



Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the further education sector

A RAPID EVIDENCE REVIEW



Ken Spours, Paul Grainger
Carol Vigers, Rachel France
September 2021

Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the further education sector:

A rapid evidence review

Authors:

Ken Spours, Paul Grainger

Carol Vigurs, Rachel France

Author affiliations

- Ken Spours, Education, Practice & Society, UCL Institute of Education
- Paul Grainger, Education, Practice & Society, UCL Institute of Education
- Carol Vigurs, EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute
- Rachel France, STEaPP (Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy), UCL

Funding & funder involvement

The UK government Department for Education (DfE) funded this work following a recommendation from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

This is one of four reviews successfully bid for and managed by the EPPI Centre (<https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>) within the DfE/SAGE programme.

The work was undertaken under the umbrella of the ESRC funded International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) (<https://covidandsociety.com>).

Conflicts of interest

There were no conflicts of interest in the writing of this report.

Contributions

The opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the EPPI Centre or the funders. Responsibility for the views expressed remains solely with the authors.

This report should be cited as: Spours K, Grainger P, Vigurs C, France R (2021) *Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the further education sector: a rapid evidence review*. London: EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute, University College London.

Design and editorial support by: Lionel Openshaw

ISBN: 978-1-911605-23-2

© Copyright 2021

Authors of the systematic reviews on the EPPI Centre website (<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/>) hold the copyright for the text of their reviews. The EPPI Centre owns the copyright for all material on the website it has developed, including the contents of the databases, manuals, and keywording and data-extraction systems. The centre and authors give permission for users of the site to display and print the contents of the site for their own non-commercial use, providing that the materials are not modified, copyright and other proprietary notices contained in the materials are retained, and the source of the material is cited clearly following the citation details provided. Otherwise, users are not permitted to duplicate, reproduce, re-publish, distribute, or store material from this website without express written permission.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
Part 1. A wicked problem in a uniquely vulnerable sector	4
Part 2. Research approach	4
Part 3. COVID Impact Themes, harms identified, and mitigations	6
Part 4. Voices from the FE Sector, learners and T20 Discussions...	9
Part 5. Conclusions and analysis...	10
TECHNICAL REPORT	12
PART 1. CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION	12
PART 2. RESEARCH APPROACH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	14
PART 3. COVID IMPACT THEMES – HARMS AND MITIGATIONS	18
PART 4. VOICES FROM THE SECTOR AND DISCUSSIONS FROM THE T20	39
PART 5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS	43
References	48
APPENDICES	61
Appendix 1. Short-term and long-term harms listed by the DfE	61
Appendix 2. Methodological Annex	63

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“There will be a ‘K’ shaped recovery, with winners and losers: we are all ‘in the same storm’ but not in the ‘same boat’” (FE college leader).

Part 1. A wicked problem in a uniquely vulnerable sector

The COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as a unique and unprecedented event in the globalized world and can be regarded as being a ‘wicked problem’ in that its effects correspond to the main characteristics of wicked problems theory – notably multi-layered complexity, factor inter-dependency and unpredictable outcomes from standard interventions (Morten Schiefloe, 2021, Rittel and Webber, 1973). In terms of conceptualising the relationship between COVID harms and counter measures, ‘combinational problems’ can be seen to require ‘combinational solutions’.

The Further Education Sector is very diverse, comprising general further education colleges, sixth form colleges, work-based learning providers, adult institutes and specialist and technical institutes, provide a wide array of learning opportunities and qualifications that provide transitions to work and higher learning. The Sector also caters for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners, providing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and basic skills programmes and independent living skills for learners with additional learning needs.

Described by the Association of Colleges as ‘uniquely vulnerable’, the nature of the Sector and its learners suggested that it could be particularly impacted by the pandemic in relation to the economic participation of young people, the process of becoming qualified, the mental and physical wellbeing of learners who often come from low-income communities; the most vulnerable including those ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ (NEETs). The Sector is also financially stressed. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (2020) calculated that funding per student in further education and sixth-form colleges in England fell by 12 per cent in real terms between 2010–11 and 2019–20 and adult learning and apprenticeships by 35 per cent.

Moreover, despite its economic and social importance, compared to higher education and schools, the FE Sector has a relatively invisible public profile and is also relatively under-researched. This was to affect the nature of the research on the pandemic, its harms and potential mitigation approaches.

Part 2. Research approach

A recognition of the key features of the Sector, and in particular its demographic, social and spatial composition and key functions. We took a systematic review approach to the following research questions.

Harms

HQ1. What is the nature and extent of the UK FE Sector experience of harms reported in research on impacts of Covid 19?

This question includes a number of sub-questions:

- a. *What short-term harms have been reported by those involved in the Sector? To what degree are the reported harms evidence-based or perception-based?*
- b. *In what ways do the specific features of the Sector inform particular harms (e.g. in relation to its social composition, transitions to work; assessment and qualification and transitions to higher study)?*
- c. *What relationship can be found between direct/indirect and short/long-term harms (e.g. connections between pre-existing social/educational divisions and new divisions)?*

Mitigations

MQ1. What systematic review evidence is there to mitigate these UK experienced harms in the research literature and those identified by those involved in the Sector?

- a. *What counter measures are being reported by those involved in the Sector in relation to short-term harms and long-term harms?*
- b. *How far can these measures be classified as emergent or established by research evidence?*

The nature and extent of the evidence in the FE sector

The FE Sector is under-researched compared, for example, with higher education (Solvason and Elliott, 2013; Exley, 2021). Therefore, in this rapid review research evidence gathering has employed a greater use of primary sources than might be seen in reviews in other sectors of education. Moreover, given that the pandemic has been in existence for less than 18 months, evidence of UK experience of COVID harms has come mainly from manual searches of data including surveys, national statistics, including real-time data from the ONS (Briggs et al., 2021) and a limited number of research projects from national government bodies (ministries, funding agencies, regulatory agencies and inspectorates, awarding bodies) together with sector professional bodies, FE institutions and learners.

In relation to mitigations, we searched for evidence wider than the UK context that were about the impacts of interventions that addressed the harms identified in the UK literature. We searched repositories of systematic reviews such as *The International Public Policy Observatory* (IPPO) Living Map (Shemilt, et al., 2021) Cochrane and Campbell collaboration systematic reviews as well as google and Google scholar to identify evidence from relevant systemic review studies. In all, 25 reviews were identified that were most likely to have reliable findings based on a quality assessment. These were supplemented with 30 research-based responses from the Sector and wider stakeholders. In all, over 120 sources were located, analysed and reported from data bases of systematic reviews and documentation from the Westminster Government, the Welsh Government and the FE Sector.

In addition, as we found little substantial research evidence, we interviewed 11 institutional leaders and sector representatives. These data provided insights into factors and strategies not yet reported in documentation and have been used to cross-reference with other literatures on COVID harms. As a result, we have been able to identify both research evidence and several areas of emerging 'good practice' that may prove helpful in relation to the respective FE Sectors in the UK. We have also included data on the 'learner voice' from institutional surveys in a number of FE providers.

Part 3. COVID Impact Themes, harms identified, and mitigations

The fundamental Sector characteristics during COVID identified in previous academic research (e.g. Orr, 2020, Hodgson and Spours, 2019) were confirmed by data-base and internet searches together with key interviews. These led to the following over-arching themes of COVID Impact used to frame the findings.

Theme 1. Vocational disruption for young people, economic participation, and apprenticeships.

Theme 2. The mental health and wellbeing of young people.

Theme 3. Changes to modes of learning, assessment, and qualifications.

Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people, and NEETs.

Theme 5. Problematical transitions and access to higher education and post-16 systems.

Theme 6. A responsive but 'stressed' FE Sector.

Harms

This report considers both harms and mitigations from a starting point of relevant harms already identified by the DfE, these were:

Short Term Harms

- Mental Health
- Well-Being & Development
- Physical Health
- Nutrition
- Misuse of Substances
- Domestic Violence
- Support Service Access
- Indirect Groups at Risk (e.g., those with extended caring responsibilities)
- Vulnerable children and SEND children
- Learning loss / Educational Knock-on Effect
- Immediate Earning Capacity Changes

Long Term Harms

- Mental Health
- Well-Being & Development
- Physical Health
- Nutrition
- Misuse of Substances
- Domestic Violence
- Support Service Access
- Indirect Groups at Risk (e.g., those with extended caring responsibilities)
- Vulnerable children and SEND children
- Learning loss / Educational Knock-on Effect
- Gender & Social Group Imbalance Widening
- Changes in socioeconomic status (SES)

From this list of harms, we examined the UK research literature of impacts of COVID-19 on students in further education, reports from interested organisations combined with the most recent insights from experts in the field into the six themes of impacts on the Sector.

1. *Vocational disruption* - the Sector has been heavily affected in its economic and vocational functions – increased youth unemployment impacting on particular on the low-pay sector (Papoutsaki and Wilson, 2020; Evans and Clayton, 2021), disruptions to the starts and completions of apprenticeships, licence to practice provision and the uptake of practical vocational qualifications (City & Guilds, 2021). Apprenticeship numbers were already in some difficulty prior to the pandemic and some Sector leaders think it will take years to fully recover. Factors affecting educational provision have impacted on adults in particular.
2. *The mental health and wellbeing of young people* – allied to vocational disruption, the mental health and wellbeing of young people has suffered with particular concerns about personal futures (Youth Index, 2021, Estyn, 2021)). These are harms are related to job opportunities and the nature of the economy and society during a recovery period (Public Health Wales, 2021).
3. *Changes to modes of learning, assessment, and qualifications* - while institutions have moved to on-line learning, little is currently known about the impact of remote learning on class gaps. The presumption is that these will deepen, but issues of learner engagement require more research. The general perception in the Sector is that disadvantaged young people require close and intimate learning support that has been denied during the pandemic, together with the structure and personal discipline that comes from regular institutional attendance. The impact of the pandemic on learner attainment and progression has been uneven. Those learners taking general education qualifications (GCSEs and A Levels) have benefitted from changes to assessment, resulting in improvements in measured attainment in 2019-2020 (Gov UK, 2020; Welsh Government, 2021a), but reversals for those taking vocational courses with declines in participation and attainment during 2020 (AoC, 2021).
4. *Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs* – evidence from systematic reviews and primary research suggests that disrupted/losses to learning have magnified class gaps and this is supported by a broadly held perception in the Sector. The pandemic has widened inequalities evidenced not only by a differential loss of teaching hours, but an increase in the number of NEETs (ONS, 2021b), rising youth unemployment (Youth Employment UK, 2021) and rates of worklessness (Elliot-Major et al., 2020) experienced particularly by racially minoritized young people.
5. *Problematical transitions and access to higher education and post-16 systems* – prior to pandemic, previous research suggests that there were already considerable problems of progression through the upper secondary phase, particularly for middle and lower-attaining learners (Rogers and Spours, 2020). Current research suggests that internal barriers to progression particularly associated with attainment in maths and English may be compounded (Raffo and Thompson, 2021).
6. *A responsive but ‘stressed’ FE Sector* – the FE Sector has been particularly impacted by the pandemic due a confluence of factors – its focus on vocational learning and the workplace that has been disrupted through successive lockdowns, the fact that it caters for more vulnerable sections of the population both young people and adults, and its financial stresses (IFS, 2020). However, sector leaders and representative organisations report the efforts of colleges and other providers to be flexible and

responsive. At the same time, they also report staff anxiety and exhaustion with the prospect in 2021-22 learners ‘piling up’ inside colleges as a new intake collides with the previous cohort still trying to complete their vocational programmes. This ‘collision’ comprises learners (new and existing) needing to catch and the previous cohort still trying to complete their vocational programmes. Cohort congestion within FE colleges could impact on the quality of education of learners in 2021/22 (see Part 4 which includes Sector voices).

Mitigations

1. *Vocational disruption* – the Government has implemented a number of mitigating measures in relation to the immediate impact of the pandemic on economic participation and vocational learning. These have been broadly welcomed by the FE Sector. However, build back will depend on the speed and scale of economic recovery to create sufficient work-based learning opportunities and ensuring that the most vulnerable young people have access to these. Evidence from systematic reviews suggests that longer-term measures require significant government investment in jobs placements (e.g. the previous *Future Jobs Fund*) and multi-agency joined up measures (e.g. careers guidance, personal support programmes), starting early and co-ordinated locally (Eyles, 2021; Mawn et al., 2017). In addition, a range of civil society organisations are calling for ‘Youth or Opportunity Guarantee’ (now policy in Scotland and Wales) and longer-term plans based on a ‘green recovery’ that have young people at its centre.
2. *Mental health of young people* – here the mitigating measures are focused on college-based strategies which have yet to be evaluated. However, when those who may be suffering most severely may come from disadvantaged backgrounds, remedies may lie with more fundamental social and economic measures to address poverty (Nelson et al., 2013). Systematic review evidence suggests that the development of ‘recovery frameworks’ based on local collaborative inter-disciplinary and multi-agency strategies are most effective when attempting to address complex socio-mental health issues (Lloyd and Waghorn, 2007; Hart et al., 2020).
3. *Changes to learning, assessment and qualification* – the reported mitigation measures of assessment flexibilities and shifts to remote learning have yet to be evaluated as have disruptions to vocational learning and the effects of grade inflation on progression to Level 3 courses post-16 and higher education access post-18. Data from AoC (England) and the Welsh Government (2021a) suggests that while many learners in general education courses have benefited from changes to assessment practice, those in vocational courses have suffered major disruption to their learning and, in particular, adults. Moreover, there is widespread concern that the shifts to remote learning may have widened class gaps. Systematic review evidence (Bond, 2021) suggest that improved training, collaborative learning and more blended learning are required to support catch-up. The degree to which losses/disruption to vocational learning are remedied will depend on the scale of the economic recovery and whether these provide ‘youth jobs’ (Papoutsaki and Wilson, 2020).
4. *Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs* – as with previous themes, evidence regarding mitigations is speculative due to the fact that official commissions are calling for greater resources to be targeted at vulnerable groups. International systematic review evidence points to the benefits of linking interventions at different levels (Nelson et al., 2013); that are brought together in personalised support packages

(Newton et al., 2020) and are part of a broader COVID recovery plan (Welsh Parliament, 2020).

5. *Problematical transitions and access to higher education and post-16 systems* - evidence from systematic reviews (Hart et al., 2020) suggest that the benefit of collaborative strategies covering training, work practices, therapeutic support and creating appropriate work environments, with active involvement of young people, are key in supporting young people with complex needs into employment. Proposals from the Sector include calls for longer-term system change (e.g. improving careers education, focusing greater resource on disadvantaged learners, creating a more flexible and inclusive qualifications system and providing more learning opportunities outside that of formal schooling). As with previous themes, proposed Sector based measures belong more to the realm of advocacy rather than tried and tested and research informed.
6. *A responsive but 'stressed' FE Sector* – systematic review evidence is very limited given the specificities of the FE Sector in the UK. However, there is some evidence (e.g. Fletcher-Wood and Zucollo, 2020) to suggest that professional development programmes, supporting leadership and incentives to join Initial Teacher Training programmes can be beneficial. In addition, Sector-based mitigations have come from a range of agencies (funding and qualifications attainment flexibility), but the main focus from stakeholders are calls for more systemic reform of funding along with guarantees for all young people and adults to be offered training provision.

Part 4. Voices from the FE Sector, learners and T20¹ Discussions: concerns raised

The situation on the ground is rapidly changing and research evidence takes time to be produced. So, in order, to understand and interpret the research evidence that is available, three additional sources of information have been collected - comprising interviews with 11 key actors from the FE Sector (college leaders and sector representatives) in April 2021², a summary of international T20 discussions on the pandemic and education (Castelli, et al., 2021) and sources on learner perspectives. These voices provide a unique and nuanced insight in real time into the effects of the pandemic on colleges, students and their families. The main concerns arising from the interviews focused on vocational disruption, deepening social divides and the need for sustained support for the Sector, the effects of disruption of practical learning and the knock-on effects of remote learning in which remediation will depend on the good will of the Sector. A review of learner perspectives, including data from four FE institutions reveal that learners appear highly satisfied with the guidance and support they have received from colleges. In the analysis, these other sources of information have been triangulated with systematic research evidence and primary sources.

¹ The academic arm of the G20.

² We interviewed a representative sample of CEOs of five large FE colleges giving a regional spread, including Scotland, senior staff from two examination boards, and four senior representatives from sector agencies (i.e. AoC, FETL, QDOS). Interviews were structured around the 13 harms identified in the specification with an additional question concerning competencies and assessment. One interview focused on COVID-related data.

Part 5. Conclusions and analysis – from a damaged COVID-19 ecology to a COVID recovery ecosystem

Viewed historically the COVID pandemic can be seen as the latest, and certainly not the last, in a line of disasters that have dramatically affected human health. While we have vastly more technologies at our fingertips compared with previous times, the scale of the problem is much greater as the pandemic impacts on a global scale and intersects with an even greater challenge in the form of climate change (Shaw-Taylor, 2020).

The complex intersectional and evolving nature of the pandemic, together with the spatial and social complexities of the FE Sector, suggest the need to conceptualise COVID harms and mitigations through a framework that embraces various types of human activities at different levels from the micro to the macro and over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a complex set of interconnected problems, can be viewed as a ‘damaged COVID ecology’. An ecology connotes a set of inter-dependent relations that can exist in varying conditions – sometimes healthy and sometimes less so (Hodgson and Spours, 2018). The case of a ‘damaged COVID-19 ecology’ can be viewed as an entangled set of pre-existing societal divisions and weaknesses that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the counter measures employed thus far.

Furthermore, this ecology is multi-layered and manifests itself across different geo-social scalars from the individual, through various mediations of social and economic relations to the societal level over time. These layers of relations can be conceptualised through a spatial, chrono and political economy interpretation of Bronfenbrenner’s human ecological scalars (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Figure 1 illustrates Bronfenbrenner’s original psycho-social ecological model, that includes the chrono dimension (1994), and Figure 2 shows its spatial and political economy adaption (Hodgson and Spours, 2018).

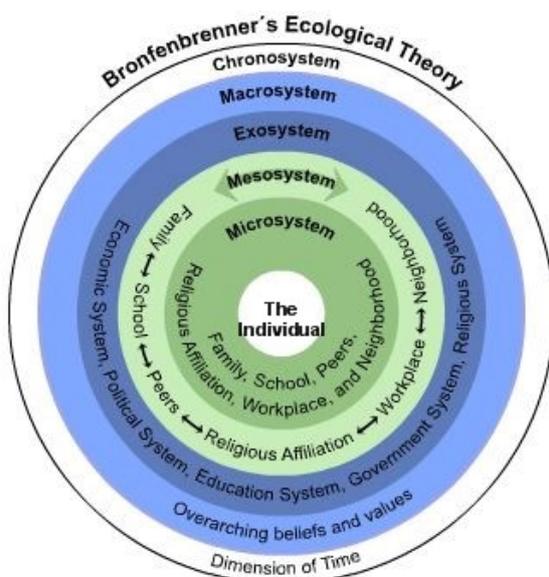


Figure: 1 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model (1994)

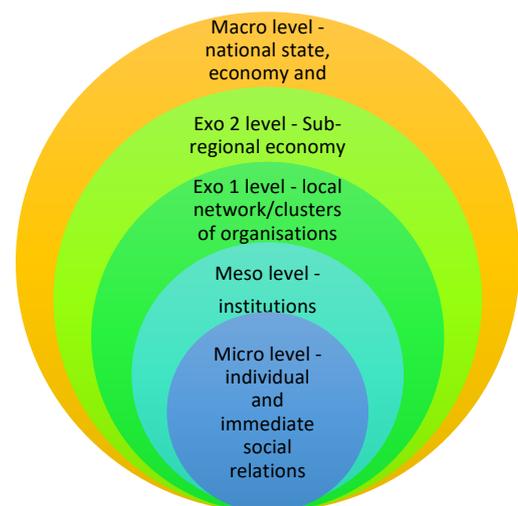


Figure 2. Social ecosystems a spatial & political economy adaption (Hodgson and Spours, 2018)

In the adaptive social model individual, familial, social and educational differences (micro) become embedded on wider scalars; the institutions being attended (meso-scale) and the communities and sub-regions (the two exo-scalars) being affected by wider economic and social factors over time (macro and chrono) (Hodgson and Spours, 2013; Hodgson and Spours, 2018). The concept of micro personal/familial characteristics becoming ‘embedded’ on wider scalars suggests the emergence of a more enduring and wicked problem.

