The House of Commons Education Committee - Impact of Covid19 on education and children's services

AoC Submission

June 2020

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents 95% of the 244 colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and has several associate members.

Introduction and summary

The national shutdown put into effect by the UK government in March 2020 to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak has had a profound effect on colleges and their students. For the first time since the 1940s there was a government instruction to close all schools and colleges on 18 March 2020 but, unlike then, education has continued online and, for a few students, in person.

To assist discussion about what was needed to support colleges in the short and longer term AoC issued a survey[1] to the leaders of the 244 colleges in England on 21st April with a return date of 28th April (report May 2020). 125 surveys were returned – more than 90% by principals or chief executives plus 7 other returns. A follow up survey[2] was conducted in late June (report July 2020). This generated 109 responses or 45% of the sector.

Representatives from AoC would welcome the opportunity to appear before the committee to discuss this topic in further detail.

Key points are:

- **Online education**: Colleges adapted quickly to online delivery, but more work needs to be done to ensure all students have access and all staff feel confident in delivering high quality online lessons

- **Widening gaps**: All students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those most vulnerable to NEET will need support to re-engage and catch-up.

- **Qualifications**: DfE, Ofqual and awarding organisations acted quickly to change assessment arrangements for summer 2020 but assessment communication needs to be clear, consistent and timely and give as much emphasis to vocational technical qualifications as A Levels and GCSEs

---

[1] AoC Covid-19 and colleges survey, 04,05,20

[2] AoC Covid-19 Summer Survey, July 2020

- **Financial sustainability:** Ministers acted quickly to protect some parts of college funding but, overall there has and will be a significant financial impact, , especially in those colleges that acted on government encouragement to reduce their reliance on public funding and increase the amount generated commercially

- **DfE and college students**: DfE tends to focus mainly on schools but should align messaging to schools <u>and colleges</u> to enable timely response to meet student needs, especially the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Only 25% of young people in the 16-18 age group are in school sixth forms.

1. The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

There was some confusion in the days after the 18 March closure announcement about who counted as a critical worker. Colleges made quick plans on the basis that they would be providing for hundreds of vulnerable young students and children of critical workers but the numbers who actually attended was less than expected. Young people aged 16 and older were mainly able to learn at home and preferred to do so when all their fellow students were also at home.

Colleges remained open throughout the pandemic to meet the needs of vulnerable students. Attendance was varied with many colleges reporting low numbers. At the beginning of closure the requests to report attendance to both DfE and local authorities was an administrative challenge as, in line with Government guidance, there were limited numbers of staff on site.

2. The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people.

Children services have been cut back in recent years and we have reports on unmet need for mental health and other support services but we have no data on this issue.

The AoC April survey indicated that adult attendance was noted as being problematic due to childcare and caring commitments.

3. The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to:
   - Children's early development
   - The early years funded entitlement and the childcare market

Colleges have a role in training early year workers but the lockdown at the end of March resulted in placements being cancelled. In T Level provider focus groups colleges report concerns about being able to provide students with the placement hours (over 700 hours) in the coming academic year due to restrictions on visitors on site.

4. The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

DfE, Ofqual and awarding organisations have worked hard to mitigate the impact of the cancellation and or delay of assessment both for A Levels and GCSEs and vocational technical qualifications. The vast majority of students who would have taken assessments in summer 2020 will receive a grade which will enable them to progress to further or higher education or employment although employment opportunities for 19 to 24-year-olds will be impacted[3]

AoC has held a series of webinars to help disseminate key messages regarding summer assessment 2020 for both A Levels and GCSEs and vocational technical qualifications.

Arrangements for the assessment of technical and vocational qualifications required different approaches dependent on purpose. Communication from awarding organisations was not always consistent and has led to confusion. It was sometimes difficult to differentiate between adapt and delay mitigations which has caused frustration for students and college staff.

