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Research and analysis

Education recovery in further education and skills providers: summer 2022

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Applies to England

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The picture overall

In December 2021 and April 2022, we published [briefings on the continuing effects of COVID-19 and education recovery in further education and skills](#). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners and providers were evident. It was clear that providers were working hard to respond and help learners to catch up.

In this briefing, we present insights from a sample of inspections carried out in April and May 2022 and from discussions with Ofsted colleagues, including inspectors, working in further education and skills.

We continued to consider the context of COVID-19 during inspections this term. We found that many providers viewed the continued impact of the pandemic as a routine operational challenge, and were more focused on the effectiveness of their education recovery strategies.

Providers continued to respond to the challenges of the pandemic with creativity and resilience. The strategies we reported in previous briefings continued to be used by many providers. These included one-to-one and group catch-up sessions, resequencing the curriculum and adjusting or developing new programmes to meet the demands of the sectors that have seen increased employment opportunities because of the pandemic. We also heard of cases where providers had developed masterclasses to help learners who have missed out on developing practical skills and rehearsing these during the pandemic.

In a small number of cases, providers had retained or reverted to remote learning where there was no clear benefit for learners in doing so. Unless there are clear benefits for learners and their curriculum, remote learning narrows opportunities for skills acquisition and rehearsal, and limits social engagement. Learners are unable to learn practical skills remotely. Remote learning also limits opportunities for learners to interact with peers and staff, including socialisation and peer learning, which can have a negative impact on their experiences and outcomes.

The poorer behaviour and attitudes we reported in our [April 2022 briefing](#) had reduced and, in most cases, were at the expected level. While learners and staff continued to be absent as a result of COVID-19, this no longer closed provision. However, some employers still did not release apprentices for off-the-job training because of staff shortages and pressures on businesses.

Challenges in securing work placements were easing, but difficulties remained in the sectors that were most affected by the pandemic, like health and social care. This was sometimes because health and social care settings were too busy to train new staff, or because employers did not want new and/or additional people on their premises. Learners with high needs were also struggling to secure placements. When learners and apprentices were in workplaces, the types of tasks they were doing were not always appropriate. For example, some nursing associate apprentices were acting as porters rather than providing patient care.

Some apprentices were still on breaks in learning (an agreed pause in their training). Many apprentices were still on their programmes beyond their planned end date due to delays in training and assessments. Access to end-point assessment opportunities was a problem in some sectors.

The pandemic continued to affect adult learners' participation in education. Many providers reported declining numbers and course closures, especially in community learning. On the other hand, some providers reported an increased interest in employability courses, as adult learners looked to retrain or move jobs. Some providers continued to offer a combination of face-to-face and remote teaching to adult learners.

As learners prepared to sit exams, there were high levels of anxiety. Many learners in further education were taking high-stakes assessments for the first time. General exam nerves were compounded by a lack of familiarity with the logistics of exams. Providers had worked hard to prepare learners. They had used mock exams, provided more structured model answers, built in more time for revision and increased pastoral support.

Many learners with high needs were now being appropriately challenged by their curriculum and were starting to re-engage in community visits and work experience. Where there were gaps, this was often a continuation of poor curriculum planning that had existed pre-pandemic. Personal development for learners with high needs had been slow to recover because of the lack of enrichment during the pandemic and inconsistencies caused by higher staff absence. Some learners had increased mental health difficulties and had regressed in their social skills.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing difficulties in recruiting and retaining high-quality staff. This is largely because salaries in further education and skills are lower than those in industry, particularly in sectors like construction and engineering.

Methodological note

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

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

Our findings are based on evidence from inspections that took place between 25 April and 27 May 2022. These were completed in line with our handbook, with no additional demands placed on providers, learners or inspectors.

We reviewed all full inspections of general and specialist further education colleges (7), independent specialist colleges (7), sixth-form colleges (2) and local authority and adult education providers (1). This term, we wanted to increase our focus on adult provision and learners with high needs, so we also reviewed evidence from all independent learning providers that receive funding for these types of provision (7). The learner surveys from these 24 providers were also reviewed to capture insights from learners. [\[footnote 1\]](#)

We also held discussions with Ofsted colleagues working in further education and skills. This included 55 Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), who had inspected a range of provider types and provision, and 12 Senior HMI, who oversee the work of HMI and engage with regional stakeholders. All [8 Ofsted regions](#) were represented in these discussions.

