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Research and analysis

# Education recovery in further education and skills providers: spring 2022

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## Applies to England

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## The picture overall

In December 2021, we published a [briefing on the continuing effects of COVID-19 and education recovery in further education and skills providers](#). The effects of the pandemic on learners and providers were evident. It was clear that providers were working hard to respond to these challenges, including helping learners to catch up.

In this briefing, we present insights from a sample of inspections carried out in January and February 2022 and discussions with inspectors; 30 of these inspections took place under Plan B COVID-restrictions, which encouraged working from home where possible. We have included all provider types, including 43 independent learning and employer providers and 9 general and specialist further education colleges. We are grateful to providers for the continued support they have given to learners.

Although we continued to consider the impact of the pandemic during inspections, many providers talked less about it. Instead, they viewed it more in terms of routine operational challenges.

Providers continued to respond to the pandemic with resilience and creativity. Collaboration between providers had increased, including sharing good practice and guaranteeing school leavers a place. Providers recognised that new learners had not taken formal examinations, like GCSEs, before and offered them additional help to prepare. They had used external funding to provide catch-up sessions, including tutorials. However, we are concerned that, because of the understandable focus on learners with gaps in their knowledge and/or skills, there is a risk that more advanced learners are not being pushed or challenged.

Gaps in learners' practical skills were still evident. However, these had reduced, which reflected the successful catch-up strategies providers had put in place in the autumn term. Some apprentices, for

example on health and social care programmes, worked throughout the pandemic, and so had gaps in theoretical knowledge because they had fewer opportunities to study. A significant number of apprentices remained on their programmes beyond their planned end date.

Some learners had not secured work placements because these had yet to be fully reinstated. When learners did have work placements, several providers had concerns that they were not being given enough tasks at work to develop their skills sufficiently, due to pressures on businesses. A number of employers were not giving apprentices enough time for off-the-job training. As a result, some apprentices were studying in their own time.

In many cases, learners' behaviour was more challenging than usual, particularly that of young learners who had enrolled directly from school. Disruption towards the end of this cohort's education had resulted in more disruptive and juvenile behaviour. In several cases, learners' social skills had dwindled, and they were less confident and independent. During classes, some learners struggled to concentrate and learn with their peers. Many learners were experiencing mental health problems, including anxiety about taking external examinations.

In too many cases, learners with high needs had gaps in their learning because the curriculum throughout the pandemic had focused on health and well-being instead of challenging them. The pandemic had also made it more difficult to secure work placements.

Staffing levels were a challenge for many providers. This included COVID-related absence and difficulties in recruitment and retention.

## Methodological note

Our inspections give us clear insight into the experiences of learners and providers. This briefing uses this insight to show:

- how the pandemic continues to impact on learners' learning and development
- how providers are helping learners to catch up

Our findings are based on evidence from routine inspections that took place between 10 January 2022 and 18 February 2022. We reviewed all 62 full inspections of further education and skills providers that took place over this period.<sup>[\[footnote 1\]](#)</sup> We included all provider types; independent learning and employer providers (43), general and specialist further education colleges (9), local authority further and adult education providers (3), higher education institutions (2), independent specialist colleges (2), 16-19 academies (2) and sixth-form colleges (1). Inspections were completed as normal and in line with our handbook. No additional demands were placed on providers, learners or inspectors. We also reviewed insights from the learner surveys from these

providers. [\[footnote 2\]](#)

To complement this evidence, we held focus groups and interviews with Ofsted colleagues working in further education and skills, including 20 Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and 12 Senior HMI, who oversee the work of HMI and engage with regional stakeholders. All regions were represented in these discussions.

The findings in this briefing are not representative of the whole sector. They illustrate the challenges that some learners and providers continue to experience and the strategies being used to support education recovery.

## **The current state of learners' education**

In January and February, we continued to consider the impact of the pandemic during inspections. However, some of the more effective and resilient providers, which were overcoming pandemic challenges, discussed it less often. Instead, they seemed to view it as part of their day-to-day running.

