



Return to Further Education

Tuesday 20th October; 12:30pm-1:30pm

Online event - Zoom

The APPG for Students held a meeting to hear from students and student officers as to the challenges that they were facing with the return to Further Education (FE) colleges. This is a summary of what was discussed at the meeting -

Teaching and learning

One attendee called on the government, universities and colleges to work together to provide financial resources to students to support them with online learning.

There was a general concern expressed that some courses are impossible to teach online, and students are worried about a lack of face-to-face learning.

A representative from Anglia Ruskin University Students' Union expressed the difficulties that they have had with timetabling, as if students are commuting long distances they are not able to be on campus for the entire day, with the lack of transport. Their university is trying to be flexible on this for FE students. Similarly, for online learning they have heard of numerous issues for disabled students, and those for whom English is not a first language in engaging with this.

Moreover, an attendee from Coleg Cambria explained how their college is operating an alternating timetable of one-week virtual, one-week in person. But this is putting a real strain on students to learn by themselves remotely. However generally this transition has gone quite smoothly, and apprenticeships and placement courses have restarted. One of the major struggles students were having was with getting work experience as most of these are not going ahead.

The challenges faced by students on access to nursing courses were raised, as many of them go to care homes for placements, but care homes are very reluctant to take on any students currently.

A representative from Gower College Swansea claimed that generally their experience of teaching and learning was very positive. However, this was not the case for all students, particularly those on arts courses, who do not have the equipment they need, and students who do not have WiFi. There were related calls for investment from the government in broadband technology for students studying remotely.

Similar concerns around technological resources were raised by other attendees. Students were struggling to afford travel costs and digital resources and institutions could often not provide this for students. This means they could not fully engage with their learning.

Student safety

An attendee from University College Birmingham Guild of Students claimed that generally the experience of returning to campus has been positive for their FE, but some concerns have been raised. In particular, concerns were raised about their safety in coming on to campus as they have had many more FE students enrol. Students were concerned about how they would cope if they caught the virus.

A colleague from UCB Guild of Students highlighted that most of their courses are vocation-based and require practical learning. Therefore, they have major concerns



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about the transmission of coronavirus on these courses, as they require a hands-on approach. Plus, the courses require bringing external people on to campus to teach them. For now, their priority has been to ensure that students are safe on campus, before considering sending them to other places of learning, but they hope to be able to plan better for next term.

An attendee from Anglia Ruskin University Students' Union explained that they will have an on-campus testing centre opening in November, which has been supported by their local MP.

Mental health

MPs in attendance noted the increased demand on mental health services, and the fact that colleges have not traditionally had the capacity to cope with this demand.

An attendee from Coleg Cambria remonstrated that it has been a very hard period for students, with many feeling very isolated working from home. They claimed that the scapegoating of students for rising transmission rates is not helping this.

Attendees raised the inevitability of poor mental health amongst students due to enforced lockdowns. There was exasperation at the lack of understanding of the impact COVID-19 is having on mental health. One attendee spoke of their personal experiences having contracted the virus, and they did not believe that enough support was in place for students. They called for government set ratios of numbers of students per counsellor.

One attendee spoke of a collaboration between their university and an app that allows for virtual mental health services to be delivered, and peer mentors and their wellbeing team to deliver regular sessions and consultation for students.

Good practice

Attendees spoke of the positive moves to provide mental health services remotely and to move them online.

Another attendee spoke of a system of peer mentorship that they had introduced in their college, which they said made it easier for students to contact each other rather than teachers. This was now being rolled out college-wide.

The work of the Student Funding Council in Scotland to give grants for counsellors to be placed in colleges and universities was also spoken of very positively. As well as the grants for laptops and dongles that have been provided.

Another positive example spoken of regarded a buddy system that has been introduced. Buddies help students with shopping and call them once a day if they are isolating.