

SAGE Paper on Further and Higher Education

9 July 2020

Summary

SAGE and its subgroups have considered the impacts of both closing and re-opening schools and early years settings. The effects of such closures have been considered individually and alongside other behavioural and social interventions.

While some of the information generated thus far has been relevant to all education settings, it is clear that both the Further and Higher Education sectors have elements that are very different from schools and they would profit from separate consideration.

Some of the issues flagged in this paper – notably observations on grouping sizes (such as classes, years, accommodation and social groups) travel implications and new ‘household’ formation – are also covered in the paper being presented by the Children’s Task and Finish Group, but some new issues are flagged here for SAGE consideration.

We have deliberately placed Further Education before Higher Education as it is less well understood, yet is fundamentally critical to the delivery of the Government’s skills agenda. It has many unique characteristics that reflect neither schools nor universities and which are worth focusing on.

The Objectives for both HE and FE Sectors are to:

- A) Enable the reopening of as much face to face provision within both sectors as possible;
- B) Ensure that this does not lead to a resurgence of the disease;
- C) Reassure learners and workforce that it is safe to return to these settings;

Key Characteristics and Issues to consider

Further Education

- 1) Further Education is a complex sector – with a huge range of providers, learners, modes of learning, course lengths and course intensities.
- 2) Learning settings mix with workplaces: apprentices between employers and workplaces, and pre-crisis around two-thirds of FE learners were in some form of employment.
- 3) In September 2019, there were 1.7m learners enrolled in FE, with around 750,000 aged 16-18 and just under 1 million aged 19+. Due to the huge variation in types of FE learning (e.g. only 3% of 24+ classroom learners are full time), we estimate that 830,000 to 965,000 learners were “on site” each day in September 2019.

- 4) There are a number of “at-risk” categories from a **health** perspective: nearly a quarter of FE learners are BAME, 150,000 learners are aged 50+, over half of adult FE learners from the bottom two Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles and teachers in FE tend to be older than in schools.
- 5) There are a number of “at-risk” categories from an **education** perspective: around 20% of FE learners self-report having a learning difficulty and/or disability and disadvantaged learners are over represented in FE. Remote learning is less feasible for many FE learners (e.g. those undertaking practical learning, lower level learners, those with learning difficulties) which highlights the importance of face to face delivery.

Given the wide range of learner characteristics, modes of learning, course lengths and course intensities, a range of further issues are of specific interest to this sector:

- 6) When thinking about controlling infection, do we need to take a differentiated approach rather than a single blanket approach for the whole of FE?
- 7) What are the implications of the fact that trainees and apprentices frequently attend both FE settings and the workplace? What is the likely impact of applying workplace guidance to a training environment (e.g. in a beauty salon where ‘customers’ can be more controlled)?
- 8) Where training cannot be undertaken in the workplace as that sector has not returned, could it take place in FE with additional precautions in place?¹
- 9) Existing barriers to learning amongst adults may be heightened as many learners are from higher risk groups, so may need more convincing about safety of the setting compared to the average learner. Are there any behavioural science interventions that would help here?

Higher Education

- 10) Universities have already undertaken significant planning about their approach to delivering teaching and learning in the coming year, based on existing government guidance, for example on safer workplaces. The majority of universities are planning to welcome students back in the Autumn term based on a blend of online and face to face learning.
- 11) As for FE, there is significant diversity across the sector and learning settings vary from classroom based activities to specialist workshops (such as labs or performance-based activity). Evidence to date is that universities are planning to restrict face to face teaching and learning to smaller groups, with larger scale activities such as lectures remaining online.
- 12) Universities are also working on a range of options to limit contact amongst students, based on the individual requirements of their institutions and courses, but including: concentrating face to face teaching time to reduce the number of days students are required on site (minimising travel and contact); maintaining

¹ Currently we say BEIS guidance must be followed, although training could take place if it is adapted (i.e. learners paint a mannequin’s nails rather than a real person).

teaching groups where possible while not restricting student choice; grouping students by subject within accommodation.

- 13) To help guide university planning, we are keen to understand: the relative efficacy of protective measures to break chains of transmission and ensure Covid security; and how well the concept of “bubbles” might serve to inhibit or accelerate transmission.
- 14) We are also keen to understand the potential implications for internal migrations at the start and end of term, and the relative risk for new cohorts of students in forming new “households” and course groups. This includes the impact on local healthcare; testing capabilities; and public transport and other infrastructure at the influx and subsequent patterns of movement of students.
- 15) Universities are also seeking additional or bespoke guidance on some specific areas, including:
 - **University Libraries**, particularly taking into account the range of requirements from lending; studying texts that cannot be removed and may need sensitive handling; and the use of libraries as a workspace for some students.
 - **Performance-based courses**: particularly taking into account the challenges of social distancing in these contexts, and the additional risk of some activities (e.g. singing).

DfE are working with DCMS to review wider guidance on both these issues but there will be a need to specifically address teaching situations.

