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EVALUATION OF INCREASED FLEXIBILITY FOR 14 TO 16 YEAR OLDS PROGRAMME: OUTCOMES FOR THE FIRST COHORT

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Introduction

The Increased Flexibility for 14-16 year olds Programme (IFP) was introduced in 2002 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to provide vocational learning opportunities at key stage 4 for those young people who would benefit most. The programme, which entailed FE colleges and training providers working in partnership with schools to offer GCSEs in vocational subjects, NVQs, other vocational qualifications and GNVQs to students, was subsequently extended to three further cohorts of young people.

The DfES commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an evaluation of the first cohort of participants. This summary presents selected key findings relating to the attainment, progression, attendance and attitudes of the first cohort of IFP students (2002-2004).

Key Findings

- The majority of young people who took new GCSEs and GNVQs attained their qualifications (91 per cent and 80 per cent respectively). In addition, the majority of the sample of young people who had undertaken NVQs and other vocational qualifications had achieved the qualification at the end of Year 11 (66 per cent and 67 per cent respectively).
- In addition, the GNVQs and NVQs achieved by these young people contributed to them gaining higher total point scores than would have been expected given their prior attainment and background characteristics. However, those who took GCSEs in vocational subjects attained levels commensurate with their prior attainment and those who took other vocational qualifications achieved fewer points than might be expected compared to similar students who did not participate.
- Students who studied GCSEs in vocational subjects and GNVQs, but did not participate in IFP, also attained better outcomes than might be expected and, indeed, gained higher points still than young people who had taken these qualifications through IFP.
- Overall, the transition target for IFP partnerships had been successfully met, as schools reported that around 90 per cent of young people who had been involved in the first cohort of IFP had continued into further education or training post-16. Analysis of the cohort as a whole, using matched participation and attainment datasets, indicated a post-16 participation rate of 80 per cent. Two-fifths (42 per cent) of young people said that their participation in IFP had influenced their decision about their post-16 destination.
- The majority of young people who were undertaking a course post-16 were pursuing a qualification that was at a higher level than the level of the course they had undertaken through IFP.

Background

The Increased Flexibility for 14-16 year olds Programme is delivered by means of partnerships between a Lead Partner, which is usually a college of Further Education, partner schools and sometimes other providers, such as training providers and employers. The partnerships are working towards a number of targets relating to achievement of qualifications, progression after Year 11 and attendance during the programme.

The IFP was introduced in 2002 and subsequently expanded to second, third and fourth cohorts commencing in the autumn term of each of the years of 2003, 2004 and 2005. For each cohort, about 300 partnerships have supported the learning of around 40,000 young people in Years 10 and 11. The IFP was therefore reasonably well established as one of the key means for providing curriculum flexibility by the time of the publication of the Tomlinson Report in 2004 (*14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform*) and the subsequent White Paper: *14-19 Education and Skills* (2005).

The DfES commissioned the NFER to undertake an evaluation of the first cohort of IFP using a range of data collection methods. Four previous reports of the evaluation have explored the nature of the cohort and partnerships, the outcomes in terms of development of skills, and changes in attitudes at the end of the second year, and the experience for partnerships and students of implementing and participating in IFP.

This summary presents selected key findings relating to the attainment, progression, attendance and attitudes of the first cohort of IFP students (2002-2004). These findings reflect the outcomes for young people who participated in the development and implementation of a new mechanism for increasing flexibility in the curriculum through working in partnership across education providers which has become increasingly established in successive years.

Outcomes for the First IFP Cohort: Achievement of Qualifications

The research examined the extent to which the IFP met its objectives in relation to the attainment of young people who participated in the programme

using multi-level model analysis. This explored their attainment, compared with similar students who had not participated, in terms of their total points score at key stage 4, their eight highest grades achieved and their achievement of five A* to C grades.

The majority of students who participated in the first cohort achieved the qualifications that they had undertaken. Nearly all (91 per cent) of those who had taken GCSEs in vocational subjects had attained passes at grades A* to G and 36 per cent achieved grades A* to C. Among the students who had taken GNVQs, 80 per cent had achieved the qualification. Within this group of students, 84 per cent of those who took an intermediate GNVQ achieved the qualification and 68 per cent of those who took a GNVQ at foundation level achieved the award. Around two-thirds of those in the sample who had taken NVQs and other vocational qualifications achieved their qualification (66 per cent and 67 per cent respectively).

The qualifications achieved by these students contributed to the total points that they achieved at the end of key stage 4. Students who participated in IFP attained slightly higher total points overall at key stage 4 than students who were similar in terms of their prior attainment and other background characteristics who had not participated in the programme. However, for students who had taken GCSEs in vocational subjects and GNVQs, the total numbers of points based on their eight highest achievements were lower than might be expected.¹

Although overall students who participated in IFP gained more points than similar students who did not participate, the total points scored by students differed in relation to the qualification that they were studying. Students who had taken GNVQs and NVQs through IFP gained more points than might be expected. The total points scores of those who took GCSEs in vocational subjects did not differ significantly from the outcomes that would be expected, and those who had taken other vocational qualifications attained fewer points than might be expected. Moreover, students who had taken GCSEs in vocational subjects and GNVQs, and were similar to IFP participants in terms of their prior attainment and other background characteristics, but had not

¹ Students who had taken NVQs and other vocational qualifications were excluded because of difficulties in ascertaining how such qualifications contribute to their eight highest achievements.

participated in IFP, gained more points than IFP participants.