In the April AoC survey colleges also reported significant levels of disengagement among students in the final year of A-level courses and GCSE English and maths resit courses as the messaging indicated that work produced after the closure of colleges would not count towards centre assessed grades.

Colleges anticipate the need for a considerable amount of catch-up tuition and other support in the autumn term.

5. Support for pupils and families during closures, including:
   - ○ The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning

Colleges were quick to move to online delivery models. Engagement is reported to be good with 90% of respondents in the AoC June survey indicating that students were engaging online. Many colleges noted that for many more vulnerable students (especially those with mental health issues) engagement on line was better than face-to-face. However, for others there were challenges with engagement because of lack of/shared equipment/ internet access.

In the AoC April survey

- Almost half of colleges reported that their learners were undertaking 75% or more of their planned learning hours, with one in ten colleges reporting that all planned learning hours were delivered remotely.

---

[3] Class of 2020

- A third of colleges reported that their learners were taking between 50 and 74% of planned learning hours.
- And one in ten learners were undertaking less than half their learning hours.

In summary, 43% of learners were doing less than three quarters of their planned hours and may need further support or catch up time in future.

Concerns are also expressed about the digital divide and that as outlined below not all students have access to digital resources, wifi or a quiet space to work.

While many staff feel confident about online delivery, this is not the case for all. There will be a need for training to support those who feel less confident.

College websites have updates for students. parents/carers, applicants and employers.

- Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

Colleges have worked hard to maintain contact with all students who they define as vulnerable. They have continued to provide access to counselling and other pastoral services remotely and in some instances they have provided wider support opportunities for parents and families. Colleges have used their regular communications with students to promote positive mental health and activities to support students remotely. They have also used their social media channels effectively and highlighted local and national support organisations available to students.

Colleges are concerned with transition both into and out of college and providing support to students who this impacts on. In addition to this colleges are supporting bereaved students and families and preparing for dealing with the impact of traumatic bereavement on members of their college community.

The June AoC survey indicated that 94% of colleges agree that there has been an additional demand for mental health and wellbeing services for students during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. 97% of colleges have put additional mental health and wellbeing support in place for their students as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown.

Colleges are supporting students in a range of ways: providing information and signposting to external support organisations (96% of colleges), adapting existing support services to deliver remotely (95% of colleges), providing regular opportunities to discuss wellbeing with staff (91% of colleges), providing guidance about self-care (89% of colleges), providing online skills sessions, e.g. mindfulness, coping strategies (84% of colleges), commissioning new online or telephone support services such as counselling (45% of colleges), providing opportunities for peer support (41% of colleges).

- The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses

Colleges have trained apprentices for decades and train, on average, 1,400 apprentices. Colleges train around half of all construction, engineering and health apprentices. Apprenticeship provision spans a number of sectors and covers a lot of employers. Each college has had to contact every apprentice and every employer to determine the position of each learner and then determine a plan to support that learner through the next months.

Sutton Trust's[4] findings show that there continue to be significant impacts on apprentices and their employers and these impacts are reflected on to the college providing the training and support. Companies are furloughing or making staff redundant, off the job learning has been disrupted, and apprentices, already on low pay, have faced additional financial strains. In early April, employers surveyed reported that on average just 39% of apprenticeships were continuing as normal, with 36% having been furloughed and 8% made redundant. 17% of apprentices had their off-the-job learning suspended. It is anticipated that more apprentices will move from furlough to redundancy as the furlough scheme comes to an end in October 2020.

In addition to the problems faced by those currently struggling to finish apprenticeships in 2020, there has been a big reduction in new starts. AoC surveyed the 17 colleges with the largest numbers of apprentices in normal times and found an average 50% reduction in new starts.

AoC would like to see a principle of 'no apprentice left behind' in response to the crisis. AoC believes that it should be possible to see most apprentices being able to finish their learning with a positive outcome. This would need further flexibilities within the funding to allow for easy transfer of learning between employers and providers and from apprenticeship to alternative provision where this is required. No apprentice should be left without a positive outcome. Those on apprenticeship standards are at greatest risk of walking away with nothing to show for their time studying as a lot of these programmes do not have qualifications within them and so recognising and evidencing partial completion is made more difficult.