- 16) While the focus of guidance to date has been on the issues that need to be considered in order to reopen provision, many universities are planning on the basis that **they may also need to respond to a renewed regional lockdown and/ or an outbreak within the university**. We are keen to understand the risks and risk factors for an outbreak and/ or a super-spreader event within a university, and the relative hierarchy of measures that a university can and should enact, along with the local authorities, to respond to an outbreak.
- 17) University student populations have broader ranges of activity, autonomy and interactions than school populations and we do not have evidence about the impact of this activity on the R rate – we would also note that this broader range of activity and interaction is likely to be true for this group even if they do not physically attend university. As for schools, we also do not currently understand how we could increase Covid Security in universities beyond those measures already set out in existing guidance and we welcome any observations that SAGE members may have.

Please note that not all figures in the following paper and associated information slides are published, we have endeavoured to be clear on the nature of all data shared.

A. FURTHER EDUCATION

Reopening Further Education (FE) providers in September 2020

Policy objectives

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have set the ambition that all education settings will be welcoming all students back, in person, in September.

There is significant diversity across the FE sector, in terms of the characteristics of young people and adults that attend FE providers, and also the types of learning undertaken and the methods of delivery.

Our objectives should be to:

- A) Enable the reopening of as much face to face provision within the FE sector as possible;
- B) Ensure that this does not lead to a resurgence of the disease;
- C) Reassure learners and workforce that it is safe to return to these settings;
- D) Ensure that FE providers, including through our skills recovery package, are able to support the delivery of an economic recovery.²

DfE have published guidance on the actions FE providers should take for all learners from September 2020.³ This note outlines further considerations regarding the planned return of learners to FE settings.

The guidance already released sets out the requirements for providers to complete risk assessments and put in place a system of controls around prevention and response to any infection.⁴

Prevention

- 1) Minimise contact with individuals who are unwell by ensuring that those who have coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms, or who have someone in their household who does, do not attend the setting.
- 2) Clean hands thoroughly, more often than usual.
- 3) Ensure good respiratory hygiene by promoting the 'catch it, bin it, kill it' approach.
- 4) Introduce enhanced cleaning, including cleaning frequently touched surfaces often, using standard products such as detergents and bleach.

² Government has announced a significant new package of technical education to assist the post-lockdown economic recovery which will require that providers will be open by September.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision/what-fe-colleges-and-providers-will-need-to-do-from-the-start-of-the-2020-autumn-term>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision/what-fe-colleges-and-providers-will-need-to-do-from-the-start-of-the-2020-autumn-term#public-health-advice-to-minimise-coronavirus-covid-19-risks>

5) Minimise contact between individuals and maintain social distance.

6) Where necessary, wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

Numbers 1 to 4 must be in place in all settings, all the time. Numbers 5 and 6 must be properly considered with providers to place measures to suit their particular circumstances.

Response to any infection

7) Engage with the NHS Test and Trace process.

8) Manage confirmed cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) amongst your FE community.

9) Contain any outbreak by following local health protection team advice.

Numbers 7 to 9 must be followed in every case where they are relevant.

Enable the reopening of as much face to face provision within the FE sector as possible and ensure that this does not lead to a resurgence of the disease

FE learners are more diverse than in other education settings. In September 2019, there were around 750,000 16-18 year olds and just under a million adult learners. Nearly a quarter of FE learners are BAME, and 150,000 FE learners are aged 50+. FE learners are also typically more disadvantaged, with over half of adult learners from the bottom two IMD⁵ quintiles. Teachers in FE tend to be older than in schools; over half are aged 45+ compared to only a quarter in schools.

Given that adult FE learners (and workforce) are more likely to have characteristics that are associated with a higher relative risk of infection:

- Should this have any impact on our controls around prevention and response to any infection?
- What are the associated implications on the amount of face to face learning, how stringent social distancing should be and the need for additional PPE?

Further Education providers range from Further Education Colleges (average over 6,000 learners, often on multiple campus sites) to Independent Training Providers (average under 200 learners). The “classroom” can be extremely varied, ranging from conventional classrooms, to specialist workshops, outdoor settings (for land-based provision), or realistic workplace type environments (e.g. a hair salon). Remote learning is less feasible for many FE learners, particularly those undertaking practical learning, or lower level learners or those with learning difficulties. In addition to modifying rooms or workshops to support social distancing, providers are directed to the guidance for workplaces.⁶

⁵ Index of Multiple Deprivation

⁶ Some of these education settings are designed to replicate workplaces.

Modes of learning, course lengths and course intensities vary, for example:

- Full-time learning programmes – for example A-Levels or BTECs.
- Apprenticeships – typically on site one day per week (half of adults are likely to receive training online or at premises of their employer).
- Short duration courses – lasting only a week or two.
- Part-time courses – that might be longer duration, but only have one or two days learning per week, or be delivered in the evenings.

