



Backbench Business Debate briefing

Proposal for a national education route map for schools and colleges in response to the COVID-19 outbreak

Thursday 25 February

Background

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents nearly 90 per cent of the 237 colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. English colleges educate over 2.2 million students every year and employ approximately 111,000 full time equivalent staff.

Introduction

- The pandemic has had a profound impact on young people and adults in education and training, with people from disadvantaged backgrounds hit hardest.
- We therefore welcome the publication of the national education route map, which sets out the measures that will be taken to support staff, pupils, students, parents and carers through the return to full attendance. We were pleased to have the opportunity to feed into the development of this.
- We are encouraged that the route map acknowledges many of the concerns we raised including:
 - The impact of lost learning, particularly on the most vulnerable students
 - Digital exclusion
 - The need for colleges to have the decision-making flexibility to address their specific needs.
- We know that every pupil will have been affected by lost-learning during the pandemic and the impact of this will be long-lasting.
- **Addressing the issue of lost learning and ensuring there is adequate catch-up support in place is of critical importance and must be prioritised by the Government as we return to full attendance in the months ahead.**
- This must include a focus on the groups that are facing more immediate challenges as a result of lost learning. In colleges, this includes those who have suffered from digital exclusion, those training in practical courses who have been unable to study or train remotely, and those studying at lower levels with higher needs.
- There are wider challenges too in terms of the impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing which must be addressed.

Lost learning

- Despite the speed of colleges' shift to online, lost learning will have affected every learner to some extent. We know this is an important and urgent priority for colleges and for the 2.2 million people who study in them.
- A recent Institute for Fiscal Studies [report](#) warned the government that failure to act on lost learning will translate into **reduced productivity, lower incomes, lower tax revenues, higher inequality and potentially expensive social ills.**

Need for increased catch-up funding:

- We believe that a more long-term plan with significant catch-up funding to support additional hours of teaching for continuing students is essential and must be prioritised.
- The March budget is an opportunity for the Government to show they recognise the importance of young people's education and training to the future of our economy, and just how profound the impact of lost learning could be.

Areas of particular concern

There are three overlapping factors facing colleges and their students that increase our concerns about the impact of lost learning on students:

- **Digital poverty:** having a device, internet access and space is a must to participate fully in remote learning. However, we know that digital poverty affects around 100,000 16 to 19-year-olds in colleges, and unknown numbers of adults and apprentices. Devices funded by the government are now being delivered and internet access set up, which will help greatly, but the very presence of these new devices now underlines their absence for 11 months of pandemic across three lockdowns.
- **Higher numbers of lower-level learners:** we are concerned that the impact of lost learning will be felt even more strongly by those on lower-level courses who may have progressed to college last summer. Their needs for catch-up were strong then but will have been compounded during a hugely disrupted first couple of terms.
- **Higher numbers of practical courses:** there are around 150,000 students taking practical subjects, for whom lost learning cannot be made up with more online lessons. We are concerned that thousands of students will struggle to become competent in their chosen trade or profession having missed many weeks of hands-on practice in the workshop.

Young people leaving education this year

- We are also particularly concerned about the challenges facing students who will not progress onto higher level or higher education courses at the end of this academic year, who will face a tough labour market with few job opportunities open to them.
- There are programmes funded to support this cohort, but they lack coherence and as they stand are unlikely to work for large numbers of those who have particularly suffered from lost learning.
- We have therefore recently written to the newly appointed Education Recovery Minister Sir Kevan Collins, to propose the establishment of a youth skills recovery task and finish group to work on this area.

The Government must prioritise ensuring that young people recover learning lost as a result of the pandemic and that catch-up initiatives are in place, particularly over summer months.

Wider context

Mental health

- Colleges are clear that there are growing challenges with the mental health and wellbeing of our learners – and we know that the pandemic has exacerbated this issue. [Research](#) we conducted in November 2020 found that:
 - 83% of colleges stated that the increase in referrals for support since September was higher than previous years with 41% stating that they were significantly higher.
 - We asked colleges how many had been offered training by their Local Authority and only 34% responded positively.