DfE acted quickly to make a number of rule changes to help colleges train apprentices but there are some further changes that would help:

- **Assessment changes**
  AoC would be keen to see some of the flexibilities being applied to, or considered for other FE learners being made available to apprentices. We are pleased to see that teacher assessment of functional skills (FS) may be applied within apprenticeships for example, which is something we asked early on in the crisis. We feel a degree of equity for learners across FE should be sought. Another area that would seem reasonable to consider such mirroring, is the auto-extension of the learning period and funding by three months, although we

---

[4] Sutton Trust, COVID-19 Impacts: Apprenticeships 20.5.20

recognise that the funding methods for apprenticeship make this more problematic.

- **Some further relaxation of end point assessment (EPA) for learners who have gone through, or are close to gateway in suitable areas**
  Some helpful flexibilities have been introduced and we recognise the concern expressed to maintain the quality of the assessment process. We are concerned that the opportunity to flex the EPA processes are taking time to implement amongst the EAOs and this is creating further delay for apprentices seeking to complete. AoC would be keen to explore possible ways in which these bottlenecks might be overcome.

- **Funding continuity**
  Apprenticeship funding is driven by activity which means that funding has dropped as a result of delays in completion of existing programmes and the reduction in new starts. There is a risk that colleges w

- **Flexibilities around the delivery of 20% off-the-job**
  The 20% off-the-job training rule ensures apprenticeships remain a substantial programme of learning but colleges are having to bring this forward while apprentices wait to resume their jobs or take up new roles. There is a risk that some will not return to work and colleges will simply be penalised for non-completion.

- **Redeployment**
  It is highly likely that many apprentices will find themselves having to shift employer and/or training provider when we are over this crisis. Colleges could play a key role in helping to ensure that the impact on apprentices is minimised by coordinating local efforts to transfer apprentices. This used to happen in the past in cases of employer or training provider insolvency but is now handled solely by ESFA. Colleges could be funded to provider this service which would help ensure 'no apprentice left behind'.

- **Apprentices alternatives need to be in place**
  Ideally all existing apprentices and all aspiring apprentices will gain an apprenticeship, but with the anticipated drop in employment levels in a wide range of sectors, it seems unlikely that this ideal will be realised. We need to ensure that those apprentices impacted by the crisis have something positive to move to, this could be a shift to a new employer/provider when one/both have failed, to a new mode of learning to allow for continued study in anticipation of

future employment, or the gaining or some form of partial accreditation to allow the apprentice to show a prospective employer what they have already achieved. Announcements already made regarding Traineeships will provide some of these opportunities, but we need to ensure that all displaced apprentices have the opportunity to continue to progress in or out of work.

6. The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families.

The financial impact of the shutdown on colleges has been severe. Government made quick decisions to guarantee the largest parts of college funding but the level of income protection varied widely between different colleges depending on their balance of delivery. On average approximately 65% of college income is guaranteed in both 2019-20 and 2020-1 regardless of actual activity and around another 20% in public funding will continue to flow until 31 July 2020 as a result of the actions taken by the government. Other income – ranging from fees charged for adult education or international students, catering, commercial contracts with employers and apprenticeship training – is less certain. The situation varies by college and has continued to change week-by-week.

From discussions with college leaders, officials, banks and unions, there appear to be four main trends in college finance:

- **A substantial loss of income in the 2019-20** from apprenticeships, summer term enrolments, international students, catering and a range of other commercial activities, adding up to about £150 million or 2% of total income. This is a similar percentage to the reduction reported by UUK for UK universities .

- **Some short-term savings for colleges** from furloughing staff, travel and agreeing cost reductions on contracted-out services. At the same time, colleges have incurred costs, for example in purchases of IT equipment and software. Several colleges will defer building works which they would normally have carried out in the summer. This will conserve cash but could store up costs for the future.

