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Andrew Malcolm

Published online: 11 Jan 2022.

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Sustaining Post-16 destinations from Alternative Provision: a review of the data and the perspectives of heads from low, mid and high performing schools

Andrew Malcolm [iD]

Applied Social Studies, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK

ABSTRACT

This study set out to explore which practices in alternative provision (AP) settings in England made a difference to post-16 transition success into further education, training or employment. APs provide education for pupils who have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools and those directed there to improve their behaviour. In 2016, 56% of young people transitioning from AP maintained a stable placement in the following year. This study took an approach which combined the analysis of official statistics, freedom of information requests and targeted semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that practices which increased sustained transitions included; effective and ongoing tracking of ex-students; a high-quality, core academic offer; and opportunities for students to increase their independence by taking well-measured steps outside of their main placement. Additionally, the views of staff and their involvement in, or awareness of, the broader context within which they worked were found to be important. This study evidences the value of comparing outcomes across similar types of setting to improve our understanding of effective practice.

Introduction

Young people in alternative provision (AP) will often have experienced significantly challenging life circumstances (Malcolm 2021). Supporting stable transitions towards adulthood is an important way in which these experiences can be ameliorated and is considered a key mark of success for AP (DfE 2018). This study explored institutions where rates of stable onwards transition varied significantly to better understand the practice which supported these outcomes. While this study is of English AP, the international similarities of good practice reported in AP (Thomson 2014) mean it is highly likely the findings of this study will be worthy of consideration by all those interested in education provision for marginalised and excluded pupils. This study will be of particular relevance to those who are interested in transitions for young people in AP beyond formal education into more specialised courses or work destinations. In England the transition at the end of the academic year in which a young person turns 16, this phase is known as key stage 4 (KS4), is key for young people attending AP. Although young people in England are legally required to continue in education or training until their 18th birthday (DfE 2016), most AP only caters up to the end of KS4 – the national data shows just 6% of AP students sustain destinations in 'Other Educational Destinations' (where post-16 AP would be accounted for) rather than mainstream college, sixth form, apprenticeship or work destinations (DfE 2019a). The term ex-students will be used throughout this article to refer to students who attended an AP setting and have now transitioned to a post-16 destination.

In England, AP denotes the schooling in place for pupils who have been marginalised and excluded from mainstream school. It includes pupil referral units (PRUs), AP free schools, and AP academies which all receive core funding from the government and which exist alongside a range of other AP which may or may not be registered as independent schools (Mills and Thomson 2018). In March 2018 the Department for Education (DfE) published its vision for AP entitled 'Creating opportunity for all' (DfE 2018). As part of this, an innovation fund was launched to fund projects supporting successful post-16 transitions, the reintegration of pupils into mainstream (or special) placements, and increased engagement from parents or carers. This research explores the first of these themes presenting evidence from an analysis of existing practice in relation to post-16 transitions and providing a robust and in-depth study of these issues which are also explored by the recently published innovation fund evaluation documents (DfE 2021a, 2021b).

The DfE publishes annual data on the outcomes of KS4 pupils (DfE 2021c). This tracks young people for two terms after leaving school at the age of 16 and identifies those who have been in stable education or employment over this period. The 2016/17 data follows pupils from the 2015/16 cohort into their destinations and reports a stark difference between those leaving mainstream and pupils who have attended AP. On average 94% of pupils from state-funded mainstream schools sustain education or employment for two terms after leaving school compared to 56% of those leaving AP (DfE 2019a). However, analysis of the institution-level data shows performance ranging between 23% and 85% for the 174 (of a total of 408) institutions which are the focus of this study (DfE 2019b). The selected institutions were of sufficient size for this information to be included in the data set, were still open when the research was conducted and were either a PRU, AP academy or AP free school. The published data also includes outcomes for independent APs but these are grouped at the local authority (LA) level so couldn't be included in this study as the focus was at the institutional level.

The institutions ($N = 43$) in the lowest quartile of performance achieve between 23% and 46% of ex-students sustaining education or employment for two terms after leaving at 16. Three of these institutions provide education up to the age of 18 and one each up to ages 17 and 19. Institutions ($N = 43$) in the top quartile of performance achieve between 63% and 85% sustained transitions, four of these provide education up to the age of 18 and another four up to age 19. This suggests that the availability of an on-site option for post-16 transition may improve this specific area of performance. There would however be related questions about transition beyond these institutions at age 17, 18 or 19. Given post-16 transition success varies so significantly by institution, this study was designed to explore what practice within those institutions makes a difference to rates of sustained onward transition to post-16 destinations.

Background

Research suggests that AP settings see post-16 success as important for validating their provision and that while some tracking information is available most providers rely on keeping in direct contact with ex-students (Mills and Thomson 2018). Significant dropout in post-16 destinations is reported with examples of positive destinations dropping from 96% to 75% from September to January and elsewhere a third of students not taking up their place in one-sixth form in the September after leaving (Mills and Thomson 2018).

This is reflected by four articles which present studies of specific projects and report post-16 transition success rates (into education, employment or training) of 80, 82, 85 and 97%. Importantly, the longest tracking for was a single term with 10% dropout recorded, indeed two of the projects studied only reported exit points (Cajic-Seigneur and Hodgson 2016; Woolford 2012; Cook 2005; Barrow 2000). One of these studies in a Further Education (FE)-based AP suggested students enjoyed this environment and progressed to post-16 courses but that retention was not satisfactory (Cajic-Seigneur 2014). Another reported the impact of a focus on post-16 transition in one setting as reducing the initial (October) rate of those not in education employment or training down to 3%

from a historical average of 11% (Woolford 2012). This scheme focused on post-16 success, made use of financial incentives and saw results in particular in relation to less overdependence on adults and better educational self-esteem (Woolford 2012).

An earlier study which considered students leaving AP found an unknown destination was most common, this was followed by employment and then equal numbers transitioning to education and training (Kendall et al. 2003). A large-scale study which tracked students for 2 years after their initial exclusion suggested that although placement in a PRU was initially less well engaged with than a placement in a new mainstream school (60% vs. 70%), engagement 2 years later was higher for students whose first placement had been into a PRU (40% vs. 30%) (Daniels et al. 2003). Interestingly, this study also suggests that where first placement was into a college engagement was highest (84.6%) and was broadly maintained 2 years later (76.9%) (Daniels et al. 2003).

There were four key areas identified in the literature on post-16 transition from AP which relate to successful transitions. These were support after leaving, careers support and connections to destinations, qualifications and culture. Support can focus on initial transition, sustaining engagement over the summer break or support for a period of time after transition; however, resourcing for ongoing support is an issue and young people can struggle when the support is removed (Mills and Thomson 2018; Tate and Greatbatch 2017). One large-scale study found that a mark of quality AP which had been long term was providing ongoing support by keeping in touch with young people upon their post-16 transitions (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014).

Studies report mock interviews and high-quality careers advice as important for successful transition (Corbett, Neary, and Cooper 2019) with recent investigative research (Mills and Thomson 2018) reporting four out of five secondary phase APs offering careers advice (this dropped to two-thirds for independent APs). Connections to destinations are reported as important in terms of good relationships with both colleges and employers or agencies enabling transition and opportunities for work experience (Mills and Thomson 2018; Tate and Greatbatch 2017). Participants in one study saw time in AP as raising awareness of the opportunities available (Learning and Skills Development Agency 2003). This study was undertaken in FE AP and students were inclined to continue in the same setting as they felt comfortable there (Learning and Skills Development Agency 2003).