Given the wide range of learner characteristics, modes of learning, course lengths and course intensities:

- When thinking about controlling infection, do we need to take a differentiated approach rather than a single blanket approach for the whole of FE?
- What is the likely impact on the infection rate of different of groups of learners returning?
- What is the relationship between the approach to vocational delivery in FE settings and the workplace? What is the likely impact of applying workplace guidance to a training environment (e.g. in a beauty salon training environment where ‘customers’ can be more controlled)?
- Where training cannot be undertaken in the workplace as that sector has not returned, could it take place in FE with additional precautions in place?⁷
- What is the likely impact of ‘bubbles’ in large providers, where traditional year groups are not valid so creating discrete groups of learners without limiting choice about combinations of courses? What is the likely impact of ‘bubbles’ when delivering training in non-classroom-based settings?

The guidance for FE providers is designed to be adapted to the circumstances, which given the diversity of the provider base will mean there may be scenarios which have not been fully considered, where further advice would be useful. We welcome views on strategies for managing risks and promoting good practice.

- Travel – where learners are travelling to their provider they may be doing so via public transport. In these cases, they would be expected to follow the same social distancing rules as the rest of the general public. The catchment areas for FE providers are much larger than the typical school. Adults should be more capable of following social distancing guidelines effectively compared to younger children.
- Mixing education settings with workplaces – apprentices will mix between employers and workplaces, and pre-crisis around two-thirds of FE learners

⁷ Currently we say BEIS guidance must be followed, although training could take place if it is adapted (i.e. learners paint a mannequin’s nails rather than a real person).

were in some form of employment.

- Mixing education settings more generally – particularly on influencing learner behaviour, and the relationship between the formal education offer provided, and what learners are likely to do in their free time. For example, having a structured environment may limit more risk-taking behaviour, but it may also encourage more mixing outside of college.
- Residential FE – around 3,000 FE learners live in residential settings on site during the week, predominantly 16-18 year olds.

We are continuing to consider options for managing the risk of transmission in the event of local lockdowns, where further advice would be useful.

- Limiting overall numbers on site and combining with remote learning, where possible. This is likely to be achieved by learners only coming in for scheduled days during the week to limit the risk on public transport. Some learners and courses are much more difficult to teach online than others. Also, disadvantaged learners are over represented in FE so less able to access online delivery. This means it would be crucial to prioritise some form of face to face delivery to those undertaking technical training that cannot happen at home, and those at risk of disengagement.
- Bubbles/Groups – in FE it is hard to limit the size of bubbles given that classes can be mixed age, and learners will combine English and maths alongside vocational delivery. We have asked providers to keep groups consistent, and to consider as part of their risk assessment.
- Rotas (i.e. two weeks on site, two weeks off). In FE this is much harder to achieve and more disruptive to the curriculum. Colleges would prefer to deliver a consistent blend of onsite and online activity throughout the term.

Reassure learners and workforce that it is safe to return to these settings

For prospective FE learners, there may be concerns from some groups about the safety of FE providers. We would welcome advice on methods to give learners the confidence to return to face to face education settings, particularly considering:

- Many learners are from higher risk groups, so may need more convincing about safety of the setting compared to the average learner.
- The need to credibly establish that the benefit of attending the course outweighs the risk, particularly given the short-term nature of some courses, (i.e. learners may think the benefit worth the risk for a one week course).
- Existing barriers to learning amongst adults may be heightened in current context. Are there any behavioural science interventions that would help here?

Ensure that FE providers, including through our skills recovery package, are able to support the delivery of an economic recovery.

Training will form an important part of any economic recovery, and so it is essential that people will be able to access that training through FE providers. At an individual level, access to training helps mitigate against some of the economic (and associated social) impacts of the crisis (e.g. DWP programmes to support re-entry into the job market, ability of adults to access retraining programmes).

B. HIGHER EDUCATION

Reopening Higher Education (HE) settings in September

Policy Objectives

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have decided that all education settings should be able to welcome all students back, in person, in September.

Higher education providers are autonomous institutions and as such, to date, we have taken the position that they are responsible for their own plans for whether and how they will reopen their provision from the Autumn term onwards, as long as they can do so in line with wider government guidance. In addition, there is significant diversity across the sector – in terms of the requirements of different courses (e.g. between practical or lab based courses and essay based courses); between campus based universities and those more dispersed across a city; and those with a high number of “commuter” students compared to those where the majority live within the university. As such, planning and understanding the range of measures that will enable reopening in accordance with government guidelines is best done at an institution by institution level based on their own understanding and assessment of their situation and options.

Our objectives should be to:

- A) Enable the reopening of as much face to face provision within the HE sector as possible;
- B) Ensure that this does not lead to a resurgence of the disease;
- C) Reassure students, parents/carers and staff (including those coming from overseas) that it is safe to return to these settings.