In response to the ‘wicked problem’ character of the pandemic, the complex inter-relationship between the various scalars of harms (from the micro-macro) affecting different aspects of working, living and learning, suggest the benefit of integrated and systemic responses. These can be conceptualised overall as a ‘recovery ecosystem’. Compared with a COVID ecology, a ‘recovery ‘ecosystem’ would comprise a series of related activities that have a positive reciprocal effect across the various scalars. These could, for example, include a series of linked interventions aimed at reinforcing resilience at each of the levels (e.g. targeted support measure at the individual and family micro-level; positive meso-level institutional actions; the co-ordination of these with a range of social partners locally and sub-regionally (the exo-scalars); and co-ordinated at the national level – macro). This concept of a multi-level ‘COVID recovery ecosystem’ attempts to conceptualise a positive synergy of interventions based on strong collaborative local and sub-regional networks comprising schools, FE Sector providers, HE institutions, employers and work-based learning providers and a range of civil society organisations implementing comprehensive and inclusive local recovery plans.

The wicked problem nature of the pandemic also has a strong chrono-dimension. The experience of the last 18 months suggests a chronic rather than acute crisis, in which an evolving virus and societal and global divisions compete with an expanding set of counter measures. The chrono dimension of the COVID ecology points to the need for continued research into the effects of mitigations employed to determine whether short-term measures (that often are initiative-based) have provided the desired outcome and understanding the necessary conditions for the success of systemic and connective social ecosystem solutions that by their nature take time.

TECHNICAL REPORT

PART 1. CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION

The COVID pandemic as a 'wicked problem'

The COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as a unique and unprecedented event in the globalized world. In terms of a health emergency, has been nothing on this scale since the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1919, and we now live in a much more connected world that is also experiencing an arguably greater threat in the form of climate change. COVID-19 is also proving to be a very complex phenomenon in which its impacts are not simply related to the direct harms of the novel pandemic on populations, but also the effects of counter measures on livelihoods and lives.

The pandemic can be regarded as being a 'wicked problem' in that its effects correspond to the main characteristics of wicked problems theory (Morten Schiefloe, 2021). The concept of wicked problems was introduced in the early 1970s (Rittel and Webber, 1973) to address emerging societal problems that are complex and intersect established sectors, such as healthcare or education.

'A problem becomes wicked because of the incomplete knowledge of effects and interdependencies, because it involves actors operating in different sectors and at different levels, because all possible actions have uncertain effects, and because they are intertwined with other problems in complex and, to a large extent, unmanageable systems' (Morten Schiefloe, 2021: 5).

While the concept of wicked problems has been questioned in systematic review literature (Lonngren and Van Poeck, 2019), viewing COVID-19 as a potential wicked problem may be helpful in that it warns against thinking that standard solutions can solve unique and complex problems. However, there are still particular evidential and analytical challenges. On the one hand, the pandemic and its effects need to be 'knowable'. This has involved attempting to systematically describe the different dimensions of the crisis and the impact of counter measures on a particular setting – the case of the Further Education (FE) Sector. This process led to the identification of a number of COVID impact themes or, in other words, 'components' of the wicked problem which signify particular harms. On the other hand, and recognising the holistic wicked nature of the problem, not only involves understanding the intersection of COVID harms, but also conceptualizing a possible relationship between mitigating measures. In the case of the FE Sector, relevant mitigating measures are reported in relation each component harm and are also presented as 'clusters of measures' required to address the complex problems of the Sector, its learners, staff and wider societal partners.

Further Education – a uniquely vulnerable sector

The FE Sector is very diverse, comprising a wide variety of educational functions and containing a number of cohorts including - full-time 14-16 year olds out of school; full-time 16-19 year olds; learners undertaking traditional academic courses (e.g. A Levels and mainly at sixth form colleges), full-time vocational provision including license to practice; part-time learners on work-based learning, day-release and apprenticeships; learners on ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) programmes; adult learners both full and part-time; higher education provision including HNC/HND (Scotland), Foundation Degrees

and some full degrees (Orr, 2020). All these programmes have a direct impact on potential livelihoods.

The role of the Sector is thus to facilitate qualification and licence to practice acquisition and learning progression to either further study or to work through inclusive education practices. This is achieved through a complex array of providers including - general further education colleges, sixth form colleges, independent work-based learning providers and a small number of specialist institutions.

In 2018/19, the Association of Colleges' (2019) in its publication about the FE Sector stated that there were over 257 general, tertiary and specialist further education colleges in England. These colleges teach all levels of education from basic life skills courses up to higher technical and degree level courses. Around 1.4 million adults study or train in colleges and the average age of students is 29. There are also four National Colleges, and 12 Institutes of Technology are in the process of being established.

The FE Sector is, therefore, more likely than other education sectors to cater for the more vulnerable and deprived sections of the population and in the words of the Association of Colleges (AoC), uniquely vulnerable to external shocks.

The nature of the Sector and its learners across the UK led the authors to hypothesise that, over and above the shared challenges of COVID across different stages of education, the following sector-specific factors could be relevant to the negative effects of the pandemic (harms) and counter measures (mitigation).

- The possible deepening of social and educational divisions particularly for the 'forgotten 50 per cent' (Birdwell et al., 2011) of young people and vulnerable adults that do not participate in higher education and tend to be catered for by general further education colleges.
- The effects of COVID on learners who may come from communities that have experienced high infection rates during the three waves of the pandemic and whose families may have experienced the virus directly.
- The degree of education disruption might vary according to the nature of the provision with particular reference to the impact of COVID on work-based and licence to practice learning (LTP) during lockdown.
- The deterioration of mental health and sense of wellbeing of young people making the transition from childhood to adulthood and for many at a time of high family anxiety.
- Impacts on gaining qualifications that will be assessed differently, together with the disruption to necessary learning, with implications for learner progression and the status of the qualifications they will receive.
- The effects of the pandemic on the management of a financially unstable FE sector that, nevertheless, has large and highly responsive institutions.

Moreover, the Sector is marked by its relative invisibility in terms of public perception (the media invariably talks about schools and universities) despite its important economic and social inclusion roles. General further education colleges (GFEs) cater, in particular, for those learners who cannot or do not wish to attend school sixth forms with a focus on

vocational and technical education that also includes some aspects of vocational higher education. Low public understanding of its multiple roles is compounded by its social, demographic, organisational and governance complexities.

Positionality of topic experts (relevant experience and perspectives of the authors)

This review draws on the specialist knowledge and perspectives of its authors. **Carol Vigers (CV)** experience of systematic review methods for policy and practice, including rapid evidence assessments, in fields such as Technical and Vocational Education and Training in low and middle-income countries (Tripney et al., 2013, Tripney et al., 2015), Education (Newnan et al., 2010;) energy transitions (Vigers et al., 2021), criminal justice (Rivas et al., 2019, Vigers et al., 2016). **Paul Grainger (PG)** formerly an FE College Principal, specialises in the relationship between regional technical and vocational education and regional economic recovery (e.g. Grainger, 2019a; 2019b; Grainger and Little, 2019). In 2020 he was invited to join the Education and Skills Task Force of the G20, and this year was appointed Co-Chair of the Digital Transformation Task Force looking in particular at the impact of digitalisation on education during the pandemic (Kahn et al., 2020; Castelli et al., 2021). **Ken Spours (KS)** has undertaken extensive research on the FE Sector across the four countries of the UK (Hodgson and Spours, 2019; Hodgson et al., 2019), the effects of Area-Based Reviews on FE and employer relations (Spours et al., 2020); policy learning in relation to education and skills (Hodgson and Spours, 2016), Future Apprenticeships in England (Hodgson and Spours, 2017) and local social ecosystem development (Hodgson and Spours, 2013; and Grainger and Spours, 2018).

PART 2. RESEARCH APPROACH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Overall approach of the review

Given the uniquely vulnerable nature of the FE Sector, this rapid evidence review considers the UK specific experiences of harms in published peer-reviewed research literature. In light of the paucity of the research literature dedicated to this sector we also conducted additional targeted searches for harms from available primary evidence (e.g. field organisations). We supplemented this with insights from interviews with stakeholders of relevant institutions charged with the recovery of the sector after COVID-19. Concerning mitigations, we searched for systematic review evidence of interventions shown to be effective in overcoming these types of harms and also supplemented these data with sector specific primary sources. We also employed 'Home International' comparisons of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland because these can illuminate different approaches across the four countries of the UK.

Rapid review methods

This review approach is called a 'rapid review' to reflect the constraints in delivering a systematic review in a short space of time. As rapid reviews are delivered at pace, and in response to immediate demands for overviews of evidence from research, decisions are made on how to reduce the usual time taken on the stages and processes of a full systematic review. This may be in narrowing the focus of the review, by population or to the most comparable contexts, or by focusing only on those sources of literature where the most on-topic studies are likely to be found. Each of these approaches involve trade-offs between specificity of topic against the generalizability of findings and what could also be learned from the wider issues and insights around the topic that may also be of interest. We aimed to achieve rapidity by focusing solely on UK evidence of harms and good quality systematic reviews of mitigation strategies. Given the diversity and paucity of the

empirical, quantitative literature, there are limitations to the confidence we can place in judgements of quality and the impact on the reliability of individual findings. Instead, we assess the individual study for obvious sources of bias and steps to overcome them, and triangulate the findings with those from other sources, such as reports from organisations and expert views. We place a higher confidence in those findings for themes that are consistent.

This review has been carried out at a particular phase of the pandemic, when it is still too early to assess what the separate effects for education have been of the pandemic, the lockdown, and the attendant social, economic and political challenges. What has appeared consistently in the commentary on the pandemic has been a theme of the interconnectedness of the education sector with all other areas of public policy and social relationships. While conventions of administration, disciplinary focus, and social relations demarcate boundaries between different phases of education and different areas of experience, for example, health, work, and education, the pandemic has highlighted their interconnection. Appreciating how these connections have been documented in the research literature is an important step in building and learning from the tragedies, stresses, and loss of the past eighteen months. Therefore, it is challenging to separate out harms due specifically to closure of educational establishments and harms due to other factors connected with the pandemic.

1. Appreciation of the specificities of the FE Sector

In the first scoping phase of research (early April 2021) we summarised the key features of further education providers (Further Education Sector – referred to as the ‘Sector’), its learners, teachers, institutions, and its regulatory mechanisms because it is important to have a conceptual grasp of the specific educational, social and economic contexts in order to inform the search questions and the research approach.

2. Deciding on the key questions

This initial work led the following research questions.

Harms

HQ1. What is the nature and extent of the UK FE Sector experience of harms reported in research on impacts of Covid 19?

This question includes three sub-questions:

- 1. What short-term harms have been reported by those involved in the Sector? To what degree are the reported harms evidence-based or perception-based?*
- 2. In what ways do the specific features of the Sector inform particular harms (e.g. in relation to its social composition, transitions to work; assessment and qualification and transitions to higher study)?*
- 3. What relationship can be found between direct/indirect and short/long-term harms (e.g. connections between pre-existing social/educational divisions and new divisions)?*

Mitigations

MQ1. What systematic review evidence is there to mitigate these UK experienced harms in the research literature and those identified by those involved in the Sector? This led to three sub-questions

1. *What counter measures are being reported by those involved in the Sector in relation to short-term harms and long-term harms?*
2. *How far can these measures be classified as emergent or established?*
3. *Identifying relevant Sector harms and possible mitigations – six Impact Themes*

A recognition of the key features of the Sector, and in particular its demographic, social and spatial composition and key functions led to the identification of six key COVID Impact Themes that provide the main structure of reporting harms and mitigations.

Theme 1. Vocational disruption - young people, economic participation, and apprenticeships.

Theme 2. Theme 3. The mental health of young people.

Theme 3. Changes to modes of learning and assessment and qualifications.

Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs.

Theme 5. Problematical transitions, access to higher education and post-16 systems.

Theme 6. A responsive but 'stressed' Sector.

We also considered in our search the types of harms of interest the DfE see out (see Appendix 1).

3. Research search strategy

We searched for relevant academic literature on harms limited to the UK experience of the impact of Covid 19 on the FE Sector, so that this would be more likely to be generalisable to the UK context, based on its unique features of UK further education. The mitigations against these harms were then searched for using international systematic review evidence that directly addressed these harms.

In addition to the research literature, there are a variety of sources available in relation to the Sector located in different parts of governmental state and civil society. These include COVID-related reports from national government bodies (ministries, funding agencies, various regulatory agencies and inspectorates), awarding bodies, sector professional bodies, trade unions, and FE institutions.

We searched the largest social science bibliographic databases available: Proquest Central, Scopus, as well as Google Scholar and Google. We used free text and subject heading search terms describing FE such as further education, post 16 education, vocational education, apprentice, or sixth form in addition to terms used for COVID-19 and limiting to UK studies (a full search strategy and terms used is to be found in the Appendices).

The bibliographic database searches were supplemented by so-called grey literature focused on sector representative associations and related civil society bodies due to their mediating role between FE institutions and the national state. Some of these organisations are rooted in the Sector and in many cases have institutional memberships. Due to their state and civil society location and function they are also likely to undertake cross-sector research and to think strategically. Relevant documentation has been reviewed from 30 state and civil society organisations in relation to both harms and mitigations.

In addition, a total of 11 institutional leaders and sector representatives were interviewed. These conversations provided an insight into factors and strategies not yet reported in documentation. Finally, we decided to include a summary of discussion of international stakeholders from the Italian-led T20 COVID seminar (Castelli et al., 2021) that provided further insights in relation to potential short- and long-term harms.

4. Approach to rapid review evidence – evaluating Sector-related harms and mitigations

We took a two-stage approach in evaluating the rapid evidence review for inclusion. The first stage was to identify the harms experienced by students and staff of further education and sixth form colleges. Amongst the 86 studies we identified in our search, see PRISMA diagram Figure 1, in appendices, we found a limited number of relevant research studies in the UK on the impacts of Covid 19 on further education, this was supplemented with a total of 30 reports of primary studies from relevant organisations in the Sector. These are mainly based on surveys, literature reviews and administrative statistics. Their inclusion was based on judgements of the degree of relevance to the six impact themes, the relative robustness of the research method employed for the study's research questions (see Table 3, Appendix 2).

The second stage examined the wider, systematic review evidence on mitigations. To be included the study must be a systematic review. A systematic review must be about an intervention that is intended to mitigate the harms identified and have the key features of a systematic review including an explicit search, listed search sources, inclusion criteria, and quality assessment. In all, 25 reviews were identified that were most likely to have reliable findings based on a quality assessment.

Throughout we have stressed the fact that there is relatively little systematic review evidence compared with other sectors (e.g. HE) and therefore we decided to introduce additional forms of evidence. While this may be deemed less rigorous in terms of the demands of rapid review, the additional forms provided insights into the challenges and potential mitigations that would otherwise might have eluded us. The additional forms of evidence were:

- Documentation from the Sector and its wider relationships for the period 2019-2021.
- Interviews with key Sector actors.
- Collation of learner voice data from four FE colleges.
- Report of a relevant T20 task group to reflect international discussion.

PART 3. COVID IMPACT THEMES – HARMS AND MITIGATIONS

In the first phase of the research exercise, the following COVID harms were identified in relation to the fundamental features of the FE Sector. These could be categorized as ‘indirect harms’ resulting from successive ‘lockdowns’ on local economies, workplaces and training opportunities.

Theme 1. Vocational disruption - young people, economic participation and apprenticeships.

Theme 2. The mental health and wellbeing of young people.

Theme 3. Changes to assessment, learning and qualification.

Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs.

Theme 5. Problematic transitions and access to higher education and post-16 systems.

Theme 6. A responsive but ‘stressed’ FE Sector.

In Appendix 2, Table 1 lists harms identified per study, and Table 2 lists harms with mitigations identified per study. See pages 59 to 62.

COVID harms and the FE Sector

Theme 1. Vocational disruption – young people, economic participation, and apprenticeships

Overview and assessment of the evidence

The first theme concerns the economic effects of pandemic counter-measures – notably successive lockdowns – their effects on employers and, in turn, on young people involved with the youth labour market. The main reported harms concern the growth in youth unemployment and declines in apprenticeship starts and completions. Together, these have been termed ‘vocational disruption’. The evidence in relation to this theme is consistent. It is based on government statistics, data gathering by specialist bodies and different types of surveys. There is convergence across the types of evidence including interviews with key Sector actors. This, however, is a snapshot of mid-2021 and what we do not know presently is the degree of persistence of the disruptive factors and possible knock-on effects.

Economic participation of young people

The rapid decline in economic participation of young people and racially minoritized young people, in particular, has been reported by ONS data (ONS, 2021a; 2021b with those under the age of 35 accounting for 80 per cent of jobs lost during the pandemic’ and 41.6 per cent of black people aged 16-24 were unemployed compared to an unemployment rate among white workers of the same age of 12.4 per cent. Also using ONS statistics, the Learning and Work Institute in ‘One Year On’ (Evans and Clayton, 2021) reported on the widening of jobs and skills inequalities with young people (16-24) accounting for half the fall in employment December 2019 – December 2020.

Apprenticeships – decline in number of starts and increased redundancy

COVID has also impacted on apprenticeships with apprenticeship starts in the UK falling by 46 percentage points overall in 2020, compared with 2019, with the worst affected sectors

being health and social care, business management and hospitality (McCulloch, 2021). Many who have started apprenticeships are unable to progress as their skills acquisition, necessary for the next stage, cannot be verified (College Principal; City & Guilds, 2021).

Organisations such as Personnel Today, a recruitment platform, reported a survey by Small Business Prices on the apprenticeship scene in the UK. Similar trends have been reported in the other countries of the UK. Colleges Wales (2021) using Welsh Government data (2021), reported the effects of the pandemic on apprenticeships furloughed, terminated and completed. The numbers being furloughed had dropped between Oct 2020 and March 2021, but the numbers completing are down to 25 per cent compared with 37 per cent in previous years.

In England and early in the pandemic, research by the work-based provider organisation The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP, 2020) found that 60 per cent of employers had stopped recruiting apprentices and many apprentices would not be able complete their programme. Its research involved 80 providers working with 12,458 businesses employing 35,350 apprentices that responded to the third AELP COVID impact survey.

Redrow - a major UK building company - has looked at the future of apprenticeships in the construction industry, surveying 2,000 parents, young adults and its own apprentices about their perceptions of apprenticeships and careers in the construction industry (Redrow, 2021). It found that with less time spent in school, the number of young people who had information on apprenticeships given to them at school has dropped from 63 per cent in 2018 to 57 per cent in 2021 to reach a four-year low. Moreover, 37 per cent of young adults, surveyed said that the pandemic has decreased the chance of them attending university in the future.

Theme 2. The mental health and wellbeing of young people – concerns about futures

Overview and assessment of the evidence

There was already a crisis of the mental health and wellbeing of young people (16-25 year olds) prior to the COVID crisis, a situation that appears to have worsened as a result of the pandemic and, particularly, the impact of counter measures (Ford and John, 2021).

In evaluating the evidence of mental health related harms, there are different challenges compared with Theme 1. The first is definitional, notably the distinction between poor mental health and mental wellbeing. In the Association of Colleges (AoC) surveys there is a tendency, for example, to collapse the two terms together – ‘mental health and wellbeing’. There is also the importance of distinguishing between surveys of FE institutions and surveys of students. Here we have evidence of both – surveys by NUS of students and AoC surveys of institutions. However, it must be noted that these surveys have not been peer-reviewed, but we are not of the opinion that this seriously undermines the usefulness of the evidence collected and reported thus far.

Overall, there is consistent evidence from both review research evidence and institutions of the negative impact of the pandemic on mental wellbeing (those young people 16-24 reporting a deterioration in their mental state who did not previously have a confirmed mental health condition). There is also evidence prior to the pandemic that depression and anxiety is greater amongst NEETs (Feng et al, 2017). There is consistent evidence that FE institutions are increasing resources allocated to mental health and wellbeing. Of

particular interest in relation to Theme 1 and vocational disruption is the finding of young peoples' concern about their 'futures'. This is echoed in research by Public Health Wales (2021) which, citing international studies, found that half of the young people surveyed were students who reported being overwhelmed with uncertainties regarding their future and education. This theme of concerns about futures was also confirmed by a Welsh Government survey of learners aged 16 or older (Mylona and Jenkins, 2020).

Health sector-based evidence

The Mental Health and Young People Survey (NHS Digital, 2020) found that the likelihood of a probable mental disorder increased with age with a noticeable difference in gender for the older age group (17 to 22 years). A total of 27 per cent of young women and 13 per cent of young men were identified as having a probable mental disorder. The proportion of young people affected has increased significantly since 2017. Surveys by relevant civil society organisations (e.g. Young Minds) found that the most cited harm by young people was that of loneliness and isolation (2021).

However, according to a systematic study of research on the views of children and young people during the pandemic (RCPCH, 2020), lockdowns did not result in a universal negative effect. A minority of young people reported that their mental health and sense of wellbeing had improved due to not being bullied at school and having greater family contact. These positive perceptions were a minority trend, but the role of a resilient and coping family climate needs to be recognised. This particular theme is revisited in the discussion of mitigations.

College-based evidence

At the end of 2020, the AoC (2021) conducted a survey of FE colleges, receiving 107 responses, 85 of which were from General Further Education Colleges (52% of all GFEs), 11 Sixth Form Colleges (22%) and 4 specialist colleges (17%). A total of 76 per cent of respondents had signed the AoC Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter.

