



Engaging Families in College Open Days: A Pilot Study

Rationale

Open days are perhaps the most common activity used to promote post 16 opportunities. Initial discussion with North West Life Long Learning Partnership (NWLLLP) Colleges, revealed that that these events are not always effective at engaging disaffected families such as those from Black and Minority Ethnic Populations, socio-economic groups iv and v, and people with disabilities, which are all under-represented within Higher Education. A pilot study undertaken during academic year 2004-05 explored year 11 pupils and their families' attitudes and experiences of open days in order to ascertain good practice to widen participation, and consider how colleges can make the best use of Open Days to raise educational aspirations.

This briefing sheet contains a summary of key findings; 'Briefing Sheet 3: College Open Days' include examples of good practice and a complementary presentation; 'College Open Days – An exploration Of Year 11 Feedback' presents additional findings from this pilot study. In all three documents, the term Open Days refers to open day or evening events at college that target families of school aged young people.

Activities Carried Out

The pilot study included telephone interviews with representatives of the eight NWLLLP colleges who had responsibility for college open days, which provided examples of good practice and generated a number of common factors which appear to influence satisfaction and participation in open days. To complement the interview data, we developed in consultation with NWLLLP representatives, year 11 pupil and parent questionnaires, which the Preston Area Partnership distributed to a Preston secondary school. Sixty-four year 11 pupils completed questionnaires during registration time. Unfortunately, parental response rate was very low, a range of alternative strategies for gathering parental feedback is planned for academic year 2005 – 06.

FE colleagues provided valuable feedback in response to initial presentations and contributed to the overall analysis of the questionnaire results and interview findings.

Year 11 Pupils' attitudes and experiences of Open Days

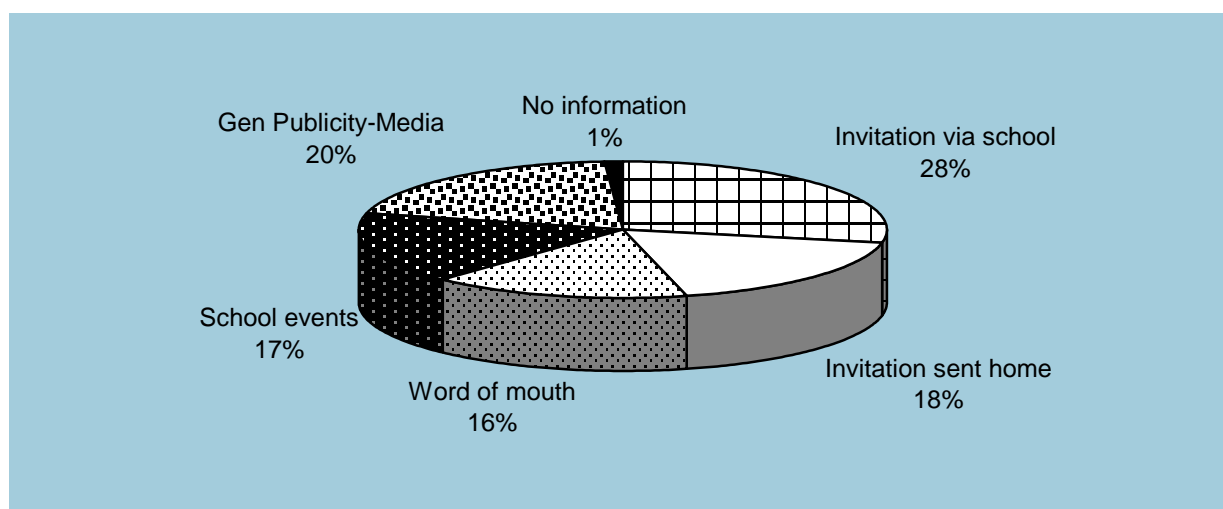
The following highlights some of the main findings, in relation to how pupils found out about Open Days, activities they would like to see at an Open Day, as well as their thoughts about family involvement.

General attendance at College Open Days:

Fifty pupils (78%) had attended to a college open day. Asked to indicate all colleges visited, 37 pupils (74%) visited Preston College, 28 pupils (56%) Runshaw and 19 pupils (38%) Cardinal Newman. Twenty-four pupils (48%) attended an Open Day with their family. Of the twenty-one (42%) who went with school, six (29%) would have liked the opportunity to go with their parents, eight (38%) preferred their parents not to be present and seven (33%) were unsure.