### **Attendance and motivation**

The pandemic continued to affect attendance. This was largely due to staff and learners testing positive for COVID-19 and self-isolating. Some staff were absent because of long COVID.

We heard concerns about the high levels of staff absence and its effect on learners. Small providers were particularly affected because they employ fewer staff, which means high levels of absence can temporarily disrupt or close provision. This is apparent in the requests we have received for inspection deferrals, with staff absence, particularly in smaller providers, being a significant challenge.

At a few providers, staff absence had temporarily affected the quality of education and how engaging learners found their programmes.

In some cases, learners' attendance was low, and, where it had increased, the rate of increase was sometimes slower than expected. This was due to COVID-related anxiety and the reluctance of some parents, especially parents of learners with high needs, to send them back to face-to-face learning. In addition, some learners, whose secondary education had been significantly disrupted, had not developed the attitudes, skills and behaviours for successful studying, and chose not to

attend.

## Gaps in learning and support

During the pandemic, learners on some vocational programmes were in key worker roles. These included nurses and nursing associate apprentices who worked on the frontline of health and care services. Many apprentices developed a range of practical skills as a result, as well as helping with the national response to COVID-19. However, in some cases there were gaps in apprentices' theoretical knowledge because, understandably, they were not able to spend enough time studying the theoretical elements of their programmes.

During our discussions, we heard that several providers largely focused attention and time on learners who had gaps in their knowledge and/or skills. The unintended consequence of this was that some of their more advanced learners were not pushed or challenged as much as they would have been usually.

Too many learners with high needs had gaps in their learning.<sup>[\[footnote 3\]](#)</sup> This was because providers had to focus on learners' health and well-being during the pandemic, rather than on delivering a challenging curriculum. In some providers, this had not yet changed.

## Practical skills

Practical training and work experience are key components of many further education and skills qualifications and, especially, of apprenticeships. During the pandemic, learners and apprentices' opportunities to develop and practise practical skills were disrupted.

On apprenticeships, this was because apprentices were furloughed, took breaks in learning and shifted to remote education. This disruption had left some apprentices unclear about their progress and what they needed to do to complete their programme successfully. Gaps in knowledge and skills were particularly evident in areas that could not be taught remotely. For example, some new learners who enrolled from school had less well-developed practical skills, including in music, drama and fine art, than previous cohorts.

Similar problems affected many learners on courses with practical content and/or work experience, especially when they were studying for qualifications that signify occupational competence. However, we heard that gaps had reduced since the previous term. This reflected the effective strategies providers had implemented in the autumn term. Our December 2021 briefing gave an overview of some of these strategies.

Securing work placements was a significant challenge for many providers because of changes in the focus of businesses and working practices, employers going out of business, a reduction in trade and employers not wanting additional people in the workplace. In some cases, learners were not aware of opportunities for work experience. Some had not had any discussions about this with their provider.

Placements in health and social care remained difficult to secure. This was due, in part, to the mandate for some care staff to be double vaccinated. In social care, for example, low staffing levels left little capacity to release people to be trained or to mentor learners. Staffing problems were compounded by staff having to self-isolate and by the social distancing measures required in health and social care settings. The number of placements available had also reduced in the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, such as hospitality, food manufacturing and hair and beauty. In the latter, this was because salons had either gone out of business or, when they did re-open, high customer demand meant they were unable to accommodate apprentices. Learners who have missed out on work experience may be at risk of disadvantage in the future labour market, since work experience is often crucial in securing employment.

Providers found it more difficult to secure placements for learners with high needs. Even before the pandemic, some had difficulty arranging work placements and these challenges had intensified. Supported internships were also difficult to secure.

Some apprentices, particularly those in key worker roles such as health and social care, childcare and road maintenance, were not being released for off-the-job training. In some cases, learners were studying in their own time.

