

# Written evidence submitted by the Education Policy Institute

## Introduction

The Education Policy Institute is an independent, impartial and evidence-based research institute that aims to promote high quality education outcomes for all children and young people, regardless of social background.

Our data-driven research and analysis sheds light on whether current policy is delivering a high quality and equitable education system and identifies issues where further policy development is needed. Through research and analysis, our aim is to hold government, policy-makers and education providers to account for their performance, and help identify the policies which can improve educational outcomes for all, particularly for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in our society.

## Summary of EPI response

In this submission, we set out our assessment of the likely impact of Covid-19 on the outcomes of children and young people.

EPI research finds that disadvantaged pupils are over 18 months behind their more affluent peers by age 16. In recent years, this gap has stopped closing and, even before the pandemic, there was a real risk that the gap would start to widen. The impact of the pandemic will almost certainly increase that risk. Research on attainment of children who have missed significant periods of schooling due to authorised absences suggest a large overall impact on attainment in addition to widening of the disadvantage gap that is expected based on studies of summer learning loss.<sup>1,2</sup>

In order to minimise the impact of Covid-19, particularly for the most vulnerable pupils, we make a series of recommendations for government.

## Reopening of schools

The timing of when schools should reopen must be guided by the advice of health experts. If the government decides to adopt a phased return to schools beginning this summer, we recommend that the following year groups should be prioritised in order to support their transition to the next phase and to support their readiness for national exams next year: Reception Year, Year 6, Year 10 and Year 12. In addition, the government should also consider whether nursery provision for 3 and 4 year olds should be reopened in order to support their transition to school in the autumn.

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/183445/DFE-RR171.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183445/DFE-RR171.pdf)

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182413/DFE-RR096.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182413/DFE-RR096.pdf)

Irrespective of when schools formally re-open, the government, along with schools, should consider making summer holiday provision available for all children, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This should not necessarily be focussed on academic catch-up, but should provide young people with positive activities, engagement and pastoral support. Such provision would not need to be staffed by teachers and could instead be run by a combination of youth workers, play workers, early years workers and others with relevant experience.

We also recommend that Ofsted inspections should be paused at least until the end of the autumn term (December 2020), with the potential for that pause to be extended based on a review of the situation in the late autumn.

### **National exam grading in 2020**

The proposals put forward by Ofqual to provide grades for pupils who would have sat national exams this summer do not, yet, meet our test for fairness and equity.

We recommend that, as a starting point, schools should be shown what their ranked order would look like if pupils followed national patterns from recent years based on prior attainment and characteristics.

Using this model as a starting point, teachers should then apply professional judgement as to how rankings within the school differ based on internal assessments, classwork and homework. Validation checks should highlight where the decisions of schools have disproportionately moved the ranking of particular groups up or down. Schools would then need to justify those changes if they have a material impact on grades for specific groups.

The government should also carry out an urgent review, working with exam boards, on exam content and grading, before September 2020, to decide if national exams in 2021 should be modified.

### **Support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people**

The pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities and widen the attainment gap that already exists. As well as dealing with the attainment gap, schools and the wider education sector are also likely to need to provide more pastoral and mental health support for pupils who have suffered neglect, abuse, anxiety or bereavement during the pandemic. Supporting pupils with these issues must be the first priority for the sector.

EPI's recommendations are as follows:

#### **Early years and wider children's services**

- The Early Years Pupil Premium should be doubled for a minimum of a year.
- The government should fund local authorities to develop an online database of early years workers in each area to galvanise and deploy workers in areas they are most needed during times of crisis and to support providers with recruitment once the lockdown period ends.
- The government should provide additional and sustained funding to wider children and young people's services. This includes for early intervention services, youth services and social care.

