

4.3 STAFFING FOR THE CAREER COLLEGE

Staff profile

In most cases Career College staff were drawn from the existing staff in the FE College. Nearly all had prior industry or vocational experience. This included, for example: working as a test and manufacturing engineer, carpentry and joinery, construction industry, military service for the RAF, owning a graphic and web design business, front of house in the restaurant business, working as a first- and second-line IT trouble shooter, electrical contractor and senior chef for an international company. In many cases the length of professional experience was extensive including 10 years, 16 years and several over 20 years. Teaching staff taught across a range of qualifications from entry level to above Level 3, although Levels 2 and 3 were the most prevalent. Of the respondents, most, 30 per cent, spent a maximum of one fifth of their time teaching time in Career Colleges, followed by 20 per cent who spent all their time teaching in the Career College. In descending order, just over 16 per cent spent between 60–80 per cent of their time teaching in the Career College, just over 13 per cent spent between 80–100 per cent, 10 per cent spent between 20–40 per cent, and 10 per cent spent between 40–60 per cent.

Perceptions of the Career College

When asked about the attraction of working in a Career College, three themes emerged: altruism, continuation of current role, and links with industry and employer engagement.

For those motivated out of a sense of altruism, this was linked to wishing to give something back and to make a difference.

I want to make a difference to people's lives. By teaching, I believe I can inspire students to strive to achieve their best and reach their goals. (Teacher)

For others, teaching in the Career College was a continuation of their current position in the college:

It's a continuation of my vocational teaching in the original Technical College. (Teacher)

Many respondents spoke of the importance of employer engagement and how this supported both staff development and enabled student progression:

Relating the training and work experiences to industry which enhances the learning experience plus allows the staff to keep up with current industrial standards. (Teacher)

A good structure to move students into the industry. (Teacher)

When new staff were recruited, one college made a point of recruiting staff for the Career College who have the kind of personality that would enthuse students rather than just being an expert in a particular industry or subject.

Where the provision involved 14–16-year olds, being taught by college staff was felt to be important in supporting transition and it also provided opportunities for younger students to work with older students:

For Hospitality and Catering they are taught by a member of staff from the main college who works with all the career college students from 14–19-year olds. This works very well in restaurant settings because it helps the younger students to work with the older students. All the Career College students as they progress to the older age will be working with staff who are familiar with them which is also useful. (Career College Lead)

The transition of older students to higher level programmes of study within colleges was also given as a reason to draw on existing staff:

We don't have separate staffing for the Career College learners because we want to make sure that they have a smooth transition. (Career College Lead)

Another college had identified a lead tutor, for each of the Career College cohorts, who was an existing member of staff. The college had then worked with these lead tutors to ensure that they understood how the Career College model was different. In turn these tutors will utilise other members of their team in the delivery of the programme. As the interviewee commented:

So, it's our existing staff because one of the things we wanted to get out of this was a way of driving career development through our wider curriculum. (Career College Lead)

In another college the Heads of Departments were responsible for the Career Colleges.

Frequently staff teaching Career College students had been involved in the planning and implementation of the Career College from the beginning:

They have been involved from the start... They will teach on other courses across the campus. They completely understand about the Career College and are able to reinforce this all the time in their teaching, workshops and tutorials. (Career College Lead)

This was not always the case:

I wasn't involved in the decision-making at all, I was just informed that we were going to be a Career College... and this is what you need to do. (Career College Lead)

Summary

Staff working in Career Colleges had a wealth of prior industry and professional experience. They valued the high levels of employer engagement within the Career College model both in relation to their own professional development and the opportunity to keep up with industrial standards and the quality of experience for young people. Where Career Colleges had 14–16-year olds, the use of existing college staff to work with these young people and support their transition into post 16 education was perceived as valuable.

4.4 SUPPORT, STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND THE REVIEW PROCESS

Continuing professional development

The majority of interviewees were positive about the training provided by the Career Colleges Trust.

New staff received induction into the Career College model and all staff benefited from regular monthly meetings with their Career College link person/educational advisor. The experience of the training provided by the Career Colleges Trust was valued by nearly everyone.

The training was to facilitate the staff into a method of thinking that was commensurate with the Career College Trust goals, which is to link us better with industry, and to work with employers a lot closer, which is something we've been working on for some time. We had a good record of students having work placements, but it was useful, because he had a very good contact within the Career College Educational Lead who worked with us very well. (Programme Manager)

The training provided extended beyond the induction sessions, to include online CPD materials e.g. Digital Bitesize, the on-going wider development opportunities and the annual conference where teachers working in different Career Colleges could share experiences and learn from one another. This sense of being part of a wider community was important in the distinctiveness of the Career College model:

I think it is the opportunity for staff to come together to be part of a wider group, peer to peer learning, good practice. (Career College Lead)

The training offered in Digital Literacy was commented on specifically as was the support given to develop project-based learning.

The Career College support at the beginning of the process around project-based learning, around them coming in and talking about the ethos of being a work-related environment was really helpful. (Career College Lead)

CPD wise we have access to a wide pool of opportunities by Career Colleges, so things like a digital self-assessment we undertook with all the staff... we get access to all the networking events or opportunities for our staff to go into industry for industry updating. (Career College Lead)

Responses from the teacher survey were less strong with under 43 per cent strongly agreeing or agreeing that they had received CPD to support the delivery of project-based learning; however, two thirds strongly agreed or agreed that they were confident in delivering project-based learning. Overwhelmingly, though, teachers were in support of project-based learning with 80 per cent strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement project-based learning enables students to be work ready.

One lead commented that it was sometimes difficult for staff to find allocated slots to join webinars due to issues around staff non-teaching time. What was important here was that the Career Colleges Trust had recognised and responded to this:

The [Career College] team are now working towards online, small unitised stuff that they [college staff] can access when they're ready. (Career College Lead)

Educational Leads

The educational and specialist leads are appointed by the Career Colleges Trust. Their remit is to work alongside Career Colleges to facilitate and support the development of the Career College in line with the vision of the Trust. The specialist leads have central roles for the Trust which cover e-learning and digital skills development, marketing and public relations and innovation and quality. To protect the anonymity of the specialist leads we have referred to all these participants as educational leads.

Prior experience

The educational leads had a wealth of experience either within industry, education or both. There was a clear sense of progression within their backgrounds as one role led to another.

I'd been a teacher of [vocational subjects] for over 20 years and worked predominantly with 16-19-year-olds but then moved into work-based learning working for a number of high-profile companies doing bespoke development and training for their staff... I set up my own education and consultancy business, working with local colleges and local training providers to help them work not only with employers but also apprenticeships. (Educational Lead, Trust)

The educational leads could be described as multi-career professionals, taking on leadership and strategic roles within organisations, including educational institutions in some cases, and / or setting up businesses, but all with an interest in supporting vocational routes to employment. Very often, this prior experience had brought them into contact with those who set up or worked for the Career College Trust, leading to their own involvement.

Other roles for the Career College Trust were referred to by the educational leads were those on 'the more specialist side' including marketing and an administrator. (Educational Lead, Trust)

Mode of working and meetings

The educational leads are self-employed consultants. They work from home but have regular meetings at the Edge offices. In addition to the monthly meetings at the Edge offices, the leads were expected to have a regular telephone conversation or meeting or an email exchange with their associated Career College. These variations were for practical reasons, demonstrating an adaptable mode of working.

I do quite a lengthy email every month. I started that this year because of the difficulty of getting hold of people. (Educational Lead, Trust)

The conversation or meeting would usually be with the head of the department relevant to the Career College and, ideally, if more than one subject specialism, a joint discussion. One lead had been visiting a college about once a month because there were difficulties. Elsewhere, the visit might be once or twice per term and with a specific purpose. An example would be attending an event celebrating student success on a course within the Career College. Sometimes the educational leads were contacted by staff in the Career College, particularly, in the early stages of setting it up.

The meetings might be with a cross-section of individuals because the communication between parts of a college or external bodies might require assistance:

I meet the marketing person at the college... do some PR around projects that are being run, I meet careers advisers, so I try to keep them up to date and meet as many teaching staff as possible [in the Career College]. I sit on [the] advisory board...I find out who the local technology person [in the local council] is and what the budget is. (Educational Lead, Trust)

Responsibilities were shared by some, for instance when two or more leads were involved in one college but working with different specialisms. One lead talked about providing support to new staff in a Career College, explaining the Career College ethos and answering questions. That lead also tried to convene employer boards at least once a year.

The educational leads were involved in the annual review process, which meant a visit to the college in most cases. Some leads talked to employers and encouraged them to be involved in educational activities such as masterclasses or offering apprenticeships or placements, even if they were not able to join the employer board. Working across organisations (businesses, colleges, other boards) gives educational leads a good understanding of development opportunities as well as some of the challenges.

Interviewees were positive about the contribution of their educational lead:

She's [the designated educational lead] really been transformational... she's certainly brought more opportunities to the table for us, and the way she interacts with the curriculum. (Career College Lead)

To me the Career College is [the educational lead], and she is superb. High calibre, professional, excellent person, she came here several times. (Course Leader)

She acted almost like an independent consultant, and that's been very useful in terms of helping the students and helping the staff developing authentic character in the industry.
(Manager)

The Review Framework

At inception the Review Framework, developed by Career Colleges Trust, required three reviews each year, one per term. Two years ago, this moved to two reviews per year held during the autumn and spring terms. The process involved the completion of the review forms and then a visit where the reviewers would meet with the Career College lead, other staff, students and employers, in some cases (see Box 4.1). The aim of the review was to discuss *how colleges are moving towards employer engagement, that the curriculum reflects that, how they are making sure the students are employable* (Educational Lead). It was a self-assessment model, although this was different to the college self-assessment report (SAR).

Box 4.1 The review process

The Career College Trust come in and talk with learners, the delivery team – both vocational areas and the career college staff. They ask questions about what we are currently delivering, how this fits in with the Career College Trust vision and they offer advice and support - how might things be enhanced. For instance, I believe looking at previous reviews there wasn't much evidence of project-based learning, and that was in the review and so we looked at this and thought how we would embed projects. So, this year we have worked hard to embed various projects throughout the year. It is a dialogic process e.g. discussion of when projects would best work in relation to other activities are going on. (Career College Lead)

Where interviewees had been part of a Career College for some years, they acknowledged that the Trust was responsive to developing its review framework and that much had changed for the better. Currently two reviews per year are carried out formally with additional visits and regular 'catch-up' calls.

