

## Briefing: Sixth Form Colleges and Free School Sixth Form Colleges

James Kewin and Laura Janowski

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### Background

There are ninety three Sixth Form Colleges in England. As a [report](#) from London Economics concluded last month, these institutions (a full list can be found [here](#)) are the most effective and efficient providers of 16-19 education in the state sector. Their success over the past forty years has led to a growing number of schools and Further Education colleges choosing to rebrand themselves as 'Sixth Form Colleges'. The Academies Act 2010 introduced 16-19 Free Schools to an already cluttered education landscape. There are seven 16-19 Free Schools currently in operation with a further six due to open next month. Several of these institutions describe themselves as Sixth Form Colleges, or use the term in their promotional material.

While imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, the ninety three institutions that are legally defined as Sixth Form Colleges and are members of the Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) do not receive the same level of funding as their Free School imitators. Several have also been created, at great expense, near to high performing Sixth Form Colleges rated as outstanding by Ofsted. It is a sobering fact that more Free School Sixth Form Colleges were opened in September 2013, than official Sixth Form Colleges in the past ten years.

Given the preferential treatment that is extended to Free Schools (something that is curiously out of step with the policy drive to introduce market forces in 16-19 education) and the Government's unequivocal support for these unproven, more expensive variants on the Sixth Form College model, some of our members had reservations about allowing these new providers to join the ranks of SFCA. But at the last meeting of the SFCA's governing council a clear majority of members agreed that subject to certain conditions, 16-19 Free Schools could join the organisation. One has already done so and it is likely that another will follow shortly.

So the response set out below to the claims made by the London Academy of Excellence (the first 16-19 Free School to open in 2010) in its recent A level [press release](#), comes from an organisation that has welcomed Free Schools into the Sixth Form College camp. Some of our members are even at the advanced stages of establishing their own Free Schools. We accept that all providers use performance data in ways that will present their institution in the best possible light. But London Academy of Excellence's claim that it has achieved "*the best ever results by a Sixth Form College in the UK*" is not only misleading, it risks being used by policymakers as proof that the 16-19 Free School programme should be accelerated. This would almost certainly be at the expense of the ninety three 'official' but less vogueish Sixth

Form Colleges that consistently deliver outstanding outcomes for learners and do so at a much lower cost to the public purse.

## SFCA response

The press release issued by London Academy of Excellence, and most of the resulting media coverage, overlooks the fact that it is a high selective institution. LAE requires prospective students to have at least five A or A\* GCSEs and at least a grade B in GCSE Maths and English Language. While all Sixth Form Colleges have some form of entry criteria, this is typically five GCSEs at grades A-C and students are usually provided with the opportunity to resit GCSEs in English and Maths.

Comparing the exam results of institutions without reference to the prior attainment of their students only provides a partial view of performance. The Government has acknowledge this which is why the 'progress' value added measure will be the centrepiece of its revised performance tables. It could be argued that LAE has actually underperformed given the prior attainment of the students it recruits. In its recent inspection of LAE, Ofsted noted that: *Not enough students achieve the high grades at AS level of which they are capable. Not enough students make the progress that their GCSE grades indicate they should when compared to similar students nationally.* It will be interesting to compare LAE's progress/value added data with Sixth Form Colleges when the performance tables are released in January.

Progress to Russell Group universities is a remarkably narrow definition of success. Each year, thousands of Sixth Form College students successfully progress to other higher education institutions or directly to employment. But even using this indicator, LAE falls below the Sixth Form College average. According to the most recent destinations data, the average Sixth Form College sent eighty two students to Russell Group universities compared to sixty eight at LAE. The same number (5 students) progressed to Oxbridge.

The typical Sixth Form College curriculum is broad and contains a range of academic and vocational subjects. By contrast, ten of the twelve A levels offered at LAE are in 'facilitating subjects', which means they almost inevitably have a higher percentage of students securing AAB in two of these subjects. Despite this, one Sixth Form College that offers over forty A level subjects reported that 35% of its students secured AAB in two facilitating subjects, an achievement comparable to LAE's 39% given the breadth of its curriculum offer and lower entry requirements.

Eddie Playfair, Principal of neighbouring Newham Sixth Form College has written very persuasively [here](#) about the need to celebrate success without rewriting history. The claims from LAE that there was nowhere for ambitious local students to study before it arrived are very wide of the mark. More broadly, meaningful comparisons cannot be made between highly selective providers with a very narrow curriculum and open access providers with a broad curriculum offer. It is also worth noting that the funding per student at LAE is significantly higher than in the average Sixth Form College. In addition to the cash and in-kind contributions from donors and independent school-backers, LAE (unlike Sixth Form Colleges) has its VAT and insurance costs reimbursed.

The students at LAE have performed remarkably well and should be congratulated for their achievements. But the partial and one-sided reporting of their exam results has forced us to issue this briefing. We welcome the opportunity to explore these issues further with the leadership team at LAE and sincerely hope we can work together in the best interests of students across Newham and East London.