## Schools

- The government should double the Pupil Premium rates for at least one year for pupils who are currently in Reception, Year 6 and Year 10 (and who will be in Year 1, Year 7 and Year 11 in September 2020) who are facing important transition points or national examinations in order to support one-to-one or small group classes, after school activities and other interventions.
- The Pupil Premium for Looked After Children should also be doubled for one year, for all year groups.
- The Pupil Premium should also be made available for those on the child protection register (at the same rate as for Looked After Children), reflecting that the outcomes of these pupils are often as poor as those who are looked after. This should be a permanent policy change.
- The extra support required by disadvantaged pupils will require additional capacity. We recommend that the government launches a one-year Teacher Volunteer Scheme to bring back retired and inactive teachers to work in schools, supporting disadvantaged pupils with pastoral care and academic catch-up.
- There is a real risk that pupils will return to school with fresh behavioural challenges due to their family circumstances (such as increased financial pressure, domestic violence and/or parental mental health difficulties) or bereavement. We know from existing EPI research that disadvantaged and vulnerable children, including children receiving social care support, are far more likely to be excluded or subject to an unexplained move out of their school than their peers. We recommend that the DfE issues fresh guidance to schools about the need to avoid exclusions and that the DfE and local authorities should monitor closely any increase in the number of children being moved out of individual schools.

## Post-16 provision and further education

The 16-19 phase has experienced sharper cuts than any other education phase over the last decade. It is likely that the pandemic will result in a combination of young people entering post-16 education with lost learning time, unstable grades and then entering a contracted labour market due to the economic downturn. We recommend the following:

- The disadvantage weighting in the 16-19 funding formula should be doubled for pupils in Year 12, for a minimum of a year.
- The government should fund post-16 provision in Alternative Provision, which currently lacks any government funding, as the destinations of pupils currently in AP are likely to be worsened as a result of the pandemic. The effects of having no specialist provision after the age of sixteen will be particularly devastating where children have been unable to achieve the best GCSE grade they were capable of due to a combination of remote schooling and teacher assessment.

- The government should provide an “Education for Recovery” package to the further education sector. This would include funding for lost learning time, targeted funding for disadvantaged students, maintenance grants and the extension of vocational courses and adult reskilling.

### **Higher Education**

The main financial threats to universities arise from three areas: lost income from accommodation, catering and conferences; a significant fall in international students; and a rise in deferrals of domestic students.

A blanket cap on numbers could have an adverse effect on access for disadvantaged students and the ability of universities to compensate for at least some of their losses from international students. EPI recommends that the government should not introduce a hard cap on numbers but instead limit the number of additional students that any individual university can accept, without explicit approval from the DfE. The Office for Students should also be tasked with monitoring entry standards.

Another option might be for the government to make available a specific fund to universities that would otherwise face significant losses due to a fall in international student numbers. This would, inevitably, benefit higher tariff universities and those in London the most.

We recommend that the government should review these options in consultation with sector experts.

### **Improving support for families during the pandemic**

The current lockdown period has been marked by several delays in getting support to disadvantaged children and their families. Notably, the Free School Meal Voucher Scheme has encountered a number of delays and technical issues, as has the free laptop scheme for disadvantaged pupils. Schools were left for several days and weeks not knowing whether or how the government would provide financial support. Irrespective of access to technology, some children may face barriers to online learning due to a combination of factors including a lack of a safe space, lack of parental support and physical or learning disabilities.

- In future the government needs to communicate with schools and the wider sector much earlier.
- The government should review its procurement processes and standards, particularly in relation to services that are reliant on IT, in advance of another wave of Covid-19 or a similar crisis.
- For the duration of this current pandemic, and in readiness for any future crisis, the government needs to consider its approach to children with SEND, including access to

tutoring and therapies at home for those who are shielded due to medical conditions or cannot socially distance within a school environment.

## EPI: Full Submission

### The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people

The closure of schools, the requirement for social distancing and the economic impact of the pandemic have cast a fresh light on the ability of wider services to support vulnerable families.

Analysis produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that local authority spending on children's services was cut by 20 per cent per child in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20.<sup>3</sup> This includes a cut of £1bn to Sure Start Children's Centres and £900m to youth services. Separate research conducted by the Sutton Trust found that around 1000 Children's Centres have closed since 2009.<sup>4</sup>

Children's social care budgets are also under pressure. In 2016-17, local authorities overspent on children's social care by £714m, higher than any other area of local government spending.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly a survey conducted by the Local Government Information Unit found that a third of councils rated children's services as their top immediate pressure.

These pressures continue to be reflected in the quality of children's services. As of August 2019, half of all local authorities children's services were deemed by Ofsted to be either inadequate or requiring improvement.<sup>6</sup>

The number of children deemed to be "in need" has remained broadly stable since 2013-14, at just under 400,000, but that figure could rise as a result of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> **In 2018-19, schools made 18 per cent of all referrals to social services** (second only to police at 29 per cent), with other referrals made by health services, local authority services and individuals.

