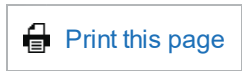**Ofsted**
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# Education recovery in further education and skills providers: autumn

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# The picture overall

The impact of the pandemic on learners and providers in further education (FE) and skills is well documented. In 2020, we published a series of COVID-19-themed briefings, which presented findings from interim visits to providers in the autumn term. Leaders told us of the challenges of providing practical elements of programmes, including work experience; that they had identified gaps in learners' English and mathematics knowledge and skills; that mental health, well-being and safeguarding concerns had increased; and that they were facing growing financial pressures.

Since then, learners, providers and partnering organisations have experienced further government restrictions due to COVID-19, in addition to the ongoing economic downturn. We have amended our inspection handbook to take the context of COVID-19 into account. This briefing presents insights from a sample of inspections that took place this term. We are grateful to providers for the additional support they are giving learners while continuing to offer high-quality education and training. Learners should be proud of what they have achieved in

these challenging times.

The pandemic continued to disrupt learning. COVID-related absences meant that learning took place remotely or that programmes temporarily closed. Providers said that some learners had gaps in their practical skills, and also in English and mathematics. In some cases, learners were unable to fully engage in work placements, as these were yet to be fully reinstated, particularly in health and social care. The number of learners on some programmes, particularly apprenticeships, had fallen.

The transition from lockdown back to face-to-face learning had been difficult for some learners. As we found in our 2020 COVID-19 briefings, there were high levels of concern about learners' mental health. Several providers had experienced high staff turnover, including redeployment.

To support learners, many providers had adapted their curriculum, putting practical elements of programmes earlier in the academic year. Others were revisiting elements taught remotely or carrying out skills checks to ensure that learners had the necessary skills and knowledge to progress. Digital technology had become a bigger part of learning, with this used in response to COVID-related absences, to supplement face-to-face learning and to help learners develop digital skills. With work placements not yet fully reinstated, some providers had secured alternative placements to give learners the opportunity to develop employment skills. However, researchers noted that, in a few cases, providers were unable to provide work placements even in November, when government guidance no longer required social distancing measures to be in place. This may have delayed their learners' progress. Other providers had established clubs for learners to discuss the current employment landscape. A number of providers had developed new programmes to support those who lost their job or wanted to change career as a result of COVID-19, giving them the skills and knowledge to re-enter employment.

Some learners remained unable to take assessments and provider responses included implementing on-site facilities and adjusting methods of assessment. Several providers increased baseline assessments to check the skills and knowledge of new and existing learners returning to programmes.

It is too early to see the full impact or to comment on the effectiveness of these strategies, but it is clear that providers were responding with resilience to support learners.

# Methodological note

This briefing uses evidence gathered from routine inspections to show:

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

Our role in inspecting providers gives us a unique insight into the experiences of learners and providers. Our findings are based on evidence from inspections that took place between 1 and 19 November 2021. With the exception of monitoring visits and prison inspections, we reviewed evidence from all 39 inspections of FE and skills providers that took place over this period. Monitoring visits were not included due to their narrower focus. We are undertaking a separate review of the progress that prisons are making towards reinstating a full education, skills and work curriculum through the pandemic, which we will publish shortly. Inspections were completed as normal and in line with our handbook. No additional demands were placed on providers, learners or inspectors.

Although we cover most inspections over this time period, the findings are not generalisable. They illustrate the challenges that some learners and providers continued to experience and what strategies were being used to support education recovery.

# The current state of learners' education

## Attendance and motivation

Providers said that attendance continued to be disrupted by the pandemic. In some cases, this was due to self-isolation, either by learners, members of their household, tutors or placement staff. Where courses were unable to continue face to face, multiple providers delivered learning remotely. For example, a tutor at one provider gave recaps and offered additional hours of study once face-to-face learning resumed.

Several providers said that a proportion of learners found the transition from lockdown back to face-to-face learning settings difficult, which created challenges in reintegrating learners. Some providers noticed cases where learners' motivation for their programme had dwindled over the course of the pandemic. These providers mainly attributed this to the shift to remote learning and balancing studies with other commitments, including childcare. In these instances, re-engaging learners with their studies had been challenging.

Although faced with these challenges, many providers had worked to retain and re-engage learners. This focus on retention had resulted in some providers seeing excellent attendance and learners being eager to engage as the provider moved back to face-to-face learning.