We cannot assume that the findings are representative of the whole sector. They present the challenges some learners and providers continued to experience, and some of the strategies used to support education recovery.

The current state of learners' education

This term, we continued to consider the context of COVID-19 during inspections. As in our [April 2022 research](#), we found that the providers that were more effective spoke less, if at all, about the pandemic. These providers focused on the impact of strategies to support learners and reflected on

how they could improve. They viewed any continued impacts as routine operational challenges. There were 2 factors that were particularly associated with whether providers responded in this way:

- the effectiveness of the leadership team, which included creating positive cultures, and investing in and building the capacity of staff
- an ambitious curriculum, which sets high expectations for learners

The less effective providers continued to see the pandemic as a barrier to developing and teaching the full curriculum. This limited the quality of learners' education.

More generally, the pandemic was less of a focus for providers this term. COVID-19 was now one of many variables, including policy shifts, Brexit and increased living costs, all of which were having an impact on further education and skills.

Attendance and motivation

Many providers, particularly colleges, recognised the anxiety that some learners had about returning to face-to-face learning, and supported learners through the transition. This included gradual returns and dealing with challenging behaviour to ensure calm learning environments. However, attendance remained lower than it was before the pandemic. Learners and staff continued to test positive for COVID-19, although this was not closing provision as we have reported previously. Absences continued to reflect the difficulties some learners and apprentices were experiencing.

We also heard that some apprentices were not being released for off-the-job training. It is important that apprentices receive enough off-the-job training to develop their knowledge and skills, and to prepare them properly for their job roles. Where learners had missed out on functional skills teaching during the pandemic, they often no longer understood the importance of these subjects and chose not to attend. Face-to-face attendance for learners with high needs was returning to normal, but a small number continued to attend remotely because they or their parents were anxious about increased health vulnerabilities. Some providers said that changed priorities involving work and care meant that adult learners were not returning in the same numbers.

When teaching was online, providers often found it difficult to monitor attendance effectively. In some cases, when learners had cameras off, it was difficult to know whether they were engaging with the session or learning.

Most learners and apprentices had high levels of motivation and engagement with their programmes. Attitudes towards education were mostly positive and learners were appreciative of

the support that their providers and teachers had given. However, some learners and apprentices were frustrated about the limited progress they had made, the delays to their programmes and the delays in end-point assessments taking place. Several providers had found it hard to re-engage apprentices with their programmes after breaks in learning and furlough during the pandemic. Where they were able to re-engage them, behaviour often remained below expectations.

Gaps in learning and support

In our [April 2022 briefing](#), we reported that some apprentices had gaps in their theoretical knowledge. While these gaps still existed, they had reduced, which reflects the effective strategies providers had put in place to help learners catch up.

Many learners had made good progress during the pandemic and academic year and were achieving well. However, the disruption learners had experienced sometimes meant that their progress had slowed. For example, some learners who had centre- and teacher-assessed grades had found it difficult to catch up. This may be because their grades did not accurately reflect their knowledge. Some learners would have benefited from further teaching of mathematics and English, but did not receive it because they had been given a grade 4 that overstated their true level of achievement. Other learners had not been pushed to reach the highest grades in a variety of subjects. This was because providers had focused on helping learners to catch up and complete programmes.

In some cases, providers had compressed the timetabling of English and mathematics to increase time and resources for learners to catch up in practical and vocational skills. This meant that there was not enough time for learners to make good progress in mathematics and English. Some learners had lower levels of English and mathematics compared with previous cohorts. For example, some apprentices demonstrated excellent technical language, but struggled with more basic elements of writing, like sentence structure.

Many providers had reinstated their enrichment programmes, including extra-curricular activities, sports clubs and visits from external guests. However, we were disappointed to find that enrichment remained unavailable in some providers because facilities were closed or there were concerns about external speakers being on premises. Learners were rightly frustrated with the lack of enrichment and keen for this to be re-established.