**More than half (54.5 per cent) of the children who were assessed by social services were deemed as suffering from abuse or neglect as their primary need.** Practitioners can also record other factors that contribute to the child being in need at the end of the assessment. At the end of March 2019, domestic violence was the most common factor identified at end of assessment, followed by mental health. Together these two factors account for over a third of all factors identified.

EPI research also finds that there is woefully low access to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).<sup>8</sup> Over a quarter (26 per cent) of referrals to specialist children's mental health services were rejected in 2018-2019. This amounts to approximately 133,000 children and young people. These rejection rates have not improved over the last four years, despite an extra £1.4bn committed by the government from 2015-16 to 2020-21.

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<sup>3</sup> IFS, "Public Spending on Children in England", June 2018

<sup>4</sup> Smith, G., Sylva, K., Smith, T., Sammons, P., & Omonigho, A., 'Stop Start: Survival, decline or closure? Children's Centres in England', The Sutton Trust 2018

<sup>5</sup> National Audit Office, 'Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities', 2018

<sup>6</sup> Ofsted, The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2018/19, January 2020

<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, Characteristics of children in need: 2018 to 2019, October 2019

<sup>8</sup> Crenna-Jennings, W, "Access to child and adolescent mental health services in 2019", January 2020

Taken together, the cuts to children’s services, the poor quality of services in many areas, the closure of schools and the high thresholds in place for accessing specialist services create a melting pot for the needs of vulnerable children to go unidentified and unmet. It is clear that, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, children’s services were struggling to cope with demand, and resources were targeted at acute, high need cases rather than on early intervention and prevention. The consequences of the pandemic not only mean that we are at risk of not meeting the needs of children who were already vulnerable, but also creating many more newly vulnerable children and putting yet further strain on children’s services.

Although the government has recognised this and has announced an additional £12m for vulnerable children, this relatively small intervention, targeted on only a few areas of the country, will not have a systematic or sustained impact on outcomes.

**The government needs to go further and provide additional and sustained funding to children’s services.** While schools have done their best to step in and compensate for the loss of many of these services, the closure of schools means there is no identification, monitoring or support for pupils, particularly those who are on the edge of being deemed as “vulnerable”.

There needs to be clear, national standards for children’s social care services both during a pandemic and “in normal times”. The government needs to ensure authorities are adequately resourced in order to meet those standards.

## **The effect of provider closure on the early years sector**

### **Children’s early development**

Attending early education and care appears to benefit children’s development regardless of their household income and socio-economic status.<sup>9</sup> However, given the lower starting point among disadvantaged children and reduced likelihood to take up childcare, early education and childcare may be of particular importance for the most disadvantaged children.

Around 41 per cent of children aged 0-2 attend a formal childcare setting, rising to 95 per cent of children aged 3-4.<sup>10</sup> In the short-term, the closure of formal early years settings is likely to on average have a negative impact on the development of these 2.1 million children, with the biggest impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the absence of access to education and care experiences in formal settings or with childminders, the importance of the home learning environment will increase. There is evidence that the home learning environment is negatively impacted by parents’ levels of stress, depression or irritability.<sup>11</sup> As well as parents experiencing poverty being more likely to experience stress, the impacts of coronavirus on the economy are likely to have distributional impacts, being worse for those with

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<sup>9</sup> Gardiner, J. and Melhuish, E. (2018) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age 4.

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education (2019) Childcare and early years survey of parents: 2019. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents-2019>

<sup>11</sup> Utting, D. (2007) Parenting and the different ways it can affect children’s lives: research evidence, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

lower incomes. For instance, lower income households are most exposed to temporary falls in income, with more than 4 million households without enough savings to cope if their income fell by 25 per cent.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that disparities in the quality of the home learning environments of children from disadvantaged families and others are likely to increase with the current crisis.

More time spent at home is likely to lead to an increase in the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their better off peers that appears in the early years due to differences in the home learning environment. In 2018-19, before the current crisis, children from disadvantaged backgrounds were 4.5 months behind their peers by the time they finished reception year at age 5.<sup>13</sup>

**To mitigate the impact of lost early education time, we recommend that the government doubles the Early Years Pupil Premium for all 3 and 4 year olds for at least one year.** This should be targeted at evidence-based interventions which support children's socio-emotional development and language and communication skills.