Enabling the reopening of as much face to face provision within the HE Sector as possible

Universities have already undertaken significant planning about their approach to delivering teaching and learning in the coming year, based on existing government guidance, for example on safer workplaces. Given that universities generally do not work to fixed timetables in the same way as schools do, and already deliver in a range of different ways across different courses and institutions, they also have more options around: changing provision; staggering start times; timetabling to limit the days on which students are required on campus and to minimise the number of groups of students who are timetabled on campus at the same time; and can more easily make use of a range of locations of face to face provision to enable them to maintain social distancing guidelines.

Recent surveys run by UUK indicate that the vast majority of universities are planning to return to wide-spread face to face provision, although most expect to continue online provision of lectures and large scale activities, with face to face teaching focused on smaller groups and practical learning (e.g. labs). The emerging plans within this sector even for the lead scenario are adopting a range of measures such as limiting the size of contact groups within an academic setting; rotas to limit the number of students on site at the same time and to limit the amount of travel required; and maintaining some provision online. Feedback to date indicates that existing guidance has enabled universities to plan successfully, and universities tell us that recent changes to guidance that allows flexibility from 2m social distancing to 1m plus additional measures where necessary will make a big and positive difference to the range of options they can explore. However, they are seeking additional or bespoke guidance on some specific areas, including:

University Libraries, particularly taking into account the range of requirements from lending; studying texts that cannot be removed and may need sensitive handling; and the use of libraries as a workspace for some students. According to internal estimates shared with DfE by CILIP, the library and information association, there are currently between 2m and 2.5m books in circulation on extended loans from university libraries, the return of which will need to be managed safely. DfE are working with DCMS to review wider guidance on libraries in development, but there may still be a case for separate guidance

Performance-based courses: particularly taking into account the challenges of social distancing in these contexts, and the additional risk of some activities (e.g. singing). Again, DfE are working with DCMS to review wider guidance on professional performance but there will be a need to specifically address teaching situations

To date, guidance has said that as part of their risk assessment and planning, universities must consider the particular needs and requirements of staff and students who are at greater risk, including those identified in the Risk Disparities report. Universities must comply with their Public Sector Equalities Duty. If there is further evidence on effective measures or interventions that are recommended, there would be a need for further guidance on this.

We have separately asked SAGE to consider a number of questions that will be relevant to HE settings, being progressed via the Task and Finish Group for Children [Separate paper provided alongside this one]. We are particularly keen to understand:

- Relative efficacy of protective measures in HE settings to break chains of transmission and ensure Covid Security. In particular, some universities are contemplating mass routine testing of all staff and/ or students as a precautionary measure, so it would be useful to understand the potential risks and benefits of this approach. Universities are also keen to understand whether there is any additional evidence on whether and how the scale and duration of events could impact the risks of adopting 2 metres compared to 1m+ social distancing;
- How well the concept of 'bubbles' in HE settings might serve to inhibit or accelerate transmission (through containing contacts vs. clustering) given the

typical size of accommodation blocks and course groups, and the inevitable membership of multiple 'bubbles' for HE (similar issues to secondary school GCSE courses and FE learner groups);

- The potential implications for internal migrations at the start and end of terms, and the relative risk for new cohorts of students in forming new "households" and course groups.

While the focus of guidance to date has been on the issues that need to be considered in order to reopen provision, we know that many universities are planning on the basis that they may also need to respond to a renewed regional lockdown and/ or an outbreak within the university. However, we think there will be benefit in providing clearer guidance on the need to be planning for these contingencies, including how universities should be working with local resilience forums to develop suitable contingency plans, ensuring local resilience planning is factoring in sufficient capacity to support appropriate testing, tracking and tracing capabilities and healthcare provision for the forecast university population and how this can be rolled out/ supported within the university. It would be useful to understand the risks and risk factors for an outbreak and/ or a super-spreader event within a university.

Ensure that this doesn't lead to a resurgence of the disease

Once students are at university, we can expect students to:

- Attend tutorials/ seminars, which we would expect to comply with government guidelines on social distancing/ safer work places;
- We do NOT expect universities to offer large-scale face to face lectures, and face to face contact will be limited to smaller groups;
- Make use of shared facilities, such as libraries, laboratories and computers, which we would expect to comply with the bespoke guidance that has or is being developed (see above);
- Use shared catering facilities, e.g. canteen/ take away, which we would expect to comply with government guidelines on restaurants/ other food providers;
- Attend social events/ gatherings – which we would expect to comply with government guidelines e.g. on pubs and other public meeting places.
- Engage in in-person sporting, fitness and wellbeing activities provided by the university in accordance with prevailing government guidance on these activities and facilities.
- Undertake assessments and exams in controlled environments.

We do not have evidence about the impact of this activity on the R rate. As for schools, we also do not currently understand how we could increase Covid Security in universities beyond those measures already set out in existing guidance. It would be useful to be clear that for the purposes of any modelling or assessment of risk, university students should be treated on the same basis as the wider adult population.

