
IMPLEMENTING THE INCREASED FLEXIBILITY FOR 14 TO 16 YEAR OLDS PROGRAMME: THE EXPERIENCE OF PARTNERSHIPS AND STUDENTS

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Executive Summary

The Increased Flexibility for 14-16 year olds Programme (IFP) was introduced in 2002 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in order to "create enhanced vocational and work-related learning opportunities for 14-16 year olds who can benefit most". Partnerships between a Lead Partner, which was usually a college of Further Education, partner schools and sometimes other providers such as training providers and employers, were formed in 2002 to achieve this aim. A first cohort of Year 10 students embarked on two-year vocational courses including NVQs, other VQs and new GCSEs in vocational subjects in the autumn term of 2002. The IFP was subsequently expanded to a second cohort of Year 10 students in autumn 2003. Across these two cohorts, around 300 partnerships are supporting the learning of 90,000 young people in Years 10 and 11.

The partnerships aimed to raise the attainment of students who participated. They also aimed to increase students' skills and knowledge, develop their social learning and increase retention in education and training after 16. They are working towards a set of targets relating to achievement of qualifications, post-16 progression and attendance. The DfES commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an evaluation of the first and second cohorts of IFP students. This summary presents the main findings from interviews conducted during follow-up visits to nine partnerships. Further details about the interviews are provided at the end of the summary.

Key findings

- ♦ In the nine partnerships visited, most students were said to be on target to complete their qualifications at or above the level predicted for them. Involvement in IFP was said to have contributed to positive developments in students' maturity, self-esteem, self-confidence, independence, attendance, preparedness for the future and career aspirations.
- ♦ The majority of students interviewed planned to embark on vocational or academic qualifications at school or college or start an Apprenticeship or job with training.
- ♦ Nearly all students interviewed would recommend their course to their peers. Reasons given for this were: because it was different from school, vocationally-relevant, enjoyable and interesting and allowed them to take a post-16 qualification before they left school.
- ♦ The interviewed students chose to participate in IFP because they wanted to learn away from school, preferred a practical style of learning and because the vocational area was of interest to them or related to a career aim.
- ♦ The students who learned away from school generally appreciated that tutors treated them like adults and provided individual support and they enjoyed the more practical approach to learning. They also liked the alternative environment and facilities and meeting new people.
- ♦ Most of these nine partnerships had retained more than three-quarters of their first cohort of IFP students. Where students discontinued early, this was sometimes due to IFP-related issues such as inappropriate selection, lack of commitment to the course by students and inability to adapt to an alternative learning environment. However, it was also due to wider issues such as personal and school-related problems.
- ♦ The partnerships visited appeared to have been largely effective in ensuring that students gained positive outcomes from their IFP experience over the two years. The partnerships had retained the involvement of schools and matured over the two years with some initial concerns allayed. Interviewees in colleges, training providers and schools identified good communication, positive working relationships and having agreed aims and objectives as important features of effective partnerships.

Partnership working and organisation

On the whole, the Lead Partners, schools and other providers who had formed IFP partnerships for the first cohort of students in 2002 remained in partnership for the second cohort in 2003. All but one of the partnerships visited had increased the number of schools with whom they worked for the second cohort.

Partnerships were generally managed by a steering group and communication was supplemented by much regular, informal communication. On the whole, the schools visited considered that communication between partners was adequate, although two reported that elements had been unsatisfactory. Approaches to communicating with schools varied within these partnerships: some tutors were in direct contact with school staff while, in other cases, the Lead Partner coordinator was the main point of contact. Increasingly, external providers were producing written reports of students' progress for schools which could be shared with parents.

Interviewees in the nine Lead Partner organisations and their partner schools generally considered that their partnerships had been successful in delivering IFP for the first cohort of students. They identified good communication, positive working relationships and having agreed aims and objectives as important contributory factors to effective partnership working.