The Review Framework is one of the things that I would say needs the most improving. Having said that, the team are open to reviewing it, we're happy with the changes, it's certainly a lot easier this year. (Career College Lead)

Interviewees appreciated the rounded process to the review, the idea that they were working together on improvements and that the reviewers met with the strategic team, students and employers, and undertook some observational work to see what the students were doing. The review was found to be useful for monitoring practice in relation to action points and for setting targets for the future.

We do know that we need to get more contact with employers. But it is good to get the positive feedback about how the students are developing in confidence, progressing in their studies.
(Career College Lead)

So it's pushing that constant discussion, and obviously the Trust is picking up intelligence from a range of other organisations. (Teacher)

I look at the report they write me, like an external examiner's report, these are your strengths, this is what you need to focus on before we come again. (Career College Lead)

The opportunity for discussion, *a basis for talking to people*, was highlighted by the educational leads as one of the benefits of the review. Another benefit identified was college staff taking the time to reflect on provision and to identify where the Career College Trust, including educational leads, could help colleges further. Supporting colleges to move towards greater employer engagement alongside a curriculum that reflects that was an important part of this.

Critical to the effectiveness of the review was an awareness of the complexity of large FE colleges and of tailoring support to specific areas of development.

... the college is quite a complex organisation because it offers very different learning experiences and it's always been, ...it's always been pro generating different learning experiences with employers and not just occasionally thinking about destinations, so it's always been this college's unique selling point, being ahead in that. I think the Career College Trust is helping focus on specific areas within that complexity so it helps you analyse your journey, your trajectory against project-based learning in key areas. In this particular level 3, in digital – the college has aspirations to grow digital – meeting the IT requirements for future industries. (Manager)

Interviewees were also positive about the wider contribution of their educational lead:

She's [the designated educational lead] really been transformational...she's certainly brought more opportunities to the table for us, and the way she interacts with the curriculum. (Career College Lead)

One participant felt that this level of accountability was what marked the Career Colleges out compared with other colleges. The importance of demonstrating the quality of sustained employer engagement and enterprise was perceived to contrast with other colleges where, for example, employer engagement might be seen as a bureaucratic exercise:

I think a lot of other colleges it might be more of a tick-box exercise, where we work really well with industry, we send them on placement and then once that's done we're done with the employers, whereas we have an ongoing relationship with the employers constantly. (Career College Lead)

Interviewees also commented on the quality of Career Colleges Trust staff in undertaking the review:

What the Career College has got is access to a number of really good practitioners in terms of some of their staffing. (Career College Lead)

The teachers in the survey also spoke positively about the way advice was provided, and about how it helped with the identification of areas for improvement in line with the Career College strategy.

The review ensures that we are developing areas that are relevant to being a Career College.
(Teacher)

An opportunity to identify good practices and also areas for development. (Teacher))

One teacher commented that it enabled them

To understand how to go from being a career college that is performing well to becoming excellent. (Teacher)

Also important was the link between the Review Framework and the SAR undertaken by the college:

The external/expert point of view is invaluable and very useful to informing our own SAR.
(Teacher)

Fifty-five per cent (N=16) of responding teachers strongly agreed or agreed that they understood the Review Framework process. Just under one third (N=9) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and fourteen per cent (N=4) strongly disagreed or disagreed. Similar patterns of responses were seen for the *statements I value the Review Framework process and the outcomes and feedback supports the development of my teaching*. This would suggest that where teachers understood the process, they also valued it and perceived it to be developmental. Where teachers were less clear about the Review Framework, they were unable to comment. Naturally the uncertainty about the Review Framework process may simply reflect the teachers' level of involvement and how this is viewed as distinct from the self-assessment process in place in the wider college.

Given the wider quality assurance processes that exist in FE Colleges, e.g. a SAR, as well as Ofsted inspections, there was a tension between the amount of work involved and the benefits of feedback:

Possibly this has been a little top heavy since we are used to our own QA processes and we have Ofsted. It is quite time consuming since we want Career Colleges to see the level of quality and the student experience when they come in. In another way it has been quite beneficial, the team has realised we are on the right track and the feedback has been positive. (Career College Lead)

It's a beast of a document. It took a long time. It was a bit of a fog of information. I've told [my educational lead] that it's too much. (Career College Lead)

This was echoed by the educational leads who were generally sympathetic to college staff's workload and understood that the Career College review could be seen as a burden, given the requirement to carry out internal quality reviews and reviews for Ofsted. It was something that had been brought up at the educational lead meetings. It was the completion of forms rather than the review visit that was questioned by some of the educational leads.

I try very hard not to ask for special papers and so on but to use the information they're already producing. We're not doing that, it's a separate system, and we're now looking at a different timetable from the colleges. I just wonder whether we do need to do it...the staff we're asking to do it are already really stretched. I know that we've had difficulty getting it done. (Educational Lead, Trust)

Several participants also raised the question of the currency of the Review Framework over time. It seemed that it was valued in the setting up of the Career College but worked less well after that.

We initially found it a useful tool. We've since been trying to produce our own action plan because although it does produce an action plan or gives us some key areas to work on, we've tried to dig deeper. We're finding a lot of the criteria from the RDF are very repetitive and there isn't that much clarity between some of the success criteria so we've come up with a document. (Manager)

Summary

Career College leads were positive about the CPD offer from the Trust and found additional value in the conferences where teachers from several colleges could come together to share experiences and learn from one another. An important element of training has been about project-based learning since this has been a new concept in some colleges and is a cornerstone of the Career College model. Teachers were highly supportive of this approach to teaching and learning but less than half of respondents reported that they had received training. Also valued was the support given to developing digital literacy – another key part of the Career College vision.

The educational leads had a wealth of prior experience and were held in high regard by the teachers and the Career College leads.

The Review Framework process was appreciated by Career College leads, especially the guidance on how to establish their provision and the support provided by the educational leads from the Trust. There were tensions between the amount of work involved and the benefits of feedback and this may be something for the Trust to reflect on further. There were also questions about the effectiveness of the review process after the initial set up. However, Career College leads were appreciative of the responsiveness of the Trust in listening to feedback and the adjustments made to the process.

4.5 RECRUITMENT OF STUDENTS

Marketing

Colleges worked hard to market their courses and to involve employers. This included road shows, presentations in schools, employer events, open days, moving on days, taster days, recruitment events with or without employers present in addition to prospectuses and the college website. As one teacher in charge of the school-based Career College provision said:

We've had a really big push last week, Career Colleges Trust had a bit push, I've been on the radio, billboards, websites and it's been really exciting and we've had a positive response, and that was pushed by Career Colleges Trust. (Manager)

The student responses to why they applied echoed these marketing activities:

I got a letter through the post recommending it. An Open Evening. I turned up and it was good.
(Student)

We got offered it at school by some of the teachers and also got a letter through the door.
(Student)

I got recommended it by a parent, one of my friend's parents. (Student)

I think I found out about it at the open evening because we were talking about, I remember talking to my teachers and they were like we have a lot of contact with careers and stuff and my parents liked that. (Student)

Among some 14–16 Career Colleges, the competitive nature of schools within the locality reduced the marketing opportunities.

I can't even come here and deliver an assembly on Career Colleges because I'm poaching students from their roll, and it comes down to funding. I can't go to careers fairs and talk about Career Colleges. It's because it's a year 9, if it was a year 11 then statutorily, I'm allowed to. (Manager)

In these instances, it was felt that 'our students are our best ambassadors'. (Manager)

Recruitment process

In promoting the Career College, the emphasis was on employability and progression in addition to gaining a qualification. What was noteworthy was that in many instances becoming a Career College student was an aspirational choice. One college spoke of *using it as an incentive... if you do well you can become a Career College student* (Career College Lead). Another college had a 'competitive' application procedure (see Box 4.2).

Box 4.2 Admission procedure

We decided to open up the Career College to all of our students. They had to meet the selection criteria to become a Career College student. The criteria included basic employability skills such as turning up on time, level of commitment, dedicated and working with employers for longer periods. They were assessed against these criteria to become a Career College student. The learners who applied were passionate about their field and felt that they would have more opportunities in the Career College towards employment or to build their CVs so that they stand out in terms of other learners. (Career College Lead)

Also apparent was how Career Colleges engaged in a rigorous selection process to ensure that the young people were making the right decision. This could include a talk about the Career College ethos and expectations of being a Career College student especially since, under the Career College model, students are expected to attend for a full day for five days per-week. Many 16–18-year olds in FE will attend for three days. See Box 4.3 for an example of a two-stage recruitment process. In this instance, there was often quite high dropout between stage one and two.

Box 4.3 Two stage recruitment process

What we do is bring them in and talk about what a Career College is, the ethos behind it, the implications of that and the expectations that go along with that. We also bring in the stakeholders either via video or with testament. Then we do a taster day where they come in and take part in the types of activities that they would do on the programme. We find that in the construction Career College, to a greater extent [than their other specialist area] is that once they've heard it's five days and week and the ethos is that they'll be treated like they are at work, some of them just aren't ready for that. (Career College Lead)

Wider awareness of Career Colleges

Where the Career Colleges recruited 14–16-year olds the application process varied in relation to the level of school involvement. In one, where a formal partnership was in place, the student had to be selected through the school and the Career College. Students were required to apply and go through an interview process – a stripped back version of the college's admissions process. In another college, where 14–16-year olds studied full time, applications were received from parents and students. The schools did not play a part in this. While 14+ may be a contested transition point, young people moving at this stage did so for different reasons. Some who wished to follow a specific pathway, e.g. catering, preferred to start this at age 14 rather than doing lots of other GCSE subjects. Others transferred because they were not happy with their school, whether this related to subject choice or a sense that they were not thriving in school.

I wanted to leave school for ages, so it was a great chance. (Student)

Whether applying at 14+ or 16+, in some instances, it was generally acknowledged that parents and prospective students were interested in the wider college and associated subject rather than the Career College aspect. This meant that some students were told during the induction process that they were a Career College student because of the specialism they had chosen.