Promotion of Open Days: How pupils found out about Open Days

As expected the majority of pupils received invitations, via school or posted home. A significant number of pupils also received information by word of mouth or at school events such as parents and career evenings.



When questioned how would pupils prefer to be informed about Open Days, the majority fifty seven pupils (89%) still said via school, or invitations sent to home address forty-seven (73%). However, thirty-seven pupils (58%) said they would like information from the Internet, this compared to one person who reported that they actually found out about Open Days on the Internet. This anomaly is an area, and is one of a number, we recommend for further investigation, to ascertain if there is a difference between schools as well as colleges.

Activities at an Open Day:

Pupils indicated from a list of 19 activities¹ compiled from telephone interviews, those they had tried or would like to see within a college open day. Figure 2, highlights the top five activities pupils agreed they would like to see, and top five they have tried.

Activity	Number of pupils			
	Tried	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
Try course activities	8 (18)	47 (1)	4	2
Know about college facilities	17 (8)	43 (2)	4	3
Financial information explained	8 (19)	39 (3)	11	4
Tutors to help me choose a course	14 (11)	39 (4)	7	3
Talk to Connexions	11 (14)	39 (5)	12	2
Talk to course tutors	25 (2)	38 (6)	4	1
Ask tutors questions	22 (3)	37 (8)	4	3
Written information - about courses	19 (5)	36 (9)	8	3
Tour of college with parents	20 (4)	29 (16)	11	6
Tour of college	26 (1)	27 (19)	2	2

Figure 2 NB Rank order in brackets (1 most popular)

¹ For a complete list of Open Day Activities see Briefing Sheet 3: College Open Days

What is noticeable about these results is the discrepancy between activities pupils have tried and those they would like to see. The top two activities pupils agreed they would like to see during an Open Day are trying out course activities and finding out more about college facilities, which they feel would help them to gain a real insight into the difference between learning at school and college. Pupils also rated knowing about the financial implications of studying being able to talk to a tutor to help choose a course and having access to a Connexions advisor very highly. This information highlights the need for one-to-one support or workshops to ensure that young people gain the advice they need. Based on pupils' views, we would also recommend that colleges consider if it is possible for Connexions Advisors to attend Open Days. Further research regarding the services Connexions Advisors offer at Open Days would seem worth investigating.

Pupils rated a tour of college campus as the most common activity (ranked 1 by 52% of pupils), however, in terms of what pupils wanted, this was the least popular activity (ranked no. 19, 42% of pupils). Given the popularity of higher education open days and the potential of College Open Days, this unexpected result warrants further investigation.

Young People's Views about family members attending Open Days:

Although only approximately half of the young people attended Open Days with family members, out of the total of 64 pupils 48 (75%) felt that their parents would want to see a college and that this would help in having their questions answered. Interestingly, 39 pupils (61%) also felt that they would ask more questions if their parents were present, with a smaller number 16 pupils (25%) indicating that they would feel less comfortable. This emphasises the importance of providing the option for young people to go with either school or parents.

