



ASSOCIATION
OF COLLEGES

NUS

Student Poverty Commission

Association of Colleges response

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Colleges



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Background

1. The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents nearly 95% of the 288 colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.
2. Colleges are drivers of social mobility, economic growth and community development. They provide high-quality technical and professional education and training for 3 million young people and adults and thousands of employers. In doing this, they support people into careers as well as strengthen the economy. Colleges are inspirational places to learn because education and training is delivered by expert teaching staff in purpose built facilities.
3. Colleges offer first rate academic and technical teaching, particularly at advanced level, and cover a broad range of disciplines including science, engineering, IT, construction, hospitality and the creative arts.

What are the barriers working class people face accessing and succeeding in post 16 education?

4. The UK is an unequal society with great differences in wealth, income and opportunity between people of different backgrounds. There has been some social mobility in recent years but there are substantial obstacles for those from poor or working class families. In post 16 education, the following obstacles exist:
 - There are substantial differences in access, opportunity and achievement at all levels of education from early years to higher education. Some of these result from intractable differences between different classes because of inherited wealth, inequality in the workplace and residential segregation.
 - Despite these class differences, there is a lack of a common language to describe the issue and a lack of good data on class and education. Outside higher education (which collects data on parental occupation in the UCAS process), there is no firm data on class for school or college students. Department for Education (DfE) uses (overuses) free school meals as a proxy for disadvantage in the school system. The discussion started by the Prime Minister about families who are just about managing recognises this issue but there is no simple solution and progress is slow. Measurement in further education is made using postcode. The financial support that parents need so

that their children can eat a good lunch and where people live are both good proxies for class but they are not complete descriptions of circumstance.

- Despite good intentions, the education system compounds problems that already exist in society particularly in terms of access to elite roles. DfE funds 16 to 18 education at a rate of less than £5,000 a student which is less than 1/3 of the average sixth form tuition fee in private education (fees now average £17,000 a year). Despite the rhetoric and the promises, high achieving students in the state system face an unequal competition for selective university places. The Social Mobility Commission has looked at various aspects of this but did relatively little on the role of 16 to 18 education in the issue. Official statistics report that more than 60% of private school A Level pupils progress to more selective universities whereas less than 25% of state system A Level pupils do so.
- DfE's major financial initiative to support school pupils from the poorest families – the £2.5 billion pupil premium – stops at age 16. Private schools increase their fees at sixth form; DfE cuts funding by about 20% at the same point which limits the opportunities that young people have to catch up at sixth form level.
- The social class differences in success at 16 are reinforced in the years that follow – partly as a result of DfE policy. Those who achieve a good set of GCSEs can progress to A Level study and probably to university. Those who don't are required to resit English and maths. This eats into the curriculum time for their other subjects. Young people who do not reach Level 2 standard at 16 generally need to spend three years reaching Level 3 by 19. In their third year ("Year 14"), funding is cut by 17.5% to a miserly national base rate of £3,300.
- There is now less money to support students with the incidental costs of accessing education than there was in the past. Education Maintenance Allowances were abolished in 2011 and replaced by bursaries, but with a budget that was less than one third of previous spending¹. Surveys show that many travel costs range from £10 to £20 a week which adds up to significant cost for those on limited budgets². Transport is a major factor that influences young people's

¹ DfE spent £560 million on EMAs in 2011-12 (excluding administration costs) and spent £180 million on bursaries in 2016-17

² NUS Pound in your Pocket survey 2012.

access to education or training. As many as 300,000 young adults are young carers, either of children, parents or older relatives³ which they often prioritise over education.

- Funds for adult learning have been cut in half in the last ten years with money restricted to lower level qualifications. There are loans available for adults taking courses at Level 3 and above but people need to be optimistic about their future prospects to be prepared to take on debt for education.
- In addition to the very real systematic and financial obstacles, poor and working class people face prejudice from many opinion formers and policy makers. Successful people attribute their achievements to their own efforts and tend to dismiss those who don't succeed as lacking ambition. There is an excessive focus on the 1% of the age group who attend the two Oxbridge universities or the 8% who attend Russell Group institutions with a consequent dismissal of other institutions and other types of education and work as being second or third class.
- Two big initiatives within education policy this decade are the implementation of a knowledge-based curriculum up to 16 and increasing the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who enter higher education. There is some merit in both plans which will benefit some poor and working class people who are supported to enter higher education but the academic, university direction of the policy focuses on the better achieving 45% in the age cohort while marginalising others. The government's technical education reforms are a laudable attempt to do something different but will take years to implement.

What evidence do you have of this?

5. We are not a research organisation ourselves but we would be happy to discuss what data is available and where it can be obtained from.

What work have you been involved in that has had an impact?

6. We have described some profound issues that create challenges for poor and working class people in post 16 education. These deserve a national

³ There are more than 314,000 young carers aged 16 to 24 in the UK. LWI young carers network

response. Some smaller but nevertheless significant measures that can and have made a difference include:

- Quality in Careers Standard for schools and colleges⁴
- Education maintenance allowance (EMA) gave students from low-income homes funding to support post- 16 education expenses such as travel and kit for hair and beauty, catering, construction
- Opportunities for Key Stage 4 students to access college programmes through Increased Flexibility and Young Apprenticeship schemes enabling students to experience technical options one-day-a-week⁵
- Skills competitions, leading to World Skills, celebrate elite performance in areas traditionally dismissed as routine, for example construction crafts or hairdressing

What recommendations do you have?

7. There are a number of specific proposals that would address the issues we have identified:
 - HM Treasury should set a target to spend 5% of GDP on education by 2025 with spending rebalanced to ensuring equal opportunities and to ensuring that skills are genuinely part of the national industrial strategy.
 - DfE should conduct a review of 16-19 funding to ensure it is linked to the realistic costs of delivering a rounded, high quality curriculum. There should be adequate funding for three years of study for those who need it.
 - DfE's scheduled review of higher education funding should be widened to consider the needs of poor and working class people whether they go to university or college.

⁴ (<http://www.qualityincareers.org.uk/>)

⁵ Research on these 14 to 16 programmes
(<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130321025827/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR790.pdf>)

- 25% of the levy budget should be used to reduce segregation in apprenticeships and to develop training at Level 3 to provide better opportunities to good jobs for those who leave education before the age of 20.
- There should be a more effective system of student support for those over the age of 16 including child benefit, education maintenance allowances and bursaries for adults in learning.

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