



Rising to the challenge of English and Maths

The college sector supports the government's policy aim to increase the number of young people who achieve Level 2 English and maths by 19. Good literacy and numeracy skills are essential for life and employment and we want students to be enthused about improving these vital skills. Colleges need support to re-motivate these students and set their sights on improvement.

By the age of 16, 35% of the age cohort have not yet achieved grade 4 in GCSE English and Maths after 11 years of schooling. The vast majority of those young people who need to improve their grades are studying in colleges and it is the college sector which is expected to do the 'heavy lifting' of turning this around. Post-16 teachers have worked hard to ensure thousands of students per year achieve their all-important grade 4 in English or Maths for the first time and many others are making progress towards it.

However, rather than stimulating aspiration, this can feel like a thankless task; squeezing diminishing returns from multiple retakes. High grade pass rates for GCSE resits remain low at age 17 and 18 and Functional Skills entries have fallen as increasingly colleges enter all students for GCSE. This is hardly surprising given that moving from Grade 2 GCSE to passing Level 1 Functional Skills currently represents 'negative progress' while moving to a grade 3 GCSE is regarded as 'positive progress'.

The current system for valuing progress penalises colleges for having learners who need more time and the notion of 'negative progress' is dispiriting for colleges who are doing everything they can. Instead, we should be incentivising every step on the ladder and helping students to see how they are progressing towards their goal.

Colleges want to rise to the challenge. We welcome initiatives such as the Basic Maths Premium Pilots and the Centres for Excellence and their networks which should do much to identify and disseminate good practice. In addition, the Association of Colleges' English and maths Policy Group has developed a 5-point plan to support colleges and students achieve this policy aim. We are calling for more resources, more flexibility to do what is best for students and some adjustments to the way progress in English and Maths is measured. We want a

system which offers a better progression ladder and values student progress. These proposals received strong support in our recent survey, which over half of all Further Education Colleges responded to.

The survey also revealed that at a time when student numbers in English and maths have increased to their highest level ever and funding is at its lowest level ever, over half of colleges are experiencing staff shortages in maths and over a third are experience staff shortages in English.

AoC 5-point plan for English and maths:

1. Fund English and maths properly

The funding formula doesn't properly cover the costs of providing the additional English and maths teaching which many students need. English and Study Programme funding, in line with proposals for T Levels.

2. Give colleges greater flexibility in English and maths entry policies

Colleges need to be able to take the lead from the Government's proposed T Level policy, which allows providers to enter students for Level 2 Functional Skills or GCSE based on appropriateness. More 'stepping stone' qualifications should also be available.

3. Increase the progress score for Functional Skills

Functional skills have been reformed to provide more robust support for progression. Increasing the progress points for the new Functional Skills would recognise progress while maintaining a differential with GCSE grades and between levels. We suggest +0.5 at level 2 and at level 1 and +0.6 at Entry level. Students with a GCSE grade 3 on entry could work towards either GCSE grade 4 or level 2 Functional Skills and achieve positive progress with either. Students with a GCSE grade 2 on entry would receive positive progress if they achieve Level 1 Functional Skills.

4. Cap the progress score at a minimum of 0 for students and colleges:

Some students who have not yet moved up a level are recorded as having made 'negative progress'. Capping this at a minimum of 0 would value positive progress and treat prior achievement as 'banked' rather than demoralising hard working students or colleges.

5. Celebrate improved cohort performance

Using data about the proportion of each age cohort crossing the grade 4 threshold would celebrate the achievements of students and the contribution of providers in achieving the overall policy aim.

Catherine Sezen and Eddie Playfair, Senior Policy Managers at AoC

January 2019

Key points from the AoC English and maths survey (December 2018)

51% of General FE Colleges responded.

94% agreed that English and maths should be a major priority for colleges.

99% felt that current funding levels for English and maths was insufficient.

93% wanted the level 2 entry flexibility offered for T Level students to apply to all students.

87% wanted to see more 'stepping stone' qualifications available and funded.

97% wanted the progress measures updated to reflect the value of Functional Skills.

84% wanted the progress measure to be capped at zero; no 'negative progress'.

56% reported staff shortages in maths.

36% reported staff shortages in English.