However, if students did not go to university to do these things, we would expect the students to remain at home and instead seek work, but we could expect the pattern of behaviour to be broadly the same i.e. we would expect them to move between a “work” and home environment, and engage in social activities in line with broader government guidance, including e.g. going to pubs and cinemas. It would be useful to understand what, if any, evidence we may have about the impact of the concentration of students within university towns including on wider social contact and transmission beyond the university, and what if any additional Covid-secure measures would be recommended beyond those in place to manage wider social interaction.

There is a case for additional guidance setting out clearly the accountability for complying with government guidelines, in particular in relation to for example Student Union organised events.

We would expect that a response to any increase in the R value would mirror the response across the rest of the country, rather than within the sector itself. That is to say: if R started to increase, we could expect a decision to restrict social activities/ access to shared social spaces and communal eating facilities across the whole country or impacted region, rather than a decision targeted at the HE sector. While it will remain at the discretion of universities to decide what provision they can maintain within government guidelines, we would not expect to see increased restrictions on face to face teaching unless there were, for example, similar restrictions imposed on e.g. office work.

For staff, universities have the same responsibilities as other employers to ensure that appropriate risk assessments and mitigations are in place to enable staff to return safely.

The additional risks that needs to be managed in relation to a return to face to face HE provision arise from:

- A significant movement of over 1 million students across the country,⁸ with potential impact on the transmission of the virus, at the beginning and end of terms;
- Students moving from their family households to set up new, temporary households during term time, and will want to return to their family households at the end of terms. This may vary from small shared households with fully mixed living environments, to large scale university accommodation blocks;
- Additional pressure on public transport infrastructure around universities, particularly if there is a continued need to limit capacity to preserve social distancing;
- “Commuter students”, who travel regularly to university from home. About 25% of full-time undergraduate students are now commuter students. In 2018/19, six

⁸ Estimated based on flows of students enrolling at English providers located outside their ‘home’ region (whether from the UK or abroad). Note that this figure includes students who are distance learners or commuters, but excludes those who move within their ‘home’ region. Source: bespoke DfE analysis of the HESA Student Record 2018/19. See accompanying slide pack ‘Introduction to Higher Education Settings in England’, Slide 14.

providers, including City University London, University of Wolverhampton and University of Bradford, had 50% or more of their students living in the parental home.⁹

- International students arriving from overseas will create a further potential impact on the transmission of the virus, although some students, depending on the country they are arriving from, will have to comply with a 14 day self-isolation expectations upon arrival to the UK.

What we need to do

We expect that SAGE will be able to advise on the availability or feasibility of modelling on the potential impact of such a significant level of movement across the country on the potential transmission of the disease. We expect that this may generate some advice or guidance on additional measures, for example in relation to track and trace and/ or rapid reporting mechanisms; short term additional distancing or hygiene measures required. As part of this, if evidence starts to show significant regional differences between transmission rates, we may want to consider whether to issue specific guidance for those moving between regions at the beginning and end of term. We may also need clear communications, together with DfT, to support students to travel safely as we can expect a significant increase in long distance travel by public transport at the beginning and end of term.

We need to have clear guidance for students on setting up new households and moving between households at the beginning and end of term. Clarity that this is permitted is needed as soon as possible, as returning students in particular are likely to be required to finalise private rental agreements very soon. We are liaising with MHCLG on guidance and we will need to ensure that this takes appropriate account of the needs and scale of student movement. Ahead of September, we need clear guidance on the appropriate measures to put in place including in large scale university accommodation, in particular in relation to shared spaces such as kitchens, bathrooms and common areas. We will need guidance on whether and how the concept of “protective bubbles” can be usefully applied to (particularly large-scale) accommodation blocks and/ or additional hygiene or other measures recommended if these go beyond existing guidance issued.

We are working on the assumption that universities should take responsibility for ensuring that they are able to support students who are required to self-isolate for 14 days upon arrival from abroad or to self-isolate in the event of a suspected or confirmed case. However, it may be useful to provide additional guidance on this, including on whether and how it would be possible to manage joint quarantining of students that arrived together. We are also working on the assumption that as part of their efforts to manage social distancing effectively, universities should be planning to timetable effectively in a way that staggers arrival and departure times in a way that will also reduce pressure on public transport to an extent. For example, we know that many universities are planning timetabling that concentrates face to face engagement for each student into a limited number of days per week, minimising the days individual students need to travel to university buildings and also allowing universities to limit the

⁹ Source: Bespoke DfE analysis of the HESA Student Record 2018/19. See accompanying slide pack ‘Introduction to Higher Education Settings in England’, Slide 15.

number of students that are required to be on site on any given day. However, the additional travel arising from the return of students may nonetheless represent a significant point of concern for effective management of the transmission risk across the local area (i.e. not just in relation to the university) and may put significant pressure on local transport provision if current social distancing measures continue to apply. Further guidance and clarity on this is likely to be required, along with engagement of local transport planning.