To be honest it was more like we joined and then we were told you're on a careers course. I'd heard of one but I didn't know it was going to be that straightaway. (Student)

Well for me, when I joined the college I didn't really know what the Career College was about. It wasn't until later on when I was in level 2 that someone in Careers College kind of explained this is the course that we're doing. (Student)

Lack of knowledge in the community about Career Colleges was commented on by several interviewees:

Come looking for a Career College? No... students very rarely, don't really, sorry, understand the brand, so the first time they hear about it is when they're with us. For parents, it's a very confusing landscape, colleges, school sixth forms, free schools... so it's just another thing. It's not going to be the thing that attracts them. (Career College Lead)

I would say that when they are with us they are aware of what a career college is, and they value it. But initially it's their local college, they do the subject there're interested in, then they find out about the career college. (Career College Lead)

For some colleges the challenge is to encourage parental involvement because of differential social capital. One college said that parents did not attend open evenings whereas for A-level events we get packed out (Career College Lead).

Summary

Colleges worked hard to promote their Career College through a range of activities. Recruitment practice varied across the Career Colleges. Some students applied for a subject with no knowledge about the Career College and were then informed that they were in the Career College simply because of the subject they had chosen. In one instance, students applied for a place in the Career College when they were already on the subject programme. It seemed that Career Colleges followed a rigorous admission process to ensure that young people understood the challenges of what they were taking on. In many instances the Career College was an aspirational choice – this is important. It was evident that there are challenges around the branding Career Colleges in the local community and how this is understood by parents/carers and young people.

4.6 CAREER COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Curriculum offer

In all Career Colleges the curriculum offer is shaped by government policy as well as the interface with schools and employers. Where Career Colleges offer 14–16 places, the curriculum must fit with Progress 8. Furthermore, these learners have to be on school or college premises for a minimum of 25 hours per week and are not permitted to spend more than 20 per cent of a week on a vocational pathway. For 16–19-year olds the curriculum is linked to study programmes – a combination of qualifications and activities linked to a core aim, such as preparation for employment or academic qualifications. Those not attaining a Grade 4 (formerly grade C) in maths and/or English GCSE must continue to study one or both. Work experience and other activities should be included to assist progression to further study or employment.

Working within these parameters, Career Colleges sought to provide young people with a distinctive curriculum offer that was shaped by employer engagement and stakeholder input. This included the embedding of employer engagement, employer-led activities, employer involvement in project-based learning and entrepreneurial activities.

So, the main core programme, all of ours are delivered, have been negotiated, agreed with our stakeholders, then we build other elements around that key programme to further develop their personal, employability skills and English and maths. Work experience is also built into the programme and negotiated with stakeholders as part of the set up. (Career College Lead)

This characteristic was echoed in the teacher survey with staff commenting:

We try to replicate their future work environment as much as possible. (Teacher)

The students can relate their experiences from site to workshop to embed understanding with hands on experiences. (Teacher)

Industry related skills are naturally embedded into the teaching and learning. Industry is linked to the curriculum. (Teacher)

Among one college-school partnership for 14 to 16-year olds the days allocated to the specialist area had changed during the life of the Career College to enable the young people to have a better understanding of the world of work:

When we first started, because the students do basically a Baccalaureate so it's quite a demanding programme, so they spent four days in school and one day in college. We've changed that, and they do three days in school, they do a day in college and then a day out in work experience. We wanted to give more focus on the vocational and what they learnt in the classroom they take out into placement, so it gave them more chance of doing project-led work while they were out in their work experience. They get a real feel for why they're embarking on engineering or their discipline. (Career College Lead)

In another 14–16 provision where students did four days at school and one day at the Career College the vocational offer was based on the Design Engineering Construct! (concept, design, understanding technical aspect, site visits). Unfortunately, this approach was at odds with the vocational qualification that students had to take owing to Progress 8. Rather than develop a holistic understanding of the entire design concept, students were focused on trade skills such as sawing wood or laying bricks.

That said the curriculum offer for 14–16-year-olds was highly distinctive in comparison with the offer in mainstream education. As one teacher commented:

Our offer is unique because the students will get six GCSEs and a BTEC level 2 engineering and a BTEC level 2 IT. (Teacher)

In addition to the formal curriculum it was felt that the work experience opportunities for this younger age group were impressive:

And the work experience they get here. We've got an excellent support system to get work placements. They've been to Nissan, Accenture, so they've had a taste of manufacture engineering, digital. We've had them at solicitors, Marine School, a range of opportunities

and they would not get that at school. They had a full week placement at Nissan and a full week at Accenture as well as individual employers in the summer time. (Teacher)

In one of the 16 to 18-year-old colleges, the curriculum was described as being ‘hard-wired’ into the Career College model. At Level 2 and the first year of Level 3 students would take a whole range of subjects related to Professional Services including marketing, accounts, law, finances and customer services. Then in the final year of Level 3 they could specialise if they wished. In designing the curriculum offer the college put together a bespoke programme based on employer involvement and feedback. This was informed by discussions about different skills gaps in terms of students being able to progress into employment.

In this way it was pleasing to see that, in some colleges, the qualifications did not drive the curriculum offered for young people:

What will be different is that we’ve gone back to the qualification requirements and have said ok the qualification requirements we will meet, but that’s not going to drive the design of the curriculum in year. So, we will focus around project-based learning and will focus around project-based learning that where possible uses real-life projects that we are developing with employers, and almost, as a side effect you will then be able to complete the qualification. (Career College Lead)

From the teachers’ perspectives, almost 90 per cent felt that the mix of academic and vocational subjects lent itself to different approaches to teaching and learning, although only 60 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that there was an appropriate balance between academic and vocational learning.

Overwhelmingly, the students, themselves preferred the practical activities when asked what they enjoyed most.

I think it was the 2D animated short film we did. We had a set amount of time we had to do it in. A project we did here but works well for portfolio. (Student)

The work experience in a garage, a mechanical environment. (Student)

The college has given us so many opportunities for things we’re all interested in such as we’ve done offshore water, marine safety and been to different companies during work experience. (Student)

Unlike many subjects, those related to construction mentioned some difficulties with guaranteed placements at set times. The weather and other practical issues were important. Although part of an authentic experience, it was challenging for colleges in terms of delivering a curriculum according to a pre-determined timetable.

Student support and development

Pastoral support was often the same as for other students in schools and colleges, as one member of teaching staff commented on their pastoral role:

That same role that I have always given to all students to ensure that they achieve their objectives. To make sure that things that could prevent them achieving or enjoying their time are dealt with in a positive manner. (Teacher)

However, for 14–16-year olds there was additional provision for pastoral issues with the indication from one college that they called on their in-house provision more often and used a lot of external agencies. Other examples included additional for support work-readiness.

They have a checklist to say what they're confident at, what they're not, what skills they need so there's a lot of prep work. There is one person who will visit them and is a contact for the employers. (Career College Lead)

In one college there was a programme of well-being classes and physical fitness since it was felt that *personal and mental fitness is really important, so that's built into their curriculum as well* (Career College Lead).

Teachers perceived pastoral support to be high quality in the Career Colleges with 90 per cent strongly agreeing or agreeing with this statement. They also felt that students benefited from the coaching/mentoring systems in place, with 83.3 per cent strongly agreeing or agreeing with this statement.

The importance of pastoral support and its relationship with the Career College model was underpinned by the following comment from one of the Career College leads when asked about what works best in your Career College:

Our pastoral support. We recognise that this is a key part of developing employability skills because this is about developing confidence and independence of students. (Career College Lead)

Students themselves felt that the whole Career College approach – employer engagement, wider experiences, project-based learning, supportive staff – had enabled them to gain in confidence and to thrive.

Being in the Career College has made me more confident talking to employers, going to work experience. (Student)

More confidence for interviews because I know I've got more experience than others, like in welding, hand-fitting and stuff. (Student)

It's made me much more confident. I'm not very confident in front of a big audience of people – not even big, just small groups, I'm still quite nervous. But in some of our assignments we had to present in front of people, and it's like a professional environment, it's like we're actually pitching an idea to a group of employers and it starts to give you more confidence in your work and how you can present it properly. Yes, confidence has been boosted for me. (Student)

Particularly important to all students, whether 14–16 or 16+, was the sense that they were treated like adults.

Most high schools students, including myself, when they don't do well or they don't do as much work as they should, they tend to blame the teacher and say it's your fault, you haven't nagged me enough. But in this college you're given what you have to do and it's your responsibility. Obviously, the teachers will encourage you. It's not like primary school, they're not breathing down your neck. You know what you have to do and if you don't do it, then it's on you. (Student)
It does feel more professional, a lot more freedom, even with assignments and stuff, you have to get on with it yourself. It prepares you more for real life. With school, if you carry on to sixth form, you are doing that 9 to 5, routine every day and it's just lessons. Here it's like if you want to you can just walk out but you need to put in the dedication. It's like a job. You can walk out of your job but you don't want to because you need it. (Student)

In turn many students felt that they had matured as a person during their time at the Career College:

I would definitely say that I have definitely got better skills and I feel like I have more insight and become more mature. (Student)

For starters, you're treated more like an employee than like a student or a kid, if you're in a more adult environment and I feel the support is more constructive from the tutors we have here and when we go on trips to studios. (Student)

It was noticeable that many of the young people in the focus groups, not least the youngest, took their studies seriously and came across as mature in their outlook.

You can really see the difference in the maturity of the career college students, no matter how old they are, they just have a different aura about them. A lot of the 14–16-year-olds [are] mature and thoughtful... It's that opportunity to grow and mature because they're seeing so many role models from the sector. (Educational Lead, Trust)

Teaching staff also commented positively on the progression that these young people had made while studying in a Career College and the growth that had taken place. Levels of student satisfaction were perceived to be very good and there was a clear sense that *once they are on the programme they generally want to stay and progress* (Career College Lead).

Students valued the Career Guidance they received and felt that this and the wider opportunities helped them to plan for their future.

When you're at school you just want your GCSEs and get out whereas at the Career College they help you to understand what you want to do and give you guidance. (Student)

When you go to Career College you're a lot more prepared for your future and the line of work you want to go into. They'll recommend jobs for you to go into. They'll show you a wider range of jobs that you get by joining Career College that you can get. (Student)

Just the opportunities that they give you. They'll set you up for work experience, set you up for your CV, send you to different companies to see what it would be like. (Student)

The different ethos of the Career College and the school for some 14–16-year-olds was a slight source of tension which is perhaps inevitable given the different ways of working in schools and colleges.