There is evidence that specially selected qualifications can support entry into college (Cook 2005) and that AP settings focus on qualifications as supporting progression into post-16 options (Cajic-Seigneur and Hodgson 2016; Levinson and Thompson 2016). Although some students who aspire to higher education experience little support towards this destination (Russell and Thomson 2011). Staff report tension between tangible outcomes for funders and their approach of building relationships with colleges and their focus on work experience (Greenwood 2012). While parents of students in AP were found in one study to diverge in their opinions of support for post-16 destinations with some appreciating the work of APs to secure positive destinations, often in vocational options which had been unavailable in mainstream, but others seeing AP as reducing the breadth of qualifications on offer and opportunities for more traditional routes of progression through college and on to university (Mills and Thomson 2018). There is also some concern of students in AP being encouraged towards stereotypical options; for example, female students in one study were initially directed into hairdressing qualifications and found it hard to move outside of this trajectory despite interests elsewhere (Vincent 2016).

Students report significant support from staff in relation to future employability (Nicholson and Putwain 2015), and students in one study identified personal confidence alongside qualifications as supporting post-16 transition success (Vincent 2016). Similarly, young adults involved in another study articulated the interest of staff in AP as focusing their ambitions and getting them onto the paths they pursued post-AP (Malcolm 2019). Interestingly, almost all students in another study saw their course in FE AP as qualifying them for a particular job and while they appreciated the relationships formed in the setting their dominant motivation was instrumental (Attwood, Croll, and Hamilton 2003). There are some concerns that the relational culture present in AP settings can hinder onward transition into less rigidly structured environments (Woolford 2012; Tate and

Greatbatch 2017). Heads and staff in AP suggested students' out of college contexts and the return to mainstream settings with transition support often tapering out as reasons for dropout (Mills and Thomson 2018). Mills and Thomson (2018) provide an example of coordination instigated by an AP leader to enhance support in FE settings to those at risk of dropping out, other examples are also given of AP staff working with relevant college staff to improve their pastoral care.

Methods

While there are numerous published studies of AP, the evidence tends to be generated by small-scale, exploratory studies which take a qualitative approach and present a thematic analysis of the perceptions of participants (Malcolm 2021). This study combines an analysis of official statistics, the use of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, and targeted semi-structured interviews. Although the key data presented is from the interviews, the use of official data to target and FOI to supplement these interviews means that this study provides a robust analysis of practice related to sustained post-16 transitions.

Analysis of official statistics

The official statistics used for this study were the underlying KS4 institution-level data from the 'Statistics: destinations of key stage 4 and 16 to 18 (KS5) students' releases. This data set is published annually by the DfE and is available along with the underlying data online (DfE 2021c). Destinations data for 2016–17 which records rates for placement success for pupils who finished KS4 at the end of the 2015–16 academic year was used to sort AP institutions by their rate of sustained onward transitions. Institutions which had since closed, those where data was not available due to small pupil numbers and instances where independent AP data was combined to the LA level were removed from the data set, leaving 174 institutions from an initial 408.

Making use of FOI

In the UK the FOI Act allows anyone to request information from public authorities (Gov.uk, n.d.). This Act has been noted as a powerful tool for social researchers (Savage and Hyde 2014) and can be used to provide information to supplement analysis of existing statistics (Malcolm 2018) or as the basis of an entire study (Murray 2013). In this study email addresses for the 174 institutions identified in the analysis of official statistics were sourced from the government's 'get information about schools' website[1] and from individual AP websites before an FOI was sent to these institutions. The FOI request asked AP settings questions about whether the data published by the government matched with their own records and about the support which students in the reference year had received. They were also given space to provide further details if they wished to do so. A total of 85 responses to the FOI were received, giving a response rate of 49%. Interestingly responses were skewed towards low-performing (LP) institutions with 59% of institutions in the lower half of performance responding to the FOI compared to 39% in the upper half of performance. These responses were bought together with the analysis of official statistics into a single data set, and it is this data which is presented in Tables 2–5 in the findings section of this article. In addition, two institutions responded to the FOI with an extended email. Both these responses were just under 1000 words, whereas the transcribed interviews were between 3384 and 6542 words. While the email responses are slightly under one-third the length of the shortest interview, using these to supplement the interview data was, on balance, considered to be beneficial to the research study. These email responses were used to supplement the interview transcripts described below and are labelled as LP3* and LP4* throughout. The use of an asterix here is intended to remind the reader that these details are from the email responses rather than the interviews described below.

Targeted semi-structured interviews

A total of 30 institutions were approached to take part in a telephone interview. The 10 lowest and highest performing institutions were selected along with 10 whose level of sustained destinations was in line with the average for the AP sector. In total it was possible to arrange and undertake nine interviews with representatives from AP settings. The author undertook, transcribed and analysed all the interviews which were semi-structured in form. The interview schedule covered AP practice and challenges faced in relation to post-16 transitions, tracking students and whether initial destinations are sustained, and a number of more specific themes from the existing research on post-16 transitions. The pattern of response was the opposite to the FOI with four high-performing (HP), three mid-performing (MP) and two LP APs taking part in an interview. Most commonly the head of provision participated in the interview, but in some instances there was a careers or post-16 lead who was better placed to respond and in one instance both the head and careers lead participated in a single joint interview and as such this was counted as one representative view. The telephone interviews lasted between 22 and 42 min and once transcribed were uploaded into NVivo (along with the two extended email responses from the FOI). A thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews combined a deductive and inductive approach. The deductive element was based on the themes covered in the semi-structured interview schedule (based on the themes from the existing literature). The inductive element meant that any themes which were not in line with the existing literature were allowed to emerge during the analysis. This approach balanced the need to contextualise the study within the existing research with the current paucity of evidence on this topic and thus the likelihood of the emergence of additional and important themes. After initial coding, each theme was considered for any patterns or divergences between HP, MP and LP institutions. This analysis was also cross-referenced with the descriptive statistical analysis of the combined data set produced by merging the destinations data and the FOI responses. Data from both these analyses will be presented alongside each other in the findings section which follows.

Ethical approval for this study was provided by a university ethics committee. An important consideration when bringing together official sources of data with the use of interviews is the potential for individual institutions or interviewees to be identified. To avoid this the destinations data has been converted into performance by quartile – lowest quartile (LQ), lower middle (LM), upper middle (UM) and upper quartile (UQ). Table 1 sets out the sustained destinations data for the HP, MP and LP institutions where either an interview was undertaken or an extended email response received. The data for the reference year (2016–17) is supplemented with data from the two preceding and following years to provide context.

The data in Table 1 which provides context over 5 years for participating institutions suggests that in broad terms the HP, MP and LP institutions do remain in line with the 2016–17 data which was used to assign LP, MP and HP status for the purpose of this study. It does however seem that LP4* has steadily improved from low to mid performance.

Findings

The findings of this study have been grouped into three sections which correspond to three over-arching themes which emerged from the thematic analysis: work in AP, work beyond AP and other factors. Cross-referencing these with the existing literature correspondence can be seen between 'work in AP' and three themes from the research on post-16 transitions from AP: 'careers support and connections to destinations', 'qualifications' and 'culture'. There is also correspondence between 'work beyond AP' in this study and 'support after leaving' as identified from the literature. The first section of the findings will consider the work undertaken in AP settings which the evidence suggests has a bearing upon successful transitions and sustained destinations. The second section will cover the work undertaken by colleges and other post-16 settings and the support which may or may not

Table 1. The proportion of pupils moving onto a stable post-16 placement from interview schools between 2014–15 and 2018–19.

