

Tower Hamlets - Alps Case Study

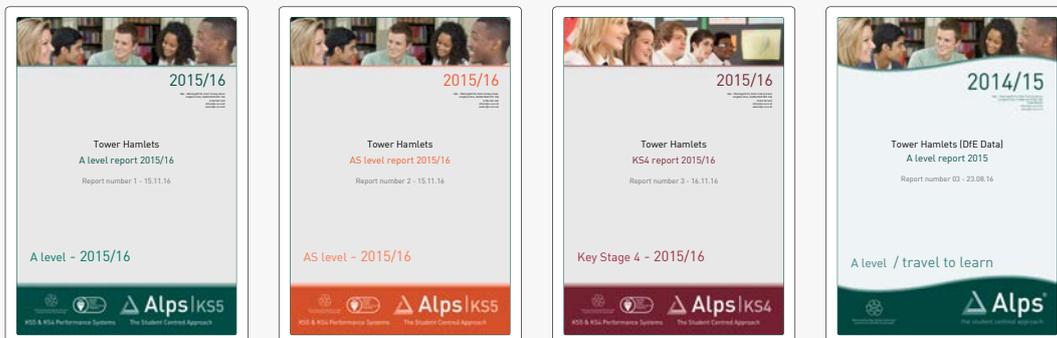
By Tim Williams, Secondary Development Officer Post 16

Education in Tower Hamlets has a fairly well documented recent history and, since the London Challenge initiative, there has been a rapid improvement in student performance, especially at KS4. Attainment and progress is consistently above the national average and Tower Hamlets schools have become increasingly high profile and high performing. We have 14 secondary schools and all but one of these is graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. All our schools have sixth forms with several being very recently introduced. We also have a further education college with an extensive provision and this is judged 'good with outstanding features'. Putting this into context, in the 1990s we were at or towards the bottom of many performance tables.

However buried within this positive story are our A level results. While there are lots of individual student and school success stories and an increasing HE progression rate, our overall A level results for the borough still lag behind national figures and we have had a couple of specific problems: the top performing students at GCSE don't get the top A level grades; and a number of students travel outside the borough to learn. Tower Hamlets is very well connected to the public transport system and it's easy for students to jump on a bus and go elsewhere to study.

Five years ago the LA developed a strategy to tackle our A level problem:

- The appointment of 2 post holders whose core role is to improve A level attainment – I hold one of these posts
- Significant investment in the Alps process. The LA pays for reports for all our providers for A levels, AS levels and BTECs. In addition we get the Travel to Learn report for Tower Hamlets.



So how has Alps helped us?

The Alps reports that we get have given us an invaluable insight into performance at three levels: school, subject and student. Our brief to improve A level results starts with a statistical overview of current performance and the Alps framework of red, black and blue indicators has given us a starting point for focused discussions with schools. An Alps team visits us at the LA during the autumn term and they take us through our reports in forensic detail. With their experience of looking at Alps data they can point us to trends and patterns at our providers and this gives us a strong basis for our work supporting teachers and schools.



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As LA officers we visit all of our sixth forms during autumn term for a challenge and support session and, armed with the Alps report for each school and the feedback from the Alps team, we can ask precise and detailed questions of each school. They, in turn, can point out patterns and trends in their results and give us the detail behind the data – curriculum changes, staff turnover, cohort differences and so on.

Using the Alps report at the autumn term meeting results in a transparent understanding of how the school is performing but, and more importantly, a precise action plan for improvement. This is particularly the case with our new sixth forms where teachers are learning all the time – but with the added responsibility of guiding students who have put their faith in a new provider. Alps have also attended the termly Head of Sixths forum to give training and other advice on using the reports in schools. These sessions have been extremely well received.

On a school level Alps has given us an insight into a range of factors that have an impact on performance: prior GCSE performance and trends, variation in sixth form numbers, retention from year 12 to 13 and the nature of the cohort. This has meant that we can ask searching questions about recruitment to our sixth forms, transition from year 11 to 12, the type of support and intervention activities available to students and internal assessment arrangements.

Our schools have also had their own individual feedback sessions from Alps and this helps them ask their own detailed questions about their provision. From all of this we can develop support activities for schools; we've developed a transition session for sixth form teachers, we've held student focus groups to get feedback on how they experience the sixth form, we've carried out reviews of sixth forms and we've developed a borough wide provision map to help inform recruitment. We also know that our high performing GCSE students don't do as well at A level but that we do well for our middle band. This has given us evidence to help with the development of an academic literacy programme and other targeted support for our high ability students.

But our work doesn't stop at this level. Alps also enables us to dig much deeper into school practices and to develop support in a focused and specific way – at subject level.

The whole sixth form analysis is invaluable for developing a strategic direction but the key work for many comes at the operational level. Alps reports give us a very clear picture of what is happening at subject level. Firstly we can look at the trends in subjects. Where there is a spiky performance we, with the head of sixth, can investigate whether this is because of teacher changes, different options being taught within the specification, changes to assessment practices, whether the subject has been blocked in the timetable differently and so on. Secondly we can see very clearly from an Alps report where there has been a consistent improvement in a subject. This enables us to investigate this and identify good practice – and to look at sharing this across the school. By doing this we have unearthed a variety of interesting activities, for example flipped learning has had a big impact in one of our schools while simple folder checks have been important in another.