Practical skills

Practical and applied training is essential in many further education and skills programmes,

especially apprenticeships. Opportunities to develop and practise skills have been disrupted and, in our previous briefings, we reported gaps in practical skills and theoretical knowledge. This term, we heard that these gaps were continuing to close as a result of the strategies that providers had implemented across this academic year.

Several providers noted that new learners brought less-developed skills to their courses than previous cohorts. For example, some learners on art and design programmes had limited skills beyond pencil work. This was attributed to the disruption they experienced at school.

In some cases, gaps in knowledge and essential skills remained, and apprentices were making slower progress than would be expected. Some were on their programmes beyond their planned end dates. A few providers had extended programmes for apprentices to allow them to complete their programmes successfully.

Breaks in learning had been used differently by providers and led to a range of outcomes. Providers had put many apprentices on breaks in learning during the pandemic and some had not yet returned. In some cases, this was because of business closures and restricted work opportunities, particularly in hospitality, health and social care, and fitness. In other cases, apprentices did not return because they had found better-paid jobs elsewhere.

There were some difficulties in completing apprentices' progress reviews. This was because of staffing problems in sectors like health and social care. We were disappointed to see that restrictions remained in place for workplace visits in some providers and that some employers were not routinely involved in apprentices' progress reviews. Some employers were unaware of the progress apprentices were making, their workloads or any concerns about their well-being.

Employment opportunities for apprentices

Although difficulties in securing appropriate work and training were easing in some sectors, challenges remained, especially in sectors that were hardest hit by the pandemic. In some cases, apprentices were allocated inappropriate tasks and roles at work. For example, some nursing associate apprentices were working in pharmacies and carrying out portage tasks rather than developing skills in patient care. Some apprentices in care homes were observing staff rather than carrying out practical tasks themselves.

Many employers continued to experience difficult business conditions. This included challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce. These pressures meant that sometimes it was difficult to allocate staff for on-the-job training, as employers struggled to balance training with operational demands. Several employers did not want new people on their premises. Some apprentices, particularly those in hospitality, travel and tourism, and health and social care, were not being

released for off-the-job training. This was because of pressures on business and difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. In some cases, apprentices had high workloads because of staff shortages.

We are concerned that some providers are not encouraging employers to provide meaningful and relevant tasks at work for apprentices. While we understand that providers were nervous about the burden on employers, apprentices must be able to expect high-quality and relevant on-the-job training.

Work experience and placements

Access to appropriate work experience and placements had an impact on how ready learners and apprentices felt for employment. Understandably, those who had experienced appropriate placements felt more confident about beginning their careers, as they had had the opportunity to practise and develop their skills. They also had more experience to draw on when making decisions about their next steps.

Many providers were working hard to secure work experience and placements through engaging with external employers and organisations by:

- re-establishing partnerships with services that had been temporarily halted or delivered remotely during the pandemic
- developing new partnerships to secure placements
- working with their own staff's sector contacts to develop projects and opportunities for learners to engage in work-related activities; for example, learners on an art and design programme had been able to work on projects from local artists

Behaviour and attitudes

In our last briefing, we reported that the behaviour of some learners, particularly those who enrolled from school, was below expectations. This was attributed to the disruption these learners had experienced in the last years of their schooling, and to periods of isolation.

There remained some instances of immature behaviour, but behaviour this term had largely improved and was now in line with expectations, particularly in colleges. This improvement is due to the efforts of all staff in setting out and reinforcing expectations, and the continuity and routine of being back in face-to-face learning.

However, some learners continued to find it difficult being in face-to-face learning environments with others. In some cases, learners found social interaction and group work challenging. Several providers said that these learners were experiencing social anxiety. Some learners were less confident than individuals in previous cohorts. To deal with this, one provider had invited parents to attend extra-curricular events and another had hired a theatre company to work with learners, developing their confidence and social skills.