	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19
HP1	UQ	UQ	UQ	UQ	UQ
HP2	LM	UQ	UQ	UQ	UM
HP3*	x	UQ	UQ	LM	UQ
HP4	x	x	UQ	x	x
MP1	x	x	UM	LM	UM
MP2	LM	LQ	LM	LM	UM
MP3	UQ	LM	LM	UQ	LM
LP1	UQ	LQ	LQ	LM	LQ
LP2	x	LM	LQ	LQ	LM
LP3**	LQ	LM	LQ	LM	LQ
LP4**	LQ	LQ	LQ	UQ	UM

LQ represents performance in the lowest quartile, LM in the lower middle quartile, UM in the upper middle quartile and UQ in the upper quartile. HP denotes an institution with high performance, MP an institution with mid performance and LP an institution with low performance.
x denotes that the cohort size was too small for reporting of actual figures in the original data set.
*HP3 was the only school where the oldest pupil was 18 all other interview schools had 16 as their oldest pupil.
**LP3 and LP4 were both detailed email responses received in response to the FOI request.

be offered by AP settings as their students leave and move into post-16 destinations. The final section will explore other notable factors which emerged from the analysis as potentially significant in relation to post-16 success.

Section 1 – work in AP

This section considers the work in AP which relates to post-16 outcomes and will cover five areas: the question of whether the level of support in AP limits post-16 success, the role of qualifications, the role of vocational placements and work experience, pre-16 work undertaken in AP which focuses on transitions and the role of paperwork.

One of the themes from the existing research explored by this study is the notion that the level of support a student receives in AP has the potential to limit post-16 success. All interviewees and one extended response were coded to this theme with indications of differential practice which may explain variation in sustained destinations post-16. There was broad consensus about the comparable lack of support in the college environment, and the more formal 'mainstream' expectations posing a challenge for students moving on from AP. HP1 noted that post-16 support could and should be better, and LP3* suggested only students with an education, health and care plan[2] (EHCP) get an appropriate level of support in college. There were however indications of different practice in relation to how this issue was viewed and addressed. MP2 discussed wanting to set up a post-16 AP to cater for the 'most needy' students, and it was striking that both LP1 and LP2 used almost identical language to describe the support students receive in AP:

> They still need you in their ear saying you can do this … in the real world people haven't got time to do that LP1.

And

> There's a lot of help for them … that's not the real world and that's not what they might experience in college LP2.

These perspectives contrast with interviewees from HP institutions. HP3 reflected that the way in which this process was managed was important noting that students' behaviour changes so much 'they change as people'. This view of students' capacity to change was also reflected by HP2 and HP4 who presented very similar ideas in relation to this challenge

> I'm kind of conscious that we don't wrap them up in cotton wool too much, you know. That's why I very much give them a lot of choices and a lot of freedoms and broaden their experiences … we just try to put an environment where they thrive and they're happy. Then we just keep pushing the boundaries to make them confident young people that can go to college HP2.

And

> That is a difficulty and we try wherever possible to get over that by, loosening the apron strings I suppose as they get further towards the end but that it is a challenge for us HP4.

Both these accounts convey that the AP environment is necessarily supportive but that there may be scope to prepare students for post-16 by encouraging independence and gradually increasing expectations. While LP1 did note that the change in expectations can cause difficulty if students were 'not prepared well enough' the contrast between AP as 'not the real world' and AP as a site where boundaries can be pushed and apron strings loosened suggests that the approach taken in AP in relation to this may be consequential. A concrete example of loosening the apron strings which emerged from the analysis was travelling independently which will be explored in more detail below.

Another area where there was clear variation between topics covered by interviewees when discussing practice related to successful post-16 transitions was qualifications. When discussing types of programme available all interviewees from HP institutions conveyed a strong focus on GCSE[3] qualifications with one describing a 'quality first education' with 'every child on 25 hours a week' (HP3). This interviewee suggested some young people came to them with very low ability after attending numerous other AP settings and then made significant progress. Their view was that

> the hook that engages these youngsters is actually education. They want to be just like everybody else. They don't want to be left behind HP3.

This suggests an orientation towards academic learning may be an important aspect of AP from which students successfully transition. This finding is corroborated by the FOI data set out in Table 2.

While this question was about the provision of qualifications to support post-16 transitions rather than specifically about GCSEs, the responses suggest there is more focus on this in higher performing institutions. Most providers responding to this element of the FOI had offered particular qualifications aimed at supporting post-16 transitions. The proportion was however lower for AP settings in the lowest quartile of performance and higher, indeed 15 out of 15, for HP institutions. An important caveat to this finding is that some AP settings are set up for specific cohorts of pupils. In one location an academically oriented AP had been set up to fill a gap in the locally available provision and in another the interviewee had responsibilities across two AP settings with one being viewed locally as

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of sustained destinations and qualification to aid post-16 transitions.

			Did you offer any particular qualifications to specifically aid with post-16 destinations?		
			Yes	No	Total
Sustained destinations by quartile	Lower quartile	Count	19	6	25
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	76.0%	24.0%	100.0%
	Lower mid	Count	23	3	26
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	88.5%	11.5%	100.0%
	Upper mid	Count	14	3	17
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	82.4%	17.6%	100.0%
	Upper quartile	Count	15	0	15
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		Count	71	12	83
Total		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	85.5%	14.5%	100.0%

more vocationally oriented. This is not to say though that an AP cannot be both vocationally and academically oriented; HP1 made extensive use of vocational provision but had on-site academic provision geared towards students gaining either GCSEs or at least functional skills[4] qualifications in English and maths, along with a BTEC[5] in science. This was undertaken in either 1 or 2 days a week at the AP with the some of this time spent on personal development and employability and the rest of the week attending off-site vocational provision.

Somewhat similarly to greater focus on academic qualifications, only interviewees from HP institutions (HP1, HP2 and HP4) were coded as having discussed making use of dual registration provision.[6] This suggests that keeping closer ties to mainstream may have positive benefits, one interviewee commented that this

> makes a difference to students, I think they feel more positive and engaged HP1.

This interviewee also noted that

> one of the things that we insist on is an exit strategy, pretty much from day one. You know, what is it you want us to achieve with the student and then we can obviously match the provision to the student HP1.

These findings suggest that a feature of AP which can facilitate onward transition is a focus on GCSE qualifications and a certain level of correspondence to mainstream schooling. Important themes also emerged around the use of vocational placements, work experience and the provision of pre-16 units or courses in post-16 settings. Interviewees from HP1, HP4 and MP3 discussed vocational placements as facilitating post-16 success. HP1 discussed placing considerable emphasis on vocational placements (students access at least two placements) and on moving students around the various options (20 programmes at 15 providers). The model is supplemented with mentors from the AP who complete daily or weekly site visits to vocational placements. HP4 suggested crossover with students accessing pre-16 vocational courses in post-16 placement locations, thereby aiding transition:

> It's funny seeing them in that environment compared to what they're like in school sometimes because it's very different. Even though it's that same young person in the same week HP4.

MP3 also discussed the benefit of students studying pre-16 in a setting which has post-16 opportunities:

> When we're able to do that and the children go off to one of those programmes the chances of them succeeding are higher in that they've already spent a year there, they know the staff, they feel comfortable. They understand that actually the provision it is investing in them and we're able to keep a closer eye on them as well MP3.