It found that, concerning 16-18 year olds, 90 per cent of respondents reported an increase in reported mental health and wellbeing issues which they argue are rooted not only in college closures, but a crisis of the examination system. A number of colleges also reported an increase in suicide risk.

In March 2021 FE Week published a special issue on Mental Health and Wellbeing in FE with a foreword by Gillian Keegan (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills). It reported that:

- 60 per cent of young people reported that their mental health deteriorated during lockdown
- 64 per cent of NEETS report always/often feeling anxious because of the pandemic
- 41 per cent of colleges report a significant increase in mental health referrals [to specialist provision].
- 94 per cent of colleges have students who have attempted suicide in the last 12 months
- 90 per cent of colleges saw an increase in students diagnosed with mental health condition in the past 12 months

- the 2021 Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index revealed that half of 16- to 25-year-olds say their mental health has deteriorated since the start of the pandemic
- now 41 per cent of 16- to 17-year-olds say they have needed more support with their mental health since the pandemic began.

Surveys of students and young adults

In addition, the National Union of Students conducted three surveys on mental health of students in further and higher education (NUS, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). Based on samples of 9872, 4178 and 4214 respondents respectively, the surveys found that the majority of students were experiencing negative impacts on their social life and family life; their finances; worried about the impact of the pandemic on their academic performance and, particularly in vocational courses and placement opportunities; and overwhelmingly concerned about their futures. Interestingly, mature students could be seen as more vulnerable than younger students.

The 2021 Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index, conducted by YouGov, gauges the happiness and confidence levels of young people across a range of areas – from working life to both physical and mental health. The 2021 Youth Index, which surveyed 2,180 16-25 year olds from across the UK, reveals:

- A total of 60 per cent of young people say that getting a new job feels "impossible now" because there is so much competition.
- A quarter (24%) of young people claim that the pandemic has "destroyed" their career aspirations.
- Young people state that they are more likely to feel anxious now than at any other time since the Youth Index was first launched over a decade ago.

While the pandemic has clearly increased levels of anxiety in young people, it is not the only factor affecting stress levels. The latest release from the UCL COVID-19 Social Study (2021) finds that 42 per cent of adults aged 18-29 report being stressed about Brexit, more than the proportion who are worried about catching COVID-19 (32%) or becoming seriously ill from the disease (22%).

Theme 3. Changes to modes of learning, assessment, learning and qualifications

Overview and assessment of the evidence

The pandemic has had a significant impact on student learning. In relation to the FE Sector, there appear to be four learning related harms – learning disruption/loss due to college closures; declines in participation in vocational and work-based learning; the effects of remote learning and the possible knock-on effects of changes to examination assessment in 2020 and 2021 (this last harm is analysed under Theme 5 on Problematical Transitions).

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (Francis, 2021) concerning the impact of school closures and the digital divide on disadvantaged young people summarises 12 recent studies across several countries during 2020 (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). This synthesis analysis found that, as of 2020, what is termed learning loss or learning gaps was about two months behind what would be normally expected of

learners at particular stages. However, the gaps were much greater for disadvantaged learners. The concern is that while smaller gaps might be remedied quite quickly when institutions reopen, the longer gaps might prove more damaging.

An allied issue is the effect of remote learning on particular groups of learners. While there is case-study research on good practice in remote and blended learning (e.g. DfE, 2021), the effects of these learning methods are harder to calculate and college-based research is required. However, the views coming from the Sector and T20 discussions (Castelli et al., 2021) suggest that vulnerable learners have been further disadvantaged by the absence of close teacher support.

The impact of the pandemic on vocational learning

While those learners taking general education qualifications (GCSEs and A Levels) have benefitted from changes to assessment, resulting in improvements in measured attainment in 2019-2020 (Gov UK, 2020; Welsh Government, 2021a), but reversals for those taking vocational courses with declines in participation and attainment during 2020 (AoC, 2021).

Particularly compelling evidence of the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on those taking vocational courses is revealed in data on declines in participation and attainment in vocational learning both at college and in the workplace. This is based on statistics gathered through institutional surveys and accountability exercises such as the Individual Learner Record (ILR). Declines appear to be most marked for those studying at the lower levels and for adults.

A total of 80 colleges responded to the AoC survey published in College Catch-Up Funding and Remote Education (April 2021). Its survey gathered information on lost learning, catch up tuition and remote learning in relation to the pandemic. The questions asked in the survey on remote learning and devices/connectivity were asked about issues prior to 5 March 2021. Colleges reported:

‘that all students have experienced a negative impact on their progress and development due to the pandemic. For 16 to 18-year-olds, colleges rated the pandemic as having 47% high and very high impact. A staggering 77% of 16 to 18-year-olds are performing below expectations. 75% are one-to-four months behind. For adult students, 69% are performing below expectations and 71% are one-to-four months behind’ (AoC, 2021).

These college perceptions are supported by the AoC analysis of ‘college performance benchmarks’, based on MiDAS R14 ILR and 223 ILR college returns. Key points include:

- Evidence of grade inflation (Grades 9-4 pass rate) for GCSE Maths and English of 10 percentage points in 2020 performance compared with the previous three years.
- Decline in performance of Functional Skills at Entry Level & Level 1 in 2019/20 compared with 2018/19 ³.
- 16-18 year olds – although retention rates are up by about one per cent pass rates are down by 5/6 per cent at Entry/Level 1.

³ Functional Skills are defined as the basic reading, writing, mathematics, and computer skills that a person needs in order to be able to live and work in society.

- Pass rates down by up to 5 per cent in a range of vocational courses including engineering and construction, whereas pass rates rose in academic subjects. Largest decline in ESOL (5.7%) and Basic Maths and English (8.4%).
- By largest learning aims – notable declines in Level 1 Diploma Construction (5.6%) and Transport Maintenance (10.7%); Level 2 Electrical Installation (8.1%) and Light Vehicle Maintenance (10.1%). By way of contrast, significant increases in A Level pass rates averaging 10 percentage points.
- 19+ - declines in both retention (-1%) and pass rates (up to 6% at Level 4) and most notably in BAME groups (3-4% compared with 1.3% for white students). Decline in pass rates concentrated in vocational areas (e.g. construction and engineering).
- 19+ - indices of deprivation in relation to pass rates – class gap of 7 per cent between most and least deprived.
- Apprenticeship starts down by 21 per cent 2019/20 compared with 2018/19 with biggest declines in health and social care, and business administration. 'The number of interruptions to courses increased by 146 per cent with largest in Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (345%).

Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs.

Overview and assessment of the evidence

The FE Sector, and especially general education colleges, caters for disadvantaged learners – those who have not performed well in earlier stages of education, learners from low-income backgrounds and sections of the BAME⁴ community.

As with the three previous impact themes, the evidence of COVID harms on patterns of inequality can be considered strong (e.g. data on rising numbers of NEETs, increases in claims for Universal Credit and findings from multi-disciplinary research (UCL) that suggests that those sections of the population who were previously understood as vulnerable have been least likely to withstand the economic and health shocks of the pandemic). Available research suggests that the causes of inequalities are deep-seated (in itself a wicked problem). A key question, therefore, is whether the effects of the pandemic on widening inequalities will prove to be brief or more persistent? The answer to this concerns the scale of mitigating measures, which is addressed in the next section of the report.

NEETs

There has been extensive discussion in the media and in emergent research concerning the impact of the pandemic on social and educational inequalities. Here we report research on young people (16-24 years old) and, in particular, those 'Not involved in Education, Employment or Training' (NEETs).

Recent ONS data (2021b) reported that those known as 'NEETs' rose by 39,000 to 797,000 in the final three months of 2020 and that an estimated 44.3 per cent of NEETs were looking

⁴ BAME is an acronym that stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups. It is contested as a useful term for combining groups that have little in common apart from assumed to be non-white or for people not of the dominant culture. It is not a term generally understood by non-academics nor is a term that people of colour self-identify with. We have used this term only where the original research being referenced uses the term to avoid misrepresentation of the research.

for, and available for, work and therefore classified as unemployed. The Resolution Foundation, the Institute for Employment Studies and the Learning and Work institute have predicted there will be at least 600,000 more unemployed young people, with a further 500,000 expected to become NEET over the next 18 months (Youth Employment UK, 2021).

Recent rises in the number of NEETs appears to have reversed the historical downward trajectory of NEET numbers over the past decade.

Impact of school closures and disrupted learning of disadvantaged young people

The Sixth Form College Association cited research by the Education Endowment Foundation (Francis, 2021) concerning the impact of school closures and the digital divide on disadvantaged young people. This research summarises 12 recent studies across several countries during 2020 (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). It concludes that students have made less academic progress compared with previous year groups and there is a large attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils, which seems to have grown.

Regional, social and racial inequalities

Bright Blue, a Conservative-oriented think tank, in its research ‘Widening Chasms’ (Sarygulov, 2021) shows data that Covid-19 is exacerbating geographical inequality in England, with London boroughs and the most deprived local authorities of the country experiencing the biggest rise in Universal Credit claimants.

The UCL COVID-19 Social Study has been surveying 70,000 adults in the UK for almost a year (Fancourt and Bradbury, 2021). Its main finding is that someone’s experience of the crisis is largely dependent on their life situation prior to the lockdown, with minoritised groups, those from lower socioeconomic positions and young people struggling much more than those with greater social privilege.

The UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP), collaborating with Money A & E, have been working with Diverse Ethnic Communities (DECs) in London’s East. When the COVID crisis hit their data found that “it impacted on DECs and deprived London boroughs especially hard. Their one-to-one debt, benefits and money advice service saw a threefold increase in demand. Many service users had ‘slipped through the cracks’ of safety nets. Those who were struggling with debts pre-crisis and had little to no savings, were left especially vulnerable to such financial shocks” (Francis, 2021).

A broad very range of vulnerable learners

The interviews with leading figures in the FE Sector revealed widespread concern about growing inequalities linked to reduced access to resources. One referred to a ‘precariat’, with stalled social mobility. They reported that there are significant numbers of students who experience some form of exclusion from technology: this takes the form of access to wi-fi, to suitable computers, or to a quiet space in which to study. College leaders also identified a loss of study habit and discipline, a loss of ‘agency’, and alienation. A large college in Scotland identified a broad range of groups affected by risk factors such as poverty, ethnicity, family breakdown, ill-health, precarious work situations and being on a vocational study course. Groups included:

- Care leavers
- Estranged students
- Students who had dropped out of school (NEETs)

- ESOL students
- Students from low-income families
- Lone parents
- Working class women (in low paid jobs)
- Students from minoritized groups
- Students living in multigenerational/cramped households
- Students with physical disabilities
- Individuals with learning difficulties
- People with chronic illness and/or people who are shielding
- Apprentices (especially Foundation and Modern)
- Individuals with low literacy and numeracy skills
- Long-term unemployed
- Gig economy workers
- Zero-hours contract workers
- Precarious self-employed
- Asylum seekers/refugees
- Key workers.

Ongoing Nuffield Foundation research on educational inequalities

The Nuffield Foundation has a total of 53 projects and news initiatives related to COVID (Nuffield Foundation 2021b), some of which are from a collaboration with the Education Policy Institute. While none of these are specific to the FE Sector, they include COVID-related research, low attaining learners, problematical transitions and low-income families. These are clearly related to the Sector's demographic. Of particular relevance are five ongoing research projects focused on attainment of 16-24 year olds, transitions and inequalities in the COVID era.

- *Measuring the disadvantage gap in 16-19 education* (Tuckett et al., 2021), early findings show that the current qualification attainment gap between the most and least affluent students is equivalent to three A Level grades.
- *Students who do not achieve a grade C or above in English and Maths - 2019-2021.* (Raffo and Thompson, 2021), seeks to provide early evidence about how recent GCSE reforms and the introduction of Progress 8 may impact on this group of learners.
- *Moving on from initial GCSE 'failure': post-16 transitions for 'lower attainers' and why the English education system must do better* (Lupton et al., 2021), to date reveals the heterogeneity of the young people who miss the GCSE benchmark and the impact it has on their access to post-16 pathways.
- *Post-16 educational trajectories and social inequalities in political engagement 2020 - 2022* (Janmatt and Pensiero, 2021), is exploring the relationship between socio-economic inequalities, political engagement, and different post-16 educational trajectories over the life course.

- *Post-16 pathways: the role of peers, family background and expectations - 2019-2022* (Pensiero and Janmatt, 2021), is investigating the extent to which expected economic and social returns account for the effects of socio-economic background on post-16 education options.

Theme 5. Problematical transitions including access to higher education and post-16 systems.

Overview and assessment of the evidence

Identifying research on the transitions of young people has proved challenging. The most trustworthy studies are longitudinal and, of course, these take time and resource. However, research pointing to the differential impact of the pandemic and academic and vocational learning in terms of disruption is compelling – access to higher education study has increased while, as reported in Theme 2, participation in vocational learning has fallen. What is not yet known is whether this will prove to be temporary or whether the vocational route will become smaller.

Moreover, we do not yet know the longer-term effects of grade inflation on university access, although early indications are that this has led to an increase in applications together with one-year deferrals that may now be affecting the offer-making of research intensive universities.

On the other hand, pre-pandemic research on transitions within upper secondary education (e.g. Rogers and Spours, 2020) pointed to difficulties of progression for middle and lower attainers and the fear is that these groups may face further disadvantage. Problematical transitions for particular groups of learners are an underlying theme in the Nuffield research.

Access to higher education

A prime function of upper secondary education is to enable transitions from schooling to higher study and working life. The evidence thus far is that the pandemic is having a differential impact on youth transitions. In the academic track, teacher-based assessment in 2020 increased the proportion of the cohort attaining the higher grades at both GCSE and A Levels.

‘Grades in summer 2020 were more generous than previous years, and to an unprecedented extent. At A level, the proportion of candidates awarded A or A went up 12.9pp, from 25.2% in 2019 to 38.1% in 2020. At GCSE, the proportion awarded grade 4 and above went up 8.8pp, from 67.1% to 75.9%’* (Ofqual, 2021b).

This ‘grade inflation’, however, should be viewed in the context of a fall in measured attainment at GCSE since 2014 and a stasis of measured A Level attainment over the same period, resulting from government policies to make qualifications more ‘rigorous’. In historical terms what has taken place in 2020, and will most likely be repeated in 2021, is a growth in measured attainment that replicates the growth phases in examination attainment in the late 1980s and the early 2000s (Rogers and Spours, 2020).

The impact of increases in grade attainments has been a growth in applications to university; again imitating the growth phases of HE progression in previous decades. Data from the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) suggests that a total of

508,090 applicants accepted places at universities across the UK in 2020, an increase of 3.5 per cent compared with 2019 (Financial Times, 2020).

The most direct result of this increase in demand has been adjustments to HE admissions policy. The YouthSite Monitor survey and UCAS data noted the increase in application rates for higher education in 2020 and expects this trend to continue in 2021 (Krystel, 2021). An issue of consideration is 'grade inflation'. Resulting from teacher assessment in 2020, UCAS concludes that this will pose a challenge of selection for only a small number of research-intensive universities. The HEPI forecasts that higher education institutions will have to develop a five-year cycle of customised access strategies as a consequence of disruption to the examination system, thus affecting learners as far back as Year 10 and GCSE arrangements for 2021.

Theme 6. A responsive but 'stressed' FE Sector

Overview and assessment of the evidence

The condition of the FE Sector is impacted principally by finance and the demands of the cohorts of learners that it serves. Evidence regarding the financing of the Sector is complex – in terms of recurrent funding, historically FE and sixth form colleges have lost out compared with schools (IFS, 2020) but in recent years the Sector has attracted greater commitment from government in terms of infrastructure investment. Due to its historical position, however, it is possible for the Sector to still be financially stressed even though it has become more of a policy priority.

The Sector experiences a confluence of shocks

The FE Sector has been particularly impacted by the pandemic due a confluence of factors – its focus on vocational learning and the workplace that has been disrupted through successive lockdowns, the fact that it caters for more vulnerable sections of the population both young people and adults, and its financial stresses. In 2020 the FE sector in England did not receive the same level of financial support from government compared with schools thus further entrenching sector disparities that have appeared over the past decade (Farquharson et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2020).

However, the Government have stated that they think the FE sector has an important role to play in 'building back better' in relation to both the pandemic and Brexit. In September 2020, the Prime Minister announced a "major expansion of post-18 education and training to level up and prepare workers for post-COVID economy" with policies to encourage lifelong learning and to help adults to retrain and over £1.5 billion in capital funding to be invested in college buildings and facilities (PM's Office, 2020).

It is possible for both positions to be true – on the one hand, the Government plans to invest in further education infrastructure in ways not seen for a decade or more and for a large number of colleges to be financially stressed due to loss of student income. Day-to-day financial stresses have been exacerbated by substantial reductions in the funding of FE and sixth form colleges over the past decade affecting adults in particular (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2020). In the event, the Government has spent over £700 millions 'propping up further education in England' (Weale, 2020).

In addition, reports from the Sector (see Part 4) suggest a shortage of appropriately skilled staff, particularly in the light of a shift in employment patterns. Colleges presently are unable to recruit staff from overseas because of the income threshold for immigrants.

Many colleges have responded to the loss of teaching and assessment opportunities by staff working longer hours. There are now repeated reports of staff burnout (see Part 4).

Mitigations for the FE Sector

Theme 1. Vocational disruption for young people, economic participation, and apprenticeships

Overview and assessment of the evidence

Mitigations for this harm include interventions for catching-up after career breaks, economic disruptions to vocational training and apprenticeships, health-related disruptions and supports for returning to work.

Systematic review evidence on mitigations in relation to vulnerable groups suggest that interventions can be partially effective, albeit based on incomplete evidence, with the possible exception of apprenticeships that showed consistent positive effects (European Commission, 2013). The literature also appears to point to the variability of the employer placement being an important factor regarding the effectiveness of a work-based intervention.

With regards to expert views evidence of COVID mitigations and emerging best practice from the Sector, there are the following observations.

- Current mitigations in the form of government programmes (e.g. Kickstart) are well-intended, but may be having limited impact due to the fact that employer capacity has been harmed by the pandemic, particularly in the service-sector. However, the programme is still in its early days and so its effectiveness could change.
- We do not yet know the speed and scale of economic recovery that could ‘mop-up’ unemployed young people.
- There is sufficient concern in policy circles about a generation of young people being ‘scarred’ by the pandemic and its wider social effects (and therefore not being ‘mopped up’ in an economic bounce back) that are prompting official enquiries and calls for an ‘Opportunity Guarantee’ (that is now policy in Scotland and Wales).
- Mitigation proposals move firmly into political territory with proposals from the LGA and other bodies with an interest in localism and sustainability policy for a ‘green recovery’ that has young people at its centre.

Systematic review evidence on mitigations for vocational disruption

We searched for systematic review evidence concerning recovery from ‘vocational disruption’ in fields and time-periods beyond the Sector in 2020-21. We found a total of 10 relevant systematic reviews in this topic area. All reviews identified multiple studies. There is evidence from these studies that interventions to incentivise employers to provide high quality apprenticeship programmes may prove beneficial for longer term labour market engagement of young people and that this should be allied with other related support measures for young people.

- *How has COVID-19 disrupted the UK labour market, and how can better adult training and job placement aid the recovery?* (Eyles, 2021). This review looked at evidence on

the current condition of the UK labour market, its findings suggests that an improved alignment of the education system and employers could be helped by three measures - addressing system complexity, changing incentives for firms and improved training resources and career advice.

- *Supported employment: Meta-analysis and review of randomized controlled trials of individual placement and support* (Donald and Tyler, 2019). In this review of supported employment interventions, the authors found that those in individual placement and support compared to usual treatment conditions had better vocational outcomes (competitive employment, job tenure, income, job length). Effects on non-vocational outcomes, including quality of life, were less marked.
- *Interventions to improve the labour market outcomes of youth: A systematic review of training, entrepreneurship promotion, employment services and subsidized employment interventions* (Kluve et al., 2017). This review found that interventions were helpful for those involved, but there was a wide variation in the quality of experience.
- *Vocational supports for vulnerable or excluded population groups - Educational and vocational goal disruption in adolescent and young adult cancer survivors* (Vetsch et al., 2018) points to the role of additional support to facilitate meaningful engagement to achieve vocational goals.

Career Ready? How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19 (Mann et al., 2020). This OECD research reviews academic analysis of national longitudinal datasets to identify indicators of comparative adult success. It found that national variations in career readiness are particularly associated with disadvantage and that effective education systems will ensure schools systematically address inequalities in teenage access to information and support in preparing for working life.