The third level of the Alps reports – the student data – has also been important. In the LA report we only get a student number but the schools get the name of each individual student and both enable us to look across at the performance in all their subjects. Again we look for consistency. A varied student performance will help the head of sixth ask precise questions of individual subjects.

The third area where Alps has been central in our operational work has been in establishing subject networks. School to school support is probably the most valuable type of help that a teacher can get. The LA Alps report details subject performance across our schools. This enables us to identify good practice and to put schools together where they can help each other. This has developed in Tower Hamlets to an extensive subject support network covering all the reformed A level subjects. This is particularly valued by the new sixth forms and teachers new to teaching A levels. We are also developing a BTEC network. In a time of fundamental change all over the education system the networks have been invaluable for keeping on top of developments and for sharing best practice.



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In Tower Hamlets most of our students either stay at their school for their sixth form or they go to the local FE college. But we have a persistent percentage who travel out of the borough. For some this is the right decision – for course reasons or socially it is appropriate – but for many they feel that the grass is greener somewhere else. Students are very astute, do a lot of research, and get places at some excellent out of borough providers. But they are a loss to us. The Alps Travel to Learn report gives us a detailed insight into whether students have been right to leave us. This report enables us to look at our local provision map and put this into the context of the wider regional provision map. From this we can look at developing our own courses or plugging gaps where progression routes are broken.

So how are we doing?

All our new sixth form provision is now well established and growing. Our performance at A level is getting closer to the national average. A large number of our students progress to higher education with an increasing percentage going on to apprenticeships. Our travel to learn numbers have stabilised and an increasing number of our high ability students are staying in the borough. But we still face challenges; we've made some progress with our high ability students getting the top A level grades, but we are by no means content with where we are; on a wider level we know that we are facing significant funding cuts over the next few years, both at the LA and in our schools; and even more widely the LA's school improvement function is likely to be changed significantly over the next year as a school to school partnership is launched independently to the LA. So it will become even more important that we are clear on our data and that Alps guides us towards the right strategies.

Contact us: The Alps office is open Monday to Friday 9am - 5.00pm. Please feel free to contact us to discuss any aspect of Alps. [t. 01484 887600](tel:01484887600) | [email. info@alps-va.co.uk](mailto:info@alps-va.co.uk)



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The Student Centred Approach

Alps Travel to Learn Report

The Alps Travel to Learn report is a key strategic report for local authorities. It considers the A level outcomes of those young people who are resident within a local authority's boundaries, analysing the progress these students have made as a part of three distinct cohorts:

1. Residents aged 16-18, no matter where they studied their A levels.
2. Residents who studied for their A levels at an institution within the local authority boundaries.
3. All residents who undertook the study of their A levels at a school/college within a different (usually neighbouring) local authority.

Our strategic analysis looks at the relative performance of all these groups by ability band, by subject and by school/college and establishes:

1. A clear analysis which will enable local authorities to prioritise and plan the curriculum mix across their own institutions, enabling them to improve outcomes for the young people they serve.
2. A significant amount of critical information that can be shared with elected members and others to analyse the successes within the authority, and prioritise the challenges that remain in their schools and colleges.

Subject performance

The Alps Travel to Learn report also gives a detailed analysis subject by subject which looks at value added outcomes of those residents who stayed within the LA, compared to those who moved elsewhere.

The ICT example below is a good one:

| Subject | 2014 | | | 2015 | | | 2016 | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|-------|-------|------------------------------------|-------|-------|--------------------------------|-------|-------|------------------------------------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|----|------|---|
| | Residents taught within the LA | | | Residents taught outside of the LA | | | Residents taught within the LA | | | Residents taught outside of the LA | | | | | | | | |
| | Entries | Score | Grade | Entries | Score | Grade | Entries | Score | Grade | Entries | Score | Grade | Entries | Score | Grade | | | |
| A - ICT | 5 | 0.91 | 5 | 40 | 0.90 | 5 | 32 | 1.03 | 3 | 32 | 0.88 | 5 | 21 | 1.17 | 1 | 22 | 0.94 | 4 |
| A - Electronics | | | | 10 | 1.10 | 3 | 8 | 1.16 | 3 | 7 | 1.17 | 3 | 7 | 1.17 | 3 | | | |

The data suggests a number of areas of interest – including the fact that the performance of those young people who stayed within the LA is significantly better than those residents who moved to institutions elsewhere - the difference is almost one grade per entry better for those young people who stayed within the LA's boundaries. And yet despite this, young people are moving away from the LA's schools in significant numbers to take this subject!

Conclusion

The Alps Travel to Learn report is a powerful tool which is used by many local authorities to celebrate the successes of their residents and to identify challenges that are evident within subjects, sub-areas of the authority, and at a student level.

To discuss this report with one of our education team, please call us on 01484 887600.



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