Both HP1 and HP4 suggested that pupils making their own way to the pre-16 options in other settings was good experience for their students in terms of independence. They relayed supporting them to begin with but then students making their own way being an important opportunity for students to 'learn to manage themselves' HP4.

Some interviewees (HP1, HP3, MP1 and LP3*) explicitly discussed making use of college settings for pre-16 opportunities. Interestingly HP1 had tried using college settings for vocational placements but had ceased this as the college environment had been too much like school and had not worked for their pupils. HP3, MP1 and LP3* also discussed running courses within the college environment and saw this in a positive light, generally suggesting that it enabled students to experience college life, get an experience of being on site and develop relationships with staff. LP3* discussed students completing some units at the college site, MP1 referred to a lot of their placements being at the college with students attending an entry level[7] course before progressing to a level 1[8] course at post-16. HP3 referred to the most targeted approach with students who they perceived as likely to struggle with transition attending a half day a week course in the college they will move onto as part of their AP

> This has really had a major impact on making sure that they stay in those colleges because they've got the relationships with the staff, it's done in a measured way, we're there to support, and if something goes wrong they can go back next week HP3.

This approach has somewhat of a goldilocks feel to it, particularly in the context of the other interviewees who mentioned pre-16 provision in colleges – not too little exposure to the college environment and not too much either. Rather a careful approach taken to support a specific group of students to experience an extended transition to a post-16 destination.

Work experience was discussed by one HP, MP and LP institution interviewee. HP3's account suggested the most extensive approach to work experience:

> That's the cornerstone of what we try and do because youngsters come to us not feeling like they can do anything let alone imagine that they could work someday. So it's about finding the hook really and changing their expectations on what their life can be HP3.

MP3, who also discussed vocational provision, mentioned the use of work experience alongside this. This interviewee discussed the fairly significant level of background work this involved but also made the connection to these opportunities linking to successful transitions. LP2 discussed work experience facilitated by a local organisation with some young people transitioning to employment after making links to employers through this process. The way in which work experience was discussed across these three interviewees suggests significant involvement and commitment in the HP institution, commitment to ensuring opportunities were available and supported in the MP institution and reliance on an outside body in the LP institution. Data from the FOI which relates to the provision of work experience is cross-tabulated with sustained destinations in Table 3. This brings interesting context to these findings from the interviews and provides a reminder that there is unlikely to be a simple catch-all solution to achieving high rates of post-16 sustained progression. This data suggests that while MP APs were more likely to report facilitating work experience than LP institutions, HP institutions were much less likely to do this.

Taken together with what is set out above in relation to vocational placements and pre-16 attendance at college settings, these findings suggest supporting students to take well-measured steps outside of the AP context into other settings for learning and work experience can support successful onward transitions.

All interviews included discussion of the APs pre-16 focus on students making a successful transition to their next step. Numerous interviewees referred to curricular approaches in relation to this; work-related curriculum was mentioned by MP2, LP3* and LP4*. MP1 discussed a curriculum focused on interests and aspirations in relation to this, and HP2 discussed having developed their own curriculum about moving beyond school. HP2's approach was extensive and involved an in-

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of sustained destinations and provision of work experience.

			Did you set up work experience for your students while they were with you?		
			Yes	No	Total
Sustained destinations by quartile	Lower quartile	Count	18	7	25
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	72.0%	28.0%	100.0%
	Lower mid	Count	19	5	24
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	79.2%	20.8%	100.0%
	Upper mid	Count	14	4	18
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	77.8%	22.2%	100.0%
	Upper quartile	Count	6	9	15
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
		Count	57	25	82
Total		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	69.5%	30.5%	100.0%

school careers fair with 24 organisations in attendance and ensuring good pathways to vocational post-16 options. This level of focus was also reflected by HP3 who discussed working with colleges, the use of work experience to clarify interests and a weekly meeting to focus on students' next steps. HP4 referred to a strong local offer around careers and post-16 providers who provide encounters for AP students.

In the interviews these approaches which sought to connect well into the local context for post-16 options were contrasted by MP3 and MP2 who respectively talked about hounding and tracking students relentlessly to ensure they had a destination in place. Similarly, LP1 referred to students making a minimum of six applications. While LP1 also discussed encouraging students to look beyond local college advertising and ran an after-school careers club with a focus on transitions and encouraging students to look at labour market intelligence there does seem to be a divergence here between interviewees from HP institutions and other settings. This would seem to suggest improved outcomes where there is a focus on understanding and even involvement in the network of post-16 opportunities in the locality of any AP. This approach would seem to make it more likely that students are supported into a post-16 destination which is well matched to their interests, aspirations and ability rather than simply ensuring a destination is in place and that their schooling has included work-related curriculum content.

This is backed up by a comment from HP3 who undertook broader work around post-16 progression and suggested that some providers see their role as about getting a college option in place rather than finding the best fit for the young person:

> I come across other provisions who go right, all our kids are going on to that course, really?! Um, why, you know, are they not individuals, do they not have any individual choice. So I think there's a fair bit of lip service, just to tick a box ... if you pay lip service to something it's more likely not to work HP3.

An interesting aspect of practice discussed by HP3 and LP1 was the role paperwork and referral documentation could play in transitions. LP1 suggested

> there's been a lot of times when students have just been rejected for no reason, or no apparent reason ... mainly sixth forms are the problem ... once they see a stamp which says PRU they like to kind of do a bit of digging LP1.

Similarly, after commenting on some colleges not responding once they look at the paperwork for some young people HP3 discussed reviewing paperwork (EHCPs) to ensure an accurate reflection of the student. So that 'information which doesn't fit' is removed and doesn't hold them back:

> Sometimes when colleges read the paperwork they don't even bother to respond ... we can take out all the information which doesn't fit this youngster anymore ... we can strip all that out legitimately because it doesn't happen, write the EHCP based on the child we've got and then we find that they can obviously get into college HP3.

This suggests that it is important for colleges and other post-16 providers to work flexibly and keep an open mind when working with students transitioning from AP. There is also evidence here that careful tactical planning undertaken by AP settings can aid their students in gaining acceptance on to post-16 opportunities.

Section 2 – work beyond AP

This section will move beyond pre-16 practice to explore the work of APs and others undertaken in support of students as they transition to and attend post-16 settings. The key areas covered are approaches to tracking students once they leave, support from AP settings for students when transitioning and attending post-16 settings, support in the college context and the use of post-16 AP.

All interviewees discussed tracking their ex-students. All HP interviewees discussed a more active and ongoing approach with all of the MP and the two LP interviewees presenting a more reactive approach where lack of data or help from external organisations and lack of capacity once a new

cohort of students arrive seemed to override the tracking of ex-students. HP1 and HP4 referred to tracking for a year after students move on from AP with HP2 maintaining contact for 3 years after students leave. HP3 kept an active and ongoing interest in their students recounting a story of supporting a successful transition to post-16 and then following up at the end of this course to ensure continued progression into stable employment for a young person who in their view would likely otherwise have disengaged from society and become long-term unemployed.