One of the better things about college is that we get treated like adults whereas in school we're treated like kids. It makes us feel uncomfortable. (Student)

We have better relationships with [college teachers], it's more like being friends with someone than having someone think they're better than you, like at school. (Student)

Young people's experiences

In line with the vision of Career Colleges, students valued the wealth of opportunities as part of their enriched curriculum offer.

Speaking about that, one of our teachers, she would always tell us about projects and work experience, I'm doing one, it's not experience, it's a workshop and a games project where you're going to be helping a group of people make a game, which is going to be presented to the public. In a Careers College like course you are going to get those opportunities which is going to benefit you. (Student)

I think visiting the animation studio so we went and then we saw how it would be and they gave us lots of information and gave us emails, best time to enter and stuff, so it gave us more of an insight. (Student)

These experiences were seen to support students in their preparation for the world of work.

I feel, again, understanding of work and the industry we're getting into and we can get inspiration because it's not only the places we've gone to, we've had people come here and talk and for me it's freedom. But through these experiences I feel we are most prepared for when we leave the college. When I left secondary school I felt lost but when I leave here I'm going to feel prepared and ready. (Student)

Understanding careers, understanding business because being in Career College we've been given opportunities. We've had opportunities to meet employers we could be working for and understand what they want from us. (Student)

In comparison with their experience of school, students felt that the main differences in being at the Career College were:

All our tasks and projects, we have to a lot more work-related in terms of scenarios. (Student)

You're getting prepared for a specific field, as opposed to generic, prepared generically. (Student)

You get better prepared for the future and jobs you might want to be doing. (Student)

Parents were also reported as giving positive feedback, this from staff and students.

My mum, personally, she didn't really know. She wasn't sure if the course was right for me, if this career thing was going to take me anywhere because I come from a very traditional family. You go to college, you go to uni and you get a degree, yay. Because I chose something different it shocked my mum a bit but after a few parents' evenings she's understood this is the best thing for me and she's very supportive of it. (Student)

They see their children involved in their project, doing extra work, getting encouraged, taking responsibility, and of course the children come home and tell their parents. (Course Leader)

Among the young students, in some cases, it appeared that parents were someone unsure of the Career College at first, perhaps because they knew very little about it. Over time their perspective changed, and they were very supportive of the experiences their children were gaining.

Me mam was a bit unsure when I first joined but now seeing the opportunities I've had and how quickly I've already been offered a place in further education, which I wouldn't have got close to, she's a lot more happy and proud. (Student)

My mum was very sceptical at first because she didn't believe it was what I said it was but when we'd gone through most of the year she's realised it gives great opportunities like he said and better qualifications. (Student)

In some colleges the younger students worked with more advanced students so *progression opportunities can be seen right from the beginning* (Career College Lead). Pairing up of more and less experienced students matches the approach taken in, for instance, restaurant kitchens, so part of an authentic experience. Other positive experiences included opportunities for students to network as a result of which some level 3 students were offered jobs.

Responses from the teacher survey indicated that staff had positive perceptions of the experiences of the students in Career Colleges (see Table 4.2). Over 90 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that students enjoyed the practical elements of learning and valued the work experience/placement opportunities. Over 80 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that students received good quality careers education and guidance and that they developed confidence in themselves when attending the Career College. Over 70 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that students benefited from being in the Career College, that it

enabled students to fulfil their aspirations, that they were better prepared for their future career, that they made significant progress during their time in the Career College and that students benefited from the wider activities available in the whole college.

Table 4.2 Teachers' perceptions of the student experience

	Strongly agree (SA) % (N)	Agree (A) % (N)	Neither agree nor disagree NA/ND % (N)	Disagree (D) % (N)	Strongly disagree (SD) % (N)
Students benefit from being in the Career College	26.67 (8)	50 (15)	20 (6)	0	3.33 (1)
Being in a Career College enables students to fulfil their aspirations	20.0 (6)	56.67 (17)	16.67 (5)	6.67 (2)	0
Students make significant progress during their time in the Career College	20.0 (6)	53.33 (16)	23.33 (7)	3.33 (1)	0
Students enjoy the practical elements of their learning	53.33 (16)	40 (12)	6.67 (2)	0	0
Students receive good quality careers education and guidance	30.0 (9)	56.67 (17)	13.33 (4)	0	0
By attending a Career College students are better prepared for their future career	23.33 (7)	53.33 (16)	16.67 (5)	3.33 (1)	3.33 (1)
Students develop confidence in themselves when attending the Career College	43.33 (13)	40 (12)	13.33 (4)	0	3.33 (1)
Students enjoy the academic subjects they study	13.33 (4)	53.33 (16)	26.67 (8)	6.67 (2)	0
Students value the work experience/placement opportunities	46.67 (14)	46.67 (14)	6.67 (2)	0	0
Students know what they wish to do after leaving the Career College	13.33 (4)	53.33 (16)	33.33 (10)	0	0
Students benefit from the wider activities available in the whole college	33.33 (10)	43.33 (13)	23.33 (7)	0	0

Student progression

Student progression was embedded in the ethos of each Career College. One college, in its first year of operation had a four-year plan to connect the Year 10 students to an award-winning Higher Degree Apprenticeship programme offered in the college. Having undertaken their GCSEs, the vision was for them to take the new T Level in construction as a pathway to the degree. It was felt that this offered good progression opportunities and also provided sensible drop-off points if the young people decided construction wasn't what they wished to do.

Interviewees reported considerable opportunities and success in terms of progression – this across a range of qualification levels and pathways.

Last year all the 14–16-year olds progressed to apprenticeships, further education or employment. It's really important in changing the lives of those kids. (Career College Lead)
Our record so far with the students is excellent, 100 per cent into destinations, particularly employment. (Teacher)

Where students have gone to university interviews, they have a high success level of getting their first choice particularly within health and social care. Some of them will go into employment in our local NHS trust and we've got direct access into level 5 if they want to. (Career College Lead)

Information from former students and employers added to the evidence on successful progression into employment (See Box 4.4). For one former student being part of the Amazon Web Services (AWS) project was perceived as a key factor in gaining an apprenticeship with Amazon. As he said,

Being part of the Career College AWS project was key to me securing this apprenticeship. I knew from the moment I stepped into AWS' offices that it was a place I wanted to work – and presenting to senior staff members here during the project really increased my confidence. (Former student)

Central to student success was employer engagement and how it helped to raise student aspirations:

The employer would have a brief – I want you to build me a website. Straightforward [but] 3000 photographs to look at... All these kind of things. The client will ask a 17-year-old student – what do you think? When you put the gallery here, for this amount of money you will only be able to have this – what the kids like, they often haven't had success in life and here someone's asking them what they think. It gives them a confidence, they're in charge because they are the experts... this is a kid who doesn't have the best English talking to a bank manager, and that gives them the confidence their expertise will carry them a long way because they have a knowledge base that others don't have. (Employer)

Box 4.4 Royal Air Force success for former student

A former student at the Lincoln Air and Defence Career College successfully gained a place to join the Royal Air Force following her time at the Career College. She joined as a medic and recently graduated from her phase two training. She said:

I owe the success of my career to the Air and Defence Career College, they invested so much time into my training, put in so much effort to help me and teach me. I have been able to develop all the skills I received at college and apply it into every single day at work, and I have realised how valuable those skills are.

The Career College helped me to feel that I was always one step ahead in basic training, I had never felt more prepared for something in my life. Basic training was the most intense, intimidating experience I have ever done – the support I received from the Air and Defence Career College was phenomenal and I couldn't have gotten through it without them. (Former student)

From the perspective of employers, the benefits of employer engagement for students included:

Opportunities for insight into the careers in industry, trials to see if their choices are right for them. A chance to look at the different types of business and opportunities. (Employer)

Early engagement with industry employers to offer work placements of job opportunities long term. Gives students an insight into working life sooner. (Employer)

Well I have the students and they come to us do their work placements. They are quite motivated, good at time-keeping, they arrive on time, we have deadlines because we're working with clients so we say if you start a piece of work, then you have to finish it and come back and talk to the client after, so I think they've got the deadlines bit working quite well. (Employer)

This point was echoed by the Career College Trust Education Leads following conversations with students as part of the Review Framework. They were confident that employer engagement was key to the Career College students' experience:

...when you get the opportunity to talk to young people about the differences, they will tell you it's about that employer-facing experience that they have that makes all the difference. (Education Lead, Trust)

Where the Career Colleges had been running for long enough, former students were invited back to talk to the current students.

They come back and tell the current students what it's like and how the programme has benefited them. (Career College Lead)

Former students were also used in brochures and media to promote what they had achieved and what they had done. In one college a video was produced of one young woman who did her work experience at a large construction company. This was *a really good example, of a young woman with huge barriers who has progressed so well in the construction industry* (Career College Lead).

Summary

From the perspectives of the Career College leads, teachers, current and former students it seemed that Career Colleges provided a motivating learning environment and future pathways into work or study with high success rates. Students spoke with enthusiasm about how they had enjoyed projects and the practical activities all of which were linked to employability. These opportunities gave the young people insight into the world of work and of understanding how business worked. There was every sense that through these experiences the students had developed increased confidence and learned how to work more independently.

4.7 EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Embedding of employer engagement

Evident from the previous sections is how integral the curriculum offer is to the overall model of Career Colleges and how employer engagement is embedded within this in terms of the qualifications studied, approaches to project-based learning, assessment and the scheduling of wider experiences for young people. As one teacher responded when asked about what works well in your career college:

Introducing students to employers and industry that gives students the confidence to see that they have achieved a level of skills that will enable them into industry. (Teacher)

The centrality of employer engagement to the success Career Colleges was noted by several of the interviewees:

I think the opening thing, for the methodology to fit you have to have an employer with a need, an employer that wants to buy in... in this case it was about skill development... it's about identifying and supporting the development of skill needs in certain areas. (Career College Lead)

For me, if I compare it to places, I've worked before that didn't have that status or that involvement then it would just be connection to the world of work. (Teacher)

Similarly, the Career College Trust educational leads emphasised the value of employers as role models and as contributors to the curriculum by offering practical, meaningful, real-world experiences, not just 'stacking shelves'.