## Gaps in learning and support

Practical vocational training and work experience are key components of many FE and skills qualifications. We know that COVID-19 restrictions reduced opportunities for placements and furlough meant that many learners were unable to engage in practical elements of their programme. Many providers cited this as a significant deficit during the pandemic, and learners consequently had gaps in their learning.

As COVID-19 restrictions eased, a few providers said that work placements had been reinstated. However, some learners remained unable to gain practical experience due to limited opportunities for shadowing and site visits not yet being available. A number of learners on health and social care programmes were not yet fully engaged in practical placements. Reasons for this included those attending placements needing, in some cases, to be double vaccinated and workplaces having yet to re-establish opportunities. Learners on these programmes also experienced limitations in which placements were available.

Several learners on placements were working from home rather than in their workplaces. A few providers thought that this limited opportunities for learners to have conversations with colleagues in the workplace that would help develop their knowledge and skills.

There is also evidence of learning loss in other areas of the curriculum. Some providers reported gaps in learners' knowledge of English and mathematics as a result of the pandemic. Enrichment activities also continued to be affected. One provider said visits from external speakers had yet to be reinstated. Others said that careers services, including CV writing and interview support, remained unavailable.

## Assessing starting points

In 2020 and 2021, GCSE and A-level examinations were cancelled and replaced with centre-assessed grades (in 2020) and teacher-assessed grades (in 2021). In addition to these, some providers enhanced their usual baseline assessments to ascertain new learners' knowledge and to identify 'gaps' in their learning. Others implemented a longer induction period to get to know learners, engage them in early assessment and gauge their starting points. Some providers were also working with learners to develop 5-year career support plans to reflect the changing employment opportunities following the pandemic. A number of providers reassessed learners returning to their programme.

# Catch-up strategies

Providers were using a range of strategies to support education recovery. While some did have plans in place for education recovery, including team building, practical skills and enrichment, many of these were still delayed by the pandemic.

In addition to the areas focused on below, other strategies providers had adopted to support education recovery include:

- using funding, including the Department for Education's tuition fund, to increase staff hours and facilitate individual and small-group catch-up sessions
- planning additional hours of study for courses that have been temporarily disrupted in the academic year 2021 to 2022 for catch-up and recap sessions

## Repeating learning and additional elements

Several providers were repeating parts of their programmes to ensure that learners had the right level of skill and knowledge to progress. This includes revisiting elements of the programme that were taught online now that learners are back in the classroom.

Some providers had added elements to the curriculum to address gaps in English and mathematics skills. For example, in a few cases, learners received one-to-one support from dedicated mentors and were holding workshops to help develop these skills. A number of providers suggested that the success of these additional systems of support meant that they would very likely continue them, as they would be helpful beyond COVID-19 catch-up.

Providers were also offering individual support for apprentices and learners in practical workshops to help them develop practical skills. Skills checks were built in to ensure that learners had the necessary level of skill to progress in their programme.

One provider had used additional programmes to support learners who had been shielding, including providing practical tasks for those needing to refresh their skills.

## Programme extensions

Several providers had extended their programmes. In most cases, this was done for learners with high needs and was agreed with parents or carers.

Other providers have given extensions in cases where learners have been absent for long periods during the pandemic and to allow learners to repeat years of study. For some, this was to allow those who had been on furlough to complete practical workshops. One provider gave learners the option to join other cohorts following breaks in learning.

# Digital skills and technology

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many providers shifted to remote learning, and some staff received training on this. Multiple providers continued to use remote learning for learners during periods of absence related to COVID-19.

Many providers intended to continue with online learning as part of a hybrid model of delivery. The hybrid model would mean a return to face-to-face learning and making more use of technology in teaching, including using digital learning to supplement classroom activity. One provider used online learning for theoretical elements of programmes, including English and mathematics, and learners attended in person for practical sessions. Some providers said that the benefits of this hybrid model were two-fold: supporting learning and delivery of course content and strengthening IT skills more generally.

One provider said the increased use of technology by external partners had improved its ability to engage and connect with them. It had also allowed partners to attend meetings that they would not have been able to attend if they were face to face. The provider hoped to continue this approach.

# Assessments

Learners were still experiencing delays in assessment. This was a source of frustration for both learners and staff. Reasons for delays included assessments having yet to be reinstated and providers assessing learners as not being ready due to missed learning.

Providers had taken action to reduce these delays and to facilitate assessments. For example, they had set up facilities on premises to allow assessment to take place in better ventilated areas where learners can socially distance; contacted test centres to secure cancelled slots; and changed the format of assessments. The latter included combining exams with coursework and using feedback from trainers.