With businesses under increased pressure, inspectors had concerns about how meaningful placements were. This is because some employers had prioritised business need over developing skills, leading to scenarios where, for example, tasks would be given to trained staff who could complete the job more quickly and efficiently. Furthermore, not all placements were relevant to learners' vocational subject(s) and so did not help them to develop subject-specific knowledge and skills.

## **Behaviour and attitudes**

In January and February, we heard more about issues concerning the behaviour and attitudes of learners, particularly those enrolling from school. Standards of behaviour were below expectations. Inspectors attributed this to the disruption learners had experienced in their education over the last 2 years.

Social interaction between some learners was more limited and peer relationships more fraught. In some instances, this manifested in disrespectful and confrontational behaviour. Friendship groups were more limited than they may have been pre-pandemic. This is because COVID-related measures, such as social distancing, digital learning, learners being in 'bubbles' at the start of the academic year and transition events being virtual, meant that learners had limited opportunities to meet peers outside of class. One provider said that learners found it difficult being around their peers as they had not learned as a group or collaborated with others in the previous part of their education.

Some learners were less resilient and confident than those in previous cohorts. A few providers noted that learners lacked confidence to speak in lessons and struggled to articulate what they wanted to say when they did. Some, particularly those with high needs, had regressed in their independence, continued to find communication difficult and were more uncomfortable in large groups of people.

Behaviour generally had deteriorated and become more juvenile, particularly in colleges. Inspectors saw an increase in poor behaviour, such as pushing in corridors, barging into classrooms and shouting.

Some learners took longer to settle and found concentrating difficult in learning environments. Some learners who had enrolled from school did not have the skills to be an effective learner, including behaviour, social and study skills, as a result of the disruption they experienced during their GCSEs.

## Catch-up strategies

Providers continued to respond to COVID-19 challenges with creativity and resilience. Effective education recovery strategies took a holistic approach to learners and staff. They combined an ambitious curriculum with a focus on health and well-being. Effective strategies included considering the progress learners were making and identifying any gaps in their knowledge. The most effective providers used this insight to review the curriculum and support needed. They reassessed learners regularly to ensure that adjustments to the curriculum and support were effective. Less effective providers took a firefighting approach to gaps in learning and did not take time to reflect on what catch-up was needed.

Several factors influenced how effectively providers responded:

- the size of the provider: larger providers tend to have more resources, including more staff and capacity compared with smaller providers

how well established the provider was: providers that have been operating for longer may have stronger connections with partners and the local community

- the impact of COVID-19 on industries in the local economy
- the effectiveness of the leadership team: this includes the ability to think pragmatically, provide consistency and create a positive culture
- the level of staff's subject expertise and knowledge

Some providers were reluctant to develop new courses and embed new strategies. This was because they were concerned about another lockdown or further COVID-19 restrictions. We recognise these reservations but would encourage providers to have the confidence to implement measures they believe would benefit learners, in line with the need to learn to live with COVID-19.

In addition to the focus areas below, education recovery strategies included:

- additional catch-up sessions, including increased timetabled hours
- more collaboration, often facilitated by membership organisations and/or networks, to share guidance and good practice
- programmes to address soft skills and work-ready behaviours, including external mentoring programmes and redesigned internal programmes
- recruiting staff with strong vocational skills and qualifications in English and mathematics
- increased collaboration with other providers to ensure that all young people had a place

## **Planning curriculum for new learners**

Some sixth-form colleges had found that new learners had lower levels of, and more variability in, prior knowledge and skills than usual. In response, colleges had developed a curriculum to ensure that learners could reach the expected levels quickly. Several engaged in subject-level conversations with feeder schools over the summer and first term to identify any gaps in curriculum coverage and ensure that these were filled. These adjustments helped to ensure that learners made the progress of which they were capable.