In contrast to this, some interviewees referred to the LA undertaking tracking of ex-students. MP1 suggested that it was hard to know if destinations were sustained as it was difficult to get this data from the LA who collected it. In relation to the reference year (2015–16) MP3 reported a similar historical relationship with the LA saying 'it seemed like it was their data, not my data' and LP1 reported not being in a position to access tracking data as this had historically been undertaken by an external organisation. LP2 referred to being able to pay for their destinations data suggested the sustained destinations data used in this study was 'really interesting' as around 84% of their students went onto an 'approved offer' but recognised they had 'no real way of tracking them onwards'. When asked about their ability to respond to placement breakdown, LP2 suggested they may not find out from the college quickly enough to be able to do something about it. This suggests that reliance upon the LA or other organisations to undertake onward tracking of AP students is not sufficient to support sustained destinations. Connected to this MP1, MP2 and MP3 all referred to capacity issues once their new cohort had started to attend:

> Obviously we've got new students coming through as well so it's very difficult for us to track them all MP1.

And

> That's work we can't do . . . we're meant to track them I think for now two years, or at least a year. We can't track our student's for that long because we've got a new cohort of students MP2.

And

> your priorities change quite naturally MP3

In line with MP2's point about the length for which tracking should now happen MP3 went on to say:

> I can't even remember how long we're supposed to do it but however long we're supposed to do it for it's an absolute nonsense, I think I decided what I would concentrate on is that first year, so sort of the year twelve year if you will MP3.

Interestingly a year of tracking is the same as reported by HP1 and HP4; however, the perception of capacity for this work is strikingly divergent.

Where interviewees discussed undertaking their own tracking, this commonly involved phone calls, emails, the use of social media and having an open door for ex-students. Other approaches included requesting data from colleges, using ongoing relationships with parents and visits. In line with what is set out above, there were indications of proactive practice in HP institutions and more reactive approaches in MP and LP settings. MP3 referred to data grabs from colleges for the purpose of tracking ex-students and commented that this was made difficult by GDPR.[9] This suggests a lack of ongoing partnership relationship with the college and a reactive response to any placements which had broken down. LP1 referred to quite an extensive approach with an LA team undertaking tracking and the AP liaising with them to understand if they have been able to support students to engage and making use of ongoing relationships with parents to supplement this:

> It's quite easy for us to get updates and feedback on family dynamics because a lot of the students that have left, their families are still engaging in services with the colleagues who work within the school LP1.

This approach is reliant on an external organisation for tracking which then seems to be used reactively. It is also important to note that the interviewee for LP1 had only recently taken on management of this setting and this practice related to a joined institution where the practice was in line with MP institutions. Of the MP and LP institutions, LP4* reported a more proactive approach referring to

> Intensive phone calls to the students and their families. All were pleased to hear from the [name of AP]. Those in need of help were invited to come into school … Letters to all parents/carers of post 16 students were sent, explaining the help available and inviting to careers club LP4*.

This approach had increased the number of ex-students actively engaged in post-16 destinations from 55% up to 73.7% between September and October. This was in reference to practice in the year of the interview but is perhaps indicative of the progress this AP had made from an LP position to an MP position over the years considered in this study. These findings suggest that taking a more proactive approach to tracking students is an important factor in higher rates of sustained post-16 destinations. A clear limitation on an organisation's ability to undertake this work is actual or perceived lack of capacity to continue to actively pursue relationships with students after they have left AP. The FOI data also backed up a relationship between active tracking of ex-students and higher rates of sustained destinations.

Table 4 clearly shows that HP institutions were much more likely to agree with the national data which this study is based upon. Comments from respondents suggested that for some of those suggesting their data didn't match up this was with reference to destinations agreed at the end of a student's time in AP rather than the AP's own tracking data. This is a clear indication to support the finding from the interviews that active tracking of ex-students after they have moved on to their post-16 destinations is an important factor for higher rates of sustained destinations. Table 5 suggests that active tracking may be more influential than ongoing support. While LP institutions reported a lower rate of post-16 support in the FOI, MP and HP institutions' responses suggest a similar likelihood of support provided with the rate slightly higher for MP institutions. Of course, there is not necessarily a clear or consistent distinction between tracking and support; however, it may be the case that better tracking enables a more proactive response to any post-16 difficulties.

Table 4. Cross-tabulation of sustained destinations and correspondence of national data to AP's data.

			Do the number of pupils and sustained destinations (for two terms after leaving your provision) included in the email correspond to your own data?		
			Yes	No	Total
Sustained destinations by quartile	Lower quartile	Count	7	15	22
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	31.8%	68.2%	100.0%
	Lower mid	Count	10	14	24
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	41.7%	58.3%	100.0%
	Upper mid	Count	7	12	19
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	36.8%	63.2%	100.0%
	Upper quartile	Count	9	4	13
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	69.2%	30.8%	100.0%
		Count	33	45	78
Total		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	42.3%	57.7%	100.0%

Table 5. Cross-tabulation of sustained destinations and provision of post-16 support.

			Did you provide post-16 support for your ex-students as they move on to college or work?		
			Yes	No	Total
Sustained destinations by quartile	Lower quartile	Count	13	12	25
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	52.0%	48.0%	100.0%
	Lower mid	Count	16	10	26
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	61.5%	38.5%	100.0%
	Upper mid	Count	12	6	18
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	Upper quartile	Count	10	6	16
		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	62.5%	37.5%	100.0%
		Count	51	34	85
Total		% within Sustained destinations by quartile	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%

One of the most common approaches mentioned by interviewees in relation to support for ex-students was a door which remained open to them after they had left. HP2, all three MP institutions, LP1 and LP4* institutions all referred explicitly to this practice. There was broad consensus across all interviewees about having an open door to students after they had left with HP2 commenting: 'we never wave goodbye, it's always, see you later'. Only one setting (LP4*) had instigated a formal offer for ex-students where they ran a careers club for post-16 pupils in the autumn term with additional meetings as requested. This was the one setting on what would seem to be a notable trajectory from LP to MP over the years for which data was considered. One AP in a more rural locality suggested that their ex-students were good at emailing when struggling, in need of advice or indeed when doing well. This is an important reflection of the geographical dynamics that some APs face when seeking to support the onward transition of their students.

In relation to transitions and college support, HP2, MP1, MP2 and all four LP institutions discussed the development of relationships for transition. HP2, MP1 and MP2 all discussed college staff undertaking visits to the AP site with the intention of forming relationships to support transitions. LP1 and LP3* mentioned support for transition days and visits, and LP4* requested mentors for their transitioning students reporting close working relationships with college leads. LP2 had AP staff who supported students into college placements but reported that students were reticent about obvious support preferring a coffee and chat to staff attending lessons with them.

There were concerns about colleges' lack of pastoral capacity, especially with regards to non-attendance. Both MP1 and MP3 suggested that if students stopped attending colleges didn't have the capacity to chase them up. LP2 reported that an AP member of staff engages with colleges rather than the other way around and LP1 suggested that churn in college staff impacted on the support available to students. HP2 suggested that their local colleges were really good signalling that effective local colleges may be an important factor in sustained transitions. This was backed up by MP2 and HP3 who both referred to one local college being a better option than others. LP3* and LP4* both referred to close working relationships with their colleges which respectively could keep options open for students where these may otherwise have been closed by limited qualifications and meant support could be coordinated if there were risks of placement breakdown.

MP1 and LP3* discussed the post-16 funding context with colleges needing students to complete their courses to keep their funding. For LP3* this was in the context of SEN support pupils who were not as well supported in college as pupils with an EHCP. This can lead to difficulties between the more pastorally oriented parts of the college organisation and those more concerned with funding

> You have almost a pastoral arm of the organisation that wants to accept struggles with attendance, it might ebb and flow, you might get good attendance followed by a complex issue at home whereas the funders within college will look at somebody's profile, perhaps not get at the SEMH needs and ask for that place to be withdrawn MP1.

