

Alternative provision: Effective practice and Post-16 transition

Introduction and background

Alternative Provision (AP) is education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; it can also involve pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour. Traditionally, local authorities have provided AP in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). More recently, many of these PRUs have become academies or free schools, and there is a broad range of other AP on offer, run by independent institutions. Some students are enrolled both at a mainstream school while also receiving some form of AP.

In recent years, a number of concerns regarding AP have been expressed, including: pupils missing out on the core skills of English and maths; lack of support for reintegration into mainstream education or progression to Post-16; and a lack of challenge for pupils in AP.

The *Educational Excellence Everywhere* White Paper (March 2016) set out the government's commitment to reforming alternative provision (AP). Accountability arrangements will change so that a pupil's mainstream school will retain accountability for their educational outcomes and will take a lead role in commissioning their provision, including those who have been permanently excluded. Schools will also have responsibility for the budgets from which AP is funded. The White Paper also proposed an innovation fund to test new approaches to support pupils who move directly from AP to post-16 education.

In the light of these proposed reforms to AP, this literature review was commissioned by the DfE to explore the evidence about successful strategies in AP provision. It focusses on the following themes: effective strategies for supporting transition from AP to Post-16; practices which have been shown to be ineffective; and where evidence is most secure or most limited. Evidence was gathered through online searches and reference searches using a wide range of databases and websites. After an initial sifting process, 85 documents were included in the review.

In reporting from the research it must be noted that a number of changes have taken place, such as the raising of the participation age, and wide reaching reforms to vocational qualifications; these have yet to be reflected in the literature.

Key points

Monitoring quality and impact

- Relatively few AP programmes are rigorously evaluated and monitored by schools and AP providers. A 2011 Ofsted report highlighted the variable nature of AP evaluation and a further Ofsted report in 2016 stated that 'too few schools evaluated properly the quality of teaching and learning that their pupils were receiving'.
- AP staff are generally keen on the possibilities of evaluation and tracking young people after they leave programmes but find it difficult to find the time and resources to collect and analyse the data. A further reason for lack of effective evaluation is that providers are not always good at stating their programme goals.
- Some providers collect basic data on their pupils following transition into post-16 learning or employment, which indicates to some extent whether a programme is effective in this area.
- More work is needed to examine the effectiveness and reliability of tools to measure the outcomes of AP.

Understanding pupils' needs

- Referral to AP should be on the basis of a comprehensive assessment of the pupil's needs and aspirations, with input from the pupil and his/her parents or carers, so that the selected provision is a good match. A large number of studies support the contention that a 'one-size fits all' approach to commissioning is ineffective and that the package of support chosen should be an individualised one. An approach which involves adapting programmes and tasks to the individual needs and learning styles of pupils is more successful than those which require the pupil to adapt to the programme.
- Providers need to conduct their own assessment of pupils' needs as part of a 'fresh start' approach, and that assessment should include consideration of wider needs as well as those related to learning. Assessment should include understanding pupils' aspirations for post-16 to ensure that the academic and/or vocational offer supports their progression.



Communication and partnerships

- Involving parents and carers can help counter negative perceptions of AP and enable them to provide better support to their son or daughter. One example of good practice from the literature is a project working mostly with pupils with a black Caribbean heritage. In this project, a six-weekly review meeting is held with pupils, their parents or carers, their mainstream school and, where appropriate, other services such as the police or social services (Evans 2010).
- Young people need to be more involved in the provision which is set up for them. Kilpatrick et al (2007) found that many of the 318 young people interviewed as part of research into AP in Northern Ireland had little understanding of why they had been placed in AP and had been provided with little or no information before beginning their placement.
- Partnership approaches with mainstream schools support successful reintegration as well as having the potential for the two types of schools to learn from each other.
- Partnerships with colleges and employers improve the chances of young people continuing to participate in education and training. This can include APs providing support post transition.

Positive relationships and autonomy

- Positive relationships with staff in AP settings are both the foundation of positive learning experiences, and an important element of social learning. Mastering the ability to develop respectful adult relationships is necessary for successful progression into further education or employment. Relationships with trusted support workers that continue beyond the placement in AP can also help young people to make positive transitions post-16. Allowing young people a degree of autonomy and choice in their learning and environment is instrumental in securing their engagement and helping them to act independently.

Behaviour management

- Many AP settings use a mixture of rewards and sanctions to manage behaviour, with clarity of the rules and their consistent application being seen as supporting positive outcomes. There are concerns that, while such behaviourist techniques are effective in the short-term, more therapeutic interventions may be needed to help students develop the self-management skills they need to make successful transitions into work or further education.
- There are some reported benefits to the use of isolation units as a technique for avoiding exclusion, but also concerns that any effect on pupils' behaviour patterns is short term. There is no evidence of success for the 'boot camp' type of behaviour interventions.

Curriculum and pedagogy

- There is no consensus on what the constituent parts of an appropriate alternative curriculum should be. Some suggest that the initial focus of providers should be learning behaviours for many young people, and others argue for an emphasis on the academic and/or vocational curriculum from the outset.
- Most of the literature supports a curriculum that encompasses core skills, including maths and English, along with a vocational offer including work placements, although some authors caution that not all young people in AP wish to follow a vocational programme. There is some disquiet that pupils in AP can sometimes be offered a

somewhat utilitarian curriculum, rather than one which is broad and rich.

- Although later studies are picking up an increased focus on the achievement of meaningful vocational qualifications and of math and English GCSEs, there is still some evidence that pupils are not being sufficiently challenged and that they are being offered vocational options that do not support post-16 transitions.
- There is some evidence that curricula which provide opportunities for engagement with the wider community are beneficial and motivating for pupils. There is more limited evidence for the benefits of complementary programmes incorporating physical activities.
- The literature on pedagogy in AP highlights the importance of small group instruction and individual attention, with awareness of individual students' needs.

Progression

- Several studies highlight the importance of developing clear transition pathways and transitional support for pupils as they move out of AP. It is important to forge links between AP and local colleges and employers in order to assist pupils in making the post-16 transition to less rigidly structured environments. High quality targeted careers advice is extremely important.

Staff and facilities

- High quality alternative education providers are strongly committed to their staff and support professional development but there are few opportunities for staff in different AP settings to share expertise and experiences.
- Alternative learning programs which are effective take place in clean and well-maintained buildings that are attractive and inviting and that foster emotional well-being, a sense of pride, and safety.

Schools' development of AP

- An increasing number of schools are developing in-house AP provision with a view to reducing the number of pupils sent off-site. In-house provision is generally regarded as improving attainment and engagement by the end of Key Stage 4 and facilitating progression to post-16 education and employment.
- Early identification of need (in Year 9) is an important feature of school-based preventative approaches to supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET (i.e. not in education employment or training). Interventions need to begin as soon as signs of difficulty emerge.

Gaps in research

- There is a lack of evidence as to whether and how transitional pathways and programmes contribute to effective post-16 transitions. Research in this area relies on anecdotal evidence or on very basic analysis which does not show the impact of transitional pathways.
- There is a lack of longitudinal evidence to show to what extent pupils have been successful after embarking on their Post-16 studies.
- There is surprisingly little evidence available on effective pedagogy for working with particular groups of pupils, e.g. in relation to gender and ethnicity.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-provision-effective-practice-and-post-16-transition>