One provider had increased repetition and reinforcement of content after new learners failed to understand an assignment that all previous cohorts had understood. Another had spent the first 3 weeks of the programme covering topics that should have been taught in GCSEs and focusing on study skills.

Providers had put strategies in place to prepare learners for externally assessed exams, having recognised that many learners had not sat these before. Some had postponed mock exams until learners were confident enough to sit them. Many providers were getting learners used to exam



conditions and being able to write and concentrate for long periods of time. Strategies included:

- providing structured scaffolding and specimen answers at the beginning of exam preparation and gradually removing these measures as learners became more familiar with exam skills
- holding mock exams in a familiar environment
- gradually increasing the length of mock exams to help learners improve their concentration and ability to work for periods of time (for example, learners completed a 10-minute mock, then increased to 30 minutes and so on)

Inspectors were concerned about whether providers had enough time to prepare learners effectively for the realities of summer exams. This was because some of the above support measures they had introduced were still in place in February, with providers still unsure when they would be able to remove them and whether learners would be able to cope without them.

## **Funding**

Providers had secured additional funding to support learners through:

- holding individual and group catch-up sessions
- recruiting additional teachers in English and mathematics
- employing a learning mentor to identify gaps and help learners to catch up
- helping learners to develop exam techniques

Some further education colleges were pooling resources from the College Collaboration Fund to develop resources and projects to help learners catch up.

## **Repeating learning and additional elements**

Some providers were repeating elements of their programmes to ensure that existing learners had the right level of skills and knowledge to progress. This included revisiting elements that had been taught remotely.

Several providers had added elements to programmes to reflect the pandemic impact on industries such as catering and hair and beauty. For example, some providers had started covering self-employment on hair and beauty programmes. Catering programmes also had an additional focus on private catering and NHS food preparation.

## Digital skills and technology

Providers continued to use digital tools as part of teaching. We saw this across all provider types. The increased use of technology may be expected given that Plan B restrictions, which encouraged remote working, were in place until late January.

At the time of the inspections, the extent to which providers were using digital learning varied. Some were using, or intended to use, online learning as part of a hybrid delivery model. In these cases, learners attended in person and the provider used technology to support those who were absent, either to catch up with missed learning at a later point or to join remotely, and to allow all learners to revisit content. Some providers had ensured that teaching materials were available online in case of another lockdown. A few providers were teaching entirely face-to-face or intended to as soon as COVID restrictions allowed them to.

Some providers had shifted entirely to digital learning. In the earlier part of the term this was to reduce infection risk, and it is unclear if some were continuing due to high COVID-19 cases. Other reasons given included learners' preferences and helping learners to develop and improve their digital skills. In some cases where training would normally happen at an employer's premises, these premises were not available, and so remote learning was used instead.

Learners expressed mixed views on digital learning. Some valued face-to-face learning due to the opportunities for interaction with teachers and their peers, including socialising and learning with others. Others preferred digital learning as it reduced the risk of COVID-19 infections and allowed more flexible learning.

Now that learners are able to return to face-to-face education, we have some concerns when providers decide to continue with remote education alone. Some providers ensure that remote education is of a high quality. However, in other cases, learners who are taught remotely receive too little support and ineffective teaching. When providers offer learners the option of studying on site or remotely, we are concerned about the impact on some learners who choose the latter. Some learners choose remote learning because they are anxious about returning and mixing with peers; such anxieties may become more entrenched in those who do not return to face-to-face learning. By not attending in person, learners also miss out on valuable opportunities to interact with their peers and staff and develop work-ready skills, behaviours and attitudes.