This interviewee also connected this to a practice of moving students onto other courses within the college giving the example of a Prince's Trust[10] course which students were moved onto if their level of engagement with the chosen course was deemed insufficient. MP1 recognised that students may well need 'personal development' and 'that level of wrap around support', but there was a risk of disengagement once they have the topic they signed up for removed from them.

This indicates an important role for colleges in how they support and negotiate placements for students transitioning from AP settings. As with the references to good college practice above, the willingness of a college to shape course options where students are able to engage in content related to their interests could be an important dynamic in shaping positive outcomes as students transition from AP settings.

Of those interviewed only one institution could retain pupils post-16, this institution (HP3) seemed to make effective use of this capability. Post-16 places were used as a dual registration option to ensure pupils, as well as continuing to study in AP with the support this offers, were also gaining experience of a mainstream college setting:

> He could get back into the mainstream kind of environment. He's got the comfort of being with us some of the time so he's ready to transition to university and that's gone really well HP3.

This interviewee connected this to the notion of there being a window of opportunity for supporting students to transition successfully also giving the example of another student who was moved into an appropriate sixth form although her parents weren't sure and had asked if she could remain at the AP:

> The time was right. So we do it based on an individual, we know every kids here. I can tell you, cos we meet every day and discuss them, whether someone's got tooth ache, whether their nans ill, I can tell you everything cos we encourage that kind of interaction with parents HP3.

This suggests that post-16 placements in AP settings may be useful for some but are not a panacea for problematic post-16 transitions from AP.

Section 3 – other factors

The other factors relating to sustaining post-16 destinations in the interviews coalesced around two themes. The first was local context, which included involvement of the AP in the local system, the availability of post-16 non-college options and the rurality of the locality. The second theme covered issues which related to the student's context, which included the role of work, personal and environmental factors.

Discussions of involvement in the local system came from all HP interviewees, which suggests that local system awareness, involvement and coordination is a possible factor in sustaining post-16 destinations. The only local issue MP and LP interviewees discussed was careers where LA services or local networks were or had been available. All HP interviewees discussed a variety of other areas within the overarching theme of the local system and seemed from their comments to play a more significant role in their local provision landscape or had views and a wider perspective on AP. HP1 saw their role as running a pupil referral service:

> What we provide are actually a lot of different types of provision all under one leadership and management structure HP1.

They took a broad role across local providers to coordinate the monitoring of attendance and ensuring that all vocational providers were accredited. HP1 also discussed inconsistencies in thresholds for their local mainstream schools, something they had sought to address by having a firm referral process:

> Schools have to justify the referral and they have to demonstrate to us that they have done the things that you would expect them to have done before they make a referral HP1.

HP2 showed a wide perspective by discussing a number of issues which intersect with AP including elective home education,[11] the role AP plays in relation to mainstream and special schools – commenting that the cohort of students AP provides for is somewhat at odds with being inspected in line with the mainstream rather than special school framework – and variation in dynamics and systemic approaches to AP by locality. HP2 referred to experiences of other localities with comparable demographics where they have large AP cohorts and no permanent exclusions:

> They're being hailed as these amazing places but it just doesn't sit right with me. It's not honest accounting HP2.

This reflection is interesting and should cause pause for thought in terms of the national debate on AP and exclusions. Areas of policy focus and prominent measured outcomes will shape the system in terms of what is worked towards as success.

As mentioned above, HP3 undertook broader work around post-16 progression and saw some settings as merely providing lip service to securing successful transitions. HP4 referred to having a national perspective as an Ofsted[12] inspector and saw their own location as different in having really well networked relationships within the LA:

> We are very integrated into the local authority offer so I attend the secondary placement panel, schools forum, the in-year fair access panel, I'm on the safeguarding board, so the relationships that you're able to build up in that way in terms of meeting people and networking I think is quite strong HP4.

Post-16 non-college options were discussed by HP1, MP1, MP2 and LP1. HP1 referred to a positive position in relation to non-college options with about half of their students moving on in this way to providers who had worked with them in the pre-16 context. These settings were viewed as more flexible, smaller and more vocationally focused. Comments from the other interviewees were in relation to a lack of non-college post-16 offer. MP1 mentioned the recent loss of a post-16 programme which was more flexible and others mentioned traineeships[13] as often the only other option given apprenticeships were few in number and subject to the same qualification requirements as level 3 college courses. This suggests the availability of non-college options in a locality may be important for post-16 transitions from AP. Availability of these options would also seem to be connected to AP involvement in the local system; these findings suggest that this may bring to the fore discussions and enable action on non-college post-16 provision.

Supporting independent travel has already been discussed. Somewhat in line with this, MP3 mentioned the AP providing travel support for getting to interviews and enrolling (as this was on the same day as results) due to their rural locality and the significant distance between the locations for these activities. The other interviewees who mentioned travel referred to difficulties such as poverty limiting the ability to travel to college (MP1), students not getting up early enough to travel to college (MP2) and a student dropping out due to the distance to a college placement (LP4*). This suggests that rurality and other travel requirements, including costs, may be factors worthy of consideration in relation to sustained post-16 destinations.

In relation to work, LP1, MP1 and HP2 referred to students who wanted to go into work rather than formalised work with training or other college or apprenticeship opportunities. Issues discussed in relation to this inclination to work were a large local traveller community (HP2), seasonal work (the AP monitored placements in the run up to December – MP1), family poverty – 'work that's very

important to the family pot' MP1, the often informal connections through family which shaped these opportunities for work outside of approved post-16 destinations, and the reality of the labour market:

> They don't want to study two or three or four years to then get a job earning minimum wage . . . there are a lot of external factors that influence the decisions that they make in terms of where they go and what they're going to do LP1.

This relates to the impact of environmental factors, such as deprivation and poverty, which were referred to by MP1, MP2 and LP1. Discussions covered homelessness of families, food poverty, hectic home lives with parental drug use, financial pressures and the draw of drugs including county lines. These kinds of contextual factors can mean that AP settings need to take on a role a parent may play in other circumstances. MP1 suggested that 'without judgement' some young people needed AP to provide the support which might otherwise come from parents, for example, making sure the student enrols at college. LP2 discussed the prevalence of anti-school and anti-authority attitudes suggesting that in college there isn't the push from families and 'it's too easy to just stop going'; although they employ a parent liaison worker, this work is difficult because there isn't a basis of trust with schools. HP3 discussed going the extra mile and proactive planning to provide support, for example, ensuring students get picked up and taken to interviews if this might otherwise not happen.

These findings suggest that there is an important balance for APs to strike between stepping into the role of a parent and supporting parents to engage with their child's education. The impact of parental expectations was discussed by HP3, MP2, LP1 and LP2. HP3 gave an example of a parent intervening to sideline the AP choice of post-16 option which after transition led to breakdown of the placement and big steps back after having taken big steps forwards in AP. MP2 referred to students not turning up to college interviews 'because they're scared', reporting they have attended with the AP only later finding out from parents that they hadn't. This suggests that there is important work that AP settings can undertake with parents which connects to progression into post-16 destinations. The findings suggest that this may be made difficult by their previous experiences of their child's education. LP1 suggested that parents could be quite disaffected and disillusioned by the time their child is in AP so ran engagement coffee mornings and provided support to involve them in decision-making. Similarly, LP2 referred to parents being alienated from schools and of the need to build relationships and get trust back. HP3 referred to what seemed to be the most structured approach to working with parents:

> We talk to them about anxiety or behavioural issues or how to manage OCD . . . we do a lot with kind of training our parents who, by the time they arrive with us, these youngsters' parents have given up HP3.