Reassuring students and parents/carers it is safe to return

For university students, reassurance is likely to come from:

- Universities clearly articulating the measures that they have taken that ensure that they will comply with government best practice – including clear evidence of complying with social distancing measures; some elements of provision remaining online; and changes to timetables to reduce crowding pressures
- Evidence from wider opening of other provision (e.g. shops, pubs etc) that reopening can be managed successfully without an impact on R, as long as people comply with government guidance. This will require clear co-ordination with the central messaging from government
- Evidence that universities are aware and are able to respond quickly (e.g. closing shared space; moving more provision online temporarily) should the risk increase. There is an option of working with Universities UK to develop a broad framework of options that universities could consider flexing should the alert levels go up and down, to give students the confidence that universities can act quickly if required.

Annex A: Further Education Background Information

Providers

Further Education is a complex sector that includes Further Education Colleges (FECs), Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs), Independent Training Providers (ITPs) and other organisations. FE is delivered by around 200 FECs, around 60 SFCs, over 1,200 ITPs and hundreds of other providers. The median number of learners per provider varies greatly from over 6,000 in FECs (often spread across multiple campus sites) to under 200 in ITPs.¹⁰ Some FE providers are also registered as HE providers, and also undertake significant privately funded activity. Overall, there are a mixture of full-time courses and part-time courses that could be just a few hours a week; some courses will last several years, whereas others will last for just a few weeks.

Modes of learning

Modes of learning also differ greatly. Education and training (i.e. classroom-based learning) ranges from basic skills like courses in English and Maths to vocational employment-focused training in e.g. hairdressing or plumbing. Providers also deliver academic courses such as A Levels and BTECs, particularly for younger learners, which is similar to what might be delivered in school sixth forms but normally on a much larger scale. Apprenticeships are predominantly situated in their employer workplace, but have a legal requirement to include a minimum of 20% off-the-job training, which may be delivered in a FE provider or on site with the employer.¹¹ Community learning is low level learning to help adults progress towards formal learning or employment, or improve their health and well-being. Nearly all FE learning is at a skill level less than Higher Education, with more than half of FE learning the equivalent of GCSE-level or below.

The “classroom” can be extremely varied, ranging from conventional classrooms, to specialist workshops, outdoor settings (for land-based provision), or realistic workplace type environments (e.g. a simulated commercial kitchen, a hair salon, a construction site etc). Remote learning is less feasible for many FE learners, particularly those undertaking practical learning, or lower level learners or those with learning difficulties.

Learner characteristics

In September 2019:

- Around 1.7m learners were enrolled in FE, with around 750,000 aged 16-18 and just under 1 million aged 19+.¹²

¹⁰ DfE (2019); FE and skills learner participation by provider, local authority, funding stream, learner and learning characteristics: 2018 to 2019; <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-further-education-and-skills>

¹¹ Based on unpublished interviews with apprenticeship providers FE colleges were much more likely to have their learners coming in one day a week; whereas ITPs were more likely to go to the employer's work site and provide distance learning.

¹² September is a normal high point for new enrolments, but the number of actual learners enrolled in FE will fluctuate over the year as new learners enrol and other learners complete or drop out.

- There were 1.1 million learners studying education and training courses, over 500,000 on apprenticeships and over 100,000 undertaking community learning.¹³
- Around 150,000 (9%) of FE learners were aged 50 or over, with around two-thirds of them being female.
- Over 400,000 FE learners were BAME, which accounted for almost a quarter of FE learners.
- There were almost 30,000 BAME 50+ FE learners.¹⁴
- Around 3,000 FE learners live in residential settings on site.¹⁵
- Around 20% of FE learners self-reported having a learning difficulty and/or disability.¹⁶

Compared to HE, FE learners study much more locally. 70% of FE learners travel less than 10km to learn, with 50% travelling less than 6km. Learners travel less far around big cities and further in more rural areas; though these differences partly reflect the extent of local provision. Learners access to at least one FEC varies across the country; there are some areas – North of England, East England and Cornwall – where less than 20% of learners have access to a college within 10km.¹⁷

Unlike other parts of the post-16 education system, disadvantaged learners are over-represented in FE compared to proportions in the overall population. FE learners are relatively spread across the country, but more likely to live in the most deprived areas of England than the least deprived areas (i.e. the most disadvantaged postcodes).¹⁸

Workforce characteristics

There are 97,000 teaching staff and 22,000 leaders, teaching across 1,400 FE providers in England. There are 216,500 staff, including non-teaching staff, in the whole FE sector. Teachers in FE tend to be older than in schools; over half are aged 45+ (and a quarter aged 55+) compared to only a quarter (and 7% aged 55+) in schools. BAME staff are underrepresented in FE compared to general working age population, and around 1 in 6 staff self-report that they have a disability or health condition.^{19,20}

Learners on site

Not all of the 1.7m learners mentioned above will be on-site at any one time. The part time nature of many FE courses (particularly adults) and the workplace element of apprenticeships and traineeships means not all learners would normally be on site

¹³ Internal DfE analysis of the Individualised Learner Record 2019/20 SN10 (provisional) data.