### **The childcare market**

Childcare settings tend to be small businesses, running on tight margins. Even before this current crisis, settings across the country have been struggling to remain open in the face of rising costs, an unstable supply of qualified workers and often insufficient government funding.

The government has committed to continuing paying early years settings for the government-funded childcare they were offering before the Covid-19 outbreak. However, this is likely to benefit some providers more than others, with one-in-10 private and voluntary childcare providers, and one-in-five childminders, not offering the childcare entitlement of 30 hours per week for working parents.<sup>14</sup> Even for those childcare providers who do offer free entitlements, the funding accounts for only a proportion of their revenue, which will vary between providers depending on the proportion of their revenues coming from parent fees.

Furthermore, the increased importance of government-funded childcare for childcare providers' survival is likely to put more pressure on those childcare providers whose costs are higher relative to the funding rate they receive from the government, which differs by geographical area as defined by the Early Years Funding Formula. Early years providers in areas where government funding is lower relative to their fixed costs, and those which provide fewer government-funded places as a proportion of their total places, are most at risk of financial strain and potential closure.

The sector has been experiencing a workforce shortage for some time. This is likely to be exacerbated by the current crisis, as early years workers are furloughed on the government's job

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<sup>12</sup> Bangham, G. (2020) In this coronavirus crisis, do families have enough savings to make ends meet? [Online] Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/comment/in-this-coronavirus-crisis-do-families-have-enough-savings-to-make-ends-meet/>

<sup>13</sup> Hutchinson et al. (2019) Education in England: Annual Report 2019, EPI [Online] Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2019/>

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education (2019) Childcare and early years providers survey: 2019 [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-providers-survey-2019>

retention scheme and face an income below National Minimum Wage, to be topped up through the benefits system. This experience may prompt some in the sector to leave, and the prospect may discourage others from joining. A reduced workforce may further limit supply in the market.

We know that before the recent crisis, around 45 per cent of childcare workers claimed state benefits or tax credits, well above the average among the female workforce and among teachers. We may see an increase in this in the coming weeks and months.<sup>15</sup>

One group of early years workers which is most likely to leave is those who are newer to the sector, with lower levels of sector-relevant qualifications, for whom jobs in competing occupations such as the retail sector are most competitive.<sup>16</sup> This could have ramifications for the sector, with shortages already persisting in the number of workers with level 3 qualifications, which are crucial for meeting statutory duties.<sup>17</sup>

Childminders are self-employed, run smaller businesses and are less likely than other providers to offer the government's funded childcare. This makes them more vulnerable to the current crisis. However, while numbers are likely to drop quicker for childminders than for other providers, since childminders operate out of their own home, they face lower start-up costs if they want to begin offering childcare again when schools reopen.

To support early years workers during the lockdown period and once settings reopen, **we also recommend that the government funds local authorities to develop an online database of early years workers in each area.** This will help authorities to galvanise and deploy workers in areas they are most needed during times of crisis; provide a consistent offer of Continuing Professional Development to all staff and particularly to those who may be furloughed for some time; and to support providers with recruitment once the lockdown period ends.

## The effect of cancelling formal exams

Ofqual has consulted on its proposed approach for providing grades for pupils whose exams have been cancelled this summer. EPI has identified two significant issues in Ofqual's proposals which need to be addressed.

The first is that it does not address any within-school bias in reference to grading and under-represented groups. Ofqual's proposal only seeks to ensure that schools with larger proportions of under-represented groups are not unfairly graded, rather than individuals in schools. Ofqual's review of the literature of teacher assessment does not sufficiently reflect the impact of such assessments on certain groups of pupils.

The second issue is that the proposal requires teachers to generate grades for individual students from scratch, without any statistical-based starting point. Ofqual then has the power to override teacher's judgements about grades, which we believe is the wrong order.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Akhal, A. (2019) The early years workforce: A comparison with retail workers. [Online] Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/early-years-workforce-comparison-retail-workers/>

<sup>17</sup> Nursery World (2019) 'Qualification levels of nursery staff drop dramatically' [Online] Available at: <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/qualification-levels-of-nursery-staff-drop-dramatically>

**We recommend that, as a starting point, schools should be shown what their ranked order would look like if pupils followed national patterns from recent years based on prior attainment and characteristics.**

Using this model as a starting point, teachers should then apply professional judgement as to how rankings within the school differ based on internal assessments, classwork and homework. Validation checks should highlight where the decisions of schools have disproportionately moved the ranking of particular groups up or down and schools would then need to justify those changes had they had a material impact on grades for specific groups. Heads of Centres will need to ensure that there is no bias in grades and this may require them to consider other information including previous exam rankings and results.

