

Article from the Times newspaper on 16th August 2012

This article combines the findings from Southampton University's research on SFCs in Hampshire with the key findings from the SFCF Sixth Sense report.

Why sixth-form colleges go to the top of the class

Students at sixth-form colleges are significantly more likely to achieve top grades at A level than those who stay on at their schools, research suggests.

Teenagers at sixth-form colleges were 7 per cent more likely to be awarded A* or A. They were also more likely to pass at AS level.

The academic who led the study said that sixth-form colleges were bigger and offered specialist teaching, a wider choice of A-level subjects and a campus-style environment. The findings will fuel debate over the Government's school reforms. Sixth-form colleges accuse ministers of discriminating against them by giving them less funding and by encouraging academy sixth forms.

Daniel Muijs and Natasha Rumyantseva at Southampton University looked in detail at the A-level grades of students at 11 sixth-form colleges in Hampshire between 2007 and 2010. Their results were compared with those of students who sat A levels in similar subjects at 52 school sixth forms, 10 further education colleges and a control group at 11 sixth-form colleges elsewhere, using figures from the national database.

Schools were matched with the Hampshire colleges to find groups with comparable GCSE results, catchment areas, family income, gender, ethnicity and proportion with special needs.

They found that students at the sixth-form colleges were 7.2 per cent likelier to achieve A* or A grades at A level than teenagers of similar ability and background at school sixth forms and 8.9 per cent more likely than teenagers at further education colleges. Results from the two groups of sixth-form colleges were broadly similar.

Professor Muijs told *The Times* that his findings suggested that most teenagers would have a better chance at a sixth-form college because they could choose subjects that suited them. "Due to their specialised nature, sixth-form colleges have developed high levels of expertise," he said. "This may result in improved teaching quality and in turn, improved performance."

A report by the National Audit Office report last year said that sixth-form colleges performed best on most measures of student achievement, although it said that, on average, pupils aged 16-18 achieved better results in larger institutions be they sixth-form colleges or school sixth forms.

The number of sixth-form colleges in England has fallen from 120 to 94 in two decades. They say that they face tougher inspection benchmarks and receive less money per student than schools, although the Government plans to cut school funding to match that of colleges by 2015.

James Kewin, of the Sixth Form Colleges' Forum, told *The Times* that they were being unfairly squeezed because academies with sixth forms were replacing comprehensive schools. He said: "We have a stable cohort of kids and a long history of educational success, but the funding disproportionately benefits unproven new providers."

An education spokesman said that sixth-form colleges had an outstanding record for university progression but added: "Academies are transforming the life chances of thousands of pupils and free schools will do the same."

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