¹⁴ Internal DfE analysis of the Individualised Learner Record 2019/20 SN10 (provisional) data.

¹⁵ Internal residential returns data.

¹⁶ Internal DfE analysis of the Individualised Learner Record 2019/20 SN10 (provisional) data.

¹⁷ BIS (2016); Understanding the FE Market in England; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-the-further-education-market>

¹⁸ Indices of multiple deprivation (IMD); <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-indices-of-deprivation-england-2015-to-2016>. Further education for benefit claimants in England: 2017 to 2018; <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/further-education-for-benefit-claimants-in-england-2017-to-2018>.

¹⁹ This is slightly lower than the general working age population (19%) but far higher than schools - likely due to older average age of the workforce.

²⁰ Staff Individualised Record 27 (2018/19) <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/research/workforce-data/>; College Staff Survey: 2018; Education and Training Professionals Survey: 2019; Schools Workforce Census 2018.

at the same time. 93% of 16-18 year olds, 34% of 19-23 year olds, and 3% of those aged 24+ education and training learners are full time, so assumed to be on site every day. Based on these assumptions we estimate that 830,000 to 965,000 learners attended each day in September 2019, of which 190,000 to 310,000 were adults, and 640,000 to 655,000 were aged 16-18.²¹

Looking forward to September 2020, we do not know the impact of COVID-19 and any recovery package on new enrolments, how many learners will want to come back (due to safety concerns or loss of engagement during the lockdown) or how many learners will be allowed on site due to COVID-19 health and safety requirements. There may be an increase in demand for some classroom-based learning, as there may be fewer apprenticeship opportunities and job vacancies, and increase demand from unemployed adults looking to retrain. Our judgement is risks to learner numbers are initially on the downside, particularly if the demand for adult learning drops. As the recovery continues, demand could pick up, particularly for people wanting to stay in the education system rather than move into the labour market, and due to increased demand from unemployed adults wanting to retrain.

Travel

A significant number of FE learners travel by bus and rail. We have some evidence on the proportion of trips to education by mode of travel and age – though it is not FE-specific. 16-18 learners are most likely to take the bus (34%), followed by car/motorbike (24%), walking (22%), other private (7%) and rail (6%). 19+ are most likely to walk (43%), followed by car/motorbike (24%), bus (17%) and rail (9%).²² Modes of travel vary significantly by region, for example the underground is used more in London. Also travel-to-learn distances vary by region, with a median distance per learner of around 3 miles in London and the North West, but 4.4 miles in the East of England.²³

Any estimates of transport demand for FE learners will need to be considered alongside other demands on public transport. FE providers normally have more flexibility in timetabling compared to school, which may provide some scope to lessen the impact on public transport at peak times – particularly any overlap in demand from children getting to and from schools.

Staff and learner safety

FE providers need to create a secure learning environment. A clear rationale on why measures are being taken and why it is safe for workforce and learners to return needs to be clearly communicated to maximise compliance and minimise legal risks. As far as possible, guidance to FE providers will follow schools approaches, however there may be FE-specific cases where this is not adequate.

Specialist courses may pose an increased risk compared to normal classroom settings, so require more detailed guidelines to ensure they are secure. For example, hairdressers would not be able to social distance when cutting hair. Compared to

²¹ Internal DfE analysis based on learner numbers from the Individualised Learner Record 2019/20 SN10 (provisional) data..

²² DfT (2018); National Travel Survey

²³ Internal DfE analysis of the Individualised Learner Record 2019/20 SN10 (provisional) data.

schools, adult learners should be more able to follow rules (e.g. social distancing), but also may have more outside contacts than children.

As with schools, FE providers may have to source their own PPE supplies, but it is unclear what the demand for PPE will be. Trade unions may encourage non-compliance among FE teachers if they feel the learning environment is not secure. FE providers may consider timetabling changes, one way systems, rotas or bubbles to minimise risks. They will also have to consider cleaning requirements including equipment, tables and chairs and also consider how regular cleaning is required (e.g. in between classes). Tables for learners may be designed for more than one person to sit at, so could break social distancing rules.

Providers are required to complete risk assessments and put in place a system of controls around prevention and response to any infection.²⁴ Decisions about how to minimise contacts will be best made at a provider level, with some high level considerations detailed in the guidance including on forming groups and measures within rooms and workshops.

Minimising contact and maintaining social distancing

FE is less suited to easily defined bubbles than schools, where bubbles within a year groups have been deemed not to be feasible. Many FE learners do a combination of courses at the same time, for example someone taking a plumbing course may also be doing basic English and Maths classes. Only 22% (around 385,000) of the 1.7m learners in September 2019 were undertaking just one course.²⁵ As such, bubbles may be difficult to maintain within a provider without restricting learning. Apprentices will have interactions in their workplace as well as within their training provider, as could other FE learners who may have part time jobs alongside learning. Pre-crisis around two-thirds of FE learners were in some form of employment.²⁶ Learners in residential settings could impact the feasibility of bubbles, though on a much smaller scale than in HE. That said, bubbles may be feasible for some small specialist providers, where learner numbers are much lower. In addition, enforcing rules is easier for adults than children in schools – which might mean a more complicated bubble regime could be possible.