Ofqual should then review group level deviations and, where necessary, challenge centres if such deviations are not adequately justified.

While we understand that this approach could result in a different national distribution of grades than in previous years we consider that, on balance, fairness to pupils is a more important factor than a neat and consistent grade distribution.

If Ofqual does not adopt this alternative proposal for centre assessed grades, we think that it should at least amend its own proposal so that there is a further step built into the Ofqual checking system which looks specifically at the grades of groups of pupils within a centre to ensure that those grades are consistent with expected performance.

We are also particularly concerned about the treatment of pupils in Alternative Provision. In many cases, year 11 pupils will only have joined their AP setting in January (existing research shows that a disproportionate number of year 11 pupils are moved from mainstream schools into AP before the January census) and in at least one extreme case we know of, a pupil was enrolled in AP during the lockdown period.

This means that teachers are unlikely to have the historical classwork or knowledge of the pupil to support reliable predicted grades. It is also unlikely that a statistical model could produce a reliable or fair prediction for these pupils. Pupils in AP are already, by definition, vulnerable and so greater consideration should be given to how they can be supported to achieve meaningful qualifications.

**EPI recommends that AP settings should be funded to provide an extra year of provision for this cohort of pupils who, in a normal year, would struggle to transition into a sustained post-16 destination.**

If Ofqual adopts our recommended approach to grading as set out above, then the decision to not allow parents or pupils to appeal against the process adopted by the exam centre is proportionate and pragmatic.

However, under Ofqual's proposed arrangement, the inability to appeal on the basis of centres' policies and procedures would be unfair and potentially discriminatory. Given the evidence of groups affected by teacher bias, this approach could mean that several pupils from low-income backgrounds, with SEND and from certain ethnic groups could have had their grades suppressed and will have no recourse for appeal.

The government should also carry out an urgent review, working with exam boards, on exam content and grading, before September 2020, to decide if national exams in 2021 should be modified.

## Dealing with the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups

The government must prioritise support for vulnerable groups as they transition back into school and for the period ahead. Before the pandemic, EPI research found that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers was over 18 months by the age of 16. And, in the last year or so, the gap had stopped closing. The attainment gap is wider still for pupils with SEND, who are, on average, over three years behind their peers by the end of secondary education.

Existing research relating to lost learning time (either due to school absences or summer holidays) suggests that the attainment gap will inevitably widen as a result of current school closures. We will not know the precise impact for different groups of pupils until the summer results of 2021 as well as in the years that follow. In the meantime, the Education Endowment Foundation is producing new estimates based on the existing research.

While the government will need to make a decision on when schools will reopen based on the best available evidence, consideration should be given to how best to support disadvantaged and vulnerable children over the summer. **We recommend that the government explores the feasibility of summer wellbeing programmes – aimed at providing young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, with positive activities and pastoral support.** This could be staffed by youth, early years or play workers as opposed to teachers (thereby avoiding any contractual issues in relation to teacher employment during holidays).

Once they reopen, schools will need to deal with two challenging issues. The first is supporting pupils who have faced neglect, abuse or bereavement over the closure period. Our recent conversations with the sector has highlighted the importance of schools being able to provide this support and the extent to which they see this as being their immediate and highest priority. The second issue is how schools then support those who have fallen behind academically.

School leaders will therefore need additional resources to provide a combination of pastoral care and support, one to one or small group classes and other evidence-based interventions.

**EPI recommends that the government should double the Pupil Premium rates for at least one year for pupils who are currently in Reception, Year 6 and Year 10 who are facing important transition points or national examinations (and will be in Year 1, Year 7 and Year 11 in September 2020).**

**The Pupil Premium for Looked After Children should also be doubled for one year, for all year groups.**

**The Pupil Premium should also be made available for those on the child protection register (at the same rate as for Looked After Children), reflecting that the outcomes of these pupils are often as poor as those who are looked after.** The latest government data states that there were 52,300 children with a child protection plan as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019. Many of these children will already be eligible for the Pupil Premium due to the economic circumstances of their families or having been looked after at some point but it is important that extra support is available for those who do not currently receive it.

