LEADING INCLUSIVE COLLEGES:

A strategic response to the growing NEET challenge



MK College

HARLOW COLLEGE

gateway qualifications



The growing NEET challenge

Recent figures estimate that 981,000 young people aged 16-24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET), equivalent to 13% of all young people in the UK*. Behind these figures are young people facing a range of barriers, including poor mental health, additional support needs, disrupted educational experiences, low confidence and uncertainty about their future opportunities. Increasingly, colleges are supporting learners with diverse and complex needs and are required to develop provision that meets learners where they are.

The independent Alan Milburn review of young people and work describes a growing risk of long-term detachment from education and employment and calls for more coherent pathways that connect learning, skills development and progression. Colleges are uniquely positioned to offer tailored support to this group of young people. Through strong partnerships, inclusive curriculum design and targeted learner support, colleges can identify risk early, re-engage young people and create personalised routes into further learning, employment and wider opportunities.

The following case studies showcase how Harlow College and Milton Keynes College have responded to this challenge. Supported by the flexibility of Gateway Qualifications' qualifications and units, both colleges have developed innovative approaches that reflect the needs of their learners, communities and local employers.

* Office for National Statistics (ONS) June 2026

Milton Keynes College: Adapting to the needs of NEET learners

Milton Keynes College identified a growing need for provision that could better support young people at risk of disengagement from education. Many learners were arriving with complex needs, including poor mental health, low confidence, disrupted educational experiences and barriers that made participation in a traditional college environment more challenging.

In response, the college developed a more flexible and inclusive model built around specialist support, personalised learning and clear progression opportunities. Alongside the creation of The Key, a dedicated provision for learners requiring additional support, the college introduced three Level 1 pathways focused on employability, English and maths, enabling learners to explore vocational interests while developing the skills and confidence needed to progress. A Specialist Transition Pathway provides enhanced support for learners with significant Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), helping them prepare for college life both academically and emotionally.

By creating multiple routes into learning, rather than expecting learners to fit a single delivery model, Milton Keynes College has developed flexible, responsive provision designed to strengthen learner engagement and support progression into further learning and employment. The pathways below demonstrate how flexible curriculum design can create meaningful opportunities for learners with different needs, aspirations and starting points.



Vocational Pathway

For learners wanting to take a vocational option/exploring future aspiration

Level 1 Certificate in Vocational Studies
Credits: 18 | Qualification No: 601/0024/2

Level 2 Certificate in Vocational Studies
Credits: 24 | Qualification No: 603/2542/2

Employability units could include:

- Conduct at Work
- Communication Skills for Work
- Career Planning

Vocational units could include:

- Beauty Unit
- Hair Unit
- Business Unit

Progression Pathway

For learners wanting to focus on English and Maths for progression

Entry Level Certificate in Progression (Entry 3)
Credits: 15 | Qual No: 600/8912/X

Level 1 Certificate in Progression
Credits: 21 | Qual No: 600/8915/5

Level 2 Certificate in Progression
Credits: 24 | Qual No: 600/8918/0

Units could include:

- Time Management [E3]
- Skills for Employability [E3]
- Improving Own Learning & Performance [L1]
- Personal Career Planning [L1]

Transition Pathway

For learners requiring additional support to transition to College/ mainstream education

Entry Level Certificate in Progression (Entry 3)
Credits: 15 | Qual No: 600/8912/X

Level 1 Certificate in Progression
Credits: 21 | Qual No: 600/8915/5

Units could include:

- Making Choices [E3]
- Managing Social Relationships [E3]
- Healthy Living [L1]
- Negotiation Skills [L1]

Harlow College: Supporting NEET Learners Through the Choices Programme

Harlow College has developed its Choices Programme to support young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. Designed around Gateway Qualifications' Level 1 Certificate and Level 1 Diploma in Progression, the programme provides learners with the opportunity to build confidence, explore their strengths and develop the skills needed for further education or work.

Recognising that many young people face barriers when returning to education, the programme takes a flexible and supportive approach. A staggered start to the college day helps learners gradually establish routines and re-engage with learning, while a combination of personal development, employability and vocational learning helps learners identify their interests and future goals. Learners can also explore specific vocational pathways, such as construction, which help them gain practical experience and make informed decisions about their next steps.

The programme has continued to grow in response to learner need, supporting increasing numbers of young people each year. Its impact can be seen in both achievement and progression. Learners have progressed into mainstream study, apprenticeships and further qualifications. One participant, who had been out of education for several years before joining the programme, progressed through Levels 1 and 2 and is now preparing to study Level 3 Science. On completion, learners leave the programme with greater confidence, recognised qualifications and clear progression routes into further education, training or employment.





Gateway Qualifications: flexible and learner-centric

Both colleges have used Gateway Qualifications' flexible qualification framework to create programmes that reflect local needs and learner aspirations. By combining vocational, employability and personal development learning, colleges can design provision that supports progression while responding to individual learner needs. This flexibility helps learners build confidence, explore opportunities and take positive steps towards further education, training or employment.

Scan to find out more.

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Charity Registration No. 1114282
Registered in England Company No. 5502449

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GATE002/OCT26