No matter whether teaching took place remotely, face to face, or through a blended approach, effective teaching was characterised by:

- careful and logical sequencing of the curriculum
- teaching methods that focused learners' attention on curriculum content

- frequent opportunities for learners to reinforce what they had learned through spaced repetition and recall, so that they could apply their knowledge and skills in different situations

## Assessments

GCSE and A-level exams were replaced with centre-assessed grades in 2020 and teacher-assessed grades in 2021, which are not directly comparable to the grades given pre-pandemic through standardised external assessments. This meant that providers' initial assessment of this new cohort was particularly important. However, the quality of initial assessment varied. Less effective providers had done little to take into account the fact that learners' starting points might be different from previous years. More effective providers, on the other hand, used the results of well-designed initial assessments effectively to inform revisions to the curriculum to bridge gaps in learning.

Several providers improved their assessment of soft skills such as group working and attributes such as confidence. Others added an extra component to assessment to gauge learners' mental health and well-being.

Some providers used enhanced subject-specific assessments to determine starting points with greater accuracy. For example, in English, they used written tasks to assess writing style and language skills. A few providers also set independent research projects over the summer. Providers also offered enhanced careers advice and guidance to ensure that learners were on the right programme.

One provider said remote initial assessment, which had been used during the pandemic, presented more logistical challenges than face-to-face assessment. In response, staff had developed a short course to give them an overview of learners' skills early in their programme. This allowed the provider to quickly ascertain whether the learner was likely to be able to complete the full course.

At the start of the 2021/22 academic year, some providers assessed learners who were returning following lockdowns and remote working. They assessed subject-specific knowledge and skills and soft skills. This enabled them to identify where support was needed and to provide it.

Some learners with high needs were assessed more thoroughly than they were pre-pandemic. The more effective providers put additional support in place to help learners adjust to changes in routine.

A significant number of apprentices had their end-point assessments delayed. This was largely due to the disruption of the pandemic and apprentices not being at a level to take these.

Some on-the-job assessments of apprentices' knowledge, skills and behaviour were delayed. This

happened, for example, if apprentices were furloughed, if their employers did not release them from their work for assessments, or if assessors were not allowed on site. This lack of contact with industry may have made it more difficult for providers' staff to keep their sector knowledge up-to-date.

During 2021/22, providers experienced some uncertainty about the form exams and any alternative assessments would take. Some providers understandably prepared learners for exams in tandem with undertaking additional assessments in case teacher-assessed grades were needed. This put learners at risk of being over-assessed, and the dual burden of assessment may have had an adverse impact on the logical sequencing of the curriculum.

## **Re-sequencing the curriculum**

Many providers had re-sequenced the curriculum in response to increased COVID-19 cases and in preparation for possible future lockdowns or restrictions. Practical skills had been scheduled earlier than usual in programmes to ensure that learners had opportunities to develop these skills when face-to-face learning was possible. One provider had secured additional work placements in the autumn term to ensure that learners had opportunities in case of further restrictions. Another provider had frontloaded coursework in case it needed to evidence learners' knowledge and skills through teacher-assessed grades.

Providers continued to re-sequence the curriculum to help learners catch up on practical skills, and to prioritise elements of programmes that had been missed. One provider had redeveloped the curriculum for apprentices whose programmes had been suspended during the pandemic. This involved reducing the time between block-release workshops so that learners could catch up.

In many cases, curriculum re-sequencing was a pragmatic and sometimes unavoidable response to the pandemic. However, in some cases, it meant that the integration of theoretical and practical parts of the curriculum suffered. In many subjects, it is crucial that theoretical elements of the curriculum are embedded and reinforced through application in practice. Where this does not happen, learners may make limited progress. For example, one provider had emphasised practical aspects of the early years educator curriculum during the pandemic at the expense of theoretical aspects. Apprentices then struggled to recall and apply underpinning theory. They also found it hard to remember aspects of the curriculum, including key information about the early years foundation stage statutory framework.

Now that nearly all learners have returned to face-to-face learning, we hope that sound educational principles will take precedence over expedience in the sequencing of the curriculum.

