



Annabel Giles was so keen to get into Farnborough Sixth Form College that she registered in the US and flew over for an interview Photograph: John Lawrence

# Teenage fanclub

Sixth-form colleges and schools are engaged in a battle for students – and the secret of success could hinge on what they call themselves. Peter Kingston reports

For years, the nation's sixth-form colleges have claimed to be the best in their field – and now comes official confirmation. Of all types of institution serving the 16-19 group, they appear far and away the most effective, according to research by Ofsted.

The verdict comes as the 95 sixth-form colleges (SFCs) across the country are poised to achieve separate legal status for the first time in their four-decade history. The forthcoming education and skills bill announced in last week's Queen's speech will establish that sixth-form colleges are neither schools nor further education colleges, but in a category of their own.

Though colleges have welcomed this recognition, there is disappointment that – unlike universities – they will not be able to use the law to protect their brand. No institution is allowed to claim university status without the permission of the Privy Council. But anyone can call themselves a sixth-form college, and a growing number of schools have been using the title for their sixth forms, in the hope of persuading year 11 pupils to stay on.

For the time being, the Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF), the umbrella group for the 95, is putting the appropriation of their title to one side, preferring to enjoy the sense of having an officially recognised identity.

"For the first time ever, there will be a legal category of sixth-form college, rather than our being further education colleges that happen to call themselves sixth-form colleges," says Sue Witham, the SFCF's chief executive.

A glance at the statistics shows sixth-form college places to be the most fiercely pursued of post-16 options. When Farnborough SFC in Hampshire opened its online applications at 7am recently, 750 would-be students had registered within 35 seconds, says its principal, Dr John Guy.

One applicant, Annabel Giles, 16, registered from Washington. She then flew over for an interview, so keen is she to join the college next September, when her family is due to return to the UK from the US. "I just know it is a very good college with tremendous facilities," she says.

Sixth-form colleges have been around since the early 1970s. Some authorities, such as Tory-controlled Hampshire, decided that their secondary schools would stop at 16 and youngsters would then progress to college. Hampshire has 11 SFCs. The movement faltered during the late 1980s when schools were allowed to opt out of local authority control, and it fizzled out in 1993 when FE colleges and SFCs were freed from local authority control.

But now there is a real possibility of new SFCs, formed either from scratch or by the conversion of FE colleges.

According to the latest figures available, from the start of the 2006-07 academic year, 142,500 16- to 19-year-olds attended the 95 SFCs. That compared with 208,300 in FE colleges and 203,300 in state schools. SFCs, like school sixth forms, focus on academic courses, but their entry requirements can be less stringent. Some SFCs offer courses at entry level (courses in reading and writing), level 1 and level 2 (equivalent to GCSE), as well as A-levels. It is difficult for school sixth forms to offer this breadth to this age group.

Though a former Ofsted chief inspector, David Bell, called "the consistent success of sixth-form colleges... one of the glories of the education system", until now it has not been possible to find a satisfactory answer to questions about which branch of 16-19 education is the most effective. There has been "no single unified system... to measure achievement across all three types of post-16 provider", Ofsted says.

Officials decided to compare the teaching of level 3 courses (A-levels or their equivalent) in SFCs with that in school sixth-forms

and general FE colleges. During the second half of 2007, the inspectorate went into nine SFCs, nine school sixth forms and seven FE colleges. Though relatively small, the sample covered a range of settings.

"The survey found that achievement overall was strongest in the sixth-form colleges visited," says the report. "Sixth-form colleges in particular used highly effective target-setting and specific guidance for individual students." They also showed "high levels of expertise in working with more vulnerable level 3 students".

Having taught in schools before taking charge of Joseph Chamberlain SFC in Balsall Heath, Birmingham, 11 years ago, Lynne Morris claims an informed perspective on both. "Colleges should value the fact that we were born out of schools," she says. "Sixth-form colleges have a legacy of teachers who learned their craft in the classroom and know about looking after kids. Schools clearly have that advantage, but for the most part their sixth forms are too small." Joseph Chamberlain has 1,700 students, of whom 1,400 are 16 to 19.

"If you are giving youngsters a transition between school and university, this college is an exciting place to be and it's definitely a better proposition than staying in a small sixth form," Morris says. "Our students may have been big fishes in school. Here they are likely to meet other big fish, and it's going to broaden their horizons."

Noorjehan Begum, 17, takes a 40-minute bus ride from Lozells in the north-west of Birmingham to Joseph Chamberlain. There are school sixth forms and a general FE college closer to home, which she turned down.

"I came to the open day at Joseph Chamberlain and it immediately felt like home," she says. Begum, who is studying law, psychology and sociology A-levels and wants to become a solicitor, reckons she was right to trust that initial impression.

Friends who have stayed in sixth forms tell her that they still feel very much at school. "The staff are new to you, which is good. They don't have an impression of you that they gained when you were younger. You can start afresh."

"We ask students why they have chosen us," says Jane Overbury, principal of Christ the King RC SFC in Lewisham, south-east London. "They tell us they come for our excellent results and our reputation." Students come from more than 100 schools across London to Christ the King, and each year nearly 3,000 youngsters apply for 750 places. Overbury adds: "What they also talk about is being able to choose from so many subjects, and about the curriculum being personalised around them."

Schools that call their 16-19 departments sixth-form colleges are, understandably perhaps, taking a defensive stance to try to stanch the outward flow of year 11s. "We did it in order to retain our post-16 students and to give them that sense of independence and ownership and that sense of joining something that is slightly different but still attached to the main school," says John Leigh, head of the all-girls Sandbach high school and sixth-form college in Cheshire.

Pupils were asked what changes might persuade more of them to stay on. Suggestions included scrapping uniforms, housing the students in a separate building with its own catering, and generally treating them more as adults.

Has it worked? "Unquestionably," says Leigh. "A few years ago, we had significantly fewer than 100 students in our sixth form. We've now got more than 300."

Some SFC principals are angered by what they see as a misuse of their brand. Others, such as Nicholas Dakin, principal of John Leggett SFC in Scunthorpe, say they are relaxed. "If people call themselves sixth-form colleges when they really are not, that merely draws learners' attention to the advantages we offer," he insists. "People aren't daft."

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