Core funding received for IFP was often supplemented by both Lead Partners and schools. In addition to drawing on their own budget, the Lead Partners visited had accessed finance from LSCs and European funding and, in two partnerships, had charged schools to some extent to deliver IFP courses. Schools which had subsidised IFP had used their own budgets to cover the cost of staff escorting students off-site and for additional teaching costs. Perceptions of whether IFP offered good value for money varied among interviewees and may have been influenced by the number of students participating in a partnership and the delivery approach adopted, which was agreed at a local level by individual partnerships. It is worth noting that partnerships were allocated broadly identical funding and decided the number of students who could participate. As noted above, some used additional funding to support the IFP. Some interviewees took into consideration the outcomes for individual students and consequently considered that it did offer good value for money whereas others noted that it did not offer good value for their organisation.

Programme development

In general, tutors who were interviewed considered that the qualifications which the students were pursuing through IFP were appropriate in terms of their level and content. Some expressed concern that, as they perceived it, the new GCSEs in vocational subjects were not practical enough and not appropriate for students of lower ability. Most of the nine partnerships had altered the qualifications which they offered to the second cohort of students. This included adding new qualifications in response to schools' requests, although these were not always taken up by students, and changing to a more appropriate qualification.

Four of the partnerships had adopted a partnership-wide model of delivery whereby the Lead Partner was the sole provider. In the remaining partnerships, a combination of delivery models was used and no one approach dominated. The approaches within these partnerships included: delivery entirely in college, shared delivery between the Lead Partner and the school, delivery in school with college staff teaching and delivery in school with some support from college staff. In the main, the partnerships had retained the approaches they had used for the first cohort of students for the second. During the first cohort, three partnerships had changed at least one of their courses from some or all delivery in school to teaching the course in college, at least in part.

At an early stage in the first cohort, tutors who were interviewed had recognised the need to adapt their teaching style to suit the needs of younger students. For example, varying their teaching methods and dividing the time into smaller chunks. Although some felt that teaching this age group would be an ongoing development process, they had not changed their approaches notably for the second cohort of students.

Timetabling IFP courses remained an ongoing challenge for some schools in these nine IFP partnerships. Although one Lead Partner had changed from provision on two half days to one whole day, in response to tutors requests and in order to reduce problems with attendance and punctuality, partnerships had not adopted any noticeably different approaches for the second cohort. On the whole, the introduction of a second cohort had not adversely affected timetabling. Indeed, some interviewees had found timetabling the second cohort easier because of their prior experience with the first cohort and the additional planning time with the second cohort. Overall, the experience which schools had of timetabling did not

appear to have been sufficiently problematic to lead them to discontinue their involvement or not to participate in the second cohort.

The involvement of employers in IFP courses in these nine partnerships was not widespread but appeared to have developed over the two years of the first cohort as more partnerships reported that they had developed such links. In some cases, this was facilitated by the use of other organisations such as Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) or by personal contacts which tutors had with employers. Interviewees and participating students generally considered that involving employers would make a valuable contribution to the programme by helping students to see the relevance of their learning and to gain a better understanding of the world of work. Interviewees commented on the challenge of engaging employers such as the limited time available to tutors to develop these links, the lack of appropriate employers and the reluctance of employers to participate. However, tutors sought to ensure that students gained an insight into the working world through the use of real work environments, drawing on personal experience of employment to relate theory to practice and accessing information about employers on-line. Interviewees were seeking to further develop their links with employers in the future including through working with their local EBP. Some were considering minimising the burden on employers by considering the most appropriate way to use their time.

The college tutors who were interviewed had often attended training relating to working with 14 to 16 year olds and specific qualifications. There had been little joint staff development between schools and colleges. Outstanding training needs which were identified included further guidance on working with this age group, guidance and support regarding the new GCSEs in vocational subjects and raising the profile of IFP and of vocational qualifications among staff in schools.