- *Vocational Rehabilitation: What Works, for Whom, and When?* This review of literature on vocational rehabilitation highlighted in its conclusions the virtue of early intervention (Waddell et al., 2008).
- *A systematic review of vocational interventions for young adults with autism spectrum disorders* (Lounds-Taylor et al., 2012). This review was not able to draw firm conclusions due to the relatively incomplete nature of the research being reviewed.
- *Are we failing young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs)? A systematic review and meta-analysis of re-engagement interventions* (Mawn et al., 2017). This review found that there is some evidence that intensive multi-component interventions effectively decrease unemployment amongst NEETs.
- *Do Youth Employment Programs Improve Labour Market Outcomes? A Systematic Review* (Kluve et al., 2017). This review found that one-third of evaluation results from youth employment programs implemented worldwide showed a significant positive impact on labour market outcomes – either employment rates or earnings.
- *Evidence Review 8 Apprenticeships* (What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, 2015) found that there is some evidence that apprenticeships improve skill levels,

stimulate further training or study, increase wages in specific cases and have a positive effect on participants' subsequent employment.

- *Review of Initiatives into Workforce: Re-Engagement of Long Term Disengaged Workers* (South Australia Centre for Economic Studies, 2008). This review assessed whether lessons learned from transitioning the long-term unemployed into sustainable employment through labour market programs, may be applicable to long-term workers' compensation beneficiaries. It found that combination of programme types including training, a work placement (sometimes with a wage subsidy) together with support once in employment, help to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Evidence from reports and stakeholder responses in relation to vocational disruption

In addition to evidence from systematic reviews, there is now a burgeoning grey literature of Sector-based and official responses with proposals to 'build back better'. These come not only from Government, but also from a range of relevant civil society organisations. Most of these proposals have yet to be evaluated but suggest the benefit of early-stage responses to a situation that is ongoing.

Government programmes, guidance and calls for evidence

The Government and its specialist agencies such as the Institute for Apprenticeships have provided several sets of guidance on how employers can continue to support apprentices during the pandemic, particularly related to assessment and funding (e.g. GOV UK, 2021; Institute for Apprenticeships, 2021). The House of Lords Committee on Youth Unemployment has published a call for evidence on 'How do we create and protect jobs for young people?' (UK Parliament, 2021).

The Kickstart Scheme

The Government also has provided support to employers, through its 'Kickstart Scheme', to offer a six-month work placement to 18-24 year-olds making a claim to Universal Credit and who are in the Intensive Work Search Group (DWP, 2021b). Kickstart provides £1,500 per role to cover the cost of training and employability support. The Government will also cover all necessary employer national insurance and pension contributions. There are also strict criteria, such as the range of roles to be offered, that could affect the response of SMEs and micro-businesses.

Recent data suggest that fewer than 500 places have been found in the North East for a programme that was intended to provide 250,000 places nationally (Savage, 2021), with reported hurdles affecting the participation of SMEs (Ruzicka, 2021). The low rate of placement was confirmed by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when she announced, that of February 2021, a total of 2000 young people had been placed on a work-based programme (UK Parliament, 2021b) out of 100,000 successful applications (a placement rate of 2%). At the same time, however, employers are reporting that they aim to recruit young people again as soon as possible (Little, 2021).

The case of the Future Jobs Fund (FJF)

While it is still early days for the Kickstart Scheme, previous job placement programmes such as FJF (2009-2012) appear to have enjoyed more success. The FJF was introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in 2009 as a response to concerns about the long-term effects of rising youth unemployment following the 2008 banking crisis. The DWP pledged 150,000 temporary paid jobs lasting six months for unemployed young people and people living in disadvantaged areas, with a maximum DWP contribution of

£6,500 per job. Participant had to be claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) one week before starting their FJF job and be aged between 20 and 24.

An independent evaluation (Centre for Economic Inclusion, 2011) found that the FJF, that made effective use of dynamic sub-regional partnerships, provided real jobs with a real wage, engaged employers, moved people off long-term benefits, improved people's health and reduced criminal behaviour and benefited community cohesion. The evaluation reported that:

'Of the 105,220 participants who started FJF jobs between 2009 and 2011, an estimated 15 per cent of them left their job before six months – more often than not to move immediately into another job. Overall, an estimated 43 per cent of participants obtained a job outcome after FJF – in the majority of cases with the same employer as their FJF job. Participants with job outcomes are experiencing impressive levels of job sustainment – modelling suggests over half will still be in that same job one year after starting' (2011: 5).

An official DWP evaluation (2012) reviewed by NIESR found that according to base-line assumptions, the FJF is estimated to have resulted in a net:

- benefit to participants of approximately £4,000 per participant
- benefit to employers of approximately £6,850 per participant
- a net benefit to society of approximately £7,750 per participant
- cost to the Exchequer of approximately £3,100 per participant.

Even though the FJW was axed by the Coalition Government in 2011 on cost grounds, both the DWP evaluation and an independent evaluation confirmed that for the period of the programme, it had significant impact on working lives of young people.

There appear to be at least two lessons to be learned from the FJF. First, that high initial costs in terms of employer subsidy become partially offset by the economic benefits of a young person being in work. There are also wider benefits to society that could be cost saving in the longer term. Second, that the delivery of more than 100,000 placements not only depended on real incentives to employers, but also local partnership delivery at the local level.

Mitigation responses from the FE Sector and its wider partners

The unique nature of the pandemic together with changes in UK society mean that there are limits to what can be learned historically or comparatively. A number of initiatives have been suggested in response to the pandemic which, if implemented, will need to be evaluated with regard to effectiveness

- Expanding the use range of the apprenticeship levy improved rates of pay for apprentices and making careers advice digital when an increasing amount of young peoples' time is spent online (Redrow, 2021).
- Improving co-ordination of government funding streams and integration at the local level with a focus on developing the green economy with young people at the centre (Quilter-Pinner et al., 2020; LGA, 2020a; LGA 2020b; LGA, 2020c; The City and Guilds Group, 2020).
- The introduction of a *Youth Guarantee or Opportunity Guarantee* of a job, apprenticeship or training offer for all young people (Learning and Work Institute,

2021; National Youth Agency (NYA) and Youth Employment UK, (2021). This is now policy in both Scotland and Wales.

- Providing targeted additional support for young people with additional needs, disabilities and other protected characteristics, to participate and benefit from the Plan for Jobs (The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Youth Employment (APPG) (2021).
- The House of Lords Youth Unemployment Committee, is to hold an inquiry on youth unemployment - *How do we create and protect jobs for young people?* (2021). The inquiry is examining how the labour market may change due to current events such as COVID-19, Brexit, and technological developments in the years ahead. It intends to propose long-term, durable solutions, and will report before the end of November 2021.
- Providing additional support for disadvantaged young people to join the Kickstart Scheme and apprenticeships (What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, 2020).
- Focusing on ‘job switchers’ and ‘career changers’ who are coming out of furlough (Aldridge et al., 2020).

Theme 2. The mental health and wellbeing of young people – concerns about futures

Overview and assessment of the evidence

Wider literatures suggest that local collaborative inter-disciplinary and multi-agency strategies are most effective when attempting to address complex mental health issues. Presently, however, FE institutions are in the front-line and the challenge is measuring the effectiveness of institutional strategies when those who may be suffering most severely may come from disadvantaged backgrounds where the remedies may lie with more fundamental social and economic measures to address poverty.

Systematic review of evidence on mitigations on mental health or additional needs in relation to working life

While there is an established and evolving literature on the relationship between education initiatives and the mental health of young people (e.g. Lee, 2020) and particularly provision with embedded psychological services (e.g. Fazel et al., 2014), this review has focused on those studies concerned with mental health in relation to transitions to working life. These consistently suggest the benefits of ‘recovery frameworks’ – the linking of different interventions based on local and network collaboration.

- *The Importance of Vocation in Recovery for Young People with Psychiatric Disabilities* (Lloyd and Waghorn, 2007). This review suggests that the most effective recovery framework combines evidence-based employment and educational assistance with mental health care, provided in parallel with brief vocational counselling, illness management skills, training in stigma countering and disclosure strategies, context-specific social skills and skills in social network development.
- *Transitions into work for young people with complex needs: a systematic review of UK and Ireland studies to improve employability* (2020) (Hart et al., 2020). This review undertaken before 2017 suggests that collaborative strategies covering training, work practices, therapeutic support and creating appropriate work environments, with active involvement of young people, are key in supporting young people with complex needs into employment.

- *Sport and dance interventions for healthy young people (15–24 years) to promote subjective well-being: a systematic review* (Mansfield et al., 2016). This review of published studies between 2006 and 2016 found that meditative activities, group and peer-supported sport and dance may promote subjective well-being enhancement in youth. However, evidence is limited and better designed studies are needed.

Manual review of Sector other stakeholder responses in relation to mental health and wellbeing

Both the AoC and Sixth Form Colleges Association have published responses as a result of institutional and NHS surveys. FE colleges are in the front line in relation to addressing complex mental health issues and, therefore, most of the recommendations for mitigations are focused on Sector institutions.

AoC noted that FE colleges have significantly increased resources being allocated to improving student and staff mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. This is a reversal of the trend of recent years that had seen a reduction in funding allocated to this area of college life.

Their main recommendations to the Sector are to:

- explore the potential to roll out a social prescribing model with colleges using physical activity and other enrichment activities as a means of promoting overall student wellbeing;
- encourage all colleges to sign the AoC MH charter and annually evidence how they meet all 11 commitments;
- engage with the Local Suicide Prevention Plan; should ensure all staff have access to suicide awareness training, should work with experts to develop specific resources on suicide prevention for FE Colleges;
- develop additional support programmes for learners with mental health difficulties or deemed vulnerable to support smooth transition and aid retention;
- ensure all institutional policies have an assessment of their impact on the mental health of staff and students.

Their main recommendations for government are to:

- create a national fund to support the transition and retention of 16-year-old students into colleges in September 2021 targeted at the most vulnerable learners;
- ensure that investments and training opportunities relating to mental health and for education settings take specific account of the needs of further education colleges and their whole learner population.

The Sixth Form Colleges Association, drawing on reported NHS Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020 and working with the Behavioural Insight Team, have proposed short-term strategies focused on introducing mindfulness exercises within the curriculum.

Theme 3. Changes to modes of learning, assessment, and qualifications

Overview and assessment of the evidence

Concerning mitigations, the question will be the effectiveness of assessment flexibilities being put in place for 2021, shifts to remote learning and institutional strategies to support catch-up. Here the evidence is at best tentative. There are concerns about the effects of remote learning on class gaps. Evidence from systematic reviews of education technology responses to the pandemic in South East Asian systems (Bond, 2021) suggest that post-disruption increased teacher training, collaborative learning and designing equity-related measures are required to support the catch-up of vulnerable groups.

Systematic review of evidence on mitigations on changes in learning

We found one relevant review on changes in learning: *Digital Learning in a Post-Covid-19 Economy* (CIPD, 2021). This review of the literature suggests the effectiveness of online learning is affected by the design of online learning programmes; the level and nature of support provided; and actions linked to boosting learner engagement.

Manual review of Sector other stakeholder responses in relation to changes to assessment, learning and qualifying

Mitigations have been led by national organisations (awarding bodies and assessment regulatory agencies) that are part of the official assessment and regulatory system. The main approach is the provision of flexibility measures for 2021 and the offer of information for providers in relation to revised assessment procedures and relationships with the workplace.

In addition, a range of awarding and regulatory bodies have been undertaking mitigation measures in relation to the scale of learning disruption in vocational courses.

- Pearson (2021) focused on support for colleges in relation to the use of BTEC qualifications and new flexibility arrangements for learners to catch up, particularly in relation to vocational and LTP courses.
- City and Guilds (2020) focused on return-to-work and various forms of work-based and technical qualification assessment (e.g. end-point assessment).
- NCFE (2021) has an emphasis on support for teacher assessment.
- Ofqual (2021) have provided a vocational and technical qualifications contingency regulatory framework that lists guidance for adaptations by awarding bodies.
- The Government launched a consultation on 2021 examination replacement (DfE & Ofqual, 2021).

The City & Guilds Group in its report *Recovery and Resilience* (2021b) has called on government to redirect its skills budget to communities most impacted by unemployment, and on employers and education providers to work together to forefront digital transformation and to create ‘Lifelong Learning & Employment Hubs’ within the regional areas most impacted by unemployment.

New research on policy responses on education across the four countries of the UK is available from the Education Policy Institute and Nuffield Foundation (Nuffield Foundation, 2021a). This research finds that while the education catch-up programme in

Scotland is more generous compared with the other countries of the UK, that all plans offer insufficient support for pupils and are unlikely to address the scale of learning loss following the pandemic.

Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs

Overview and assessment of the evidence

International systematic review evidence points to the benefits of linking interventions at different levels that are brought together in personalised support packages. In relation to the UK this has been manifested in the proposal for a ‘Youth or Opportunity Guarantee’ following its launch in Scotland.

Systematic review evidence on mitigations to increasing educational and social inequalities

We found no systematic review evidence on mitigating the increased educational inequalities directly relevant to the FE Sector. However, there are a number of sources reviewing studies on overcoming inequalities in wider society.

- *What Works in Supporting Children and Young People to Overcome Persistent Poverty? A Review of UK and International Literature* (Nelson et al., 2013). This NFER review provides evidence of a range of structural, individual and practice-level factors that can enable families to escape from persistent poverty, such as supporting families into work and supporting employment stability.
- *Service needs of young people affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): A systematic review of UK qualitative evidence* (Lester, et al., 2020) (ages 3-18 years). This review highlights the importance for those affected by ACEs of stability and continuity in the support they receive.
- *Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work: An initial evidence review to identify what works and inform good practice among practitioners and employers* (Newton et al., 2020). This rapid review points to the usefulness of a range of practices including accurate identification, effective engagement, effective assessment and profiling, a trusted, consistent advisor and delivery of personalised support packages.

Manual review of Sector other stakeholder responses in relation to widening inequalities

There is additional and more contemporary research activity and interest in this area from relevant organisations in the FE Sector and relevant parts of civil society.

- The Nuffield Foundation intends to fund research over the next two years to ‘make a marked contribution to shaping the society that emerges from the consequences of COVID-19, in its core areas of interest - *Education, Justice and Welfare*.
- *The Social Mobility Commission* (2021) investigated the drivers of socio-economic differences in post-16 course choices and their likely social mobility consequences. Implications of its findings are reported in Theme 5 on learner transitions.

- *The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* (CRED, 2021) has been investigating ethnic disparities in employment, the criminal justice system, healthcare and education and has recommended a wide range of proposals around the principles of trust, fairness, agency and inclusivity.
- IPPR (Quilter-Pinner et al., 2020) recommends the creation of a new ‘Opportunity Guarantee’ for young people in which the government should ensure that every young person is either in education or work and a more active approach to youth labour market policy.

Theme 5. Problematical transitions and access to higher education and post 16 systems

Overview and assessment of the evidence

Evidence from systematic reviews, once again, point to the benefits of integrated and aligned programmes for young people that emerge as personalised packages of skills, financial, emotional and practical support (Nelson et al., 2013; Newton et al., 2020).

Beyond measures to help learners catch up, there have been range of calls for longer-term system reform - improving careers education, focusing greater resource on disadvantaged learners, creating a more flexible and inclusive qualifications system and providing more learning opportunities outside that of formal schooling. As with previous themes, these are in the realms of advocacy rather than tried and tested and research informed. The wider research literatures, once again point to the potential of local collaborations combined with national strategic leadership.

Systematic review evidence on interventions for improved transitions, tackling disengagement and supporting NEETs

- *Evidence scans of educational interventions for children and young people disengaged from education* (Social Ventures, 2018). Much of the research finds that individual programs are unlikely to achieve transformational change – and that a system of integrated and aligned services is needed, and further research required to understand interactive effects.
- *Approaches to supporting young people not in education, employment or training – a review* (Nelson and O’Donnell, 2012). This review builds on the body of evidence accumulated in the early 2000s. It suggests that the most effective approach combines national leadership in terms of co-ordination and funding with local collaborative strategies.
- *Teenagers’ Career Aspirations and the Future of Work – OECD* (Mann, et al., 2020b) review highlights the role of effective careers education and guidance in relation to a changing labour market.
- *ILO Working Paper 8 Youth Aspirations and the Future of Work: A Review of the Literature and Evidence* (Gardiner and Goedhuys, 2020). This review of the literature on the concepts and drivers of aspirations develops a conceptual framework that

relates labour market conditions to aspirations; maps the existing survey-based evidence on the aspirations of youth worldwide; and provides insights into how to improve data collection, research and evidence-based policy making related to young people's aspirations.

- *Young people's suggestions for the assets needed in the transition to adulthood: Mapping the research evidence* (Hagell et al., 2019). This review identifies four key assets the young people had in relation to transitions: skills and qualifications; personal connections; financial and practical support and emotional support.

Manual review of Sector other stakeholder responses in relation to improved transitions, tackling disengagement and supporting NEETs

As reported in Theme 3, the main mitigations in terms of vocational learning have been in relation to creating flexibility in order that learners can complete their courses. However, a number of bodies have highlighted the role of improved careers education, additional support such as summer schools and wider reforms of the education system to facilitate smoother transitions for all learners.

- The Education Development Trust (Hughes and Smith, 2020) in its report on '*Youth transitions: creating pathways to success*', drawing on 105 research reports to identify a cluster of strategies to shape policy and practice including embedding careers in the school curriculum, engaging employers and utilising technology and labour market information.
- The OECD report *Career ready? How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19* (Mann et al., 2020a) has identified nine key indicators of impact evaluation for careers education.
- The Social Mobility Commission (2021) made five recommendations which include target specific disadvantaged groups, improved guidance is needed on technical routes before the age of 16, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, promote progression and combining academic and technical courses and help with travel.
- The UPP Foundation has announced the formation of its *Student Futures Commission*. The Commission is a major new independent inquiry that will look at how the pandemic has affected university students' learning, development and prospects, and provide practical ideas to get them back on track and secure their successful futures.
- The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) (2021) has partnered with The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) to provide a monitoring and evaluation service of an extensive system of outreach participant data collection and tracking. Its research, which is multifaceted, shows a strong correlation between KS4 attainment and progression to selective HEIs with a particularly strong role for summer schools to improve attainment at KS4.

Theme 6. A responsive but 'stressed' FE Sector

Overview and assessment of the evidence

Systematic review evidence is very limited given the specificities of the FE Sector in the UK. However, there is some evidence to suggest that professional development programmes, supporting leadership and incentives to join ITT programmes can be beneficial.

Evidence coming from the Sector is contested. Throughout the pandemic colleges have been supported by a range of government agencies (e.g. operational guidance documents (DfE, 2021) and catch-up funding of £96 millions for colleges (although in England colleges were initially left out of the catch up plan). Support for the sector has also come from awarding bodies to help those learners who have had their studies delayed.

Mitigations have come through a range of agencies (funding and qualifications attainment flexibility), but the AoC is calling for a recovery plan in England along with guarantees for all young people and adults to be offered training provision. Given comparisons between the historical position and current position, evidence of the condition of the Sector is contested.

Systematic review evidence to support the FE Sector

The effects of high-quality professional development on teachers and students, a rapid review and meta-analysis (Fletcher-Wood and Zucollo, 2020) suggests that teachers are more likely to experience high-quality professional development if designers of professional development anticipate and mitigate predictable problems, such as teacher turnover, lack of leadership support and limited time.

Leading skills: Exploring leadership in Further Education colleges (Savours and Koehane, 2019) focuses on general further education colleges in England highlights the importance of leadership and the socio-economic and delivery context for FE leaders.

Incentive programmes for the recruitment and retention of teachers in FE. Literature review (Cooper Gibson Research, 2018). A total of 15 schemes dating back to 2000 were identified that specifically tackled recruitment and retention issues in the FE sector. Key findings include financial incentives to encourage take up of ITT training have been somewhat successful, but that more robust evaluation activity would ensure that good practice in FE recruitment and retention is identified and taken forward for future schemes.

Manual review of Sector: other stakeholder responses to support the FE Sector

In addition, evidence for mitigations in this theme are also drawn from primary research from interested organisations in this sector. The main representative body of the Sector – the AoC has launched a recovery plan comprising three major policy proposals for fair funding of practical courses, targeted support for those most disadvantaged through 16-19 student premium, and provision of extra-curricular activities such as sport, drama, music and volunteering (AoC, 2021b).

PART 4. VOICES FROM THE SECTOR AND DISCUSSIONS FROM THE T20

The dearth of systematic evidence in an under-researched FE Sector led the authors to add two additional layers of evidence directly from the Sector and from international T20 discussion on the pandemic and education. While this evidence is perception based, these ‘voices’ can help both to understand and to triangulate the documentary evidence to reinforce messages particularly in relation to COVID harms affecting vulnerable student populations and the effects of lockdowns on licence to practice provision.