Where learners and apprentices, particularly those aged 16 to 18, continued to learn mostly or entirely online, behaviour remained below expectations. This is because it is extremely difficult to develop social skills remotely, and for staff to properly assess and improve behaviour online. Worse behaviour, particularly poor punctuality and negative attitudes to learning, was more evident in small independent learning providers. This was sometimes because these providers had fewer resources and were therefore unable to provide the level of support many larger providers could offer.

Differences across provider types

Several factors influenced the extent to which COVID-19 continued to impact on providers.

The size of the provider

On the whole, larger providers were more resilient to the impact of COVID-19. This was because they had more capacity, in terms of staff and space, to deliver extra support and make adjustments.

How established the provider was

Some newer providers may have had relatively undeveloped partnerships with employers, for example, which impacted on their ability to ensure that learners and apprentices had a high quality of work experience and/or on-the-job training.

The focus of a provider

Those providers that were delivering programmes in the sectors that were hardest hit by the pandemic continued to experience problems. Independent learning providers with a curriculum that was restricted to 1 or 2 sectors were at particular risk.

Vulnerability of students

Providers with learners who faced particular challenges because of their health or other circumstances were more cautious about lifting COVID-19 restrictions.

Catch-up strategies

Providers continued to respond to the challenges of the pandemic with resilience, and had implemented a range of strategies to support learners.

Many learners benefited from additional catch-up sessions, for individuals and groups. Several providers offered apprentices remote catch-up sessions that were focused on specific areas of theoretical knowledge. This meant that apprentices were able to attend, irrespective of their employer or location. However, engagement with catch-up sessions in colleges was mixed. Reasons for low engagement included sessions being voluntary and limited awareness of the sessions.

Providers continued to use available funding, including the tuition fund, to support learners. This was being used thoughtfully to deliver initiatives, including more enrichment and extra-curricular activities. However, providers were concerned about the costs of delivering and maintaining these in future. This is because the funding is unlikely to rise with inflation, so that some of these initiatives are likely to end.

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

- those responsible for governance more closely engaging with heads of department to understand gaps in knowledge and better support staff to deal with these
- setting up a stakeholder forum to identify gaps in knowledge and skills, and following it up with an improvement plan
- increased focus and support, particularly during induction, on how to engage with learning and maintain progress on programmes

Re-sequencing the curriculum

Many learners continued to study a curriculum that had been re-sequenced in response to the pandemic.

In some providers, theoretical elements of apprenticeship programmes, like hairdressing, had been front-loaded, with practical skills developed later. Practical skills were sometimes taught very quickly towards the end of apprenticeships so that apprentices could complete their apprenticeships in time. As a result, we have some concerns that apprentices were not given enough time to learn curriculum content securely. In other cases, providers were still front-loading practical aspects of

the curriculum, in case of further lockdowns. This meant that some providers were expecting learners to learn practical skills before they had the necessary underpinning knowledge. These providers were only now beginning to return to the usual sequence of the curriculum.

Some providers added additional elements to some programmes, such as sessions on improving learners' confidence and communication skills. At one college, learners were taught to work first in small groups before progressing to larger group tasks. Providers also added elements to programmes to reflect how the employment landscape has changed due to the pandemic. For example, hairdressing apprentices at one college now studied infection prevention to keep themselves and clients safe.

Several colleges had redesigned the curriculum to deal with the potential knowledge and skills gaps of learners who enrolled with centre-assessed grades. Learners felt that their knowledge had improved as a result and were more confident about their end-of-year assessments. However, some providers had moved previous modules that learners could not complete because of the pandemic into their current programmes of study, without adjusting the curriculum. Learners therefore felt overwhelmed by the increased amount of content that they needed to learn within a shorter timeframe than normal.

Some providers had added elements to programmes specifically to support catch-up. These included a series of monthly masterclasses for learners on catering programmes, which allowed learners to expand their repertoire of dishes and techniques.

In some cases, apprentices were given more responsibility than usual at work, because of staff shortages. Some providers re-sequenced the curriculum to support these increased responsibilities. When this was done carefully and skilfully, apprentices made good progress and some gained promotions quickly. However, when increased responsibilities were not underpinned by careful curricular planning, apprentices struggled and felt that they were taking on too much too soon.