...a typical business studies class you would wax lyrical about all the different organisations and what they do but the career college students have actually been in and seen it and been part of it, so they do recognise the differences. (Education Lead, Trust)

...we wouldn't expect career college students to visit a site and be given a very dry tour without perhaps an activity or some research to do in advance, so they're actually involved in the work itself rather than rock up on a coach, file through and come out again. That's not the career college model, it's much more involvement with an employer... [students] have done a number of events for 500 plus, which is something that no college could ever provide. (Career College Lead)

Career Colleges have been operating for different periods of time some for four years, others just two and one started this academic year which meant inevitably that they were at different stages of development. For some, there were strong employer links before the establishment of the Career College, for others, this was an aspect of provision that they hoped would develop with the input of the Career Colleges Trust. Where colleges had more than one specialist curriculum area, often one of these had stronger employer links than the other: one aim of partnering with the Trust was to strengthen the weaker area.

All the colleges had a strong focus on the line of sight to work and employability. For instance, when discussing recruitment, one college lead commented;

When we talk to parents, when your child comes here we will not only get your child qualifications, but we will also get them to progress onto something that will lead them to employment in the near future. That's what parents want – the reassurance that their child will gain employment. (Career College Lead)

In setting out the vision for the Career College the importance of employer involvement was critical:

Fundamentally underpinning this was the college's commitment to employer engagement and specifically looking at how we can generate a more employer-led curriculum. (Career College Lead)

The same was true of the process of establishing the curriculum offer in relation to the centrality of stakeholder involvement. One teacher commented, *our whole curriculum is directly associated with the needs of our employers and specialist sector*. Even at interview stage, there was often a focus on the world of work.

The emphasis on employability and employer engagement was seen by some interviewees as marking the Career College out from the wider FE college:

I'm guessing the Career College students are getting more experience in what it's actually like to be part of industry whereas in other parts of the college possibly the emphasis is more on the curriculum and topics than employability. I'm sure that's not the overall case but our focus is definitely more on employability and giving these students more experience in that field, giving competitions and things like that, the equipment we're using and the standards we're using mimics what would be out there in industry. (Teacher)

They'll [the students] always be a part of that [the wider college] so what you're doing is giving them a status as members of the Career College and that also opens up relationships with employers who've bought into the Career College idea. (Governor)

In line with the Career College model, colleges were aware of the requirement to embed the teaching of maths and English within the specialist area. This was sometimes a challenge for those offering 14–16 provision where students studied the academic curriculum in school. In other instances, even when young people had Level 3 maths and English they undertook an English/maths type of module that was business related, again emphasising the world of work and the skills needed to be successful.

Generally, Level 3 students have maths and English. We do a Level 3 English/maths type of module that is business related – it may not be a qualification as such, but we ensure that they are developing higher level skills e.g. business English, business maths. (Career College Lead)

Employer engagement

All Career Colleges had an employer board and regular patterns of meetings throughout the year. Some met formally twice a year, others three or four times, one had six meetings each year plus a strategy meeting and another met every four weeks. Some of these boards had been in place before becoming a Career College. In other cases, the launch of the Career College and the support of the Trust had helped colleges to engage with more employers and to recruit these onto the board.

I think in some ways it has accelerated employer engagement. It's quite hard to define exactly what we've benefited because it's multi-faceted... It gives access to a wider group and they are ambassadors on behalf of the Career College. (Career College Lead)

Following Career Colleges, the employers engaged more than they had done previously. It started off with the majority medium/small employers but over time as we have developed ideas in general over the college and because we are in an area where there is a lot of development going on, we have been able to recruit Tier 1 construction and engineering companies. (Career College Lead)

Employer representation was high. Representatives included large companies as well as SMEs, although some Career Colleges wished to engage more, larger companies when in others this was already in evidence. As an illustration, in one Career College the board involved employers, two college governors, the Career College Lead, and representation from the two curriculum teams.

From the perspective of employers their involvement in Career Colleges was about making a difference in relation to their industry:

As a construction company we wanted to engage with young people who are interested in a career in construction and to promote the industry and its opportunities. (Employer)

and in relation to the local community:

[I'm a] local authority employer, involved as a stakeholder and employer, reason - to support the development of skills for local people. (Employer)

Overall all, employer boards were reported as working well:

The employer board for the Career Colleges is really good. The original idea was to have two boards one for each Career College but given they are evening meetings and people are busy, so it works better having one board. Also, there is such a lot of cross over between the two - this is increasing really quickly at the moment. If you go to any construction site now they are surveying with drones they are using modelling so there is a lot of technology so there is a lot of engineering. The same with materials, a lot more steel and glass now with people having engineering background rather than traditional construction. (Career College Lead)

In addition to the support given with the employer board, some interviewees also commented on how the Career Colleges Trust had been central in gaining access to employer who were seen as hard to reach:

This is one the things that's a benefit of Career Colleges because before I was always a real advocate of trying to contact IT companies and computing companies in nature are very secretive and don't want people to go in there. I tried Google, there's a gaming company I tried because a lot of students are interested in gaming, and it was very, very difficult to break into any IT company. One of the benefits of Career Colleges is they've provided us with contacts with different organisations over the years because, as I say, it's notoriously hard. (Teacher)

This was not always the case. One college had struggled to generate sufficient workplace providers and had hoped that more support would have been received from the Career Colleges Trust for this:

I thought there would be more exposure to the workplace and employers, better links with employers so the students have more opportunity. (Director)

The Career College was situated in an area where there are many major hospitals and healthcare providers, there was a lot of competition for work placements and the perception was *that the 16-18-year olds were relegated to non-consideration* (Career College Lead). While providers were happy to be involved with students over the age of 18, they were reluctant to take younger students.

What seemed distinctive was the development of a reciprocal relationship between employers and the college so that both parties would benefit. For instance, although one college had had conversations with employers about how they could contribute to the Career College by delivering guest lectures, upskilling staff and engaging in delivering teaching learning and assessment, they had also offered training to employers to undertake workplace assessments. There was a sense too, that this relationship meant that employers were being about to shape their future employees:

We have the opportunity to engage with young people and promote the construction industry. Long term to be able to offer apprenticeships and shape our own emerging workforce.
(Employer)

Another college commented on a change of focus with the board, saying:

What we do now is we change it completely where our main aim is to be giving the employers more than we're asking from them. (Career College Lead)

Where new facilities or buildings were being built, members of the employer boards often contributed their expertise in design, equipment and/or software. In one Career College employers had helped with the complete refurbishment of the kitchen and advised on state-of-art equipment.

There were often wider spin offs from this form of engagement, for instance in one college where a new campus was being built conversations with employers were impacting on the development of the curriculum:

We've had employer engagement in the building of the campus, and they have said have you thought about this and this has helped the curriculum team also. They have helped thinking about equipment and software. As part of this our construction team are now thinking beyond the biblical trades and thinking about new ideas. (Career College Lead)

Employer-led activities

A wealth of activities were in place. These included guest lecturers, masterclasses, skills demonstrations, site visits, extended work placements, mentoring and co-assessment for practical work. Not unnaturally employers were engaged in different levels of activity as illustrated in the following quotations:

I work with the college to offer employability training and work placements - I have also recruited. (Employer)

Day to day introductions to opportunities, promotion of the career college to local businesses.
(Employer)

Attending employer's board meeting with the governing body to help shape curriculum to industry needs and also offer industry expertise and work experience opportunities.
(Employer)

What seemed to set the Career Colleges apart from other colleges was the high level of sustained engagement with employers. One college had a strong contact with a local coach company who had the contract for tour buses around the city. The travel and tourism students had been on the buses and undertaken the 'meet and greet' of customers and given the commentaries during the tour. This was enabling the young people to develop in confidence.

Students in another Career College studying health and care benefited from strong links with the local hospital where they trained as part of their study programme. The hospital itself had its own educational unit, and nursing practitioners from there contributed their expertise to the college teaching. The fact that the hospital and college were in close proximity in this case made it easier to facilitate employer-led activities.

Their staff are here a lot. Our students train over there. (Career College Lead)

Furthermore, the opportunity to experience different work environments (e.g. Accident and Emergency and then a therapeutic placement) provided students with a clearer idea of what they might do in the future.

Air and Defence students had in the region of 22 to 24 excursions out to either operating RAF stations or to the stakeholders. These visits were built around career enhancements and, as with much of the work undertaken in Career Colleges, added to the authenticity of the career and work-related experiences that the young people were getting.

They can actually meet people that they aspire to be, to be more aware of their prospective career trajectories. (Career College Lead)

For students doing hospitality and catering, there were real benefits of associated with having a commercial kitchen. In one college students worked with key chefs from across the country and local restaurant owners. Regular guest chef evenings were held in the college restaurant with members of the local community invited. The Career College students prepared the food under the direction of the guest chef. In addition to these special evenings, students had work placements in college and workplace mentors. Level 3 students acted as mentors to level 1 and 2 students so there was a real sense of progression and role models.

Employers also contributed by identifying development areas for young people. In one college, following the launch event, employers commented that the young people could have made more of the networking opportunities. The Career College acted on this and offered students an additional session on softer skills – confidence, networking and developing their communications skills. The attitude was that:

If the employers say there is a skills gap, we will try to implement extra sessions to address identified gaps – these sessions can be offered by an employer or a member of staff. (Career College Lead)

Teachers responding to the survey also highlighted the importance of employer engagement:

Students get a lot of opportunities to liaise with employers from many different industries. (Teacher)

The competitions run by industry are motivational and boost students' confidence. (Teacher)

Employers and project-based learning

Related to the curriculum and to employers is the encouragement to use project-based learning in Career Colleges. Although this is an approach that any course could use, the special feature of Career Colleges is the opportunity to take part in real-world projects that are not just theoretical exercises but could have or do have application and could, potentially, cross disciplinary boundaries. Examples included developing apps, supporting small companies in complying with GDPR, creating a booklet for a young target market relating to tourism, and catering for events. All these projects enabled students to develop enterprise capabilities such as teamworking skills, problem-solving, communication, cooperation, planning and organisation. See Boxes 4.5 and 4.6 for further examples.

