

Hot Topics Hot Seat: Colleges and COVID19 with Shane Chownen

In addition to Hot Topics? Coole Solutions! Coole Insight brings you these regular articles where we interview experts, professionals and commentators on a range of issues that impact on education and society.

The Hot Topic – Colleges and COVID19

None of our public institutions are unaffected by the complete social and economic upheaval brought about by the COVID19 outbreak. Our entire education system, from early years to adult education, has been disrupted and there will be long-lasting and permanent changes to the way we do things.

In further education, with all of our complex regulatory structures, diverse student body and provider base and our vast curriculum offer, responding to the crisis has required careful but rapid decisions from policymakers, regulators and college leaders.

Across the country the vast majority of college buildings are closed, save for a few that have remained open for children of key workers and vulnerable students with Education, Health and Care Plans. Teaching and training is taking place on various online platforms for the first time at this scale and students' teachers have been charged with calculating final grades for general qualifications like GCSEs and A Levels, as well as most technical and vocational qualifications. Ofsted have suspended inspections and the FE Commissioner has paused their intervention activities.

Now that some of the more emergency and immediate decisions have been made, attention is turning to what the FE sector looks like once this crisis is 'over', whatever that means. How can we best support bruised local business and industries? How do the funding rules need to evolve to provide colleges with the flexibilities needed to support young people and adults? Where next for apprenticeships?

In the Hot Seat – Shane Chownen, Area Director (Midlands), Association of Colleges

Shane has been working in further education since he finished studying at an FE college at 18 years old. Following his first role as President at City College Plymouth Students' Union, Shane was the Vice President (Further Education) at the National Union of Students between 2009 and 2011. During this time, Shane led NUS' FE campaign in the 2010 general election, began NUS' engagement with apprentices and served as NUS' deputy national president in his second year.

Following a number of campaigns, policy and public affairs roles in organisations such as Institute for Learning and Learning and Work Institute, Shane joined the Association of Colleges in October 2017 as their Area Director for the East and West Midlands. In this role, Shane works closely with around 50 general further education colleges, sixth form colleges, specialist and land-based college and supports them on a range of issues including governance, finance, local collaboration and quality improvement.

Outside of AoC, Shane serves as a governor on the board of Capital City College Group and chairs the Westminster Kingsway College Education Board.

Shane has written for several FE publications including the Further Education Trust for Leadership, Education and Training Foundation and was a regular columnist for sector publication FE Week.

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How have colleges responded to the lockdown?

Colleges were training staff, moving materials online and putting measures in place for vulnerable students as soon as it became clear the decision to close college buildings was coming. The amount of work involved and the commitment from all parts of the college workforce has been incredible to see. The immediate priorities were all about making sure staff and students had everything they needed to work and learn from home, and make sure that those who had to continue to physically be at college were kept safe.

Students and staff have responded brilliantly. It's safe to say that online learning hasn't been utilised to its potential in colleges up until now. Colleges are keen to make clear that they are not 'closed'. Some remain physically open for dependents of key workers and vulnerable students with EHCPs or who are under the care of a local authority.

Another really inspiring way that colleges have responded is by showing their colours as true civic community institutions. We've seen college engineering departments manufacturing PPE for the health service, facilities being provided for emergency and essential community services and hundreds of staff and students with health and care related specialisms being called up to provide extra capacity.

Did you know that:

As of February 2020, there are 244 colleges in England; 168 general FE colleges, 51 sixth form colleges, 2 art, design and performing arts colleges, 13 land-based colleges and 10 institutes of adult learning in England.

In 19/20, colleges educated and trained 2.2 million people; 1.4million adults, 670,000 16-18 year olds, 70,000 16-17 year old apprentices and 13,000 14-15 year olds.

The average age of a college student is 29.

26% of 16-18 year olds and 32% of adults studying in colleges are from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Around 137,000 people study on a higher education programme at a college. Colleges deliver 82% of Higher National Certificates, 82% of Higher National Diplomas and 59% of Foundation Degrees.

Colleges training nearly half of all construction, engineering and manufacturing apprenticeships. The average college trains 1300 apprentices.

650,000 college students are taking STEM subjects.

The next challenge:

Speculation about when we will 'return to normal' is, in my view, distracting and somewhat irresponsible. Nobody is going to set a date for things to return to the way they were and the lockdown has probably taught us a few things that mean there might be some permanent changes:

- Confidence around online delivery will mean far greater blended learning and colleges will adapt their quality processes
- We will accelerate investment in digital infrastructure and capital
- The robustness of continuing assessment and teacher-calculated grades will be tested and may question the need for so much regulation and resource going to external bodies
- Colleges' ability to respond rapidly to their local economies will force what are currently restrictive funding rules to be relaxed
- Planning is already underway for prolonged social distancing
- As well as e-learning, e-governance has developed quickly and will likely remain, at least in part, permanent.

The funding challenges facing colleges were already severe. What impact is the COVID19 crisis having on an already fragile sector?

It's well known now that colleges have endured a 30% reduction in government funding over the last ten years. The biggest drop has been in 19+ education which is a huge part of what colleges do plus the declining numbers of 16 year olds in the system. The cumulative impact on colleges of that has been; low cash and some high profile emergency interventions, low investment in estate and staff pay and growth in things like commercial and international work.

In many cases, those 'non-government' income lines have kept colleges solvent – such has been the scale of under-funding from the centre. And essentially so as the government introduced an insolvency regime for colleges last year.

Despite being told for years to diversify, the lockdown has now made those 'non-government' income lines the biggest risk to college finances. The way apprenticeship reforms have panned out now means there are complex contractual relationships with government and levy paying employers, and only part of this will be able to be guaranteed.

All of that paints a very worrying picture for colleges even before you consider the extra resource that's going to be required in efforts to get young people back in to learning, keep young people in learning who were hoping to join the workforce, support adults who will lose their jobs and revive an apprenticeships system which is facing massive strain.

AoC is working constructively with officials to make sure all of these issues are fully understood, and the right support is made available.

Colleges offer a huge range of courses and qualifications. What measures are being put in place to protect students' education?

Alongside college finances, the top issue filling my inbox over the last few weeks has been about how students complete their courses.

Quite soon after the shut-down, the government announced that the summer exams series had been cancelled, with the announcement focussing mainly on GCSEs and A Levels. It was another couple of weeks before any detail emerged informing us how teacher-calculated grades would work and how they would be moderated.

Unlike general qualifications with well-established written exams, the picture for vocational and technical qualifications is more complicated because of the variety of assessment methods used. There are also competing interests to contend with as we operate under a tightly regulating awarding and qualifications regime in this country involving commercial organisations. The regulator, Ofqual, has rightly put the best interests of students at the heart of its proposals around assessment and is introducing an extraordinary regulatory framework for qualifications which will allow teachers to use a hierarchy of evidence to calculate a final grade, adapt assessment methods or, in particular circumstances like where there's a license to practice or professionally regulated qualification involved, delay final assessment altogether.

All of this is putting huge pressures on college staff and students are understandably anxious.

Throughout all of this, we've all been mindful that everything that's happening at college is just a part of the disruption our staff and students are experiencing in their day to day lives. Colleagues will be worried about vulnerable or ill loved ones, will have children at home to entertain and home school and will want to volunteer and support their communities. It's been genuinely inspiring to see the initiatives brought in at colleges across the country to make sure every member of staff and every student has access to the right support when it's needed, whether that's regular check-in calls with vulnerable students & staff, flexible working and access to 1:1 advice and counselling.