Curriculum offer

Providers continued to offer new programmes in response to changes in the employment landscape and workforce pressures. For example, one provider had introduced an early years practitioner programme in response to the staffing crisis in the sector. One independent learning provider had started to deliver the urban driver apprenticeship in response to increased demand for home deliveries.

Remote learning

We were pleased to see that many providers, particularly general further education colleges and sixth-form colleges, had returned to face-to-face learning.

In-person provision is preferable to online learning in most cases, unless there are clear and particular benefits for learners in working remotely. This is especially the case in provision for young people on full-time programmes.

In particular, it is difficult to teach practical skills online. No matter how good online teaching is, it is not possible to change brake pads or lay bricks remotely. Opportunities for collaborative learning with peers are also severely limited where there is insufficient face-to-face teaching. Some younger learners whose courses were still being taught online missed face-to-face interaction and the benefits of working with others. For example, some learners on A-level programmes missed the opportunities to have in-person discussions with their peers and teachers. This was especially the case in subjects where informed, structured debates can be used effectively to reinforce aspects of the curriculum, such as in government and politics and religious studies.

Some younger learners and apprentices also missed out on valuable socialisation and opportunities to develop work-ready behaviours and attitudes as a result of remote learning. Some learners also did not have the information technology skills or digital tools to engage remotely.

Online or remote learning can have a useful role to play if the curriculum is carefully designed, if the teaching medium suits the subject matter and teaching methods engage learners with the curriculum, and if there are frequent opportunities to reinforce learning. This is particularly true for adult learners and those who already have formal qualifications. However, providers must be able to demonstrate the added benefit to learners of adopting or retaining remote learning.

Some courses were taught well online before the pandemic and, in some cases, these courses have improved because of increased teacher expertise in remote teaching.

Adult learners studying professional qualifications often appreciate the flexibility afforded by remote learning. Some adults, for example on the level 6 senior compliance risk specialist apprenticeship, said that they appreciated the opportunity to learn online from other industry professionals in different companies, which would have been difficult to facilitate face to face.

However, online courses can have low completion rates. This is true especially when courses were originally designed for face-to-face delivery and moved online for COVID-related reasons. In these cases, we hope that the quality of learners' education now takes precedence again. In most cases, this means face-to-face teaching, especially for younger and more vulnerable learners.

Learners with high needs

Impact of the pandemic

In April 2022, we reported on some of the ways that the pandemic had affected learners with high needs. For example, there had been difficulties with external work experience and a regression in some learners' social skills. This was still the case for some providers. We also heard how some learners were experiencing mental health difficulties, such as increased anxiety. Learners with additional needs who were following study programmes experienced similar challenges to their peers, such as feeling nervous about taking exams for the first time.

Providers were continuing to work on re-establishing good behaviour, learning habits and social skills that had deteriorated during the pandemic. In general, education for learners with high needs and special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) was recovering well. There were fewer challenges, especially in larger colleges.

Some providers, however, still had gaps in their curriculum, and learners were not always being challenged sufficiently. This was often because of the ineffectiveness of the leadership and management team rather than the impact of the pandemic. For instance, some leaders struggled to plan a curriculum effectively to help learners catch up. This was often a continuation of poor curriculum planning that had existed before the pandemic.

We previously reported that some providers had been focusing on mental health and well-being during the pandemic, and had not been challenging learners with high needs sufficiently. This was still the case this term, and these learners had learning gaps as a result.

The vulnerabilities of learners meant that some providers had been more cautious about lifting COVID-19 restrictions. Examples of this included staff continuing to take routine COVID-19 tests, and limits on learners mixing outside of their class groups. This was especially the case where providers had learners with complex health conditions. Activities such as community visits and external work experience were reinstated more slowly in some of these providers.

In general, the provision of personal development opportunities for learners with high needs has been slow to recover. This is due to inconsistencies caused by staff absence related to COVID-19 and a lack of enrichment opportunities during COVID restrictions. Some less-effective providers have been slower to bring back enrichment activities. Often the lack of personal development opportunities in these providers was a weakness before the pandemic.