Box 4.5 Real world Project-based Learning

The local RAF Fire and Rescue museum had closed down. They had lost their building. This charity has a vast collection of 40-50 old engines. Unsurprisingly there is a huge cost to take old engines to public displays and exhibitions and they didn't have any storage for them. They wanted a way of promoting the museum and they had an idea of a mobile museum trailer which opens out with digital activities. The museum went and bought the trailer and they brought it into college. So, the project centred on what should the mobile museum look like and what should it have. This is the problem a) we need to go out to the shows b) we want to talk about the history and the engines and c) talk about fire safety. The students were split into different groups – project management, finance, construction, digital – info graphics to tackle this. (Career College Lead)

Box 4.6 PBL as part of induction

There are over 40 roles in the RAF and a number of roles in our support partners. Most young people don't know about all of these careers or roles. So the project focuses on the need to identify a social media campaign around all the different roles within the RAF. Students will need to research the roles and find about social media marketing. Students work in groups doing peer to peer work and critique each other. At the end of the projects there is always an artefact, a presentation and a critique of the work of others. This gives them a much better understanding – students finding out the different roles rather than us spoon-feeding them. They retain it better also. So again, developing a whole raft of employability skills within a project. (Career College Lead)

Where project-based learning was working effectively and involved employers it added to the young person's understanding of the specialist area, the world of work and the skills required to be successful.

We also set them projects around the sector that they're in so they do project-based learning and they research and present projects on the stake-holding companies that we have. (Career College Lead)

Undoubtedly, it was the authenticity of the experience that was valued, as indicated by one teacher who commented *it gives the students the real world instead of scenario-based lessons.*

Frequently employers set tasks for young people and contributed to their assessment, for instance, *so, a quantity surveyor comes in and they do a task where they cost out building a single garage* (Career College Lead).

Central to the experience of many Career College students was the annual industry-led project that was organised and run as an inter-college competition by the Career Colleges Trust. For the last three years Career Colleges Trust had run this in partnership with AWS and a range of charitable organisations. For 2019 the partnership extended to the Samaritans, London Sport, Marylebone Cricket Club and UK Active. The involvement of several partners meant that the project crossed boundaries between aspects of digital, and health and social care and thereby extended beyond the curriculum to enable young people to think about the wider community.

A total of 58 Students from four digital Career Colleges had undertaken the eight-week challenge to develop an innovative digital solution to promote the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of young people. Each team appointed a project manager, and participants had two project meetings with the client to develop their ideas. The project culminated with students presenting their ideas to judges at the AWS head office in London.

This rich experience was highly valued by the students (see also Box 4.7).

I went to Amazon the other week. I'm meant to be helping with a project to pitch a game idea to a load of companies. When we were there, they were talking about what the work's like, what it's like to be an employer, how to get the jobs so that gave me a greater understanding of the media business. It was a really good opportunity to go to Amazon and learn about how they get jobs, what they do, when we do it. (Student)

Box 4.7 The impact of employer engagement

It gives you more of a professional view of the industry. When we were there they were talking about roles and it gave me a mature understanding of how business works. I guess it's given me a better work ethic. It's made me want to work harder to get into the role I want. Everyone has a specific role and it's up to you to make sure you're doing what you need to do and it's more like you can't rely on someone else, you have to take the consequences of your actions, you have to make sure you're doing the work you're meant to be doing and you can't push blame on other people. If you're given a specific job you have to get that done. (Student)

The wider benefits of this experience were echoed by the teaching staff:

One of the benefits is that it brought that concept of working for the industry and it's been good for the students because it's a transition time, mentally and emotionally, and they became more mature, more responsible. (Teacher)

An important element was not just carrying out the project but reflecting on and learning from it:

They take the idea and have to develop it. It's amazing, the difference in the students between the beginning and end... they have to appoint a leader, manage a budget... in a company you work with people, you might not like them, you have to get on with them... They're not really aware that they're learning. It's about them doing it and then realising they're doing it... I always run a workshop at the end of the project about lessons learnt. (Educational Lead, Trust)

In one college where employers had been involved in the construction of a bespoke programme for the Career College, they also had an integral role in assessment. In selecting modules, the college had written a scheme of work and assessment schedules around what the employers said they were looking for. Previously employers had commented that across different qualification levels (even those who had graduate training) they were missing certain skills, such as reading financial information, or putting together a professional email or presentation. As part of the new approach to assessment, the college integrated employer-led ways of assessing students, in response to the identified skills gaps (see Box 4.8).

Box 4.8 Employer-led assessment

So rather than do a traditional report or a presentation, as before, they are doing things like presenting on a project through different means. This could be a spreadsheet or a set of financial accounts; they might have to communicate it through email or other means... In terms of the email, they [the students] might have to send it to employers and then employers would feedback on how professional they felt it was. This has been a completely new way of doing assessment. (Career College Lead)

Some interviewees acknowledged that project-based learning needed to be developed further and had discussed this with the Career Colleges Trust as part of the review meeting.

We are currently working on embedding PBL across traditional GCSE subjects, to reinforce/enhance the learning of vocational subjects. It is really exciting and engaging for both staff and pupils. (Teacher)

Often students were engaged in small projects, but these needed to be developed more extensively.

Career College Trust education leads were mindful though that the projects or work experiences and specification requirements might not match up. College staff could play a role in aligning the employer-led or employer-based experiences with the course requirements, but there was a call for awarding bodies to respond to a different approach to teaching and learning.

It's for the college to pull out what they can use for their BTEC. Quite a lot of it won't be BTEC-usable... Because it's paid, you can't use [the work] for their qualifications. The awarding organisations want to see essays. They're not really geared up for how you can use the practical work, and that goes back to trying to get awarding organisations to be more flexible. (Education Lead, Trust)

Entrepreneurial and enterprise activities

Given the short time that several of the Career Colleges had been operating, it was acknowledged that they were in different stages of development whether in relation to entrepreneurial activities or project-based learning, for example.

To an extent, entrepreneurship was encouraged across all Career Colleges.

I always encourage it [entrepreneurship]. There's a lot of past students who, most of them, worked for companies at the time and set up on their own as self-employed engineers. (Teacher)

In one college, during the first two years of being a Career College, the focus had been on the employer programme, internships, placements and visits from industry speakers every week. Their plan was to link enterprise into this and ensure that employers were linked in. They did, though, have a vision of what they are looking for:

We do do enterprise but it's an area that we want to revisit and do more of. Making sure that students are doing more than those obvious enterprise activities like raising money for charity but more about the entrepreneurial skills they are developing. (Career College Lead)

In another Career College the Lead talked about the recent progress they had made with enterprise and project-based learning so that this was part of the Year 10 offer and of how

We're naturally doing it. Some lessons you're looking at product and using those skills to make something for real that could be used commercially. (Career College Lead)

The catalyst for this work had been an awareness that as staff they had no clarity of definition of what was meant by enterprise, so we came up with our own definition and that helped us to plan what we were doing and recognise that we were doing enterprise without realising it (Career College Lead).

One FE college had their own trading company where students could bid for business. Career College students benefited from this (see Box 4.9).

Box 4.9 Bidding for work

It gives students the opportunity to get earned work opportunities, so in the creative and digital space we have a number of, well actually anyone from the community, any organisation, any company can apply for a piece of work to be done and our students will pitch in, do and quote and if the offer is right they'll win the business. So, for example, our students have created Apps for the NHS, that's paid income. That's something we've done in the career college subjects, something we've initiated. (Career College Lead)

Other students had been fortunate to work on an advertising agency commission for a piece of artwork for new transport provision. Their brief was to *go along with the flavour of what the carriage was like, this one was ice cool, air-conditioned, the polar bear idea, so things that were related to the whole idea of travelling on the new line* (Teacher).

In the FE sector students are often encouraged to take part in national skills competitions; these could be the World Skills Competition (World Skills UK is the biggest vocational skills competition of its kind in the world), enterprise competitions or regional competitions. All these opportunities enable students to develop a wide range of skills relating to enterprise and entrepreneurship such as communication, team working, risk-taking and collaboration. In addition, they were seen to develop confidence among the students.

The competitions run by industry are motivational and boost students' confidence. (Teacher)

For example, in one college the design of a float for the mayors New Year's Day Parade was part of a competition that involved students on joinery and construction courses. They worked collaboratively to develop the design plans and to construct the aeroplane float on top of their normal college hours. The students won second prize and were awarded money for charity.

Summary

It was evident that staff and students valued the high level of employer input. This assisted with *making the students understand what is needed to be employed* (Teacher). Where employer engagement was working well, what was particularly striking, was the contribution made to the authenticity of the student experience. This was seen in the involvement of employers in the co-creation of project-based learning and involvement in assessment and feedback, the line of sight to work and progression, and in the quality of the work placement/experience. The opportunities for young people to develop their understanding of the world of work and to develop their confidence were plentiful. The focus on project-based learning also enabled students to develop a range of skills and capabilities relating to enterprise such as team working, collaboration, planning and co-ordination and the resilience required to see a project through to completion. This in addition to discreet entrepreneurial and enterprise activities. It was apparent that Career Colleges are at different stages of development and for some more work was required to establish meaningful entrepreneurial and enterprise opportunities.

4.8 STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF THE CAREER COLLEGE MODEL

Strengths of the Career College model

There was considerable support from staff and students for the Career College model, its aims and vision. It was notable that in many colleges, being a Career College student was presented as an aspirational choice for young people.

It is evident from the research that, although, there is not just one model of a Career College, there were, however, several common themes. These are set out in alphabetical order.

Contribution from the Career Colleges Trust

Interviewees were positive about the contribution made by the Career Colleges Trust, the support with the launch events, the training opportunities and the work of the educational leads. For some, the Career Colleges Trust had been influential in engaging more employers with the Career College.

The educational leads were valued by staff and Career College leads for their supportive approach to development and for the assistance given to establish and grow the Career College within their

institution. Staff appreciated how the educational leads worked in an adaptable way with colleges. They also had a wealth of experience to bring. It was evident that the process of the Review Framework had worked well for most colleges as a scaffold in setting up the Career College. The process had helped college staff to think about how they engaged with employers, including the establishment of the employer board, collaborations over qualifications, projects and work-based learning opportunities.

It was all useful in setting up a model that has all the extra employability skills that we want our students to have. (Career College Lead)

The CPD training offered by the Trust, such as that for digital literacy and project-based learning, was well received. Where Career Colleges participated in the annual Amazon project, staff and students gained an immense amount from this experience.