Initially, some college staff interviewed in 2003 had reported reservations about the IFP and the ability, attitudes and behaviour of the students involved. However, there appeared to have been some improvements in their perceptions and tutors acknowledged the benefits to the students and to the college. Some teachers expressed concern that school staff who were not directly involved with the programme were not fully aware of IFP and its potential benefits.

Students' experience

Some of the 45 students who were interviewed chose to participate as part of their options process, while others had been approached by a teacher and invited to participate. The students could choose whether they wished to participate or not and generally chose to do so because they wanted to learn away from school, they preferred a practical style of learning or because the vocational area they were studying was related to a career aim or was of interest to them.

All but four of the interviewed students undertook at least part of their IFP course away from school. A total of 33 students undertook their entire IFP course away from school and eight studied partly at school and partly at college. Nationally, around two-thirds of students studied off site which was a smaller proportion than was the case among the interviewed students. Where the students had studied off site, they generally appreciated that tutors treated them like adults and provided individual support and they enjoyed the practical approach to learning. They also valued the change of environment and the opportunity to meet new people and be more 'grown up' and the access to college facilities. A few students had concerns about learning away from school. These included difficulties they had experienced with travel, learning approaches which they had not liked and the attitude of tutors where they were "too strict".

Support provided by some external providers for students included access to learning resource facilities and the provision of Learning Support Assistants or teachers in the classroom. There were instances where providers had instituted Saturday drop-in sessions and access to on-line resources. Students had generally received an induction to the college or training provider and appreciated the ongoing support provided by their tutors.

Support provided by the schools visited to assist students to complete their qualification did not appear to be extensive and students generally only worked on their IFP qualification during their IFP sessions. However, some schools provided opportunities for students to work on their IFP qualification during timetabled study support sessions and some teachers visited their students off site. Half of the interviewed students reported that they missed other timetabled lessons as a consequence of attending their IFP course. Many felt that they caught up with the work missed successfully, although a few of these indicated that they did this independently.

While half of the students who were interviewed felt that the amount of time they spent on the course was about right, half did not. Of these, half felt that they would have liked more time so that they were less pressured while the other half would have liked less time because they sometimes lacked interest in the course. Most of the students considered that they had made good progress on their courses and were provided with ongoing feedback by their tutors.

Nearly all of the interviewed students said that they would recommend their course to their peers because they had found it different from school, vocationally relevant, enjoyable and interesting. They believed that they had benefited from taking a qualification which was relevant to their future choices and had enabled them to gain a post-16 qualification before their peers. They believed that it was valuable to have the choice to take vocational qualifications while at school.

Perceptions of the impact of IFP

Interviewees identified a range of positive effects of IFP on their organisations. They had experienced improvements in staff's attitudes towards IFP and their confidence in delivering courses. They also considered that it had enabled them to provide a broader curriculum offer for students at key stage 4. IFP was also said to have enhanced links with external organisations and to have raised the profile of some organisations. IFP had also benefited partnership working, although this was mentioned less often by interviewees. Improved collaboration and reduced competition between education providers and enhanced communication between colleges and schools were noted to have occurred as a result of IFP.

The implementation of IFP with a second cohort of students appeared to have been informed by the experience of the first cohort in certain respects. More specifically, some partnerships had learned how to adopt a more informed approach to identifying students to participate and a more tailored approach to teaching and learning. Some partnerships noted that they had better partnership organisation through advance planning and joint negotiation of issues and a more appropriate approach to discipline and support of students. Some partnerships had also re-assessed the degree to which colleges should be involved in the delivery of IFP courses and were considering a slightly reduced involvement in future.

Half of the interviewees had no concerns regarding the impact of having two cohorts of IFP students on

their organisations. However, the remaining interviewees perceived that the increased number of participating students was creating capacity issues in terms of the availability of resources, increased administration requirements, staff workload and timetabling. In contrast, a few interviewees believed that the introduction of a second cohort had consolidated and raised the profile of IFP.