Students with lower attainment at key stage 3 who took GCSEs in vocational subjects, NVQs and other vocational qualifications, gained more in terms of their total points achieved at key stage 4 than those with higher attainment at key stage 3. In addition, male students who undertook NVQs through IFP gained more points than similar students taking these qualifications who were female.

Around 15 per cent of the sample of students appeared to have discontinued their involvement in IFP in so far as they had embarked on a GCSE in a vocational subject or a GNVQ but were not entered for these qualifications on DfES's National Pupil Database (NPD). Further exploration of this group indicated that they gained significantly fewer points at key stage 4 than similar students who had not participated in IFP, or students who had continued their involvement in IFP to the end of Year 11.

Having a positive attitude was associated with gaining higher total points at key stage 4, while poor punctuality and truancy was associated with gaining lower points. Evidence from the surveys of IFP participants indicated that IFP students' attitudes improved between Years 10 and 11, and around half said that participation in IFP had made them more aware of the importance of qualifications and learning. This may have contributed to this improved outcome at key stage 4.

Partnerships where some of the delivery of IFP qualifications was shared between schools and external providers were associated with higher outcomes in the IFP qualifications. Partnerships which were smaller (for example working with five schools or fewer) were associated with higher outcomes in IFP qualifications. Involving employers in the partnership, through using them as visiting speakers, was associated with higher outcomes in qualifications taken through IFP.

Outcomes for the First IFP Cohort: Post-16 Destinations

The majority (90 per cent) of the sample of young people were reported by their schools to have

continued into further education or training after finishing Year 11. Analysis of the cohort as a whole, using matched participation and attainment datasets, indicated a post-16 participation rate of 80 per cent. Most of those in the sample had embarked on a course-based route (in a school sixth form or at an FE college or training provider), while a notable minority were following a work-based route, in an Apprenticeship, or other job with training. Students who had taken their IFP course away from school, and those who had undertaken an NVQ pre-16 were significantly more likely to have continued into further education at an FE college or training provider than elsewhere.

Two-thirds (66 per cent) of young people undertaking a course post-16 were pursuing a qualification that was at a higher level than the level of the course they had undertaken through IFP. Some young people appeared to have a continuing commitment to the vocational area they studied through IFP. This is reflected in the finding that around two-fifths (41 per cent) of those taking a qualification post-16 were taking a course that was in the same subject area as their IFP course.

Eight per cent of respondents felt that they would have been employed, rather than in further education and training, if they had not participated in IFP. This suggests that IFP may have encouraged these young people to consider further education, rather than employment, post-16.

A range of variables emerged as influencing these young people's post-16 destination, including their experience pre-16, through IFP. Just over two-fifths (42 per cent) of young people reported that the IFP had been an influence on their choice of post-16 destination and, indeed, eight per cent felt that their IFP course had been the most influential factor on their post-16 choice. Those who had taken an NVQ or GNVQ through IFP, and those with lower levels of attainment at key stage 3, were significantly more likely to have found IFP influential. Young people who had not continued into further learning after Year 11 were less likely to have talked to a school teacher or college tutor about their plans for the future than respondents overall.

The majority of young people, particularly those who had continued into further education or training, were positive about what they were doing post-16. However, nearly half of young people would have liked more help and guidance in deciding what to do after Year 11,

particularly in relation to exploring which careers might suit their skills, abilities and interests. Just over a third of young people stated that they were considering continuing into higher education. Although students who were taking NVQs, GNVQs and other VQs post-16 were less likely to state that they were intending to continue into higher education, a notable minority were considering this option.

Outcomes for the First IFP Cohort: Attitudes and Attendance

The evaluation also aimed to assess the impact of the IFP on participants' attitudes and attendance. Young people who participated in IFP and were surveyed in Years 10 and 11 were significantly more positive about school and its usefulness for their future in the second year of the programme. A positive change in attitude towards school was associated with having talked to an informed person about their progress towards the qualification that they were studying.

There was evidence that students who participated in IFP improved in their confidence in their ability between Years 10 and 11. Improved confidence was associated with discussing progress on the course with an informed adult and finding the course interesting.

The sample of students for whom details of their overall attendance was provided had missed around ten per cent of their curriculum time across Years 10 and 11 due to authorised and unauthorised attendance. The proportion of days missed was slightly greater for this sample of students in Year 11 (11 per cent) than Year 10 (nine per cent).

A comparison of the attendance of students who participated in IFP with their peers in Years 7 to 11 in the same schools suggested that IFP participants had slightly more authorised and unauthorised absences than their peers. Among the IFP cohort, the students had missed two per cent of time due to unauthorised absence while in their schools on average, students missed one per cent of their curriculum time due to unauthorised absences. Within the IFP cohort sample, students who had taken NVQs and other VQs through the programme had significantly more absences than those who had taken GCSE and GNVQ qualifications.

Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation of the first cohort of IFP has found that the majority of students who participated had benefited in so far as the majority achieved their qualifications at the end of the programme and nearly all had progressed onto further education and training. Overall, students gained more points at key stage 4 than similar students who did not participate in IFP although, in the case of GCSEs in vocational subjects and GNVQs, students who took these qualifications through the programme gained fewer points than similar students taking these qualifications who did not participate.

These findings, together with the findings reported previously in the evaluation² which indicated that there was evidence that IFP participants had developed their social skills and confidence in their employability skills, including interpersonal, communication and problem solving skills, and their attitude towards school, suggest that, on the whole, the IFP made a valuable contribution to the education of the first cohort of participants.

The evidence indicates that, where students had benefited from participation in IFP in terms of their key stage 4 attainment, those with certain characteristics appeared to have benefited more than their peers. For example, young people in the first cohort who had lower attainment (level 5 or below) at key stage 3, and who studied GCSEs in vocational subjects, NVQs and other vocational qualifications, benefited more in terms of their total points achieved at the end of key stage 4 than students with higher attainment.

In terms of the achievement of the qualifications that students were undertaking through IFP, students who found the course 'interesting' had better outcomes than those who had found it 'boring'. Students who had a positive attitude towards school gained more in terms of the points they achieved through their IFP qualification than other students. One aspect of IFP delivery that appeared to contribute to the development of a positive attitude towards school was providing the opportunity for students to have discussions with a teacher or tutor about their progress on the programme.

² GOLDEN, S., O'DONNELL, L. and RUDD, P. (2005). *Evaluation of Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds Programme: the Second Year* (DfES Research Report 609). London: DfES.

With regard to the delivery approach, it emerged that young people who attended partnerships where the approach to delivery was shared between a school and an external provider, achieved better outcomes in terms of the points achieved through IFP qualifications than those where delivery was through other approaches, such as an external provider only, or a school only, teaching the qualification.

Certain aspects of IFP partnership working also appeared to be related to achievement outcomes for young people. Students in partnerships that were larger (working with more than five schools) achieved less well than similar students in smaller partnerships. Moreover, those where EBPs had been involved in steering groups, and those where employers provided visiting speakers, experienced better student outcomes than those where this was not the case.

The IFP had been an influence on the post-16 choice of two in five IFP participants, and, for eight per cent, the IFP had been the most influential factor on their post-16 destination. There appeared to be some continuity of routes from pre-16 to post-16, as students who had taken NVQs or other VQs through IFP were more likely to be taking these types of qualifications post-16. This suggests that participation in IFP, therefore, may have given young people the opportunity to find out more about the qualification pathways they could follow post-16. There was some indication that this transition into further education and training would be sustained, as most young people planned to remain in education and training for two years or more, and around a third were considering continuing on to higher education.

Policy Implications

The experience of the first cohort of IFP participants may be helpful for informing the future development of the IFP and similar programmes. The findings point to a number of possible implications for policy:

- **Targeting students** The evidence indicates that there were particular outcome benefits for students with lower attainment at key stage 3. This suggests that, if such a programme is to be targeted at a sub-group of students within school, it may be worth considering targeting it

at lower attaining students who would potentially benefit more from the experience.

- **Further guidance** Around half of the IFP participants surveyed indicated that they would have liked more information and guidance about their post-16 choices. In particular, it appears that young people who wished or chose to pursue a work-based route post-16 had a particular need for guidance. This suggests that, while many students would benefit from enhanced information, advice and guidance relating to their destinations after Year 11, those who intend to pursue a work-based route post-16 would particularly benefit from guidance about that route.
- **Engagement of students** Higher attainment at key stage 4 was associated with students having a positive attitude towards school. Finding the course interesting, and having helpful discussions with teachers and tutors about progress on the course, in turn, were associated with having a positive attitude towards school. There would be value, therefore, in ensuring that teachers and tutors are able to incorporate these discussions into their delivery of the programme and to ensure that their delivery is engaging for participants. One mechanism for achieving this might be to encourage opportunities for providers to share experience and good practice.
- **Shared delivery approaches** The evidence indicated that partnerships were more effective in terms of higher attainment where they included some element of delivery by school staff, either shared teaching with an external provider, or through delivery in the school. Shared teaching approaches were used in a minority of partnerships, so there may be value in exploring how best to support partnerships in further developing this shared delivery aspect of IFP.
- **Partnership organisation and communication** The findings from this report indicated that smaller partnerships were more effective in terms of attainment outcomes than those which worked with larger numbers of schools. This may be related to the time required to liaise with, and coordinate provision with, a large number of schools. While this suggests that encouraging partnerships to work more effectively with a smaller number of schools may be worthwhile, this would need to be balanced by the need to continue to enable as many schools to participate as wish to do so. Identifying creative and more effective approaches to working in partnership with a large number of schools may

usefully inform the further development of partnerships.

Additional information

Copies of the full report (RR668) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

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