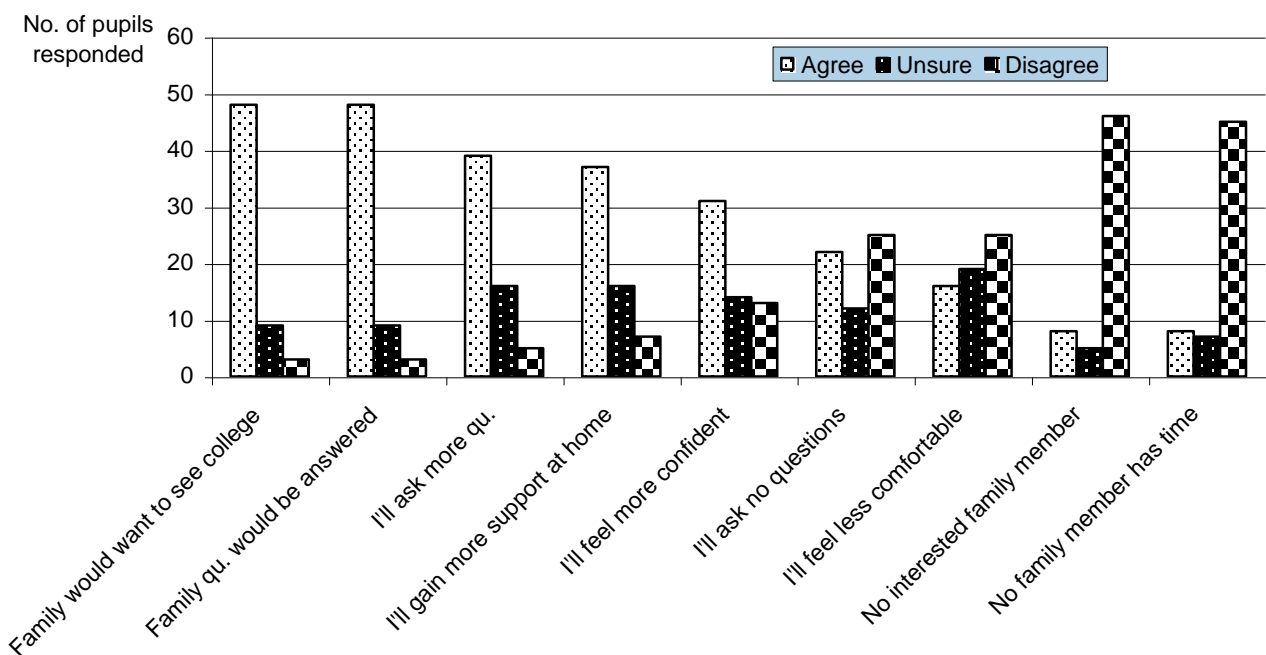


Figure 3

Whilst carrying out telephone interviews with colleges, a school liaison officer shared that they negotiated with a school that when the organised school trip to a college open day was scheduled, they gave pupils a choice to make their own way down to the Open Day with their parents or to go with the school. A large proportion of the young people chose to attend with their parents. In this particular circumstance, this option proved to be beneficial and facilitated young people's families in gaining information, thus enabling them to provide support that is more informed.

College staff views about the factors influencing Open Days

Whilst having a number of features in common, the factors which appear to differ and which perhaps provide the basis for further consideration include:

Size of team involved in organising Open Days / Evenings: generally, larger teams of people had the capacity to organise more open evenings and were able to carry out more promotional and development work, such as parent workshops in schools.

Size of institution – this affected the logistics of college tours, for example where tutors assembled and areas included in the tour. Larger institutions delivered most activities within one area, which had practical advantages in terms of ensuring people did not get lost and had easy access to information and staff. However, this meant that they did not always have the opportunity to see the range of college facilities. Whilst smaller colleges tended to spread out the open day activities in corresponding departments, which gave families an opportunity to walk through the college, this does not necessarily mean families are more aware of student support services. For different reasons, the benefits of college tours, which highlight the facilities available, would respond to pupil expectations and provide an opportunity for answering families' questions. For further advice see Briefing Sheet 2: 'Families on Campus'.

Funding, commitment and experience of working with families: individual staff committed, or funded to work with families integrated targeted approaches to encourage the involvement of families. For further ideas see, Briefing Sheet 3: College Open Days.

Engaging Families: generally, colleges reported that it was difficult to reach disengaged families. Obstacles to greater family involvement included awareness of the benefits of Open Days, and traditional perceptions about the difference between Sixth Form and FE Colleges. Sixth Form Colleges still tend to attract more parents to their Open Days than FE colleges. The use of Connexions Learning Mentors has proved useful in getting pupils to encourage their parents to attend. Whereas, regular attendance by college staff at school events has provided an opportunity to answer parents' immediate questions.

Schools' contribution to promoting Open Days: varies according to teachers' levels of awareness regarding the breadth of college opportunities currently available. In turn, awareness appears to influence how enthusiastically teachers promote Open Days.

Locality of college: and easily accessible transport, do not seem to guarantee parental attendance at Open Days. Interestingly, it appears that when parents transported their young person, they would often remain and take part in an Open Day.

Future Plans

During 2005-06, Lancashire Aimhigher will build on issues emerging from this pilot study. NWLLL Colleges will be able to use and adapt pupil questionnaire to ascertain feedback on their own Open Days. Postal questionnaires with a prize draw, parent workshops, telephone interviews, will allow us to gather parental feedback.

Prepared on behalf of Lancashire Aimhigher

For further information about working with families, or copies of other briefing sheets, contact:

☒ Lancaster University, Department of Educational Research, REAP,
Lancaster, LA1 4YD ☎ 01524 592907

☒ Ann-Marie Houghton: a.houghton@lancaster.ac.uk



Reference for this paper:

Sethi, J., Houghton, A. (2005) 'Engaging Families in College Open Days: A pilot Study' *Aimhigher Lancashire Families Briefing Papers*

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/reap/Documents/Briefing%20Sheet%204.pdf>