In order to deliver extra support to disadvantaged pupils, schools may well need additional teaching capacity to allow for one to one tuition and small group catch up classes. The additional pupil premium which we propose will allow schools to purchase external support from existing private and charitable providers of supply teachers and tuition.

However, the challenge of preventing vulnerable learners from falling behind is so great that in order to supplement this existing activity we propose a one year National Catch Up Volunteer Scheme, in which retired and inactive teachers would come back into the profession on a voluntary basis for a limited time to help schools to support the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. We propose a simple national website where volunteers – who will be experienced former teachers and leaders – are able to register their interest and skills so that schools needing their help can contact them. Schools should receive travel cost reimbursement for volunteers. Volunteers can apply either to a school they know or opt to be allocated to the nearest school which particularly needs their expertise. This would reflect the recent and popular NHS volunteer scheme.

This will help us to tap into the strong sense of social responsibility amongst those who teach and who have taught, and the desire these individuals have to contribute to a process of social and educational recovery from this pandemic.

Where possible, schools could use the extra Pupil Premium funding to pay for teaching assistants to support specific learners, including those for whom English is an Additional Language and those with SEND.

There is a real risk that pupils will return to school with fresh behavioural challenges due to their family circumstances or bereavement. We know from existing EPI research that disadvantaged and vulnerable children are far more likely to be excluded or subject to an unexplained move out of their school than their peers. If we want to protect the outcomes of this group of pupils, then exclusions and other school moves should be avoided as far as possible. **We recommend that the DfE issues fresh guidance to schools about the need to avoid exclusions and that the DfE and local authorities should monitor closely any increase in the number of children being moved out of individual schools.**

As we state earlier in this submission, the government should also fund post-16 provision in Alternative Provision which currently lacks any government funding and the destinations of pupils currently in AP are likely to be worsened as a result of the pandemic.

## **The implications for post-16, vocational and higher education**

### **Further Education**

EPI's annual report finds that post-16 destinations are becoming more segregated along socio-economic lines. Furthermore, while more disadvantaged young people are going to university each year, the gap in entry between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students has largely remained unchanged.

Existing EPI evidence also shows that in the period between 2011/12 and 2018/19, funding for 16-19 education fell by 16 per cent in real terms per student (from £5,900 to £4,960). These cuts mean

that the 16-19 phase has been the biggest real terms loser of any phase of education since 2010/11 and this has been evident in the financial health of the sector, with in-year deficits increasing across all types of 16-19 institutions over the decade. While the government announced an increase of £400m to this phase for 2020-21, unlike for schools, this is only a one-year settlement with no longer term certainty.

So even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the 16-19 sector faced steep challenges in relation to both funding sustainability and equity of access and destinations. The pandemic now brings fresh challenges in relation to:

- Potentially unstable and biased GCSE and A-Level results;
- Lost time either on academic courses or on work-based courses and apprenticeships; and
- The risk of long-term unemployment which arise during economic downturns (the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates an increase of the unemployment rate by 6 percentage points, from its pre-lockdown base of 4 per cent).

The government must therefore prioritise actions which mitigate against these effects. Such actions should include:

**Doubling funding for disadvantaged students:** Disadvantaged students are more likely to have suffered from lost learning time than their peers. The 16-19 funding formula already includes a weighting for disadvantaged students so increasing this weighting for a limited time would be straightforward. In addition, there should be dedicated catch-up funding for those resitting English and maths in Year 12, to compensate for their lost learning time.

**Extending 16-19 vocational courses for an additional year:** The risk of an economic downturn and high unemployment rates means that it is feasible that many young people could leave vocational courses with limited prospects of employment. To guard against this and to keep those young people on secure pathways, we recommend extending their study for a further year, with associated funding for these students.

**Ceasing performance tables for 2020 and keeping 2021 under review:** This reflects our position for primary and secondary schools. Selective institutions should also ensure contextualisation of results when considering admissions for both 2020/21 and 2021/22.