Most of the nine partnerships had been successful in retaining the students who had embarked on their IFP courses in the first cohort. Although all encountered some students discontinuing, in most partnerships, less than a quarter discontinued. In two partnerships, more than half of the students had discontinued. In some cases, the reasons for discontinuing which staff identified were related to IFP. These included inappropriate selection of students, lack of commitment to the course by students, individual students experiencing difficulty adapting to the different learning environment and because students were missing lessons. Students were also said to have discontinued for reasons that were not related to IFP, including having wider school-related problems and students having left, or been excluded from, school. Some students discontinued for personal reasons such as family difficulties.

The majority of staff interviewed who commented on the achievements of the students considered that most were on target to achieve their qualifications at, or above, the levels predicted for them. Involvement in IFP was also said to have contributed to positive developments in some students' maturity, self-esteem and self-confidence, independence, attendance, preparedness for the future and career aspirations. Many students themselves also felt that they had matured and developed their confidence through their IFP experience.

Staff considered that involvement in IFP had led to positive outcomes for students' progression post-16 in terms of their choices to remain in learning post-16, to undertake a course in the same or different vocational area and being more able to make an informed decision about their post-16 choices. The majority of students who were interviewed planned to embark on vocational or academic qualifications at school or college or to start a Modern Apprenticeship or a job with training. Around half of the students were continuing with plans that they had before Year 10 and half had changed their plans. Most of this latter group appeared to have been influenced positively by their IFP experience in their plans.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The visits to partnerships revealed that, on the whole, students who had participated in the first two years of IFP were on course to achieve their qualifications and had benefited from developing personally and socially and in their preparedness for the future. The partnerships between schools and colleges and training providers which had facilitated this success had been most effective where there was good communication and relationships between the partners, along with commitment from all parties to shared aims and objectives.

The students who had undertaken at least part of their course away from school had valued the alternative learning environment and the approach and teaching style of the tutors. There was evidence that these students had benefited in their personal development and social skills, which suggests that there is value in IFP partnerships continuing to strive to overcome some logistical and practical challenges in order to offer this balance between school-based and college-based provision. Ensuring that students who participate in IFP are well-informed about the content of the course, the nature of the approach, and the associated commitment required by them, emerged as important in terms of minimising the risk of students discontinuing their involvement before the end of the two years of the course.

In some cases, tutors' initial concerns and reservations about the students they would be teaching through IFP were not realised and they were beginning to perceive benefits to the students and the college of their involvement. School staff who were not directly involved were less aware of any benefits and raising the profile of the positive outcomes for students could make a valuable contribution to the place of vocational learning within schools' curricula.

Finally, the experiences of staff and students in these partnerships of the first two years of IFP revealed some implications for policy. These included the need to ensure that schools and colleges have sufficient support to develop their links with employers and the need for ongoing professional development for college staff in teaching a younger age group and the new GCSEs in vocational subjects. Finally, it emerged that there is a need to ensure that students access good guidance when making their choices to participate, including through ensuring that school staff are fully informed about vocational options. Overall, the research has revealed that there are positive outcomes where schools and colleges and training

providers work in partnership to offer greater flexibility to students at key stage 4. However, policy makers need to take into consideration the logistical and operational complexities in merging two types of providers, and the associated costs, when seeking to develop such provision.

Summary of research methods

The findings presented in this summary are mainly based on interviews conducted in nine partnerships in February and March 2004 with:

- ♦ IFP coordinators in nine Lead Partners;
- ♦ a total of 18 tutors across a range of vocational areas in each of the nine Lead Partners, six representatives of other external providers comprising two senior managers and four course tutors;
- ♦ one student support worker;
- ♦ 25 school staff in 17 schools;
- ♦ 45 Year 11 students in 16 schools across the nine partnerships.

Visits were conducted in the same partnerships as in spring 2003 and, where possible, the same individuals were interviewed.

Additional information

Copies of the full report (RR562) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB562) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Maura Lantrua, DfES, Room W606, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.

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