The size of the FEC estate shows some potential to allow for social distancing. Pre-pandemic evidence suggested that there was some overcapacity in the FE college estate in terms of m² per learner, implying there may be enough space to allow for some distancing – though this will vary significantly by region and provider.²⁷ More problematic might be the combination of adequate teaching space with available teachers and the number of learners, and the need for specialist teaching settings (i.e. not normal classrooms).

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision/what-fe-colleges-and-providers-will-need-to-do-from-the-start-of-the-2020-autumn-term#public-health-advice-to-minimise-coronavirus-covid-19-risks>

²⁵ Internal DfE analysis of the Individualised Learner Record.

²⁶ Internal DfE analysis of the Labour Force Survey. Participation in FE identified using the variable 'EDINS11' (categories 2,3,6,7 & 10).

²⁷ Internal DfE analysis of FE estates data.

Class sizes tend to be smaller than school class sizes, particularly vocational subjects and those that require specialised workshops, but may also reflect the diversity of the curriculum offer or the physical size of classrooms. However, A Level classes tend to be bigger in FECs and SFCs than in school sixth forms (~20 vs ~11 learners) – which further demonstrates the variance according to the type of learning.

Remote learning

Lockdown survey results show variation in learner engagement, with impacts likely to be larger on learners undertaking practical learning, lower level learners or those with learning difficulties²⁸. FE learners may lack the necessary access (i.e. laptop and internet connection) or confidence to engage with remote learning and FE teachers may lack the confidence to deliver remote education. FE learners are also more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and so not have access to the necessary equipment to complete online learning. Also, the quality of digital content may vary, and developing high-quality online provision requires time and expertise.

Pre-crisis analysis of online training indicated that it was fragmented and only met the needs of low-medium skilled adults to a limited extent. Simply, developing online provision was not a priority for most FE providers. Pure online provision was also found to be less suitable for disadvantaged learners because they require more one-to-one support.^{29,30}

²⁸ AoC Covid and colleges survey (May 2020);
<https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/AoC%20Covid19%20and%20colleges%20survey%204.5.20.pdf>

²⁹ NRS online discovery report (UNPUBLISHED)

³⁰ DfE (2019) 'Review of the online learning and artificial intelligence education market';
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-online-learning-and-artificial-intelligence-education-market>

Annex B: Higher Education Background Information

Higher education providers are autonomous institutions, and as such, to date, have been responsible for their own decisions on opening and closing their facilities and changing their provision, in response to wider governmental guidance. We have consistently said that they are responsible for their own plans on how and when they will reopen their campuses and buildings from the Autumn term onwards, as long as they can do so in accordance with PHE and other government guidance.

The most recent changes to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 (which apply from 1 June) provide that gatherings inside of two or more people are permitted where it is reasonably necessary for work purposes (covering university staff) or where it takes place at an educational facility and is reasonably necessary for the purposes of education (covering students). Up until now, we have said publicly that it is for providers to make a decision on when and how they can reopen their campuses and buildings, based on their own assessment that it is safe to do so in their individual circumstances, and in line with government guidance.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 does give the Secretary of State exceptional temporary powers to direct providers (a) to take reasonable steps to secure that specified persons do not attend some/all of their premises and (b) to take various steps for the continuity of the provision of education including requiring a provider to open. These powers were not exercised at the point of lockdown, as providers independently took appropriate action in line with PHE guidance. As part of this they moved educational provision online. If the government chose to exercise these powers to direct universities away from face to face provision when universities think that they can deliver this provision in line with wider government guidelines (for example implementing similar social distancing/ protective measures as recommended for offices), then we think that universities would seek to challenge this.

The higher education sector makes an important significant contribution to the UK economy, generating an estimated £21.5bn in gross value added (representing about 1.2% of total UK GDP) and directly employing over 400,000 people in 2014-15 (latest available data).³¹ Higher education providers also play a vital role in the local area, supporting local jobs and businesses and providing valuable social and cultural amenities for the community.

Higher education providers are highly diverse in terms of the personal characteristics of their student population, reflecting differences in their mission, geographical location and provision (mode and level of study as well as subject mix). For example, medium and lower tariff providers tend to have a higher proportion of ethnic minority and disadvantaged students compared to high tariff providers. Providers which are smaller, more specialised and privately funded tend to have a proportion of students who are older and from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to the HE sector overall. Additional data on the HE Sector is available in the data slides accompanying this

³¹ Source: 'The Economic Impact of Universities in 2014-15', Oxford Economics (report for Universities UK), 2017. Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/the-economic-impact-of-universities.pdf>.

paper.