Voices from the Sector

We interviewed 11 key actors from the FE Sector (college leaders and representatives of sector bodies) in April 2021. Their voices provide a unique and nuanced insight in real time into the effects of the pandemic on colleges, students and their families. The main themes arising from the interviews are as follows:

- Increase in reported mental health problems with reports of increased domestic violence.
- Access to technology for adults and those with high levels of need has been difficult.
- Major restructuring of economy is affecting young people.
- Major attendance and engagement issues, particularly concerning learners on vocational courses, and disadvantaged and SEND students.
- Real problems for LTP provision because of the absence of practical learning.
- Colleges looking to ways to remediate learning disruption, but staff suffering burn-out.
- Biggest social impact on the ‘precariat’ – vulnerable adults – who are suffering multiple impacts.
- College cannot delay the incoming cohort, so it will be tight on space. Catch-up will take 10 years – *‘it’s a massive crisis’*. Over summer there will be childcare issues for staff – exacerbated need for child-friendly hours.
- Areas which have experienced multiple lockdowns are showing lower participation than others but more regional data are needed. These need to include data on efficiency – areas with high levels of college competition achieve lower OFSTED grades (AoC, 2020).
- Fears for young people – lacking skills for life – economic, social, educational, cultural – needed to support the fabric of society.

There were also important insights into the scale and nature of ‘vocational disruption’.

‘Colleges are having to cover content normally assessed in the workplace (e.g. care homes). All accreditation authorities working with OFQUAL to ensure ‘fairness’, but lots of stuff can’t be assessed at home, including functional skills. Lots of concern about the long-term impact of gaps, about a lack of competency’.

‘LTP has been ‘strangled’ and this will play out in apprenticeships (there are 100,000 students stuck in the system). Last year 700,000 came in on time, but do they really understand ‘competence’. There are now 2 years of stagnated completions’.

Nevertheless, Sector leaders were broadly welcoming of government actions - College catch-up funding is seen as helpful; Ofsted has been supportive, as has DfE guidance and support for students (e.g. laptops).

However, at the same time, college leaders report a deficit in the preparation of students for employment that takes two forms - a deficit in the advice available to students and a concern that the skills being taught are less appropriate to the rapidly changing employment context. This raises the issue of the relationship between education and work and some interviewees noted a lack of co-ordination between DfE and DWP. But perhaps the most telling perceptions concern the cumulative effects of the pandemic and the impact on inequalities.

‘The second lockdown has more of an unseen impact - less resilience, less proficiency, practical learning can’t be done on-line. Behavioural issues will continue to emerge over time, creating a lost generation. There has been a loss of the part-time jobs, enhanced digital poverty, deferred progression, hardship and destitution, loss of practical skills, loss of community, diminished student experience. No jobs, no progression. 16-year-olds will not be the same again. There is a cycle of grief.’

‘Everyone suffering Zoom fatigue – there is a need for social interaction. This generation of students is being short-changed - stalled social mobility, disrupted learner progress, exhausted workforce. There will be a ‘K’ shaped recovery, with winners and losers: we are all in the same storm but not in the same boat’.

Learner views and perspectives

Despite widespread research suggesting that young people have suffered mentally during the pandemic and understandable concerns about futures, surveys of the learner voice in a group of four inner London colleges (May 2020, September 2020 and January 2021) indicate that learners have, in the large, adapted well to the conditions imposed by the pandemic and were satisfied with the measures taken by colleges regarding their education.⁵

Asked about their adaptation to distance learning, in May 2020, 82 per cent reported that their briefing had been clear, 82 per cent that they had been supported in acquiring new skills and 80 per cent that they had regular support. By January 2021 approval of the level of support had risen to 93 per cent. On-line study was seen as helpful over a range of 70 to 77 per cent. 76 per cent were happy with on-line resources.

A survey of the enrolment process in September 2020 showed 98 per cent reporting clear advice on staying COVID free, with 94 per cent stating that they were keeping well mentally and physically. In looking at learning styles, 58 per cent preferred collaborative work while 42 per cent preferred independent learning. A total of 93 per cent were positive about their online resources.

In a survey of January 2021, 95 per cent felt that their college had been active in keeping them safe, and 95 per cent that they were happy with the way that they were being taught. A total of 97 per cent stated that going to college had been the right thing to do.

⁵ The learner voice samples were - 909 out of a possible 8564 (May 2020), 3405 out of a possible 6096 (September 2020) and 2046 out of a possible 6477 students (January 2021).

T20 Discussions of the pandemic and its effects on post-school education

Task Force 4 of the T20 (T20, 2021) has considered the impact of the digitalisation of education globally. The following is a summary of these discussions that have formed the basis of a paper (Castelli et al., 2021) presented to the Global Solutions Summit in May 2021. Further papers presented to the T20, but not yet published, augment this discussion and argue for improved access to technology for deprived groups. Paul Grainger (2021) of UCL IOE has identified artificial intelligence (AI) based learning technologies as essential to overcoming current educational challenges.

Given the disruptive impact of COVID-19 and rapid technological change to complement or replace in-person education, some administrations (including UK, US and Argentina) are awarding qualifications to those progressing from education which reflect a normal distribution profile of passes and grades. This is despite lost learning time, teacher shortages, incomplete assessment, and other disruptions.

Awarding bodies state that they are under pressure to assuage student and parent anxiety, and to ensure continuity of entry to universities, further training, or employment. While this might be considered to be 'fair' for this cohort of students, it represents a misunderstanding of the societal and economic value of qualifications at tertiary level, which goes beyond allocating scarce progression provision. The pandemic has posed particular problems for Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) provision, which depends on providing evidence in both educational and workplace settings of required levels of vocational competence. This problem is most acute for those qualifications which can be described as 'licence to practice'. In order to maintain mandatory workplace standards during lockdowns, colleges and employers have been facing a backlog of vocational learning and assessment that will have to be remediated before awards can be made. Issues of academic assessment are of less immediate concern, as deficiencies can be remedied over time. Frustratingly academic assessment is more easily achieved over digital platforms. Such platforms also favour the affluent with access to facilities and space. Licence to practice provision is more technical, hands-on and practical. Remote assessment is virtually impossible.

Additionally, many 'technical' students are less well placed to access virtual learning environments at home. This is of particular importance as the pandemic has not so much introduced a new paradigm of skills requirements as accelerated fundamental changes that were already in train. There is a danger that as reconstruction becomes urgent, economies will be denied or have misrepresented critical skills, particularly universally required soft, interactive, or practical skills, that are hard to teach or assess virtually. This is compounded by the rapid development of new skills generated by artificial intelligence. For lack of appropriate skills those born 2002-4, and in the years thereafter, may be branded the 'COVID Generation', known for deficits at various stages of their education, and thus hampered in their careers. One UK-based assessment authority estimates that 100,000 students are presently stuck in the system, unable to achieve accreditation.

Education by video-interactive platform is socially divisive. To maximise its effectiveness the learner needs a good Wi-Fi connection, access to a suitable computer, space, peace and quiet. These are, in the large, socially determined. The greater the reliance on these platforms, the greater that relative disadvantage is reinforced. A potential, long-term consequence will be further social divisions between the digitally advantaged/disadvantaged with a long-term consequence of lifetime earnings, quality employment and, indeed, social stability.

The long-term impact of the pandemic varies greatly by qualification type. Academic and theoretical knowledge is more easily exchanged in data form. Moreover, progression for academic studies is generally through the system, into another learning organisation. It is relatively simple to arrange compensatory learning to fill in any gaps. Skills and practical know-how, such as in licence to practice qualifications are not amenable to remote learning, and accurate assessment impossible. Progression is frequently into employment, where compensatory skills acquisition and assessment is more difficult to arrange and to demonstrate for assessment.

In both cases there is a need for some form of compensatory education. Four models are being explored by institutions that deliver a high proportion of technical and vocational learning, generally as a response to local issues rather than regional strategies.

- A 'fourth term' where an additional semester is added to the academic year.
- A delayed start for progressing students in order to complete the learning and assessment of existing students.
- A doubling up of cohorts so that the older cohort, in effect, repeats a year.
- A programme of in-work assessment whereby instruction and assessment are organised for a student post assessment.

Each of these solutions is resource heavy and relies upon the good will of a teaching workforce that is already overloaded because of greater demand on time, the requirements of virtual teaching and also being challenged by the cultural issues associated with this new generations (Gen Z) and where, in the case of skills in particular, the supply chain of suitable personnel is at risk.

PART 5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

The nature and extent of the evidence

Evidence from systematic reviews has been limited but with significant mitigation messages- given the specificities of the FE Sector in the UK and the novelty of the crisis evidence from systematic reviews has not been able to cast light on COVID harms but has provided possible transferable mitigations focused on targeted investment in vulnerable groups; joined-up and collaborative interventions leading to personalised support packages.

A novel crisis in an under-researched sector - the density of grey literature and the paucity of peer-reviewed studies- the vast majority of the extant evidence underpinning COVID-related research in the FE Sector comes from 'grey literature' (e.g. non-peer reviewed surveys, sector-based statistics; research by sector representative organisations; perceptions of key actors and policy proposals of an array of civil society organisations).

The reasons for the relative absence of peer-reviewed studies are not difficult to understand - the pandemic has thus far lasted just over a year and so we are still relatively early in the crisis; the Sector is under-researched compared with schools and universities; academic research takes time, and the UK-based FE Sector has strong national specificities which makes the transfer of meaningful findings from international comparative studies challenging.

Sector based evidence is of high relevance, but with caveats concerning the degree of trustworthiness - the nature of the evidence in this report is highly relevant to the core issue. It was searched for manually and cross-referenced with interviews with key actors in the sector. Moreover, the international T20 discussions were also illuminating particularly regarding the knock-on effects of certain mitigation strategies.

The challenge with grey literatures is the degree of trustworthiness. Here the picture is uneven. The findings concerning vocational disruption are firmly rooted in national and sector-based statistics whereas findings regarding mental health and wellbeing are based on surveys by sector organisations or the perceptions of sector leaders and young people. These are not to be discounted (concerns about the mental wellbeing of young people come from a variety of sources), but there may be methodological shortcomings of these kind of sources that have to be taken into consideration when assessing the strength and reliability of the evidence.

The evidence strengthens through triangulation - despite caveats concerning the trustworthiness of some of the evidence, we are in little doubt concerning the main dimensions of harms due to the ways in which different types of evidence can be triangulated. However, the same cannot be said regarding mitigations. Evidence concerning the effects of single or clusters of mitigations from a wider international literature is largely inconclusive save for the recognition of local collaborative activity to address complex problems. Effect research concerning the effect of mitigations will require a return to the field in a year's time at least. Due to the paucity of relevant research we have, in addition, reported what sector and policy actors have been doing, the measures being advocated and the perceptions of stakeholders as to the potential impact of mitigation and counter measures. As part of this, we have also included a section on 'learner voices'.

Sector-based harms

Consistent correlations exist between unique Sector-based characteristics and Sector-based COVID harms - at the beginning of the report we asked a number of questions regarding COVID harms and mitigations and in particular, whether there was any relationship between the specific features of the Sector and particular harms. In the research we found a strong correlation between the unique functions and social vulnerabilities of the Sector and reported harms. These gave rise to the identification of six COVID impact themes from which the following main longer-term harms can be distilled. The mental wellbeing of young people and their concerns about futures will depend on the resolution of the following factors.

Vocational disruption - the research evidence, however, suggests that not all of these harms are of equal weighting in 2021. The most consistent findings relate to preparation for working life. Themes 1, 2 and 5 could be seen to merge into the concept of 'vocational disruption', particularly in relation to licence to practice courses, apprenticeships and transitions to the labour market. There are reports of hundreds of thousands of young people 'parked' inside the FE Sector due to holds ups in practical assessments. These learners could collide with a new intake in September. The evidence here is based on sector statistics and so should be considered as strong.

Widening the academic/vocational divide? - interestingly, differentials in the scale of learning disruption may have increased quantitative divide between academic and vocational learning. Teacher assessment of GCSEs and A Levels has led to an increase in the number of young people applying for university whereas Sector-based ILR statistics point to a decline of participation in vocational courses, particularly amongst adults. The academic track, including its transitions, may be expanding, whereas the vocational track appears to be shrinking. While the evidence here is based on participation statistics, the saliency of the issue is analytical. Trends in 2020-21 appear to correlate with growth phases of the academic track in the late-1980s and early 2000s and diverge from the attainment and participation 'stagnation' of the past decade of GCSE and A Level attainment.

Increasing social and educational inequalities - there is also evidence of increases in educational inequalities reflected in the growth in NEET numbers and the effects of learning disruption on disadvantaged learners due to national pandemic counter measures (the Education Endowment Foundation multi-study). There are concerns that remote and even blended learning may increase class gaps, but evidence from existing and commissioned studies is yet to deliver a clear picture. Moreover, and more serious in the longer-term is exactly how learning, socio-economic, demographic and spatial factors will intersect in the coming years and the ways in which these will relate to existing structural inequalities. Nevertheless, there is sufficient concern amongst policy makers and key civil society actors to suggest the need for major inquiries into youth unemployment in particular. To address Q3 concerning the relationship between direct/indirect and short/long-term harms will require longitudinal research.

The evidence regarding the condition of the FE Sector is contested - if the FE Sector is conceptualised as its diverse array of providers together with its relationships with major end-users (i.e. employers and work-based training providers), there is emerging evidence of Sector harm. Despite being a government priority post-Brexit with plans for infrastructure investment and the current provision of 'catch-up funding', a number of colleges remain financially stressed reflected, for example, in the recent collapse of the high profile HS2 college in Birmingham. In this context, disparities in per-capita student

income with schools have may be an issue. Moreover, what is not yet fully known is the condition of the SME sector of the economy at this point in the pandemic that has provided the bulk of apprenticeships and the impact of any economic declines on the flow of Apprenticeship placements. It seems, for example, that the Government's Kickstart programme has resulted in relatively few placements to date.

Spatial scalar and chrono analysis point to intersectional problems that require joined-up solutions over time - given the complexities of the Sector, the unfolding effects of the pandemic and the extent of the educational footprint of large GFE college groupings, in particular, it may prove helpful to conceptualise both harms and mitigations through spatial scalar and chrono lenses. It is tempting to see the main effects of the pandemic being at the micro-level (the individual learner and their immediate relations). It is clear that some individuals and their families are suffering both in terms of health and financial stability more than others. The pandemic is not socially indifferent. However, an additional concern is when differences become 'baked in' on wider scalars – the institutions being attended (meso-scale) and the communities and sub-regions (exo-scale) being affected by deeper economic and social factors over time.

Types of mitigations evaluated in systematic reviews

Multi-agency, collaborative interventions and personalised support packages - evidence from systematic reviews provides consistent evidence of potentially transferable mitigations focused on targeted investment in vulnerable groups; significant incentives for employers to expand work-based learning and, in particular, apprenticeships; joined-up, collaborative multi-agency interventions at the regional and local levels that bring together job placements; relevant careers education and guidance; personal support for vulnerable learners; additional learning opportunities in the form, for example, of summer schools. There is also evidence of the benefits of joined up service leading to personalised support packages.

Sector-based mitigations

'Welcomed' short-term measures - the mitigations measures implemented so far come from a variety of sources – government guidance, additional funding, IT resources and special programmes; the role of national agencies such as awarding bodies, Ofqual in terms of assessment flexibilities to assist vocational catch-up; adapted Ofsted inspections and monitoring visits and college-based support measures aimed at particular cohorts of learners. These measures are essentially short-term to address the immediate and foreseeable impacts of the pandemic. Government measures thus far have been largely welcomed by Sector leaders as both timely and necessary.

Sustained institutional strategies will prove to be very important – FE/sixth-form colleges and independent work-based learning providers are the first line of contact with learners and, therefore, the main vehicles through which policy is enacted and resources allocated. Evidence thus far, supported by key interviews, is that the Sector is proving to be responsive and resilient but stressed. Unsurprisingly, funding is key and this is the single sector-related factor mentioned in a House of Commons Briefing - Coronavirus: implications for the higher and further education sectors in England (Hubble and Bolton, 2020).

But little evidence thus far concerning impact - beyond the views of college leaders (important, but with the usual health warnings regarding institutional interests), we have

little evidence of the impact of these measures, particularly in relation to the deeper structural problems of learning and transitions inequalities. The key Sector indicators to note in the near future will include:

- Number of apprenticeship starts, completions and jobs offered.
- Participation, retention and pass rates, particularly in college-based vocational courses.
- Unemployment rates amongst 16-24 year olds.
- Number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- Funding levels of 16-19 education.
- Training and retention of FE staff.

If all these indicators, bar unemployment and NEET rates, were to rise then this would constitute some evidence that the Sector is recovering from the pandemic.

Not all mitigations impact equally – one of the key strategies employed to date has been the rapid promotion of online and remote learning. There is significant anecdotal evidence that more disadvantaged learners have found it more difficult to engage with this mode of learning due to resource and familial factors, thus widening class gaps. There are several studies underway on the effectiveness of remote learning and these may well confirm what is already widely perceived.

A response to a wicked problem is to build integrated recovery ecosystems – the complex inter-relationship between the various scalars of harms (from the micro-macro) affecting different aspects of working, living and learning has given rise to calls for comprehensive recovery programmes (e.g. AoC, 2021; GCLI, 2021; LGA, 2021). Some of these are sector-based, whereas others are area-based. However, taken together they could be seen to constitute the building of a skills and social-based ‘recover ecosystem’ (Buchanan, 2017, Grainger and Spours, 2018). The building of a COVID recovery ecosystem would see the further development of strong collaborative local and sub-regional networks comprising FE Sector providers, schools, HE institutions, employers and work-based learning providers together with a range of civil society organisations implementing comprehensive recovery plans that addressed fundamental structural issues of working, living and learning laid bare by the pandemic. These would have to be funded by central government, but with freedoms locally to integrate different funding streams to tailor interventions to locally identified need.

‘Home International’ comparisons - a preliminary four country analysis

FE Sector-based research across the four countries of the UK prior to the pandemic (e.g. Hodgson and Spours, 2016; Hodgson et al., 2019) suggested that there were strong forces for divergence between the smaller three countries of the UK and England/Westminster. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland could experience the benefits of smallness of scale to achieve a higher level of participation of FE partners in policy and governance compared to England. Moreover, England’s institutional landscape was more marketized and less co-ordinated than in the three smaller nations.

There was, therefore, an anticipation that these divergences might be revealed in the experience of the respective FE Sectors across the UK. In the event, we did not find particularly marked ‘differences between the UK nations regarding their experiences of the pandemic’. In specific instances, funding was more generous in Scotland compared with elsewhere and there was some evidence here of more sector participation with policy

makers given the smallness of scale. However, these differences were minor in relation to commonality (convergence) of challenge facing both FE learners and their providers across the different FE sectors of the UK. Interestingly, the quotation concerning ‘all in the same storm, but not in the same boat’ came from a Scottish Sector leader. Towards the end of the research, we received additional policy related documents from the Welsh Government via the DfE and these have been included in the text and in the references.

Limitations of the research

Four factors impacted on this research exercise to limit its effectiveness in terms of systematic review evidence. First, the relatively under-researched nature of the FE Sector and its UK specificities meant that there were a limited number of studies that were relevant to the identified impact themes. This led to the decision to add extra layers of primary evidence. Second, the evolving nature of the pandemic and the changing nature of counter measures means that what we have identified thus far can only be regarded as a snapshot of COVID related harms. More research will be required to understand how these harms will evolve. Third, and allied to this, the review of relevant mitigating measures should carry a health warning regarding the limitations of ‘policy and practice borrowing’ – what works in one context may not work in another and, therefore, there are also judgements to be made about the validity of transfer. Finally, while appreciating the distinction between short- and longer-term mitigating measures we have yet to fully understand how any of the researched and proposed measures will work out in practice. This suggests the need for a rolling programme of research and evaluation.

References

Aldridge, F., Pickles, C., Evans, S. and Shilson-Thomas, A. (2020) When furlough has to stop: next steps to avoid long-term unemployment, Learning and Work Institute and Reform, London.

All Parliamentary Group for Youth Employment (2021) Making Youth Employment Policy Work - <https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/APPG-Report-Plan-for-Jobs-FINAL.pdf> - accessed 13 May.

Association of Colleges (AoC) (2019) College Key Facts 2018/19 - <https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf> - accessed 17 May.

AoC (2020a) Rebuild: A Skills-led Recovery Plan - https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/REBUILD%20-%20A%20skills%20led%20recovery%20plan%20-%20%28full%20doc%29%20FINAL_o.pdf - accessed 17 May.

AoC (2020b) The impact of competition in post-16 education & training: A study on sufficiency, efficiency, and effectiveness of Post-16 provision - https://www.aoc.co.uk/system/files/AoC%20report%20-%20sufficiency%20efficiency%20and%20effectiveness%20FINAL%20publication%20v2_o.pdf - accessed 20 May.

AoC (2021a) Coronavirus Resource Hub - <https://www.aoc.co.uk/covid-19-resources> - accessed 25 May.

AoC (2021b) Mental health in colleges, January, <https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Mental%20Health%20in%20Colleges%20-%20Report.pdf> - accessed 26 April.

AoC (2021c) College Catch-Up Funding and Remote Education (April), <https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Report%20-%20College%20Catch-up%20Funding%20and%20Remote%20Education%20-%20April%202021.pdf> - accessed 27 April.

Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) (2020) Apprenticeship starts falling off a cliff, <https://www.aelp.org.uk/news/news/press-releases/apprenticeship-starts-falling-off-a-cliff/> - accessed 26 April.

Birdwell, J., Grist, M. and Margo, j. (2011) The forgotten half: a demos and private equity report - https://www.demos.co.uk/files/The_Forgotten_Half_-_web.pdf?1300105344 - accessed 1 July.

Bond, M; (2021) Schools and emergency remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic: A living rapid systematic review. Asian Journal of Distance Education, 15 (2) pp. 191-247. [10.5281/zenodo.4425683](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4425683).

Briggs, B., Freeman, D. and Pereira, R. (2021) Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on UK population - ONS - <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2021/01/25/understanding-how-the-pandemic-population/> - accessed 11 July.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U.; Ceci, S.J. (1994) Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychol. Rev.* 101, 568–586.

Buchanan, J., Anderson, P., and Power, G., Warhurst, C., and Mayhew, K. in D. Finegold, and J. Buchanan, eds. (2017) Skill ecosystems. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Skills and Training*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 444-465. ISBN 9780199655366.

Castelli, S., Grainger, P., Goldberg, S. and Sethi, B. (2021) Education and training: recovering the ground lost during the lockdown. Towards a more sustainable competence model for the future – G20 Insights - https://www.g20-insights.org/policy_briefs/education-and-training-recovering-the-ground-lost-during-the-lockdown-towards-a-more-sustainable-competence-model-for-the-future/ - accessed 21 May.

Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) (2021) An investigation into the relationship between outreach participation and KS4 attainment/HE progression - <https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/relationship-outreach-attainment-progression.pdf> - accessed 13 May.

City and Guilds Group (2020a) Act Now Or risk levelling down the life chances of millions - <https://www.cityandguildsgroup.com/research/act-now-or-risk-levelling-down-the-life-chances-of-millions> - accessed 13 May.

City and Guilds Group (2020b) Covid-19 – returning to the workplace and staying safe <https://www.cityandguilds.com/covid-19/return-to-work> - accessed 27 April.

City and Guilds Group (2021a) Building bridges towards future jobs - <https://www.cityandguildsgroup.com/research/building-bridges-towards-future-jobs> - accessed 13 May.

City and Guilds Group (2021b) Recovery and resilience: Reskilling our way back into work - <https://www.cityandguildsgroup.com/research/recovery-and-resilience-reskilling-our-way-back-into-work> - accessed 15 May.

CIPD (2021) Digital Learning in a Post-Covid-19 Economy: A literature review - https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/digital-learning-literature-review-report-2_tcm18-89290.pdf - accessed 21 May.

Colleges Wales (2020a) The effects of Covid19 pandemic clearly visible in apprenticeship furlough and redundancy numbers <https://www.colleges.wales/en/blog/post/the-effects-of-covid19-pandemic-clearly-visible-in-apprenticeship-furlough-and-redundancy-numbers> - accessed 26 April.

Colleges Wales (2020b) Further Success: Policy recommendations for the next Welsh Government in post-16 education and lifelong learning for Wales - <https://www.colleges.wales/image/publications/reports/Policy%20Asks/Manifesto%20asks%20eng.pdf> – accessed 17 May.

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report* -

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974507/20210331 - CRED Report - FINAL - Web Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974507/20210331_CRED_Report_FINAL_Web_Accessible.pdf) - accessed 15 May.

Corke, D. (2020) 'College Performance Benchmarks', London: Association of Colleges.

Cooper Gibson Research (2018) Incentive programmes for the recruitment and retention of teachers in FE. Literature review – Department for Education - [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762441/Incentive Programmes for the Recruitment and Retention of Teachers.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762441/Incentive_Programmes_for_the_Recruitment_and_Retention_of_Teachers.pdf) - accessed 21 May.

Department for Education (2021) FE remote and blended learning case studies: Good practice developed during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic - [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/966511/FE remote and blended learning case studies.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/966511/FE_remote_and_blended_learning_case_studies.pdf) - accessed 3 June.

Department for Education and Ofqual (2021) Consultation launched on 2021 exam replacement https://www.gov.uk/government/news/consultation-launched-on-2021-exam-replacement?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_source=b66528d1-f965-4056-9166-e96c679a202b&utm_content=daily - accessed 27 April.

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) (2021) Kickstart Scheme, 21 January <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme> - accessed 26 April.

Donald, F. and Tyler, J. (2019) Supported employment: Meta-analysis and review of randomized controlled trials of individual placement and support, PLOS One 14(2): e0212208.

doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0212208.eCollection - <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30785954/> - accessed 21 May.

Education Endowment Foundation (2021) Best evidence on impact of Covid-19 on pupil attainment. Research examining the potential impact of school closures on the attainment gap. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-school-closures-on-the-attainment-gap/#nav-best-evidence-on-impact-of-school-closures-on-the-attainment-gap> - accessed 27 April.

Elliot-Major, L., Eyles, A. and Machin, S. (2020) Generation COVID: Emerging Work and Education Inequalities, LSE Centre for Economic Performance - <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cepcovid-19-011.pdf> - accessed 6 July.

Estyn (2021) Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing - the work of further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic - <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-03/Learner%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Emotional%20Wellbeing%20in%20the%20Post-16%20sectors%20.pdf> - accessed 11 July.

European Commission (2013) The effectiveness and cost-benefits of apprenticeships: results of the quantitative analysis – European Union.

Evans, S. and Clayton, N. (2021) One Year On: The labour market impacts of coronavirus and priorities for the years ahead <https://learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/pandemic-has-widened-jobs-and-skills-inequalities-putting-levelling-up-at-risk/> - accessed 26 April.

Exley, S. (2021) Building an FE Research Community of Practice – FETL – <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/building-an-fe-research-community-of-practice-> accessed 4 June.

Eyles, J. (2021) How has COVID-19 disrupted the UK labour market, and how can better adult training and job placement aid the recovery? IPPO - <https://covidandsociety.com/about-ippo/> - accessed 21 May.

Fancourt, D. and Bradbury, A. (2021) We asked 70,000 people how coronavirus affected them – what they told us revealed a lot about inequality in the UK, The Conversation - <https://theconversation.com/we-asked-70-000-people-how-coronavirus-affected-them-what-they-told-us-revealed-a-lot-about-inequality-in-the-uk-143718> - accessed 15 May.

Farquaharson, C., Britton, J. and Sibieta, L. (2019) Big New Money for Schools and FE, But FE Spending Still Over 7% Down On 2010 While No Growth In School Spending Per Pupil For 13 Years, IFS, <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14370> - accessed 2 June.

Fazel, M., Hoagwood, K., Stephan, F. and Ford, T. (2014) Mental Health Interventions in Schools in High-Income Countries The Lancet, Doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)70312-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)70312-8) – Accessed 2 July.

FE Weekly (2021) Mental Health and Wellbeing in FE, March. <https://feweek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Mental-Health-Wellbeing-in-FE-digi.pdf> - accessed 26 April.

Feng, Z., Ralston, K., Everington, D. and Dibben, C. (2017) Long-term health effects of NEET experience: evidence from a longitudinal analysis of young people in Scotland, International Journal for Population Science 1(1) DOI:[10.23889/ijpds.v1i1.327](https://doi.org/10.23889/ijpds.v1i1.327)

Fletcher-Wood, H. and Zucollo, J. (2020) The effects of high quality professional development on teachers and students, a rapid review and meta analysis – Education Policy Institute - https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EPI-Wellcome_CPD-Review_2020.pdf - accessed 21 May.

Financial Times (2020) UK universities see record admissions, despite the pandemic, <https://www.ft.com/content/8f3ab80a-ec2b-427d-80ae-38ad27ad423d> - accessed 16 May.

Ford, T. and John, A. (2021) Mental health of children and young people during the pandemic, BMJ 2021;372: n614.

Francis, B. (2021) Why research on remote learning offers hope <https://www.sixthformcolleges.org/1412/blog-6/post/38/why-research-on-remote-learning-offers-hope> - accessed 27 April.

Francis, C. (2021) Covid-19's effects on Diverse Ethnic Communities: a deeper understanding through co-production - https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement/2021/02/23/covid-19s-effects-diverse-ethnic-communities/?utm_source=Bloomsbury%20Theatre&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2882457_Engagement%20Team%20February%20Newsletter&dm_i=2HJW,1PS49,7WEDTE,5V1I4,1 - accessed 15 May.

Frederick, DE. and Vander Weele, TJ. (2019). Supported employment: Meta-analysis and review of randomized controlled trials of individual placement and support - PLoS One. Feb 20;14(2):e0212208. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0212208.eCollection 2019.- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30785954/> - accessed 21 May.

Gardiner, D. and Goedhuys, M. (2020) Youth Aspirations and the Future of Work: A Review of the Literature and Evidence, ILO Working Paper 8 - http://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/working-papers/WCMS_755248/lang--en/index.htm - accessed 21 May.

Gov UK (2020) Academic Year 2019/20 - A level and other 16 to 18 results - <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2019-20> - accessed 11 July.

GOV UK (2021) Providing apprenticeships during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, updated 20 April <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response> - accessed 26 April.

Grainger, P. (2019) Crossing Boundaries 2: The FE sector and permeable spaces. London: Further Education Trust for Leadership 2019. - <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/crossing-boundaries-2-the-fe-sector-and-permeable-spaces/> - accessed 4 June.

Grainger, P. and Little, P. (2019) Colleges as anchors in their spaces: a study of college leadership of place, London: Further Education Trust for Leadership 2019 - <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/colleges-as-anchors-in-their-spaces-a-study-in-college-leadership-of-place/> - accessed 4 June.

Grainger, P. (2021) Missing generation's skill gap must be addressed for sustained economic growth - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2020/aug/missing-generations-skill-gap-must-be-addressed-sustained-economic-growth> - accessed 21 May.

Grainger, P. and Spours, K. (2018) A Social Ecosystem Model: A New Paradigm for Skills Development? Insights T20 Argentina - <https://t20argentina.org/publicacion/a-social-ecosystem-model-a-new-paradigm-for-skills-development/> - accessed 20 May.

Hagell, A. et al., (2019) Young people's suggestions for the assets needed in the transition to adulthood: Mapping the research evidence - Health Foundation Working Paper - https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/upload/publications/2019/Health%20Foundation%20working%20paper%20assets%20final_v3.pdf - accessed 21 May.

Hart, A., Psyllou, A., Eryigit-Madzwamuse, S., Heaver, B., Rathbone, A., Duncan, S. and Wigglesworth, P. (2020). Transitions into work for young people with complex needs: a systematic review of UK and Ireland studies to improve employability. British Journal of Guidance & Counselling <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2020.1786007> - accessed 21 May.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2013) Tackling the crisis facing young people: building 'high opportunity progression eco-systems', Oxford Review of Education 39 (2) 211-228 - <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03054985.2013.787923> - accessed 21 May.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2016) Restrictive and expansive policy learning – challenges and strategies for knowledge exchange in upper secondary education across the four countries of the UK - Journal of Education Policy Volume 31, [Issue 5](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1132012) <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1132012>.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2017) 'Future apprenticeships in England: the role of mediation in the new model', Journal of Education and Work, 30 (11) 1-16.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2018) *A social ecosystem model: conceptualizing and connecting working, living and learning in London's New East.* - <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A76419> - accessed 2 July.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2019) 'Further education in England: at the crossroads between a national, competitive sector and a locally collaborative system?', Journal of Education and Work 32(3):1-15 DOI:10.1080/13639080.2019.1621272

Hodgson, A., Spours, K., Gallacher, J., Irwin, T. and James, D. (2019) FE and skills – is the 'UK laboratory' open for expansive policy learning?, Journal of Education and Work Volume 32, 2019 - [Issue 3: Further Education and Skills Across the UK: New Opportunities for Policy Learning?](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13639080.2019.1621272?journalCode=cjw20) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13639080.2019.1621272?journalCode=cjw20> - accessed 20 May.

House of Lords Youth Unemployment Committee (2021) How do we create and protect jobs for young people? *A call for evidence* - <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/506/youth-unemployment-committee/news/153152/how-do-we-create-and-protect-jobs-for-young-people-committee-seeks-views/> - accessed 13 May.

Hubble, S. and Bolton, P. (2020) Coronavirus implications for the further and higher education sectors in England, Briefing Paper Number 8893, 17 April - <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8893/> - accessed 20 May.

Hughes, D. and Smith, G. (2020) Youth transitions: creating pathways to success - <https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/EducationDevelopmentTrust/files/76/7625c6ce-d1cd-4250-80b7-7b0bd23ac421.pdf> - accessed 12 May.

Janmatt, G. and Pensiero, N. (2021) Post-16 educational trajectories and social inequalities in political engagement <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/post-16-educational-trajectories-and-social-inequalities-in-political-engagement> - accessed 21 May.

Kluge, J., Puerto, S., Robalino, D., Romero, JM., Rother, F., Stöterau, J., Weidenkaff, F. and Witte, M. (2017) Interventions to improve the labour market outcomes of youth: A systematic review of training, entrepreneurship promotion, employment services and subsidized employment interventions. Campbell Systematic Reviews,- <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2017.12> - <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.4073/csr.2017.12> - accessed 21 May.

Institute for Apprenticeships (2021) COVID 19 information regarding apprenticeships, <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/covid-19-information-regarding-apprenticeships> - accessed 26 April.

Institute of Fiscal Studies (2020) 2020 annual report on education spending in England - <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15150> - accessed 17 May.

Khan, M., Grainger, P., Sethi, B. and Goldberg, S. (2020) 'Policy Brief: Heightening cybersecurity to promote safety and fairness for citizens in the post-covid-19 digital world: Task force: COVID-19' Multidisciplinary Approaches to Complex Problems of T20 Saudi Arabia. 2020.

Krystel, S. (2021) Five questions on the minds of senior leaders after UCAS's January deadline - <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/03/26/five-questions-on-the-minds-of-senior-leaders-post-ucass-january-deadline/> - accessed 21 May.

Lee, J. (2020) Mental Health Effects of School Closures During Covid-19, The Lancet, DOI:[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1016/S2352-4642\(20\)30109-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30109-7) - [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/pii/S2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/pii/S2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext) - accessed 2 July.

Lester, S. Katwa, M. and Sutcliffe, K. (2020) Service needs of young people affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): A systematic review of UK qualitative evidence, Science Direct Volume 118, 105429 - <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740920310227> - accessed 21 May.

Local Government Association (LGA) (2020a) Re-thinking youth participation for the present and next generation: education to employment <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation-education-employment> - accessed 12 May.

LGA (2020b) Re-thinking local: skills and the green economy - <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/re-thinking-local/re-thinking-local-skills-and-green-economy> - accessed 12 May.

LGA (2020c) Rethinking Local, https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/3.70%20Rethinking%20local_%203councilscan_landscape_FINAL.pdf - accessed 12 May.

Lönngren, J & van Poeck, KL. (2020) Wicked problems: a mapping review of the literature, International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology, DOI: 10.1080/13504509.2020.1859415.

Lounds-Taylor, J. et al., (2012) A systematic review of vocational interventions for young adults with autism spectrum disorders, Pediatrics, DOI: [10.1542/peds.2012-0682](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0682) - <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22926170/> - accessed 21 May.

Lloyd, C. and Waghorn, G. (2007) The Importance of Vocation in Recovery for Young People with Psychiatric Disabilities, British Journal of Occupational Therapy, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030802260707000202> - accessed 21 May.

Lupton R., Thomson, S., Velthuis, S and Unwin, L. (2021) Moving on from initial GCSE 'failure': Post-16 transitions for 'lower attainers' and why the English education system must do better - <https://mkonuffieldfounpg9ee.kinstacdn.com/wp->

[content/uploads/2021/02/Post16-transitions-for-lower-attainers_summary.pdf](#) - accessed 3 June.

Mann, A., Denis, V. and Percy, C. (2020a) Career Ready? How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19 – OECD - <https://cica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/e1503534-en.pdf> - accessed 21 May.

Mann, A. et al., (2020b) Teenagers' Career Aspirations and the Future of Work – OECD - <https://www.oecd.org/berlin/publikationen/Dream-Jobs.pdf> - accessed 21 May.

Mansfield, L. et al., (2016) Sport and dance interventions for healthy young people (15–24 years) to promote subjective well-being: a systematic review, *Sports and Exercise Medicine* - <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/8/7/e020959> - accessed 21 May.

Mawn, L., Oliver, EJ., Akhter, N., Bambra, CL., Torgerson, C., Bridle, C. and Stain, HJ. (2017). Are we failing young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs)? A systematic review and meta-analysis of re-engagement interventions. *Systematic Reviews*, 6, Article number: 16
<https://systematicreviewsjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13643-016-0394-2> - accessed 21 May.

McCulloch, A. (2021) Which apprenticeships are worst affected by Covid-19?, *Personnel Today*, 8 February - <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/which-apprenticeship-sectors-are-worst-affected-by-covid-19/> - accessed 26 April.

Morten Schiefloe, P. (2021) The Corona Crisis: A Wicked Problem, *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 49(1):5-8.- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33200675/> - accessed 1 June.

Mylona, S. and Jenkins, H. (2020) Survey of effect of Covid-19 on learners (2020) - Results summary – Welsh Government Social Research - Social Research Number: 25/2021 - <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2021-03/survey-of-effect-of-covid-19-on-learners-2020-results-summary.pdf> - accessed 11 July.

Newton, B., Sinclair, A., Tyers, C. and Wilson, T. (2020) Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work An initial evidence review to identify what works and inform good practice among practitioners and employers – Institute for Employment Studies - https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/548_o.pdf - accessed 21 May.

National Union of Students (NUS) (2020a) Coronavirus and students survey report, April <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/covid-19-and-students-survey-report> - Accessed 27 April.

NUS (2020b) COVID-19 and Students Survey Report Phase 2, September, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/covid-19-and-students-survey-report-phase-2-public-version> - accessed 27 April.

NUS (2020c) Coronavirus Student Survey Phase III – November, <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/coronavirus-student-survey-phase-iii-november-2020-finance-report> - accessed 27 April.

Nuffield Foundation (2021a) Education catch-up plans of all four UK governments fail to offer pupils the support they need - <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/education-catch-up-plans-of-all-four-uk-governments-fail-to-offer-pupils-the-support-they-need> - accessed 21 May.

Nuffield Foundation (2021b) Working to understand and address the social implications of COVID-19 - <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/research/covid-19> - accessed 21 May.

National Youth Agency and Youth Employment UK (2021) Outside, Looking In Young people's employment and the future economy: A youth work response. <https://backend.nya2.joltrouter.net/wp-content/uploads/1013-NYA-employment-report-Digital-Final-version-1.pdf> - accessed 12 May.

NCFE (2021) Covid-19 response for 2020-21 <https://www.ncfe.org.uk/covid-19-response-for-2020-21> - accessed 27 April.

Nelson, J. and O' Donnell, L. (2012) Approaches to supporting young people not in education, employment or training: a review – NFER - <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/rsrno1/rsrno1.pdf> - accessed 21 May.

Nelson, J., Martin, K. and Featherstone, G. (2013) What Works in Supporting Children and Young People to Overcome Persistent Poverty? A Review of UK and International Literature - <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/2027/nieqo1.pdf> - accessed 21 May.

NHS Digital (2020) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey, October, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up> - accessed 27 April.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021a) Youth Unemployment, January to March 2019 to October to December 2020. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/adhocs/1296oyouthunemploymentjanuarytomarch2019tooctobertodecember2020> - accessed 26 April.

ONS (2021b) Labour market overview, UK: April 2021: Estimates of employment, unemployment, economic inactivity and other employment-related statistics for the UK. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/april2021> - accessed 26 April.

ONS (2021c) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: March 2021 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/march2021> - accessed 27 April.

Ofqual (2021a) Vocational and technical qualifications contingency regulatory framework, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vocational-and-technical-qualifications-contingency-regulatory-framework?utm_source=City%20%26%20Guilds&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=12310856_Mandy%20newsletter_April_15_04_2021&utm_content=Vocational%20and%20Technical%20Qualifications%20contingency%20oframework&dm_i=1LRT,7BV48,R62SDY,TQI1O_1 - accessed 27 April.

Ofqual (2021b) Grading GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021 Setting out Ofqual's decision on grading in 2021 and the rationale for that decision - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/940665/6720-2_Grading_GCSEs_AS_and_A_levels_in_2021.pdf - accessed 16 May.

Orr, K. (2020) A future for the further education sector in England, *Journal of Education and Work*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2020.1852507> - accessed 27 April.

Papoutsaki, D. and Wilson, T. (2020) Covid-19 and the Low Paid: Early Analysis Of Labour Force Survey, Institute for Employment Studies - <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/covid-19-and-low-paid-early-analysis-labour-force-survey> - accessed 6 July.