Work experience and supported internships

The pandemic continued to disrupt external work experience for some learners with high needs. Supported internships were also affected, with some learners not being able to access external placements. However, there was less disruption this term.

Placements were more difficult to secure in certain sectors, such as business administration and transport and logistics. Many providers faced challenges with finding work placements before COVID-19, and these had been exacerbated by the pandemic. Several factors contributed to this:

- placements for learners with high needs are often in sectors that have been hit hardest; some of these businesses had closed and providers were finding it difficult to replace them
- providers had lost links with local employers during the pandemic, and were struggling to re-establish these
- some learners were at a higher risk from COVID-19; in these cases, they and their providers were sometimes anxious about the potential risks of engaging in external placements
- employers did not want additional people on their premises
- employers said that they did not have the capacity to provide the right level of support for learners with high needs, due to staff redundancies and absences

Many providers were offering internal work experience as an alternative. This included placements in college kitchens, receptions or offices. However, sometimes there were not enough opportunities for all learners, or the internal placements were insufficiently aligned with learners' curriculum and ambitions. They were often not a good substitute for the experience gained on external placements.

Strategies to support learners with high needs to catch up

Providers used a range of strategies to help learners with high needs catch up. The more effective providers implemented strategies quickly, and based these on the individual needs of the learner. The less effective providers had been slower to develop strategies and did not always understand individual needs. This was sometimes because of difficulties with staffing.

Examples of education recovery strategies for learners with high needs and SEND included:

- extra pastoral sessions, such as therapist sessions to help learners self-regulate
- additional English and mathematics sessions
- spending additional time on key topics and revisiting basic skills, such as tying a shoelace and telling the time

- additional focus on behaviour management; this included implementing personal behaviour plans for each learner and contacting parents regularly to discuss behaviour
- adjusting staff-to-learner ratios where learners needed additional teaching assistant support when they returned, to redress challenging behaviour

The more effective providers were dealing with learning gaps and making sure that learners were ready for their next destination. For example, one provider was facilitating more enrichment activities for learners with SEND, such as city trips, so that learners could understand potential career paths.

Additionally, some providers were keeping key meetings online, such as annual reviews and reviews of education, health and care plans. Before the pandemic, it was a challenge to get high attendance in person, and providers found attendance was better at online meetings.

Programme extensions

Many providers have given learners with high needs programme extensions to help them catch up on missed learning, such as work experience, community visits and internships. These opportunities help learners to develop employment skills, independence and confidence. They are important in preparing learners for their next destination.

Providers understandably want to give learners the opportunity to develop personal and employability skills. Where extensions are in place, it is important that the additional time is used to provide an ambitious and challenging curriculum for each learner. We saw some examples this term where this was not the case.

Adult learners

The pandemic has affected adult learners' participation in education. This term, some providers reported that they had maintained high achievement rates for adults, as well as good attendance. However, many reported declining learner numbers across programmes. Although this trend pre-dates the pandemic, it has been exacerbated by it.

Some employers were offering adult learners jobs that required a lower level of basic skills than would have been required before the pandemic. This had the effect of discouraging some learners from participating in courses in English, mathematics and employability skills. However, some providers reported increased demand for GCSEs and functional skills, as this cohort of learners

sought better or different employment after 2 years of the pandemic.

In some providers, fewer courses were available for adult learners to enrol in. During the pandemic, some adult and community sessions have stopped, particularly in local authorities. These were yet to be reinstated or had been reduced. For example, one large general further education college had reduced recreation and leisure courses. Some colleges had also been unable to deliver courses due to staffing shortages.

Strategies to support adult learners to participate

Many providers had focused on getting existing adult learners to the end of their programmes. For some, this had taken precedence over recruitment of new learners.

Providers were working hard to support adult learners to participate. Those that better understood and tackled barriers to participation often saw high levels of participation. Strategies included:

- timetabling accessible evening and weekend courses across the year
- offering support, such as food vouchers and money for bus travel
- uploading resources so they were more accessible for learners if they missed sessions
- using newsletters to increase communication with learners
- increasing support from mental health first aiders

The pandemic has changed the job market, and many adults were looking to move to new industries or sectors and retrain. Some providers responded to this by focusing on generic employability courses, rather than courses aimed at preparing learners for particular sectors. Other providers were collaborating with partners, such as the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus, to identify skills gaps, or were running new courses, like horticulture, in response to demand.