## **Developing work-ready behaviours and attitudes**

With opportunities for work experience still limited, many providers responded creatively. This was a feature that distinguished the most effective providers from the least effective. The latter seemed to accept too readily that placements could not be secured, whereas the more effective providers worked hard to ensure that learners developed work-ready behaviours and attitudes through a variety of means. For example, some providers hosted more discussions with employers. Some arranged virtual work experience for their learners. Others increased capacity to contact a wider range of employers in the hope of finding new opportunities for placements.

Some large further education colleges struggled to find local external work placements for all learners. However, they were often able to provide internal work experience in realistic environments in on-site facilities such as restaurants and salons, and in teams such as marketing and IT.

## **Learners' mental health and well-being**

In our December 2021 briefing, we reported that learners' mental health had suffered during the pandemic. This was still the case.

New learners who enrolled from schools appear to be most severely affected in terms of mental health. This was largely due to anxiety about sitting formal exams for the first time and about returning to education more generally. With exams taking place as usual in summer 2022, the next few months may be difficult for learners and staff. Several providers also noted that this cohort of learners had lower self-esteem.

## **Strategies to support mental health and well-being**

Providers continued to provide a range of measures to support learners' mental health and well-being, many of which were in place before the pandemic. These included increasing the capacity of counselling and/or mental health teams, adjusting off-the-job training to allow apprentices to spread work across the week, referring or signposting learners to external support, training staff to be mental health first aiders, and facilitating collaborative activities to help learners develop peer support networks. They also introduced individualised learning plans with elements that focused on well-being, QR codes allowing easy access to the provider's welfare and safeguarding team, therapy dogs and sensory rooms.

Learners' motivation and attendance had increased at some providers with these enhanced support measures. Learners felt more comfortable attending providers that offered frequent opportunities to have open discussions about mental health and well-being.

## **Providers' sustainability**

### **Learner enrolment numbers**

The negative impact of the pandemic on some industries had motivated some learners to return to education, either to change to a more sustainable career or to upskill.

However, recruitment of learners was more difficult. Several providers noted that the number of adult learners on English and mathematics courses was lower. One college noted that some schools had extended programmes beyond 18 for learners with high needs because of the pandemic, and that this had reduced the number of learners.

Learner retention remained a challenge for some providers. Reasons for high attrition included increased demands in the workplace, insufficient support from employers, changes in personal circumstances and securing employment with higher salaries.

### **Impact on staff**

The pandemic continued to affect staffing in further education and skills providers. One provider, for example, reported that staff turnover had increased by almost 50%. Factors that made recruitment and retention of staff more challenging included:

- salaries in further education and skills provision were lower than those in industry and some staff had returned to their industries as a result
- the pandemic and experience of lockdowns had made some staff reconsider their careers
- COVID-related procedures and ways of working had increased demands on staff, who were now prioritising their well-being and personal life

The impact of this was significant and, in some cases, had a knock-on effect on the quality of education. One provider noted that staff vacancies had prevented practical sessions from fully

operating.

Staff continued to experience high workloads. Some were working beyond their contracted hours, particularly since remote working was introduced, and some tutors had higher caseloads.

Many providers implemented enhanced strategies to support staff. This included establishing 'down-time' to boost morale and encourage active lifestyles, increasing communication, and adjusting workloads and working patterns to reflect individual needs.

However, some staff were not receiving sufficient support for continuing professional development. Too often, staff training focused largely on developing teachers' digital skills at the expense of their subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Some staff had received insufficient training to help them address some of the negative behaviour and attitudes that learners were not displaying in face-to-face learning environments.

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1. Monitoring visits were not included due to their narrower focus. We've published a separate review of the [progress that prisons are making towards reinstating a full education, skills and work curriculum](#) through the pandemic. [↩](#)
  2. An online survey that captures views from learners attending the provider being inspected. [↩](#)
  3. Learners with high needs are young people aged 16 to 25 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who require additional support to help them progress and achieve. Learners will receive additional funding for support, typically from specialist staff providing education, health and care services. [↩](#)

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