- Only 28 colleges were aware of the Student Space resources for Higher Education which were funded by the Office for Students (OfS).
- The full impact of COVID-19 has yet to be felt and since this survey was undertaken we have entered into a further national lockdown, had more uncertainty about exams and assessment for all of our student cohorts and returned to most interaction being online.
- On top of this colleges are now preparing to receive new students in September who will have had two years of severely disrupted learning and limited time in school or college alongside second year students who have had a disrupted first year in college, many of whom will be preparing for their first set of formal exams in 2022.
- **In the return to full attendance, it's important that mental health is prioritised and colleges have the resources they need to support students.**

Funding

COVID-19 related funding pressures

- In November last year, we warned that 20,000 students in colleges were underfunded, due to increased levels of students turning to education, rather than the workplace, during the pandemic, and a lagged funding model.
- At the time, our data showed that 62 per cent of colleges had seen an increase in 16-19 enrolments, while outgoing costs had increased due to COVID-19.
- A report published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies also found that despite the £400 million extra in funding this year, exceptional rises in student numbers could still generate a real-term fall in funding per student for colleges.
- We welcome the recent announcement that the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) will provide extra funding to lessen the pressure on the 16-19 budget.
- However, if we are going to ensure that colleges can continue to provide high-quality learning to all of their students in the challenging months ahead, then **the Government must provide additional funding to colleges in the March budget.**

Wider funding pressures

- The strategic related challenges facing the college sector in England are all compounded by the chronic lack of funding.
- Despite recent uplifts, funding remains inadequate, and compares extremely unfavourably with both university and school funding; **annual public funding per university student averages £6,600 compared to £1,050 for adults in further education.**
- Funding levels have fallen significantly over the past decade. Recent research from IPPR has found that if further education funding had kept up with demographic pressures and inflation over the last decade, we would be investing an **extra £2.1bn per year on adult skills and £2.7bn per year on 16-19 further education.**
- The result of this underfunding is that colleges have had to narrow their curriculum and reduce the broader support they offer to students – including across careers advice and mental health services.
- In addition, the current complexity of the approach to funding leads to planning uncertainties, burdensome data management and turbulence in cash flow.

The need for a long-term funding settlement

- The Government's recent [Skills for jobs](#) White Paper recognised that funding has been wholly insufficient, and that alongside increased funding there is a need for simpler, longer-term funding settlements which allow colleges to deliver on longer-term strategic priorities.
- The range of capital funding proposals are extremely welcome, and a strong statement of intent. Longer term, these reforms will require concrete, long-term funding across revenue, as well as capital.
- The [English College of the Future](#) report, from the Independent Commission on the College of the Future chaired by Sir Ian Diamond, recommended a new three-year funding settlement for colleges, alongside a shift in approach away from the current restrictions toward a more integrated and streamlined offer. **If the Government is going to meet the ambitions set out in the white paper and address the long-term systematic and pandemic related challenges facing colleges, it is absolutely vital they get the funding they need.**

The role of colleges in the economic recovery

- Every community in the UK has a thriving college that works with hundreds of local employers to develop their workforce and anticipate their future needs. That makes colleges perfectly placed to offer education and training in what business needs and to ensure a strong pipeline of nurses and care workers, construction workers, engineers, designers etc.
- In June 2020 we published [Rebuild: a skills led recovery plan](#) which called on the Government to reduce the post-furlough shock, minimise the risk of economic scarring, and prepare the country for the rebuild. We believe the report's recommendations for Government remain the right ones for today:
 1. Guarantee a high quality, education or training place for every 16 to 18 year old, funded to meet their needs and the learning lost.
 2. Offer a suite of work focused training programmes, including expanded traineeships and apprenticeships designed to get young people into jobs as soon as they become available. This should include a comprehensive bursary system and incentives for employers.
 3. Provide support for adults who lose their jobs to train or retrain flexibly up to higher level technical/ professional level, aimed at getting them back into the workforce as quickly as possible, with additional training to manage their transition once back in work.
- This package would cost £3.6 billion and deliver incentives to businesses and a flexible offer for students.
- **Colleges are ready to deliver in every community across the country to ensure that nobody is left behind, and that we build back better through one of the best prepared future-ready work forces.**
- This will require a national long-term strategy, coordinated across government departmental agendas and aligned with the need to transition to a more sustainable green economy, as set out in the [English College of the Future](#) report.

Further information

For further information or to discuss these themes in more detail, please contact:

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