Readiness for assessments

End-of-year exams

Many learners, particularly those who had never sat an external exam, had high levels of anxiety

about their end-of-year assessments. These anxieties were compounded where learners had been awarded centre- or teacher-assessed grades. This was because many learners were not sure that the grades they had been awarded accurately reflected their knowledge and skills.

Some learners were anxious not just about taking exams, but also about the logistics of exams, including the role of invigilators. Providers reported an increase in the number of learners requesting to take their exams in smaller rooms to reduce anxiety. Absences during the pandemic and associated missed learning also affected some learners' readiness for examinations. Learners were aware of their lack of experience.

Many learners who were taking their first formal exams lacked both the experience of preparing for exams, including revision, and the stamina to work under exam conditions. Learners and teachers were concerned about learners' ability to focus for a full exam, especially after periods of remote learning.

Strategies to prepare learners for exams

In this section, we want to focus briefly on how learners are being prepared for external assessments, since so many learners had no previous experience of these and many of them told us about their anxieties.

Of course, the best way to alleviate exam anxiety is to study a well-taught, well-planned curriculum. It is paramount that providers return to teaching a full, ambitious, well-planned curriculum, using effective methods. There is no substitute for this. When this happens, learners make good progress and are much more likely to pass any exams that they take.

Most providers, however, also want to prepare learners for the form, structure and discipline of exams. Strategies included:

- use of more informal exams, including practice assessments, timed exams and mocks held in exam conditions with invigilators; the latter gave learners an opportunity to meet invigilators
- more detailed guidance on how to respond to exam-style questions
- extra revision sessions

Providers also increased pastoral support in response to exam anxiety. Examples of this included:

- extra support sessions and breakfasts during exam periods
- support for those who needed scribes or additional time
- provision of smaller exam rooms for anxious learners

End-point assessments

As discussed, many apprentices continued to be on programmes beyond their planned end date. This was partly because some apprentices were not ready to take their assessments, as they had been on breaks in learning or furloughed during the pandemic. This may have an impact in some providers on the number of places available on apprenticeship programmes, or the progress of new cohorts.

In some cases, providers had difficulty finding an end-point assessment organisation. These are separate organisations that administer final tests at the end of apprenticeships. In some regions, or in some subjects, there are not enough external organisations to carry out all the required end-point assessments, and some assessment organisations struggled to recruit enough end-point assessors. End-point assessment organisations adopted a flexible approach wherever possible, in line with approved flexibilities from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, to ensure that end-point assessments could take place.

Other sector pressures also affected end-point assessments. For example, delays with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency had a knock-on effect for driving-related apprenticeships where a driving test is part of the end-point assessment.

Where end-point assessments were going ahead for apprentices, the more effective providers had constructive arrangements in place to help apprentices prepare. For example, some began assessment preparation early and integrated it throughout the programme.

Functional skills

Many apprentices had their functional skills assessments delayed. This was sometimes because awarding organisations did not have well-planned remote invigilation arrangements in place. This could exacerbate already very low achievement rates in functional skills.

Readiness for next steps

There were mixed views across the sector as to how ready learners were for their next steps, and the extent to which the pandemic was a factor in this. The quality of careers guidance varied across providers. Many providers that had effective careers guidance before the pandemic have continued

to prepare learners well.

Centre- and teacher-assessed grades might not always accurately reflect a learner's knowledge and skills. As a result, some learners were still on programmes that were too challenging or too easy. For example, some learners on level 3 health and social care courses did not have the English skills needed for the course. As outlined above, many learners were taking high-stakes exams for the first time and this anxiety may have influenced their confidence in progressing to further study.

We heard that many employers had no concerns about the cohort of learners who would be entering employment. This is positive, given the challenges we reported in our previous briefings.