- **Major uncertainty and risks on all non-grant income lines in 2020-1** outside the 16-18 funding or adult education budget. As with universities, this leaves a major sum at risk – as much as £2 billion (40%) for colleges – though a lot depends on the behaviour of students, employers, government and colleges between now and Christmas. 1 Universities UK "Achieving stability in universities following Covid-19" April 2020 1

- **A risk that the crisis will impact on some commercially focused colleges very hard** and compound financial issues for colleges who were already financially

stretched, resulting in mounting problems for individual institutions in the run up to March 2021.

Colleges operate on very thin margins, incur fixed costs in advance to ensure quality with risks that income will not be forthcoming and have few places to turn for cashflow support. Three banks account for 95% of college lending and have little appetite for new college customers. Meanwhile DfE pays colleges in arrears. Late March is the lowest point in the annual cycle. At that time of year, DfE underpays grant funding to colleges by an average of 6% against an even monthly profile. Apprenticeship funding is typically paid 2-3 months late

The shutdown, the disruption to business and the rise in unemployment all threaten new starts. There may be a shift in demand – from apprenticeships to education – but, for colleges this will mean a reduction in activity-led income and higher demand in areas where their allocations are fixed. There is the prospect of higher costs and fixed or lower income.

There are lead-times in terms of handling people. 75% of colleges told us in April 2020 that they planned to make use of the job retention scheme but generally in small numbers and either for people whose roles were connected with buildings or with income generating activity that ceased with the lockdown. Colleges have already brought many staff back but, as in the private sector, many will be making redundancies.

Data from the June AoC survey indicates that 46% of colleges plan to make redundancies by the end of the autumn term 2020. 21% will have made redundancies by September 2020.

Colleges complete their budget setting in July and will be sharing summary information with ESFA and AoC. We will have updated information on their financial position by early September.

7.   The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

Free School Meals

The decision to extend free school meals into the summer break was welcomed by colleges, but the announcement was made late in the college term and administration was not always straightforward, especially for colleges which directly enrol 14 to 16-year-olds with 30% FSM. The AoC June survey indicated that three out of four colleges would need additional resources to support the provision of free college meal vouchers to current eligible students over the summer.

Disadvantage

Colleges are concerned about the gap in study for some students since school and college closure on 20 March 2020. In a short space of time colleges worked hard to move to an online curriculum offer enabling students to continue to work from home. Colleges reported good engagement with this approach, but voiced the following concerns:

· 	Not all students have access to PCs/Laptops and others have to share with siblings and other family members
· 	Broadband accessibility varies from area to area and home to home.
· 	Not all students have access to accommodation which facilitates learning – some are in cramped and or shared accommodation.
· 	Some subjects such as onsite construction and hair and beauty are much more challenging to deliver online in order to engage students successfully.

The AoC June survey indicates that 56% of colleges report that their existing and additional bursary funding from DfE has not enabled them to purchase laptops and/or connectivity (dongles) to support all their disadvantaged learners.

Concerns around gaps in learning will also extend to current year 11 students who will join colleges in the autumn term. Many of these students will have had little or no exposure to teaching and learning since school closure on 20 March. The KS 4 disadvantage gap index is based on average attainment in GCSE English and maths at the end of Key Stage 4. The gap in attainment of grades 5-9 between advantaged and disadvantaged students in 2018 and 2019 was 25 percentage points. General Further Education Colleges teach 90% of those students who have not achieved a grade 4 or above in English and maths on resit programmes. College data indicates that nationally 70% of students continuing to study English and maths under the resit policy are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Funding was confirmed for disadvantaged students on 20 July when college budgets and timetables for September 2020 had already been confirmed. While the sector welcomes the £96 million catch up allocation, earlier confirmation, in line with the announcement for schools, would have made planning for delivery much easier.