Pearson (2021) UK BTEC, Work-based learning and Functional Skills assessment arrangements in the light of COVID-19, <https://www.pearson.com/uk/educators/fe-college-educators/supporting-the-fe-sector-during-coronavirus-covid-19/assessmentarrangements.html> - accessed 27 April.

Pensiero, N. and Janmatt, G. (2021) Post-16 pathways: the role of peers, family background and expectations - <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/post-16-pathways-the-role-of-peers-family-background-and-expectations> - accessed 21 May.

Prime Minister's Office (2020) Major expansion of post-18 education and training to level up and prepare workers for post-COVID economy - <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-expansion-of-post-18-education-and-training-to-level-up-and-prepare-workers-for-post-covid-economy> - accessed 17 May.

Princes Trust Youth Index 2021 - <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/youth-index-2021> - accessed 14 May.

Public Health Wales (2021) Children and young people's mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic - <https://phw.nhs.wales/publications/publications1/children-and-young-peoples-mental-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-report/> - accessed 6 July.

Quilter-Pinner, H., Webster, S. and Parkes, H. (2020) Guaranteeing the right start - Preventing youth unemployment after Covid-19. IPPR <https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-07/guaranteeing-the-right-start-july20.pdf> - accessed 12 May.

Raffo, C. and Thompson, S. (2021) Students who do not achieve a grade C or above in English and Maths - <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/students-who-do-not-achieve-a-grade-c-or-above-in-english-and-maths> - accessed 21 May.

Redrow (2021) Construction careers and apprenticeships post-coronavirus: the impact of earn while you learn. https://www.redrowplc.co.uk/media/3047/op21439725_apprenticeship_report_2021_v4.pdf - accessed 12 May.

Rittel, H, Webber, M. (1973) Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sci* 4: 155-169.

Rivas, C., Vigurs, C., Cameron, J., and Yeo, L. (2019). A realist review of which advocacy interventions work for which abused women under what circumstances. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*, 6, CD013135. doi:10.1002/14651858.CD013135.pub2

Rogers, L. and Spours, K. (2020) 'The great stagnation of upper secondary education in England: A historical and system perspective', *British Educational Research Journal* - <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3630> - accessed 16 May.

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) (2021) Covid-19 - Research Studies On Children And Young People's Views - <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-research-studies-children-young-peoples-views#completed-studies> - accessed 2 July.

Ruzicka, A. (2021) 'How does the Kickstart Scheme work? 10 key questions answered on the long-awaited £2bn plan to get young people into jobs', *This is the Money* <https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/smallbusiness/article-8694325/Kickstart-Scheme-does-work-good.html> - accessed 26 April.

Sarygulov, A. (2021) Widening chasms - <http://www.brightblue.org.uk/widening-chasms-analysis/> - accessed 15 May.

Savage, M. (2021) 'Youth jobs scheme creates just 490 posts in north-east of England' *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/25/youth-jobs-scheme-creates-just-490-posts-in-north-east-of-england> - accessed 26 April.

Savours, B. and Koehane, N. (2019) 'Leading skills: Exploring leadership in Further Education colleges', *Social Market Foundation* - <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Leading-skills-Exploring-leadership-in-Further-Education-colleges-Paper-1.pdf> - accessed 21 May.

Scottish Government (2020) Protecting Scotland, Renewing Scotland: The Government's Programme for Scotland 2020-2021 - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/protecting-scotland-renewing-scotland-governments-programme-scotland-2020-2021/pages/7/> - accessed 25 May.

Shaw-Taylor, L. (2020) COVID-19- The long view – *University of Cambridge* - <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/covid19-the-long-view> - accessed 11 July.

Shemilt, I., Gough D, Thomas, J., Stansfield, C., Bangpan, M., Brunton, J., Dickson, K., Graziosi, S., Hul, P., Kneale, D., Muraki, S., Ramadani, F. and Vigurs, C. (2021) *Living map of systematic reviews of social sciences research evidence on COVID-19*. London: EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute, University College London.

Sixth Form Colleges Association (2021) What colleges can do for their students' mental wellbeing right now <https://www.sixthformcolleges.org/1412/blog-6/post/37/what-colleges-can-do-for-their-students-mental-wellbeing-right-now> - accessed 5 April.

Small Business Prices (2021) The best industries for apprentices In The UK: 2021 Stats <https://smallbusinessprices.co.uk/uk-apprentices/> - accessed 26 April.

Social Mobility Commission (2021) *The road not taken: the drivers of course selection: The determinants and consequences of post-16 education choices* -

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/973596/The_road_not_taken_-_drivers_of_course_selection.pdf - accessed 12 May.

Social Ventures Australia (2018) Evidence scan of educational interventions for children and young people disengaged from education – <https://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/SVA-Perspective-Education-Evidence-scan-for-Children-and-young-people-disengaged.pdf> - accessed 21 May.

Solvason, C. and Elliott, G. (2013) “Why is research still invisible in further education”, *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. Plymouth, UK, 6(6). doi: 10.47408/jldhe.v6i6.206.

South Australia Centre for Economic Studies (2008) Review of Initiatives into Workforce: Re-Engagement of Long Term Disengaged Workers – https://www.adelaide.edu.au/saces/ua/media/86/reviewofinitiativesintoworkforcereports_ept2008.pdf - accessed 21 May.

Spours, K., Hodgson, A., Grainger, P. and Smith, D. (2020) ‘Area-based reviews and their aftermath: moving to a post-incorporation model for further education in England?’, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 72 (3) 35-374.

T 20 Italy (2021) Task Force 4 – Digital Transformation - <https://www.t20italy.org/2020/12/05/tf-4-digital-transformation/> - accessed 11 July.

Taylor, J.L., McPheeters, M.L., and Sathe N.A., Dove, D., Veenstra-Vanderweele, J. and Warren, Z. (2012). A systematic review of vocational interventions for young adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics* 130(3):531-8. doi: 10.1542/peds.2012-0682.Epub 2012 Aug 27. - <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22926170/> - accessed 21 May.

Thomas, T. (2021) Black youth unemployment rate of 40% similar to time of Brixton riots, data shows *The Guardian*, 11 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/11/black-youth-unemployment-rate-brixton-riots-covid> - accessed 26 April.

Thomas, J., Brunton, J. and Graziosi, S. (2010) EPPI-Reviewer 4.0: software for research synthesis. EPPI-Centre Software. London: Social Science Research Unit.

Tripney, J. S., Hogrebe, N., Schmidt, E., Vigurs, C., & Stewart, R. (2019). Employment Supports for Adults with Disabilities in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Campbell Systematic Review. *Research on Social Work Practice*. doi:10.1177/1049731517715316

Tuckett, S., Robinson, D. and Bunting, F. (2021) Measuring the disadvantage gap in 16-19 education. Nuffield Foundation, https://mkonuffieldfounpg9ee.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Measuring-the-16-19-disadvantage-attainment-gap_EPI-2021.pdf - accessed 27 April.

UK Parliament (2021a) How do we create and protect jobs for young people? Committee seeks views, 25 March <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/506/youth-unemployment-committee/news/153152/how-do-we-create-and-protect-jobs-for-young-people-committee-seeks-views/> - accessed 26 April.

UK Parliament (2021b) Employment: Young People: Question for Department for Work and Pensions <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-02-03/148799> - accessed 12 May.

University College London (UCL) COVID-19 Social Study, February, Analysis: We asked 70,000 people how coronavirus affected them <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2021/feb/analysis-we-asked-70000-people-how-coronavirus-affected-them> - accessed 27 April.

UPP Foundation (2021) Student Futures Commission - <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/> - accessed 13 May.

Vetsch J, Wakefield CE., McGill, BC., Cohn RJ., Ellis SJ., Stefanic ,N. Sawyer, SM., Zebrack, B., and Sansom-Daly, UM. (2018). Educational and vocational goal disruption in adolescent and young adult cancer survivors. *Psycho Oncology*, Volume27(2), <https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.4525> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pon.4525> - accessed 21 May.

Vigurs, C. A., Schucan Bird, K., Quy, K., & Gough, D. (2016). *The impact of domestic violence perpetrator programmes on victim and criminal justice outcomes: A systematic review of reviews of research evidence* (What Works: Crime Reduction Systematic Review Series, Pp. 1-88). UK: College of Policing.

Vigurs, C., Maidment, C., Fell, M., and Shipworth, D. (2021). Customer Privacy Concerns as a Barrier to Sharing Data about Energy Use in Smart Local Energy Systems: A Rapid Realist Review. *Energies*, 14 (5), 1285. doi:10.3390/en14051285

Waddell, G., Burton, A. and Kendall, N. (2008) Vocational Rehabilitation: What Works, for Whom, and When? - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209474/hwwb-vocational-rehabilitation.pdf - accessed 21 May.

Welsh Government (2021a) Outcomes for learners in post-16 education affected by the Coronavirus (COViD-19) pandemic: August 2019 to July 2020, <https://gov.wales/outcomes-learners-post-16-education-affected-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-august-2019-july-2020> - accessed 2 July.

Welsh Government (2021b) Apprentices furloughed or made redundant during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: up to 26 March 2021 <https://gov.wales/apprentices-furloughed-or-made-redundant-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-26-march-2021> - accessed 26 April.

Welsh Parliament (2020) Into sharp relief: inequality and the pandemic - <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld13403/cr-ld13403-e.pdf> - accessed 11 July.

What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (2015) Evidence Review 8 Apprenticeships - https://whatworksgrowth.org/public/files/Policy_Reviews/15-09-04_Apprenticeships_Review.pdf - accessed 21 May.

What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (2020) COVID-19: Local responses to youth unemployment and scarring -

https://whatworksgrowth.org/public/files/Policy_Reviews/COVID_19_Local_responses_to_Youth_Scarring.pdf - accessed 6 July.

Young Minds (2021) Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs - <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/4350/coronavirus-report-winter.pdf> - accessed 11 July.

Youth Employment Group (2021) Securing a place for young people in the nation's economic recovery - <https://www.impetus.org.uk/assets/publications/Youth-Employment-Group-Final-Working-Group-Recommendations-August-2020.pdf> - accessed 13 May.

Youth Employment UK (2021) *New Inquiry Launch – APPG for Youth Employment* - <https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/new-inquiry-launch-appg-for-youth-employment/> - accessed 3 June.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Short-term and long-term harms listed by the DfE for group to consider evidence on:

Short Term Harms

- Mental Health
- Well-Being & Development
- Physical Health
- Nutrition
- Misuse of Substances
- Domestic Violence
- Support Service Access
- Indirect Groups at Risk (e.g., those with extended caring responsibilities)
- Vulnerable children and SEND children
- Learning loss / Educational Knock-on Effect
- Immediate Earning Capacity Changes

Long Term Harms

- Mental Health
- Well-Being & Development
- Physical Health
- Nutrition
- Misuse of Substances
- Domestic Violence
- Support Service Access
- Indirect Groups at Risk (e.g., those with extended caring responsibilities)
- Vulnerable children and SEND children
- Learning loss / Educational Knock-on Effect
- Gender & Social Group Imbalance Widening
- Changes in socioeconomic status (SES)

Appendix 2. – Methodological Annex

Provides details on:

- Overall approach
- Data sources
- Search strategy
- Data handling
- Prisma for harms studies
- Table on harms identified per study
- Table of harms by mitigation identified per review
- Quality assessment

Evaluating Sector-related harms and mitigations

We took a two-stage approach in evaluating the rapid evidence review. The first stage was to identify the harms experienced by students and staff of further education. We looked to the limited number of research studies in the UK on the impacts of Covid 19 on further education, together with a total of 30 reports of primary studies from relevant organisations in the Sector. These are mainly based on surveys, literature reviews and administrative statistics (see Table 1). Their inclusion was based on a high degree of relevance to the six impact themes and the relative robustness of the research method employed.

Primary documentation searched for harms

Relevant documentation has been reviewed from the following UK-based organisations for both evidence of harms and mitigations.

Government agencies UK

DfE and DWP – guidance documents
Scottish Funding Council – strategic documents
Northern Ireland Direct
Ofqual

FE sector representative organisations

Association of Colleges
Colleges Wales
Colleges Scotland
Sixth Form Colleges Association
Further Educational Trust for Learning (FETL)

Trade union/professional associations

UCU
UNISON
NUS

Awarding bodies

Pearson
City and Guilds
NCFE

Sector representatives

11 interviews with institutional leaders and sector representatives

Work-based route and apprenticeships

Institute for Apprenticeships
Local Government Association
The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP)
The Federation of Small Businesses
National Youth Agency
Welsh Assembly Government
Personnel Today

Think tanks, research institutes and educational foundations

The Education Endowment Foundation
Bright Blue
The Education Policy Institute
The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)
Nuffield Foundation
Learning and Work Foundation
Education Development Trust

Search strings for database search for harms: Proquest and Google Scholar

Proquest Central – searched 21 April 2021

Ti/ ab (COVID19 OR coronavirus OR pandemic OR lockdown)

Or

MAINSUBJECT.EXACT:COVID19

AND ti/ab

“further education OR “vocational education” OR “A level” OR “sixth form” OR “6th form”
or “post 16 education” OR “tertiary education” OR “post-secondary”

AND

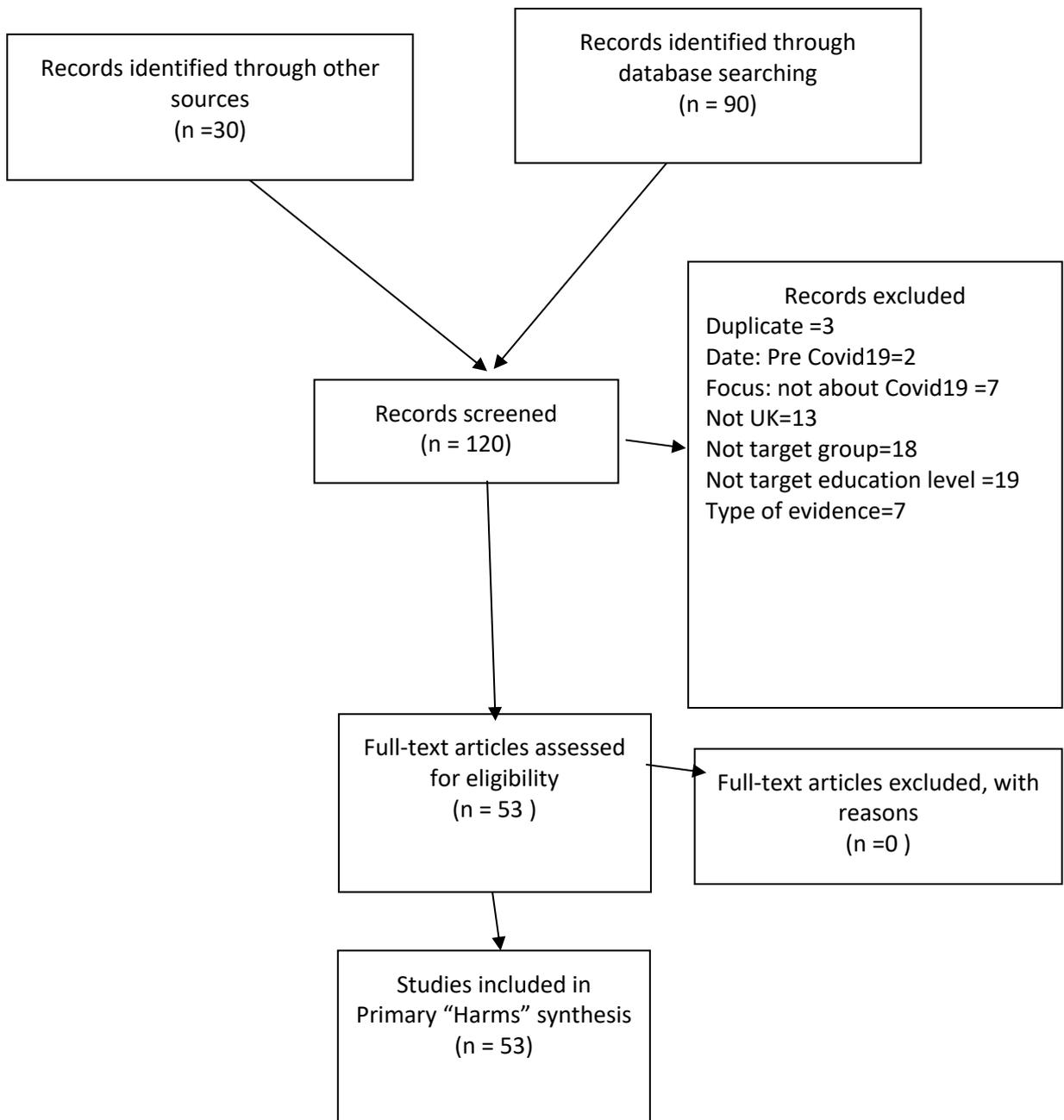
FILTER: UK

Google scholar – searched 21 April 2021

Covid19 AND ("UK" OR "England" OR English OR "Wales" OR Welsh OR "Northern Ireland"
OR “Northern Irish”) and ("vocational education" OR "sixth form" OR "A-levels" OR
"further education" OR “post 16 education” OR (“tertiary education” OR “post-secondary
education”)

results 10k plus – 90 included for screening

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for identification of studies on harms



Screening

Screening for inclusion of literature on harms from bibliographic databases was done by CV using EPPI Reviewer Information management software (Thomas et al., 2010). Handsearching for literature outside of databases necessarily takes place at the time of searching, this searching was conducted by KS, PG. Screening for inclusion of systematic review evidence was done by CV and checked by KS and PG.

Data extraction and synthesis

There was a diversity of types of research design and outcomes measured. A meta-analysis was not appropriate and so a narrative synthesis was performed against the framework of harms identified from the literature.

Quality assessment of harm literature included

Given the relatively tentative nature of the evidence in the FE Sector, the concept of ‘robustness’ can be seen to build from a triangulation of different forms of evidence and the ‘density’ of emerging findings. As well the quality of the execution of the study and the precision of measures, or relevance to this evidence review. It may be the case, therefore, that the concept of robustness may be found over time in the subsequent connective analysis, rather than in a single piece of evidence.

At the beginning of each COVID impact theme we assess the veracity of the evidence from two perspectives – the relevance of the research in terms of the review and the questions being asked and the trustworthiness of the research under review. We also referred to the quality checklist below at the end of this appendix.

In making these judgements we are also alive to three issues. First, that the degree of trustworthiness can be built by virtue of the density of evidence in a particular issue rather than simply assessing a single piece of evidence. Second, that we may be more confident of reports of COVID harms than proposed or actual mitigations because of the challenge of assessing their effects over time. Third, the impact of both COVID harms and mitigations could inter-relate in a complex system way and, therefore, we either have to seek evidence historically and international comparatively or understand these possibilities analytically.