Strategies to prepare learners for next steps

Providers used a range of strategies, many of which were in place before the pandemic, to support learners approaching the end of their programmes. In some cases, strategies reflected the impact of the pandemic. These included:

- some independent learning providers working with employers to host recruitment days for apprentices in sectors where there are high numbers of vacancies, such as hospitality
- some providers, particularly sixth-form colleges, working with higher education providers and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to identify gaps in learners' knowledge and development, so that they could put appropriate support in place to fill gaps

Colleges were also helping learners to decide their next steps. This included reintroducing face-to-face sessions with guest speakers and employers. Providers had also delivered more employment sessions that were focused on interview techniques and CV writing.

Learners' mental health and well-being

For some learners, their mental health and well-being, including social anxiety, were improving. However, learners and apprentices continued to be negatively affected.

In addition to anxieties about taking formal exams for the first time, some learners continued to experience anxiety related to COVID-19. Other learners found that a return to face-to-face learning had improved their mental health.

Some apprentices were struggling with their mental health. The reasons for this included burnout

due to a high workload and apprentices not being given enough time for off-the-job training.

Providers said there were more safeguarding referrals connected with mental health and well-being concerns than pre-pandemic.

Provider sustainability

Learner enrolment and retention

There is a mixed picture on adult participation. Data from the Department for Education shows that the number of funded adult learners has declined throughout the pandemic. [\[footnote 2\]](#) However, the number of adult learners participating at level 3 has increased. Community learning numbers increased through 2021/22, but remained lower than before the pandemic.

Apprenticeship numbers were in decline before the pandemic. However, data on apprenticeship starts shows that numbers have recovered this year. [\[footnote 3\]](#) Numbers of apprentices in some sectors, like health and social care, have increased. However, retention has remained a problem. Many apprentices left their programmes due to the increased cost of living and job opportunities elsewhere. Some employers decided only to recruit apprentices who already held the required English and mathematics qualifications. This was because they were experiencing business pressures as a result of the pandemic and wished to reduce the need to release apprentices for the additional training time.

Financial pressures had caused some providers to review the viability of their apprenticeship programmes. For example, some smaller independent learning providers had decided to reduce their apprenticeship offer and focus on a smaller number of qualifications in which they had most expertise.

Staff recruitment and retention

The recruitment and retention of high-quality staff in further education and skills providers has been a long-term problem. The pandemic has complicated matters, particularly in the staffing of vocational and specialist roles, including the teaching of English and mathematics.

Salaries in the education sector, particularly for teaching in areas like engineering, construction,

travel and hospitality, often cannot compete with salaries in industry. The recent increase in living costs has compounded these issues.

The pandemic and experience of lockdowns had also prompted some teaching staff to reconsider their careers. Some had opted for hybrid working, changed career or retired. Some health and social care teachers had returned to employment in the sector as a result of increased demand during the pandemic. Staffing problems inevitably had an impact on learners. For example, one employer-provider was unable to recruit a programme course leader and, as a result, had to transfer 2 cohorts of apprentices to a local college.

Providers were working hard to attract high-quality staff. This included using recruitment agencies and advertising on a range of platforms. Some providers were recruiting staff who, while not at the required level, had potential, and then developed their skills once in post. In one college, technicians were being trained to teach some parts of the curriculum.

The quality of some new applicants for teaching posts was also a worry for providers. Several colleges indicated that the quality of applicants for technical lecturer positions in engineering and construction had declined.

Continuing professional development for staff was still being affected by the pandemic. Industry placements, which some teachers used to keep their knowledge of the sector up to date, were much harder to organise. During the pandemic, a large amount of staff training has focused on the technicalities and functionality of online systems, and we were concerned that there has not been enough focus on pedagogy and curriculum. Some staff have struggled to adapt teaching techniques to suit online teaching.

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1. A 'learner survey' is an online survey that captures views from learners who are attending the provider being inspected. [↩](#)
 2. ['Academic year 2021/22: further education and skills'](#), Department for Education, January 2022. [↩](#)
 3. ['Academic year 2021/22: further education and skills'](#), Department for Education, January 2022. [↩](#)

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