

# Commons Education Committee inquiry: 'Making further education fit for the future'

**Martin Allen *takes a critical look at the Inquiry set up on 29/1/25.***

Any inquiry into this forgotten sector is to be welcomed, but its title is rather a misnomer - it isn't really an inquiry about FE at all. As its subtitle and the initial terms of reference for the curriculum make clear, it's largely concerned with the 16-19 age group and the quality and status of vocational/technical education at level 3, covering a range of issues from assessment to T-levels. (It's likely that by the time the Committee inquiry is published these will have already been addressed by the more high-profile National Curriculum Review.) Given this, the Rt Hon Members will not be inquiring about the large numbers of other FE students not in this age group (up to 7 million are well over 19), not following level 3 courses of study; or retaking GCSEs in maths and English, also highlighted in the terms of reference.

Neither does the Committee appear to understand that a large proportion of 16-19-year-olds study in the school sector - this could soon be the majority, if more sixth-form colleges seek 'academy' status, which at least promises greater funding as well as better pay for staff (over a third of these colleges have already converted). But even if these colleges remain part of Further Education in the legal sense, most will continue to recruit students directly from the end of Key Stage 4 in local schools, unlike further education colleges who draw from far and wide.

Asking (as the terms of reference do) whether the additional £300 million made available in Labour's first budget is 'sufficient' would be even more laughable if the inquiry was planning to address the whole FE sector. As it stands, if the entire amount were directed to 16-19 education, it would just about maintain funding per student at current levels in real terms. Meanwhile, total spending on adult skills is around 23 per cent below 2009-10 levels, even after

accounting for recent funding increases. Classroom-based adult education has experienced some of the sharpest reductions, with real-terms funding levels over 40 per cent lower than in 2009-10.

The reference to 'skills and apprenticeships' essentially refers to improving the latter. But this only adds to a more general misunderstanding, by equating apprenticeships with FE. The reality is that well over half of 'off the job' training for level 2 and 3 (levels that 16-19-year-olds are more likely to be found on) is delivered by private providers, not colleges. In addition, there's little awareness of the fact that less than a third of apprenticeship starts are by under 19s, or of the rapid growth at Level 5 and 6 (graduate level and above) where the university sector, not FE, is far more likely to be the provider. The old relationship between FE colleges and industrial training - a key part of the post-war educational settlement - has now run its course.

On the plus side, the inquiry points to the need to improve access to education and training, though again the emphasis is on removing barriers that groups of disadvantaged young people encounter when moving on to post-16. These objectives closely reflect wider government paranoia about the one million plus NEETs and the implications of 'economic inactivity' for labour market shortages and the welfare bill.

Though the closing day for submission (March 7th) will have passed by the time of PSE 119 publication, and submissions will need to relate specifically to tight evidence requirements, the inquiry's eventual publication can still be used as a backdrop for a wider discussion on the role of FE, particularly FE colleges, under present conditions of learning and employment.

## MPs on the Inquiry:

Labour MPs on the Inquiry are: Helen Hayes, Dulwich & West Norwood (chair); Jess Asato, Lowestoft; Sureena Brackenridge, Wolverhampton N.E.; Amanda Martin, Portsmouth North; Darren Paffey, Southampton Itchen; Mark Sowards, Leeds SW & Morley; Marie Tidball, Penistone & Stocksbridge. Lib Dems are: Manuela Perteghella, Strateford-on-Avon; Caroline Voaden, South Devon. Conservatives are: Caroline Johnson, Sleaford & N. Hykeham; Patrick Spencer, Central Suffolk & N. Ipswich.

## The Inquiry's Terms of Reference

The Committee welcomed written evidence submissions responding to the following terms of reference (by 7th March).

### Curriculum and qualifications in further education

- The post-16 curriculum.
- The assessment system.
- Driving better standards in further education; the quality and consistency of provision and outcomes.
- Post-16 numeracy and literacy, including GCSE resits.
- The strengths and weaknesses of T Levels as the main qualification option for students wishing to pursue a technical route into further education.
- The reform of Level 3 qualifications.

### Delivering further education

- Funding for further education, including whether the additional £300 million announced by the Chancellor in last year's Budget is sufficient and how it should be distributed.
- The effectiveness of current funding arrangements in tackling the attainment gap in further education.
- Workforce pressures, including college teachers' pay and the recruitment and retention of staff in all further education settings.
- Funding arrangements for specialist colleges.
- Quality of facilities and capital investment strategy.

### Skills and apprenticeships

- How to resolve the skills shortage and narrow the gap between the skills that employers want and the skills that employees have.

- The level of collaboration between the further education sector, local government and employers in responding to the skills shortage.

- The role of Skills England in meeting the Government's industrial strategy and boosting economic growth.

- Current challenges for apprenticeships, including employer engagement, funding issues, and apprentice pay.

- The role of devolution in addressing regional skills needs and apprenticeships.

- The quality and availability of work placements within vocational courses.

### Supporting young people, widening access, and narrowing the attainment gap

- The difficulties facing further education students, including mental health issues and access to mental health support, and cost of living pressures.

- The specific barriers to accessing and pursuing further education for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and children and young people in care across specialist and mainstream settings.

- Access to higher education, other qualifications levels, and employment; career and course guidance.

- Disparity in attainment, including by gender, area of the country in which a student lives, ethnicity, and between disadvantaged students and their peers.

## AOC data:

The Association of Colleges annual briefing on 'Where are 16 and 17-year-olds studying in England', based on 2023-24 Performance Table data, shows that: 63 per cent of publicly funded 16-18 year olds are in colleges; that proportion is

increasing, with the largest increases coming from FE Colleges; the average 16-18 cohort in a school sixth form is 222 students; around half of all school sixth forms still have fewer than 200 students, which is the recommended minimum for viability.