# Developing work-ready behaviours and attitudes

Due to a lack of work experience opportunities over the last 18 months, some providers focused on developing learners' employment skills in other ways. This includes seeking alternative placements that, although not career-specific, would give learners the opportunity to develop their employment skills more generally.

Other approaches included job clubs to discuss shifts in the job market and to help learners potentially amend their career planning to reflect current opportunities, trips to different industries to give insight into working environments

and skills, virtual work experience programmes and soft-skill workshops.

Some providers focused on helping learners to develop routines following the disruption of the pandemic. A few learners said they valued this, especially the face-to-face interaction and the opportunity to engage with their peers.

## Re-sequencing of curriculum

In the academic year 2020/21, many providers re-sequenced their curriculum to enable learners to do practical elements of courses and work experience placements earlier in the academic year than normal. Many also used this opportunity to re-sequence their curriculum for new cohorts of learners, building practical skills in alongside classroom learning.

Some providers had seen the advantage of this adaptation and had repeated it this year. They suggested that this would lead to a permanent change in their curriculum sequencing. For these providers, the renewed focus on sequencing had reinforced the importance of the interrelationship between theory and practice. They said that learners were securing their practical learning and progressing onto more complex tasks faster, thereby accelerating their overall progress. A few learners said that having these opportunities woven into their course had enriched their studies and that they felt prepared for future employment.

# Learners' mental health and well-being

As we noted in our COVID-19 briefings published last year, providers continued to report an increase in poor mental health and well-being concerns among learners. They said that the transition out of lockdown and back to face-to-face learning had been a source of anxiety for some learners. Reasons for this were returning to the physical setting and commuting. In one case, returning to physical settings had created mixed feelings: learners felt safe at home but being in the setting reduced isolation.

One provider noted that the number of safeguarding concerns had doubled in comparison with last year, as lockdown ended. Mental health concerns were part of these, but self-harm and sexual abuse were also cited.

## Strategies to support mental health and well-being

Some providers had adapted their curriculum to focus more on mental health and well-being, including managing stress, improving confidence and reducing anxiety.

Alongside this, providers were continuing to use strategies, many of which were in place before the pandemic, to support learners' mental health and well-being. These include engaging with external organisations, either through referrals or signposting; training staff; offering mental health first aid; communicating about well-being through newsletters, magazines and apps; doing pastoral check-ins; and implementing specialist programmes or support tools.

One provider supported staff to cope with the effects of the pandemic using online well-being courses, running mindfulness sessions and offering the option to work from home.

# Providers' sustainability

## Learner enrolment numbers

The number of learners on some programmes had fallen as a result of the pandemic. Recruitment of apprentices was particularly challenging and numbers were lower than in previous years.

While some providers were able to offer alternatives, such as one provider running stand-alone short courses when uptake on a level 5 apprenticeship was particularly low, others had not been able to find alternatives and had been left in difficult financial positions. One provider had limited its intake of apprentices due to employers not being able to offer placements as they were focused on rebuilding the core skills of staff following turnover during the pandemic.

Although a proportion of apprentices had returned to their programmes, others were still on breaks in learning. Several providers said they had seen attrition from programmes. Reasons for this were thought to be the pressures of remote learning, lack of face-to-face assessments, changes in employment and limited time for learning. Reduced learner numbers had made apprenticeship programmes in some providers vulnerable to closure.

## Level and variety of courses

A number of providers had developed new programmes in response to shifts in local need, particularly people losing their jobs, unemployment and people changing their career, as a consequence of the pandemic.

These programmes were designed to give learners the knowledge, skills and behaviour needed to gain new employment, but also to support learners to progress into self-employment. For example, one provider established a new

partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions through Jobcentre Plus and a local NHS trust to help those who were long-term unemployed or who had lost their job as a result of the pandemic to move into entry-level positions in the NHS.

## Impact on staff

As we highlighted in our COVID-19 briefings last year, the workload of some staff had increased as a result of the pandemic. Providers said this was because of the backlog of work and the need to support learners to catch-up. Providers also noted that some staff had poorer mental health due to the additional demands on their role to support learners during the pandemic.

There were a few instances of high staff turnover. Some providers highlighted that the impact on staffing was particularly felt in careers information, advice and guidance teams. Redeployment as a result of the pandemic was cited as one reason for this.

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Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance and support

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