Table 1. Primary studies of harms from Sector-related organisations

Theme	Reviews found from Sector organisations
Theme 1. Vocational disruption - young people, economic participation and Apprenticeships	<p>AELP Covid impact survey on apprenticeships (2020) of 80 providers working with 12,458 businesses employing 35,350 apprentices.</p> <p>City And Guilds Group and YouGov - <i>Recovery and Resilience</i> - Survey Of 2,000 Working and Non-Working Adults In The UK</p> <p>Learning and Work Institute (2021) <i>One Year On: The Labour Market Impacts Of Coronavirus And Priorities For The Years Ahead</i> - Synthesis Of Multiple Statistical Sources</p> <p>Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021) <i>Youth Unemployment</i>, January to March 2019 to October to December 2020 - survey.</p>

	<p>ONS (2021) <i>Labour market overview, UK: April 2021: Estimates of employment, unemployment, economic inactivity and other employment-related statistics for the UK</i> – survey.</p> <p>ONS (2021) <i>Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)</i> – survey.</p> <p>Small Business Prices (2021) <i>The best industries for apprentices in the UK: 2021</i> – Apprenticeship statistics from DfE and survey of 4000 apprentices.</p> <p>Welsh Government (2021) <i>Apprentices Furloughed or Made Redundant During the Coronavirus (Covid-19)</i> – Statistical Release.</p>
Theme 2. The mental health of young people	<p>Association of Colleges (2021) <i>Mental Health in Colleges</i> – 107 FE institutional survey responses.</p> <p>NHS (2020) <i>Mental Health of Children and Young People in England: Wave 1</i> follow up to the 2017 survey.</p> <p>NUS Student Survey of mental health and wellbeing 1 (April 2020) – survey of 9872 students.</p> <p>NUS Student Survey of mental health and wellbeing 2 (September 2020) – survey of 4178 students.</p> <p>NUS Student Surveys of mental health and wellbeing 3 (November 2020) – survey of 4214 students.</p> <p>Princes Trust (2021) <i>Youth Index 2021</i> – survey of 2,180 16-25 year olds from across the UK.</p>
Theme 3. Changes to assessment, learning and qualifying	<p>Education Endowment Foundation (2021) <i>Best Evidence on Impact of Covid-19 On Pupil Attainment. Research Examining the Potential Impact of School Closures On The Attainment Gap</i> – Synthesis Of Multiple International Studies.</p> <p>Association of Colleges (2021) <i>College Performance Benchmarks</i> – analysis of sector-based ILR data.</p>
Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs	<p>Commission On Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) – Synthesis of Eight Major Reviews on Ethnicity.</p> <p>NFER (2021) <i>Approaches to supporting young people not in education, employment or training: literature review.</i></p> <p>Nuffield Foundation (2020-2022) <i>Post-16 educational trajectories and social inequalities in political engagement</i> – using British Household Panel Survey and Understanding Society (BHPS/US).</p> <p>Nuffield Foundation and Education Policy Institute (2021) <i>Measuring the disadvantage gap in 16-19 education</i> – analysis of data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) student and exam files and the Ofqual qualification register.</p> <p>Social Mobility Commission (2021) <i>The road not taken: the drivers of course selection: The determinants and consequences of post-16 education choices</i> – analysis of</p>

	<p>administrative data linking the education and earnings records of young people over time.</p> <p>University College London (UCL) (2021) <i>COVID-19 Social Study</i> - 70,000 people tracked through regular on-line surveys.</p>
Theme 5. Delayed transitions, access to higher education and life-long learnings reforms	<p>Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) <i>An investigation into the relationship between outreach participation and KS4 attainment/ HE progression</i> – correlations of various data sets.</p> <p>Education Development Trust <i>Youth Transitions: Creating Pathways to Success</i> – Synthesis of 105 Studies on Skills and Youth Transitions</p> <p>Nuffield Foundation (2019-2021) <i>Post-16 pathways: the role of peers, family background and expectations</i> – analysis of National Pupil Database with data from Next Steps (the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England).</p> <p>Nuffield Foundation (2018-2021) <i>Students who do not achieve a grade C or above in English and Maths</i> – analysis of individual-level data with information on post-16 pathways and options provided in two city-regions in England.</p> <p>OECD (2020) <i>Teenagers' Career Aspirations and the Future of Work</i> – synthesis of PISA data over several PISA cycles.</p>
Theme 6. The 'stressed' condition of FE Sector	<p>AoC (2021) <i>College Catch-Up Funding and Remote Education</i> – survey of 80 FE colleges</p> <p>Institute of Fiscal Studies (2020) <i>2020 annual report on education spending in England</i> – synthesis of data on education spending per student across the life cycle.</p>

Inclusion criteria for systematic review evidence on mitigations

The second stage examined the systematic review evidence on mitigations. To be included the Study must be a systematic review. A Systematic review must have the key features of a systematic review including an explicit search, search sources, inclusion criteria, and quality assessment.

A study must be a systematic review of interventions. A Study is not included if the reports are on prevalence, extent, characterisation of an issue. Where there was more than one systematic review, the best available evidence was selected by making a judgment about the:

- a. most up to date systematic review. To avoid double counting individual studies included in reviews as well as choosing the most up-to-date findings;
- b. systematic review most relevant/ transferrable in terms of population, contexts and topics;
- c. systematic review or reviews that were most likely to have reliable findings based on a quality assessment of the execution of the review.

In all, 25 reviews were identified that were most likely to have reliable findings based on a quality assessment (see Table 2).

With regard to mitigations of harms, we searched for systematic reviews that aimed to mitigate the harms we identified so far. These were wider than the focus on the UK and COVID-related literature. We searched for systematic reviews in:

- Cochrane Collaboration
- Campbell collaboration
- NICE Guidelines
- DARE
- Centre for reviews and dissemination CRD, University of York
- Google Scholar and Google.

Table 2. Systematic review of mitigations

Harm theme	Reviews on mitigations found
Theme 1. Vocational disruption – young people, economic participation and apprenticeships	Eyles, 2021 Donald and Tyler, 2019 Kluve et al., 2017 Vetsch et al., 2018 Mann et al., 2020 Waddell et al., 2008 Lounds-Taylor et al., 2012 Mawn et al., 2017 What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, 2015 South Australia Centre for Economic Studies, 2008
Theme 2. The mental health of young people	Lloyd and Waghorn, 2007 Hart et al., 2020 Mansfield et al., 2016
Theme 3. Changes to assessment, learning and qualifying	CIPD, 2021
Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs	Nelson et al., 2013 Lester, et al., 2020 Newton et al., 2020 Nasheeda et al., 2018
Theme 5. Delayed transitions, access to higher education and life-long learnings reforms	Social Ventures, 2018 Nelson and O'Donnell, 2012 Mann, et al., 2020b Hagell et al., 2019
Theme 6. The 'stressed' condition of FE Sector	Fletcher-Wood and Zucollo, 2020 Savours and Koehane, 2019 Cooper Gibson Research, 2018

Table 3. Quality assessment of the reviews of mitigations

Harm theme	Reviews on mitigations found	
Theme 1. Vocational disruption – young people,	Eyles, 2021	Highly relevant to the harms of vocational disruption. Blog post of a review, no systematic review methods in the article,

economic participation and apprenticeships		but the general approach of the author's organisations can be found in an embedded link. Not clear which are the included studies or QA.
	Donald and Tyler, 2019	Moderately relevant, given that this is supported employment for a people with a severe mental illness Including US veterans, authors suggest that this could be effective with other groups. Appropriate methods used.
	Kluge et al., 2017	Moderate to highly relevant to this review as it includes interventions from low- and middle-income countries. High quality systematic review. Appropriate methods used.
	Vetsch et al., 2018	Primary study of 42 cancer survivors. Limited relevance and reliability for a single study.
	Mann et al., 2020 a	Highly relevant to this review. Search for included studies limited to "statistically significant associations" which may miss findings on any lack of associations between aspirations and actual careers/overstate the connections.
	Waddell et al., 2008	Moderately relevant. Vocational rehabilitation for people with a range of conditions. Appropriate methods used.
	Lounds-Taylor et al., 2012	Moderately relevant...Vocational supports for young people with autism. Included studies of poor quality and limited to on the job supports. Appropriate methods used.
	Mawn et al., 2017	Highly relevant review. Appropriate methods used, included studies were of low quality and limited in scope and findings.
	What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, 2015	Highly relevant topic area, possibly old at 2015, appropriate methods used.
	South Australia Centre for Economic Studies, 2008	Highly relevant topic area, studies are likely to be old at 2009. Appropriate methods used.
Theme 2. The mental health of young people	Lloyd and Waghorn, 2007	Moderate relevance to review. Interventions for young people with psychiatric disabilities. Adequate search strategy but no QA of included studies
	Hart et al., 2020	Highly relevant to this review, employment supports for the UK and Ireland contexts. High quality systematic review methods used. High reliability of results.
	Mansfield et al., 2016	Narrow topic area,. but highly relevant to this review. High quality systematic review. Appropriate methods used. Included studies were limited in their study designs/
Theme 3. Changes to assessment, learning and qualifying	CIPD, 2021	Highly relevant to this review topic area. Limited reliability of results., Mixed methods literature review of Desk based research with expert views insights., Non systematic review may be biased in study selections. Results are emerging practice, rather than effectiveness of interventions.
Theme 4. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs	Nelson et al., 2013	
	Lester, et al., 2020	Moderate to low relevance to this review. Partial review of reviews from a larger systematic review.
	Newton et al., 2020	Highly relevant to this review. Rapid evidence review. Clear and consistent QA

		of included programmes. Appropriate methods used.
Theme 5. Delayed transitions, access to higher education and life-long learnings reforms	Social Ventures, 2018	Highly relevant to this review. Appropriate methods used, however results were inconclusive
	Nelson and O'Donnell, 2012	Highly relevant to this review. Appropriate methods used. Includes high quality studies.
	Mann, et al., 2020b	Moderate relevance. Not a review of effectiveness of interventions. Views and experiences of young people's aspirations and to what extent these are realised. Population PISA participating countries. Appropriate methods used
	Hagell et al., 2019	Highly relevant to this review, not a systematic review, however, but broad literature "ground clearing exercise", so not exhaustive search for studies., nor QA
Theme 6. The 'stressed' condition of FE Sector	Fletcher-Wood and Zucollo, 2020	Highly relevant to this theme, and review. Systematic review of RCTs. Authors suggest more follow up data needed. Evidence from trials do not support firm conclusions of effectiveness.
	Savours and Koehane, 2019	Highly relevant to this theme and review. Mixed methods literature review, rather than a systematic review. There may be bias in study selection and conclusions drawn from findings from the literature selected.
	Cooper Gibson Research, 2018	Highly relevant to this theme and review. Desk based, mixed methods literature review with interviews. There may be bias in study selection and conclusions drawn from findings from the literature selected.

Quality assessment checklist based on study design

Four overarching questions that were answered dependent on study design as detailed below this box.

1. Is the nature and extent of the claim relevant to your review?	Yes
	No
	Partly
	Unclear
2. Is the evidence claim trustworthy in using a relevant method to achieve that evidence claim?	Yes
	No

	Partly
	Unclear
3. Is the evidence claim relevant in terms of how its focus (how it applied the method such as for e.g. questions asked, outcome measures etc) to address the study question and make the claim?	Yes
	No
	Partly
	Unclear
4 Are there any aspect of the execution of the study methods that undermine your confidence in the trustworthiness of the claims being made? Indicate any concerns below for all the method specific questions below (for systematic reviews)	(i) Please specify under the relevant methods specific question and summarize here:
(ii) Please state whether these undermine the evidence claim:	Yes
	No
	Partly
	Unclear

DFE SAGE QA SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS

Domain 1. What are the methods SRs?

SR1. Did the review address a clearly focused question?

SR2. Did the authors look for the right kinds of studies?

Were the study designs suitable for answering the review's question?

SR3. Was there a comprehensive search for all relevant material?

SR4. Risk of selection bias

taking into account the answers to questions SR.1 - SR3 what is the likelihood of the reviewers' decisions and methods of how to find relevant studies impacting on the findings of the study?

SR5. Did the authors do enough to assess the quality of the included studies?

Did the authors assessed the quality of the included studies? including the internal and external validity of the execution and relevance to their review?

SR6. Were the methods of data extraction, synthesis valid?

this includes measures to minimise rater bias, interrater reliability exercises, double coding qualitative studies for thematic analysis etc

SR7 Risk of researcher bias

taking into account the answers to the questions in domain 1, what is the likelihood of researcher bias impacting on the findings of this review?

SR8. If sponsored by industry, was the involvement of the sponsor described?

all conflicts of interest must be disclosed by the authors of a systematic review, including who sponsored the study and what role the sponsor had in its design, conduct and reporting

SR9, Risk of Conflicts of interest bias

Taking into account the question on industry involvement, what is the risk of conflicts of interest bias?

Domain 2. Are the results valid? SRs

Adapted from CASP- the results themselves are not an indicator of quality, but instead look for the choice of methods and consideration of variation, any sensitivity analysis and discussions of heterogeneity or any consideration of bias and how this might impact on findings

SR10. Was the choice of synthesis suitable for the data?

results were broadly similar from study to study, variation is discussed, appropriate weighting where appropriate, heterogeneity discussed

SR11. Was the quality of the studies taken into account in any synthesis?

SR12. Overall assessment of reliability of the findings (SR)

taking into account the answers to questions in domain 1 and 2 and the risk of bias questions, how reliable are the findings of the study?

Domain 3. How generalisable are the results? SRs

SR13. Did the review consider contextual factors?

SR14. Overall assessment of reliability of the findings

taking into account all the questions on reliability of findings and scores for bias, what is the overall assessment of the reliability of the findings?

DFE SAGE QA SURVEYS

Domain 1. what are the methods? (surveys)

SY1. Are the objectives of the study clearly stated?

SY2. Is the survey research design appropriate for the objectives of the study?

consider whether the survey designs are the most appropriate for the research question - e.g. is the survey design the most appropriate for a question of effectiveness? or is a predefined survey design the appropriate designs for exploring people views and experiences?

SY3. Are there references made to original work if existing tool made?

if the study uses an existing tool, do the authors make explicit references to the original source?

SY4. Is the reliability and validity of the new tool reported?

if the study uses a new tool, did the authors report on reliability and validity tests (factor analysis, pilot testing) of this new tool?

SY5. Is any statistical analysis correctly performed and interpreted?

SY6. Are these measures of direct experience?
measures that ask people to reflect on hypothetical scenarios, or their hypothetical behaviour are generally less reliable than those based on experience

SY6. Were steps take to improve accuracy of recall?
Participants who are asked to reflect on experience that happened a long time ago may suffer from degraded recall. steps to avoid this are activity diaries or participants are asked to recall events from recent memory.

SY7. Risk of measurement bias (surveys)
the risk of the study not being able to measure the factors it sets out to measure.

SY7. Risk of questionnaire bias (surveys)
Unintended communication, difficulties in questions designs and factor bias in untested questionnaires.

Domain 2. Are the results valid? (surveys)

SY8. Is the survey population and sample frame clearly described?
How was this sample identified, and from what whole population are they drawn?

SY9. Are the methods of handling missing data described?

SY10. Are all factors and outcomes reported?
Are all factors and outcomes that were measured reported, significant and non-significant?

SY11. Is the response rate calculated?
authors should provide detail on the methods used for calculating the response rate

SY12. Risk of sampling bias
the risk that the sample selected is not representative of the whole population.

SY13. Risk of reporting bias
selective reporting of results - reporting on e.g. significant differences only

SY14. Overall, how reliable are the findings of the study (surveys)
Considering the answers to questions in domain 1 and 2, and the risk of bias questions, how reliable, believable, trustworthy are the findings of the study?

Domain 3. How generalisable are the results? (surveys)

Consider also the answers to the domain 2. sampling frame (what population is this a sample supposed to be representative of?) and response rates (did it achieve its objective of a representative sample?), as well as dealing with missing data (attempts to mitigate the effect of drop out to remain representative of the population the sample was drawn from)

SY15. Is the study large enough to achieve its objectives?
is the study powered to detect significant differences?

SY16. Is there a clear description of the context?
*such as the purpose of the survey is it part of another project of which this survey is only part.
where was the study conducted?*

SY17. How relevant is this study to the review? (surveys)
consider whether the study talks directly to Harms of COVID19 or is it indirectly?

DFE SAGE QA CASE STUDY

Domain 1. What are the methods?

CS1. Are the objectives of the study clearly stated?

the objectives of a case study (whether exploratory, or evaluative) determines the types of case selection and methods.

CS2. Are the theories and methods for case selection clear?

Cases are selected based on the research purpose and question, and for what they could reveal about the phenomenon or topic of interest.

consider whether the case is

- an exemplar

- an outlier

- a novel case

what is the theoretical position of the authors - Post-positivist (there is a discoverable world out there- that is also interpreted by the receivers of the phenomena (realist methods, experimental,) vs constructivist (the world is constructed by people's experience, meanings and interpretations of phenomena-grounded theory, researcher

Domain 2. Are the results valid?

CS3. Does the study use multiple methods of data collection and data sources?

to minimise the selection bias of case study design case studies should use multiple methods of data collection and data types of sources

CS4. Is data triangulated to confirm or refute findings?

related to the above, but uses triangulation from different data sources to look for similarities and differences in findings from different sources. Similar findings from different sources give more confidence in the findings than those from only one source.

CS5. Are the descriptions given of the phenomena "rich"?

the validity of the case study analysis lies in the depth and detail of the description.

CS6. Risk of verification bias

Single cases, (i.e. with no comparison) are at risk that the findings reflect what the researcher set out to find. the characteristics of the case selected is associated with the findings. There is a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions.

CS7. Overall, how reliable are the findings?

Domain 3. How generalisable are the results?

CS8. Is there a clear description of the contexts?

CS9. How relevant is this case study to the review?

DFE SAGE QA CONTROLLED/ EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Domain 1. what are the methods

Exp1. Are the objectives of the study clearly defined?

Exp2. Were the groups sufficiently similar at baseline?

Exp3. Risk of selection bias

Exp4. Risk of performance bias

Performance bias refers to systematic differences between groups in the care that is provided, or in exposure to factors other than the interventions of interest

Exp5. 1.3. Were participants blind to which group they were in?

Participants should not be aware of whether they are receiving the novel intervention or programme.

where this is impossible (departs from usual care enough that people can guess) participants should be randomized at recruitment, that is they agree to take part in the study before knowing which group they will be in

Domain 2. Are the results valid?

Taking into account the questions on domain 1 and risk of bias in the design, what impact will this have on the results? This section also considers the risks of bias that result from the analysis

Exp6. Risk of detection bias

Detection bias refers to systematic differences between groups in how outcomes are determined. Blinding (or masking) of outcome assessors may reduce the risk that knowledge of which intervention was received,

Exp7. Risk of attrition bias

There may be patterns in shared characteristics of the people who drop out of trials that can impact on the findings.

Exp8. Risk of reporting bias

Bias introduced with selective reporting, under reporting of unexpected or undesired results

Exp8. Overall, how reliable are the findings?

Domain 3. How generalisable are the results?

Exp9. How relevant are the outcomes to this review?

DFE SAGE QA QUALITATIVE STUDY

Domain 1. What are the methods?

this QA was adapted from the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research: A Synthesis of Recommendations journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges 89(9) · June 2014

QUA1. is the method appropriate to the question?

the study should state the Qualitative approach (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, narrative research) and guiding theory if appropriate; identifying the research paradigm (e.g., postpositivist, constructivist/interpretivist) is also recommended; rationale

QUA2. Were the sampling methods appropriate to the question?

Did the researcher aim for a range of participants, and for a diversity of perspectives (breadth) , or a narrower range of participants for greater in-depth exploration of phenomena (depth)

QUA3. Risk of sampling bias

*is the sample limited in such a way that would exclude some views and perspectives that could skew the results? were there systematic biases in the sample selection. Was the sample such that a diversity of views could be explored? OR
Were the subjects justifiably chosen because of their unique perspectives?*

QUA4. Was the study approved by an ethics committee?

QUA5. Was informed consent given?

Anonymity assured, plus withdrawal any time without detriments

QUA6. Risk of procedural bias

How the research is conducted could impact on the results, did the participants have all the time they wanted to answer the questions?

Domain 2. Are the results valid?

QUA7. Does the researcher reflect on their influence in the research process

Researchers' characteristics that may influence the research, including personal attributes, qualifications/experience, relationship with participants, assumptions, and/or presuppositions; potential or actual interaction between researchers' characteristics and the research

questions, approach, methods, results, and/or transferability

QUA8. Were the participants involved in the production of the research?

this could be in the form of formulating the research question, reading and commenting on drafts, or interpreting the findings etc

QUA9. Risk of researcher bias

Where the researcher allows their own preconceived ideas to drive the research

QUA10. Risk of response bias

Where the participant gives the answers they think the researcher wants.

QUA11. Was the analysis supported by theory?

Process by which inferences, themes, etc., were identified and developed, including the researchers involved in data analysis; usually references a specific paradigm or approach; rationale

QUA12. Do the results include direct quotes from the participants?

Do participants speak for themselves., or are results presented only as author interpretations?

Is the data Rich/ thick?

QUA13. Risk of reporting bias

QUA14. Overall, how reliable are the results?

taking into account the answers to the risk of bias questions in methods and analysis

Domain 3. How generalisable are the results?

QUA15. Does the study provide sufficient detail on contextual factors?

QUA16. How relevant is the phenomena explored relevant to this review?

QUA17. Overall, how relevant is this study to the review?

International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO)

IPPO is an ESRC funded initiative to provide decision-makers in government at all levels with access to the best available global evidence on the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effectiveness of policy responses. IPPO is a collaboration between the Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy (STePP) and the EPPI Centre at UCL; Cardiff University; Queen's University Belfast; the University of Auckland and the University of Oxford, together with think tanks including the International Network for Government Science (INGSA) and academic news publisher The Conversation.

EPPI Centre

Founded in 1996, the EPPI Centre is a specialist centre in the UCL Social Research Institute. It develops methods: (i) for the systematic reviewing and synthesis of research evidence; and (ii) for the study of the use research. As well as being directly involved in the academic study and the practice of research synthesis and research use, the centre provides accredited and short course training programmes in research synthesis and social policy and research.

UCL Social Research Institute (SRI)

The SRI (formerly the Department of Social Science) is one of the leading centres in the UK for multidisciplinary teaching and research in the social sciences. With more than 180 academic, research and professional staff, it works to advance knowledge and to inform policy in areas including gender, families, education, employment, migration, inequalities, health and child/adult wellbeing.

First produced in 2021 by:

**UCL Social Research Institute
University College London
27 Woburn Square
London WC1H 0AA**

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/departments/ucl-social-research-institute>

Twitter: @UCLSocRes

ISBN: 978-1-911605-23-2

Design and editorial support by: Lionel Openshaw

This document is available in a range of accessible formats including large print. Please contact the UCL Social Research Institute for assistance.

Email: ioe.sriadmin@ucl.ac.uk