Employer engagement

All staff involved in a Career College had a shared vision around the involvement of employers as an essential element of the Career College concept. Employers were valued as role models and as contributors to the curriculum by offering practical, meaningful, real-world experiences. The employers had much to offer to students' learning and their experience, all geared towards future employment. Employers also brought access to resources beyond the classroom, for example the use of industry-standard software, which would be beyond the budget of a general FE college, and in some cases they contributed to the design of new buildings and specialist provision.

Employer engagement and employability were viewed as a real strength of the model by Career College leads, teachers, parents and students. This included access to specialists and their contribution to the curriculum; work experience and placements; the line of sight to work and employment; enrichment trips; and the benefits for learners. In many instances, the quality of the work experience was very high. Younger students realised that they would not have these opportunities in school.

Project-based learning

Allied to the importance of employer engagement, was the commitment of the Trust to foster project-based learning and hands-on practical activities as an approach to teaching and learning. The CPD provided by the Trust on project-based learning had been essential in developing aspect for many staff. Overwhelmingly students and staff valued these opportunities. Students reported learning new skills, developing in confidence, learning more about their vocational pathway and valued the preparation they were gaining for their future careers. Where project-based learning was fully embedded employers were involved in the co-creation of projects including assessment and feedback.

Transitions

Central to the work of all the Career Colleges was a strong concern for the progression for their students whether this be to future study, employment or an apprenticeship, indeed there were some wonderful examples of successful destinations among the students. For the 14–16-year-old students there was a strong sense that their experiences of being in a Career College and starting their vocational pathway at this age, would make for a smooth transition into the main college. Among the older students the additional opportunities as a Career College student were felt to enhance their employment opportunities.

Challenges

Several challenges were articulated, divided into the following areas: cost, curriculum, expectations of the Trust, identity, tracking of student progress and sustainability. However, some of these issues overlap, such as identity and curriculum.

Costs

In a minority of Career Colleges membership of the Career Colleges Trust was considered expensive at a time when the government is not providing any funding to offset extra costs. In one of the 14–16 Career Colleges, the schools were not paying for the Career College students and the college itself was funding this.

Costs were also connected to the required number of hours involved and therefore the curriculum.

... we were just creating situations to keep students at college to meet those requirements and therefore it was unrealistic and for us to do the job properly, the funding that was available... just doesn't stack up. To be funded for a study programme of 540 paid delivery hours and for us to be running programmes at nearly double that becomes a financial burden. (Career College Lead)

There are questions to be asked about the financial model underpinning the Career Colleges concept and whether it is sustainable in the long term. Where Career College students were in college for the full five days a week, staff were aware that in essence the college was paying for this themselves. It appeared that this commitment was beyond what could be offered to other students.

There is also a link here with recruitment and access. Being more selective could be financially compromising. The model of a Career College that is set apart from the rest of the college in some way becomes problematic as a result.

Curriculum

Already referred to is the imposition of government requirements in developing the curriculum, including Progress 8 and 16–19 Study Programmes. These requirements impacted on 14–16-year olds learners in the choice of vocational qualifications and the time that they could spend on their specialist area.

The educational leads and some staff raised an interesting point about how the projects or work experiences and specification requirements might not match up. While college staff could play a role in aligning the employer-led or employer-based experiences with the course requirements, there was a call for awarding bodies to respond to a different approach to teaching and learning.

It's for the college to pull out what they can use for their BTEC. Quite a lot of it won't be BTEC-usable... Because it's paid, you can't use [the work] for their qualifications. The awarding organisations want to see essays. They're not really geared up for how you can use the practical work, and that goes back to trying to get awarding organisations to be more flexible. (Educational Lead, Trust)

The tension between developing employability and the demands of delivering a qualification was also raised in conjunction with the emergence of T Levels.

The T levels – I get the concept behind the T levels, I understand why they're coming in, it's very difficult for me personally, or any teacher here, because we have a balance. We have the Career College pulling us in one direction for employability, the T levels will be important for that and how to give the skills to learners but we also have a curriculum to deliver and sometimes it seems like they're pulling in different directions, that's what I see, rather than them working together. (Teacher)

As T Levels are rolled out, this will be an important area to all college staff to consider, not just those working in Career Colleges.

It would be anticipated that where Career Colleges have high levels of employer engagement this will help with the implementation of T Levels and the required industry placements. There were though requests for greater support from the Career College Trust from teachers including need for a *wider range of industry links to input into curriculum and assessment* and for *more help for teachers who are trying to link up with employers*.

Expectations of the Career College Trust

While many of the college staff were supportive of the developments since becoming a Career College this was not the case everywhere. In a minority of Career Colleges staff saw little value in being a Career College. For some this seemed due to a mismatch in expectations about the role of the Career Colleges Trust in relation to increasing employer engagement and opportunities for students to undertake industry placements:

Nothing's changed. We've not received any work experience placements through the Career College. (Manager)

or to offer wider student opportunities:

They [the Career Colleges Trust] haven't really generated or created anything in addition to what we've always survived on. (Manager)

or the professional development for staff

Their offer is limited to some staff development but in the general scheme of things our staff wouldn't have asked for that, but in terms of benefits cascading to students it's been zero. Nothing outside what we've always done. (Manager)

Several staff also highlighted the need for greater networking across the Career Colleges to share good practice, to develop specialist areas and to generate a stronger sense of the presence of Career Colleges.

I do often ask for links with other Career Colleges, I'd love to get in touch with some other Career Colleges, have a forum, but it hasn't quite come about. (Manager)

More interaction with other Career Colleges [as] I have no idea who else is in the system. May be a seminar so that we can get together and share ideas. (Teacher)

While acknowledging the annual conference, some interviewees suggested this was more of a showcase than a forum to share experiences and learn from one another.

In two FE colleges staff felt that they had surpassed what the Career College Trust could offer. In both they acknowledged that the Trust had been really helpful in the assistance and support provided when setting up their Career Colleges, but felt they were no longer getting value for money.

Identity of the Career College brand

Throughout the evaluation everyone spoke of Career Colleges as a concept that was centred around the idea of employability and a vocational education that has strong connections to employers and the real world of work. However, often respondents felt that the identity of the Career College brand was not known well enough to attract students or perhaps to create trust between institutions.

People hear these words. It's like the academies. Who are they? The words are bandied about, and people think 'yet another initiative'... It should be a separate bit of the college, it's a college within a college that has a pure vocational focus, to develop a whole range of skills that will develop a young person for the world of work. (Educational Lead, Trust)

It's slightly embarrassing when we have trainers come in and they haven't heard of them. Ofsted, he hadn't heard of Career Colleges and I feel a bit foolish sometimes that people we bring in don't know about it... (Programme Manager)

It was felt that the same was true of many parents, even when students were studying in a Career College.

I'd be very surprised if any parents understood or knew anything about Career Colleges. They would know about the projects, they're developing an App, they're developing this but wider than that there wouldn't be anything. (Teacher)

Several participants would like to see the brand being advertised more by the Career Colleges Trust.

I think it is about brand awareness and being a lot clearer about what you actually get from it. (Career College Lead)

I think there needs to be more promotion from Career Colleges sides about this, really explaining what it's about. (Career College Lead)

Getting Career College out there – so many people have never heard about it - it needs a national campaign, like the NCS one. (Teacher)

In some cases, staff employed within Career Colleges, recognised that there were internal challenges about branding the Career College within the main FE college.

There have always been questions about how we visualise the students in the Career College. We always had an intention of branding the area a bit, not just told in the induction, but recognise that it's a college within a college, which I know is part of the ethos. That was difficult to achieve. I don't think we branded. We didn't put the Career College logo up. We didn't reinforce the process. The technical support, the printing. It was always on somebody else's priority list, but it just didn't happen. They were going to have a different lanyard but security, student services said no. They wanted to keep the security tight. (Programme Manager)

One of the challenges with branding relates to the flexibility of the Career College model. It was evident from the research that there is no one Career College model. This presents challenges for the marketing of the brand or concept because different colleges have different approaches, for instance, to access and recruitment. This trade-off between flexibility and a more rigid approach to make branding explicit is something the Career Colleges Trust may wish to consider.

Each college's website did refer to their Career College somewhere, most often as a news item when the Career College was launched, reached through searching for 'Career College' so not easy to find. Only one of the case-study colleges' websites referred to there being a Career College on the home page and in that case, once selected, the two subject areas offered were stated and linked to further information. The Career College was clearly identifiable, therefore, and stood out as an important part of the college more widely and the curriculum offer.

Undoubtedly, where the Career College approach was valued, there was a sense of pride in being part of this:

When I see Career College things in the media I do feel good that we're part of it, so there are moments I feel like oh it's growing but I would want, it's not in my gift, if it had a bit more a national position and we could say oh we were there in the early days, a few teething problems but now it's really good. (Programme Manager)

This begs the question of how Career Colleges capitalise on success. Owing to relatively small numbers in many of the colleges, there are relatively few students who can report on the value of a Career College course and encourage the next set of learners to join, thereby contributing to the expansion of the Career College.

Allied to the challenges of the branding of Career Colleges, was a question about the visibility of Career Colleges in the large FE colleges in which they are situated, and the number of initiatives colleges would be working on at any one time. As one governor explained

A college like us has five core areas on which it focuses, so we've made a deliberate choice to focus in on five particular areas, and I think anything that advances relationships with employers and creates opportunities for kids from the local community has got to be a good

thing... It is one of a number of different initiatives. There's not one single mode within which we'll develop relationships with employers, clearly different levels of programmes, different types of programmes, different target groups of students will require different types of arrangements and relationships. (Governor)

How each Career College sits within the different parts of the wider college is something to consider.

Sustainability

In two FE colleges staff felt that although the initial support and development received from the Career College Trust had been instrumental in shaping their provision, they had outgrown what the Trust could offer them.

I think it's very difficult for an organisation like Career Colleges to grow and be sustainable because the way employment and industry works, computing, it's evolving all the time so one size doesn't necessarily fit all. That's the danger that organisations like the Career Colleges Trust may face if they don't evolve... (Teacher)

Staff in some colleges questioned the usefulness of the review framework after the initial start-up period of developing the Career College concept and had subsequently developed their own approaches to action planning.