This suggests that while rebuilding relationships with parents was recognised across the board there may be opportunity to make work more effective by engaging parents in training or learning activities based in the AP focused on better understanding and supporting their children.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to better understand the practices in AP in England which make a difference to the levels of sustained work or education destinations for students moving on from these settings. The findings of this study have identified five areas which will now be discussed and contextualised with the existing research evidence. These are the perceptions of staff, tracking students, staff knowledge of the post-16 network of opportunities, support for well-measured steps outside AP and a strong academic offer.

There were a number of areas in the findings which were related to the perceptions of staff vis-à-vis their students and the role AP plays in relation to the wider social and educational context. Comments from some of the MP and LP institution interviewees suggested a view that, while AP

provided helpful support to students, this wasn't the 'real world'. There were also discussions of hounding and tracking students relentlessly to ensure they had a destination in place. This conveyed a lack of confidence in their students' ability to transition into post-16 contexts. In contrast to this, interviewees from HP institutions discussed ways in which they created a safe environment for students but then sought to push the boundaries, encouraging independence and increasing expectations. This suggests that staff in AP who perceive students' potential are important to effective practice. The importance of AP staff who perceive the potential of their students has been reported in other studies (Page 2021; Malcolm 2020) and is in line with elements of the existing research on post-16 transitions from AP which discusses reducing overdependence on adults (Woolford 2012) and the role of personal confidence (Vincent 2016).

The perceptions of staff were also somewhat related to tracking students' progress in post-16 destinations with a number of LP and MP institutions framing tracking as a burden and something for which they lacked capacity once a new cohort of students had replaced those who had moved onto their post-16 destinations. There were also reports from MP and LP interviewees of reliance on the LA or other external organisations for tracking information with higher-performing institutions collecting their own data. This may relate to the issue of resourcing for ongoing support (Mills and Thomson 2018) but importantly was backed up by the FOI data which showed higher rates of agreement with the national data from higher-performing institutions. This is in line with Thomson and Pennacchia (2014), who suggested a mark of quality AP was keeping in touch with young people who had transitioned on from AP and continuing to provide support. Indeed, a more hands-on approach to tracking may mean that a more proactive approach to difficulties can be taken. If difficulties emerge for an ex-AP student in their college placement, the knowledge that someone who cares about you is likely to call you to find out how things are going may well act as an important incentive to seek support to remain engaged. There is likely to be some overlap between tracking ex-AP students and effective working relationships with colleges. Indeed, Mills and Thomson (2018) describe the role that AP staff can play in coordinating with FE settings both to provide support to AP students who have transitioned to FE settings and to support college staff who provide pastoral care.

Findings suggested the value of staff knowledge of the local network of post-16 opportunities and working to match these to interests and aspirations rather than simply ensuring a destination was in place. Indeed, one HP interviewee referred to the practice of some APs as 'lip service' in relation to ensuring destinations were in place by enrolling all students onto a single post-16 course. Knowledge of the local network of post-16 opportunities was enhanced by involvement in collaboration in the locality of the AP. This is in line with the research on the importance on connections to both education and employment destinations (Mills and Thomson 2018; Tate and Greatbatch 2017). Only the four interviewees from HP institutions discussed active involvement in local collaboration or a broader perspective on AP. Active involvement was also seen as shaping the availability of non-college options for post-16 progression which provide opportunities in smaller settings with good connections to future employment. This scale is likely to be important for some students and a plausible route to adulthood has been reported as an important motivator by some young people in FE AP (Attwood, Croll, and Hamilton 2003).

The findings suggested an important aspect of AP related to successful post-16 transitions was supporting students to take well-measured steps outside of their immediate AP environment. This could be into a college placement, vocational setting or work experience. Indeed, AP heads are reported as seeing connections with employers as important for successful transitions, seeking to give students positive experiences and relationships in this area (Mills and Thomson 2018). Well-measured steps outside AP provided opportunities to encourage independence (see also Woolford 2012), for example, in travelling to placements, and also developed relationships in settings to which the young person would transition for post-16 education. Both increased independence and the development of relationships in post-16 settings happened in a supported and measured way because the student's main base was still in their AP placement. Interviewees from two HP

institutions talked about encouraging independence when reflecting on whether the supportive environment of AP could limit successful transitions, they reflected that 'loosening the apron strings' and 'pushing the boundaries' were important to setting students up for successful transitions.

A strong academic offer was prominent for all the interviewees from HP institutions, a point which was backed up by FOI data with every institution in the upper quartile of performance affirming that they offered qualifications to aid with post-16 transitions. This suggests a focus on quality qualifications is important for successful progression into post-16 destinations. This is in line with but also beyond the reporting on the importance of qualifications for transitions as reported in the existing research (Cook 2005; Cajic-Seigneur and Hodgson 2016; Levinson and Thompson 2016). This finding is perhaps more in line with the findings of Russell and Thomson (2011), who report a lack of support for students aiming to attend university. A strong academic offer could also run alongside placements in vocational settings, college or work experience; one interviewee from an HP institution referred to a core academic offer running for 1 or 2 days a week with the remainder of a student's time spent in either one or two vocational placements where quality qualifications were also in place. The personal confidence that was seen as resulting from developing independence outside of the core AP setting was seen alongside qualifications as important for post-16 success by young people involved in another study of AP (Vincent 2016).

Implications

This study set out to explore AP practice related to sustained destinations in post-16 settings. In particular, looking for differences between LP, MP and HP institutions which may provide an explanation for the significant variation in levels of sustained destinations. The findings suggest five key areas which AP practitioners and others responsible for these settings should focus on when seeking to improve rates of sustained destinations for students moving on from AP. These are effective and ongoing tracking of ex-students; a high-quality, core academic offer; opportunities for students to increase in independence by taking well measured steps into other settings outside of their main AP placement; reorienting staff views from AP as 'not the real world' towards a commitment to 'loosening the apron strings'; and either collaboration in local networks or the development of a wider view of AP.

Effective and ongoing tracking of ex-students should be undertaken by the AP with a view to maintaining ongoing contact and relationships with students as they move on; indeed, one respondent noted that 'constant phoning has paid dividends'. This study would seem to suggest that maintaining this kind of relationship, essentially at a distance from the student's post-16 placement, may be more impactful than provision of a transition or college mentor. This may be because it supports students to develop independence in their new setting while providing a familiar point of support which can be drawn on if needed.

While AP settings need to provide wide-ranging holistic support and an educational programme which engages the young people who attend, a high-quality core academic offer was prominent in HP settings. One interviewee from an HP setting noted that what students want is to be 'like everyone else' with education acting as an important hook for these students. This suggests that core subjects on offer should be linked to GCSE qualifications wherever possible and where not possible to qualifications which will enable students to progress on to post-16 study on the course of their choice at an appropriate level. Findings included reports of students being held back from studying their course of interest at an appropriate level because their maths and English qualifications were deemed insufficient.

Taking well-measured steps outside of AP settings could sit alongside a strong academic offer with one AP reporting the use of vocational placements alongside student attendance at the AP for their core offer. This notion of well-measured steps sits alongside work to increase the independence of students in AP settings and can be seen as counter to the potential for the supportive environment in AP to limit successful onward transitions. These well-measured steps provided an

opportunity to develop independent travel arrangements and seemed to work well where the students attended the placement as a specific part of their learning package rather than a generic element of what all students at the AP received. Taking these steps outside of AP also provided opportunities for students to begin to familiarise themselves with potential post-16 environments and to develop relationships in these settings. Again, there seemed to be some evidence that this was more effective if the placement also had a post-16 offer which the student could transition in to.