High Needs Students

Colleges have many students with EHC plans and receiving High Needs Funding - between 100 and 500 at most institutions. About half are being supported on mainstream courses and half on special courses for students with learning difficulties. These students are of course particularly vulnerable to missing out on education.

Colleges have been supporting these students in a variety of ways. A small number, likely to increase gradually, are coming into college or another specialist site. Many others are being supported at home with home learning packs, video sessions and very frequent telephone or skype contact with students and their families.

Concerns about return are that some of these students find social distancing very hard, some require personal care and staff will need access to PPE as outlined in Government guidance. Some have other conditions making them particularly vulnerable to Covid-19. Arrangement of Local Authority transport is also an issue.

There are also concerns that students with EHC plans and complex needs who are in their final year at college might well need some extension programme - e.g. some one to one sessions, an additional term or half term, if they are to make a good transition to their next placement. This would require a coherent response from Local Authorities and sufficient capacity for the college to provide this additional support.

Other vulnerable groups

There are many other groups of vulnerable students in college including young people with mental health difficulties, high anxiety etc. and also those young people who might be at risk of abuse or of being drawn into gangs, online extremism etc.

The Government recommended that these young people should be in college and a few did attend. However the reality is that this is a cohort whose attendance is not the best in normal times and are unlikely to attend if their peers are not. There is also a danger of further stigmatising an already stigmatised group. The AoC April survey indicated that colleges have supported these vulnerable students on a 1:1 basis. including very regular phone/skype/text contact; group sessions in mindfulness, yoga, watching and discussing a film etc. This support continued right over weekends and bank holidays. If staff could not contact an individual this was followed up by contact with family, friends, social workers and young offender teams where appropriate.

There are concerns that these young people will need considerable support to help them return to college and also about the transfer of similarly vulnerable young people from school to college. This will require outreach work, increase in youth workers attached to colleges and also resources for enrichment programmes such as sport and music.

AoC has held webinars[5] to share good across the sector for those working the most vulnerable student groups highlighted above.

8.   What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

Aligning school and college funding announcements for 16 to 18-year-olds

---

[5] AoC Covid-19 webinar series

It would be helpful to align school and college communications regarding funding. Messaging does not always make clear whether college 16 to 18-year-olds are included in funding announcements.

Digital

Colleges changed their mode of teaching and learning in around three weeks. Many are now thinking about how to capitalise on best practice and sustain this change post-crisis. AoC is working with Jisc to promote good practice in remote working, teaching, learning and assessment while the crisis persists. We are also seeking to establish a consensus on what "good" looks like in a transformed learner and staff experience, ready for when both are able to return to physical sites and the workplace.

There is an opportunity to make a shift towards a 'digital first' sector but this may need:

- a national online repository of high-quality interactive content specifically designed for vocational and skills-based delivery. This will include 'bite size' micro-credentialed content endorsed by industry sectors,
- resilient and reliable connectivity for FE learners so that they can access online resources,
- development and adoption of new assessment methodologies designed for secure remote delivery, and
- work on technical solutions to support teachers and administrators including digital assistants, automated workflows, data analytics, flexible working and reduced workflow.
- Training for staff to ensure confidence in using online teaching to the best of its potential.

Assessment

We would recommend that in case of future national emergencies a comprehensive and agreed communication plan is put in place to ensure a managed approach to communications to centres and key stakeholders such as students, parents/carers and employers. This is particularly true for technical and vocational qualifications where there are a large number of awarding organisations and qualifications with a variety of purposes. Media attention focused on GCSEs and A Levels which was confusing for key stakeholders and frustrating for centres.

As above a move to online assessment should be explored more comprehensively.

Disaster recovery

Most colleges have disaster recovery plans, but they focus on single institution closure. The AoC brought together senior leaders from colleges to discuss key areas of focus regarding reopening in June and September 2020. The groups considered implications for curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment; estates; HR; costs;

online enrolment. DfE officials were invited to and attended these groups. This type of arrangement should be ongoing and should be formalised with DfE leads.