Another challenge was about the size of the Career College in relation to the outgoings the colleges make and the possibility of expanding. Building links with schools was challenging and there were limited opportunities to do so, although the interviewees continued to seek those links. Some would like the Career College Trust to be involved with apprenticeships and drawing in employers:

...getting employers in, focus on work placements, little projects is all well and good, but I don't think we can sustain that over five years, we need to do something more meaty and worthwhile. (Career College Lead)

Underpinning these concerns there appeared to be an underlying question about the capacity of the Career College Trust to evolve to support the current requirements of Colleges. In this context, it was a little surprising that stronger evidence of preparedness for T Levels wasn't seen.

For some colleges with 14–16-year-old students, recruitment was difficult given the local competition from schools. Indeed, some Career Colleges had decided against 14–16-year old direct entry for this reason. Whether the provision for young students is sustainable in all Career Colleges is uncertain.

Tracking of student data

The lack of available MIS data was disappointing. It is important that the Trust maintain accurate records of the number of students in Career Colleges, their qualifications and destinations so that they can demonstrate evidence-based success. While understanding that FE colleges are extremely busy, better ways of sharing data need to be considered.

Summary

The challenges and strengths identified by the respondents often reflected the local context, how long the Career College had been established, how the Career College functioned within the larger institution and the subject specialism. For instance, more than one college already had in place strong links with employers and a commitment to employability, which eased the inclusion of a Career College as part of their provision. This contrasted with one Career College where they had struggled to gain sufficient employer buy-in.

Undoubtedly the strengths of the Career College approach lie with the high levels of employer engagement that, in conjunction with the highly experienced staff in colleges, support the adoption of project-based learning as a pedagogic approach. This means that students benefit from rich, authentic experiences and through these develop a wide range of employability skills that enable them to progress to further study, apprenticeships or employment. The work of the Career College Trust through its CPD offer and the employment of educational leads supports this development.

There are though several challenges that warrant reflection from the Career Colleges Trust and the Career Colleges themselves to ensure the wider success and sustainability of this concept.

5 Conclusions

This report has set out the different ways in which Career Colleges operate, how the identified specialist areas are rooted in the skills priorities within each locality, the contribution made by employers and how this is linked to the curriculum offer and experiences of the young people.

Our findings indicate that the distinctive and innovative features of the Career College model are as follows.

1. The ethos embraced, and the vision identified across all Career Colleges, particularly around strengthening levels of employer engagement and the line of sight to work and further study, which is directly related to skills priorities within the local area.
2. The decision to launch a Career College to further develop the expertise the college already had in the specialist area(s) – including approaches to teaching and learning, and employability.
3. Training provided by the Trust and the work of the educational leads was supporting the development of project-based learning and digital literacy and helping Career Colleges think about ways of working with employers.
4. The continual process of development and support underpinned by the Review Framework which was effective in the setting up of Career Colleges.
5. High levels of employer representation on employer boards and the benefits accrued from this. In several instances the Trust had enabled Career Colleges to engage with more employers.
6. The wealth of meaningful, embedded employer-led activities in place, including a taste of enterprise/ entrepreneurship, that make a significant contribution to the authenticity of the student experience and the students understanding of the world of work.
7. The extensive vocational and professional experience of teaching staff and how they see employer-engagement as central to the provision offered to the young people.
8. The notion of Career Colleges as an aspirational choice for some young people.

There is every sense that the Career College initiative is offering a form of ‘vocational enhancement’ to strengthen existing vocational provision and vocational organisations in key sectors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is work to be undertaken to maximise the potential of the Career Colleges concept. Some of this relates to conceptual thinking around the brand, the operation of the different Career Colleges, the affordances of the Career College network and the role of the Trust. The flexibility of the Career College approach presents challenges for the identity/brand of each Career College and how this sits

within the locality. This would suggest that the different Career College ‘models’ might benefit from being conceptualised more clearly according to the extent they constitute ‘distinctive’ or ‘integrated’ approaches to curriculum, employer partnership, professional development and student support developments. Also important to consider is how the evolution of Career College strategies could be informed by ‘mutual learning’ across this national network, something requested by several Career Colleges, together with in-depth understanding of relationships within colleges and across localities. As part of this thinking the Trust would benefit from reflecting on their role in developing the Career College concept and how this is communicated clearly to participating institutions.

The sustainability of the Career Colleges also suggests some actions to be taken. At a practical level it is essential that effective systems of gathering student level data are put in place so that student success and progression can be demonstrated by more robust quantitative data in addition to the individual success stories. There are questions to be asked about whether financial issues may impact on the sustainability of Career Colleges with respect to the ‘expense’ of delivering the provision (e.g. curriculum time) and the fee paid to the Trust. Local competition with schools may also impact on the sustainability of the 14–16-year old provision, as has been seen with the recent move of some UTCs to extend their intake to 11-year olds. As would be anticipated in a relatively new initiative there is development work to be undertaken to support high quality project-based learning and entrepreneurial activities across all Career Colleges. One further point relates to the Review Framework. It is evident that the Trust had put much effort into developing this process and has continued this development since its launch. Although the framework had been of significant value in setting up each Career College there were questions about its utility after that period.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Pedagogic approaches to teaching and learning

The demands of the 21st century, in relation to the complex economic, environmental and social challenges that we face, call for different approaches to teaching and learning and assessment that enable young people to develop a wider range of skills and attributes than previous generations (e.g. Hipkins and Cameron, 2018; OECD, 2018). Within this, student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, as seen in project-based learning, can prepare young people for life and work; it also makes them engaged, motivated and keen to learn, all of which underpin life-long learning.

The emphasis on project-based learning in Career Colleges offered rich activities that promoted a deep approach to learning where young people engaged with employers and their teachers to develop new ideas, artefacts and products. Team-work and independent learning were encouraged and supported within this approach. The assessment of these tasks, including presentations to employers, encouraged critical thinking, reflection and creativity. This contrasts with the reforms to qualifications in England where the emphasis is on linearity, factual knowledge and exam-based assessment. The consequences of an exam-based system include teaching to the test, a narrowing of what is taught and the adoption of a surface approach to learning by students (Hodgson and Spours, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2008; Daly et al., 2012; Madaus and Russell, 2010). Without question more varied forms of assessment are needed where authentic evaluations evidence the development of non-traditional outcomes such as employability and life skills.

The 14–16-year-old curriculum offer

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc), introduced in 2011, was designed to increase the uptake of the core ‘academic’ curriculum – English, mathematics, science, history or geography and a language. It brought a shift in GCSE entry policies in schools with students ‘encouraged’ to take EBacc subjects (Weeden, 2011). The introduction of Progress 8 marked another shift in the uptake and provision of qualifications and subjects with significant changes in the proportion of young people entered for the full Progress 8 and a jump in the proportion of young people taking at least four EBacc subjects. Allied to this are concerns among secondary school teachers that the EBacc has led to a narrowing of the curriculum offer (Neumann et al., 2016).

The 14–16-year-olds in Career Colleges were receiving a different educational offer to that in many England schools. Evident from the evaluation was how they valued the opportunity to follow a vocational pathway and how they benefitted from employer engagement. They were aware that they would not have had these opportunities had they not been in a Career College. Important here is the issue of learner motivation and the mismatch between a restricted academic curriculum and the interests, aspirations and skills of the students (Rogers, 2016). It is time for the Key Stage 4 curriculum to be revisited so that students have a choice in the subjects that they study, that they are engaged and motivated in their studies and have opportunities for success. This could become more important with the introduction of Technical Levels (T-Levels) especially with regard to how young people make informed decisions about occupational qualifications if they have little experience of technical and vocational education prior to age 16.

Technical Levels and employer engagement

The introduction of Technical Levels (T-Levels) as the vocational equivalent of A-levels, may help to address the perceptions that vocational qualifications are second best, and may provide a meaningful progression opportunity for 16-year-olds. The challenge here, as noted by others will be in establishing high levels of employer engagement to secure the industry placements that are required for all learners. Strong knowledge of the local community and skills shortages will be essential here – noteworthy was that in all the Career Colleges decisions about the specialist areas were premised on the skill priorities within the locality and the expertise of the college. This meant that students had strong opportunities to progress to employment, apprenticeships or further study and were not taking qualifications for their own sake.

The approach taken by the Career Colleges Trust and the Career Colleges in building sustained employer engagement might provide a fruitful avenue for others to learn from. It is also possible that the Review Framework together with the model of support provided by the educational leads could be useful starting point. Specific implications for fostering employer engagement arising from this evaluation include:

- The establishment of an employer board involving college staff and employers working in partnership, where employers inform the curriculum and contribute industry and business expertise.
- The embedding of authentic employer-led projects that enable students to engage in ‘real world’ tasks and activities so that students develop the attributes and skills needed for employability and enterprise.

- The success of employer-led projects, including entrepreneurship and enterprise activities, is further enhanced when these are integrated into the approaches to teaching and learning and the programme of study being followed. This necessitates creative approaches to assessment, such as when college staff map the activities to the learning outcomes of the qualification.
- College-wide strategies to enable all staff to continually update their professional expertise. This includes time to develop and sustain relationships with employers.

In summary, Career Colleges provide a motivating learning environment for young people and future pathways into work or study with high success rates – the strength of this approach is underpinned by the Career College model. The innovative nature of the model is seen especially in the centrality of employer-engagement and the authenticity of the student experience.

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The Edge Foundation and the Commercial Education Trust commissioned UCL Institute of Education to undertake an evaluation of Career Colleges between April 2018 and July 2019. Career Colleges, supported by the Career Colleges Trust, offer a choice in vocational education opportunities for 14–19-year old young people. This is an innovative model and the evaluation aims to investigate how Career Colleges fulfil their objectives from the outset.

The overall aims of this research were to understand how Career Colleges are set up and operate; the perceptions of Career Colleges held by different stakeholders; how employer engagement and commercial education contributes to the experience of the young people; how Career Colleges support young people's transition to positive destinations and how the Support, Review and Development Framework, developed by the Career Colleges Trust, drives improvement.

From these overarching aims it was possible to characterise the uniqueness of the Career College model including the factors that contribute to its success, the wider applicability of the Review Framework and the identification of wider policy implications in relation to 14–19 education.