The opportunity to reorientate staff views from AP as 'not the real world' towards seeing greater potential in their students was an interesting and somewhat unexpected finding of this study. There were clear divergences between language used by some interviewees and striking similarities between some of the LP and MP responses and likewise some of the comments from HP interviewees. Views of AP as 'not the real world' and of a need to take a relentless approach with students essentially suggests a lack of hope. While the notion of 'loosening the apron strings' still conveys a need for a caring and supportive environment in AP, there is also an indication here of a belief that, with encouragement and support, things might change. It may be useful to facilitate discussion with staff in AP settings which explores the notion of hope for change, of hope despite what all the evidence might suggest. If hope is needed anywhere in the English education system, it is needed in AP. Consideration of how to facilitate staff to cope with the challenges of working in AP and to believe in the potential of the young people with who they work has been noted elsewhere – Malcolm (2021) suggests that there may be scope to improve the outcomes of students by providing and enhancing supportive structures to those working in AP settings.

All HP interviewees either discussed local collaboration or a wider appreciation of AP. This suggests that AP settings and those leading them can act as critical nodes within the local educational environment. Heads of AP settings are likely to be connected with mainstream schools, the education team in the LA, social care, youth offending, and potentially local colleges, vocational providers and a variety of other actors in the locality. Those working in AP have a unique perspective, perhaps even the best view of the local system which provides for children and young people on the margins of mainstream society. This suggests that there is an important role to be played by AP staff in plugging gaps and effectively connecting the wide range of services which interact with young people who attend AP. While it is possible to lead from anywhere within a system and some of those working in AP will need no invitation to act in the best interests of their children and young people, local leaders should actively seek the perspective of those working in the AP sector empowering them to shape and strengthen the local service provision for children and young people who attend AP.

Limitations and alternative interpretations

While this study was designed to provide a robust contribution to the existing evidence on post-16 transitions from AP it does face certain limitations. Foremost of these is the relatively small number of interviews undertaken. These interviews were targeted and thus undertaken so as to be able to draw conclusions about practices which influence stable progression into post-16 destinations; however, the small number of interviews upon which the findings draw is a factor in determining whether wider application of the conclusions is warranted. Although these findings are backed up with the responses from the FOI and data analysis, it is conceivable that had there been a higher response rate from other AP institutions who were requested to participate in this study the findings could have been altered. Another important limitation was that interview participants were asked to respond to questions retrospectively in relation to the practice that had been in place in the year in which the cohort under consideration had completed their studies in AP. An important mitigation to this limitation was the consideration of rates of sustained destinations for other cohorts from the AP institutions who participated in interviews. Table 1 set this out in detail and showed that these AP institutions had remained broadly in line with the performance reported in the reference year for this study.

Finally, it is important to note that one key explanation for variation in outcomes is cohort dependency; that the outcomes of students in any year group can vary quite significantly depending on their individual circumstances with this variability intensified by the small size of most institution-level AP cohorts. However, as noted above there was broad consistency in terms of the outcomes for those providers who participated in the interviews. As such the findings of this study provide a valuable contribution to the evidence base on transitions from AP to post-16 destinations.

Future research

There were indications in this study of three areas which should be explored further to better under-stand post-16 progression from AP settings. These were geographical dynamics, the role of effective local colleges and the experiences of students with an EHCP. Geographical dynamics were evident in relation to placement breakdown, for example, students disengaging with a course because the journey was too far or because they couldn't afford the travel costs. Indeed, one interviewee from an HP institution noted that the compact nature of their local city meant that many opportunities were close at hand. Another providers noted the need to support students to travel on results day so they could get signed up to the local college; this was due to the rurality of their location. This suggests further research could usefully explore the barriers AP settings in rural locations face when seeking to support successful onward transitions. The role of effective local colleges is also worth further exploration. A number of comments were made by interviewees of certain colleges being more attuned to the needs of AP students or indeed simply being outstanding FE providers. This suggests that it would be worth exploring the views and practice of local colleges vis-à-vis students transitioning from AP cross-referencing this with sustained outcomes data for students transitioning from AP. Finally, interviewees noted the high level of pupils with SEN within the AP sector and the differential support given to those with and without and EHCP, the latter being supported up to the age of 25. This suggests the post-16 transition experiences of AP students with an EHCP would be worth exploring further to understand whether the higher level of ongoing support provided to this group has a beneficial impact compared to AP students with SEN without an ECHP.

Conclusion

This study is large in scope, making creative use of published data sets, FOI requests and targeted interviews to build up a robust evidence base which enabled in depth exploration of the research question. It makes an important contribution to the body of research focused on education in AP settings and advances our understanding of the practice and characteristics of AP settings which are related to sustained post-16 transitions. While sustained post-16 transitions are an important indicator of successful AP practice, the cohort dependency suggested by year-to-year fluctuations in outcomes acts as a reminder of the significant difficulties children and young people in AP will likely have already faced in their lives, and indeed, the likelihood of further difficulties to come. While it is important to measure success and seek to improve practice, AP settings play an important role in providing a stable environment where care and support can be encountered by students for whom much else may be chaotic. For students in AP, simple comparisons to mainstream outcomes will always undermine their educational experiences; however, this study has evidenced the significant value of comparisons across AP settings with a view to understanding and supporting improvements in practice.

This study confirms the existing evidence about the importance of APs tracking students as they move into post-16 destinations (as Thomson and Pennacchia 2014). It suggests a strong academic was important for settings with high rates of students with sustained destinations and that staff have an important role to play in shaping the educational environment in AP. This relates to staff views of AP and the potential of students in their setting, the support they provide to students to take well-measured steps outside of the AP setting and their local knowledge and involvement in relation to the coordination of this area of the education system and of post-16 opportunities for AP students.

Notes

1. This website allows users to look up the details of schools and colleges in England. Individual schools can be identified by either their name or reference number. The website is available online: https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/
2. In England, an EHCP is for children and young people up to the age of 25 who require support which is additional to that which is available through special educational needs support. Details are available online: https://www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs/extra-SEN-help
3. GCSE qualifications stand for the general certificate of secondary education and are the most common form of qualification completed by school students at the end of KS4 in England.
4. Functional skills provide an alternative to GCSE qualifications in English and maths, are based on everyday contexts and are awarded at either level 1 or 2 which equate to the lower levels and higher levels of a GCSE pass.
5. BTEC stands for business and technology education council and provides specialist work-related qualifications with level 1 and 2 equating to GCSE level.
6. This is where a pupil attends both an AP setting and a mainstream school
7. Entry-level courses are for students working below level 1.
8. Level 1 qualifications are equivalent to the lower range of GCSE pass grades.
9. In England GDPR (the general data protection regulation) sets out the requirements organisations need to comply with in relation to data protection.
10. The Prince's Trust provide a range of courses and other opportunities for young people in England.
11. Elective home education refers to the choice parents in England can make to educate their child at home.
12. Ofsted are the official inspectorate for educational institutions in England.
13. In England traineeships are skills development programmes which include a work placement and can lead onto an apprenticeship or into work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr Andrew Malcolm is a senior lecturer and member of the Childhood and Youth Studies team within the School of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Bedfordshire.

ORCID

Andrew Malcolm http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8137-8122

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