**Greater flexibility for apprenticeships:** Given the temporary cessation of many schemes, the government should relax the rules around End Point Assessments and the delivery of off the job training. The government should also consider compensating colleges for a sudden reduction in apprenticeships for at least one year.

**Extending maintenance loans:** EPI has previously called for the government to extend maintenance loans to young adults aged 19 and over pursuing a first full level 3 qualification, to assist take up and progression. This policy shift is increasingly necessary as a result of the pandemic.

**Greater support for adult reskilling:** Given increased unemployment for the medium to long term, the government will need to do more on reskilling and retraining. This should include a relaxation of many the eligibility rules for the Adult Education Budget, particularly in relation to online provision and allowing those aged over 24 to take a second Level 3 qualification.

To support these measures, EPI recommends that the government creates an “Education for Recovery” financial packages for colleges for a minimum of one year.

## Higher Education

The main financial threats to universities arise from three areas: lost income from accommodation, catering and conferences; a significant fall in international students; and a rise in deferrals of domestic students.

International students make up around 20 per cent of the student population in the UK, with the largest number of international students (120,000) coming from China. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that, if no new international students enrol in the forthcoming academic year, universities would lose around 10 per cent of their funding. That is before any impact of other losses caused by Covid 19, including impacts on domestic students. These losses would not be distributed equally across the Higher Education sector as higher ranked universities, those in London and specialist institutions tend to take a higher proportion of international students than lower ranked universities.

This carries the risk that the higher ranked universities could lower their entry requirements in order to attract more domestic students, to absorb some of the international student losses. This could then result in lower ranked universities being unable to attract their usual demographic of students and therefore the financial impact would be passed from the higher to the lower ranked universities.

To avoid a large expansion of domestic places (which would incur larger unpaid student loan liabilities to the Exchequer), a cap on student numbers is being considered.

A blanket cap on numbers could have an adverse effect on access for disadvantaged students and the ability of universities to compensate for at least some of their losses from international students. **EPI recommends that the government should not introduce a hard cap on numbers but instead limit the number of additional students that any individual university can accept, without explicit approval from the DfE.** The Office for Students should also be tasked with monitoring entry standards.

Another option might be for the government to make available a specific fund to universities that would otherwise face significant losses due to a fall in international student numbers. This would, inevitably, benefit higher tariff universities and those in London the most.

Both options come with very knotty issues for government and the sector. **We recommend that the government should review these options in consultation with sector experts.** Any cap or transitional funding should be in place for 2020 and then reviewed.

## Improving the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

As we set out above, the cuts to children’s services in recent years have, by default, placed a greater responsibility on schools to identify and support vulnerable children.

One of the more practical issues which has arisen is the provision of free school meals. There have been continued delays in both confirming government policy on this issue and then implementing it. Details of the voucher scheme were confirmed on 31<sup>st</sup> March, thirteen days after the announcement to close schools. In the meantime, schools were already adopting their own solutions including delivering lunches themselves. The DfE voucher scheme has since experienced several further issues and delays including in getting the registration emails sent from Edenred (the voucher provider) out to schools and parents reporting problems with downloading the vouchers themselves.

The provision of free school meals policy has also been inconsistent. Despite existing evidence of “holiday hunger” much before the pandemic, the DfE initially stated that free school meals would not be provided during the Easter holidays. As a result of lobbying from schools and charities about the potentially magnified impact of holiday hunger during the pandemic, the DfE changed its policy. While this was a positive shift in policy, it highlights the inconsistency of communications and decision-making that has sometimes come from the government.

Educational support during school closures has been varied and appears to depend on the approach taken by individual schools and academy trusts.

While the government published a list of online educational resources shortly after schools closed, the issue of access to technology was not addressed until the 19<sup>th</sup> April (over one month after the announcement that schools would be closing). The announcement that laptops would be available to vulnerable pupils (via their academy trust or local authority) was welcome but, as with the Free School Meal voucher scheme, it appears to be beset by technical and operational issues. Despite saying that the online portal would be available for applications on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, it was delayed by at least a couple of days and the Education Secretary has since confirmed that he expects the majority of laptops to be June – three months after schools were required to close.

**In future the government needs to communicate with schools and the wider sector much earlier.**

**The government also needs to review its procurement, particularly in relation to services that are reliant on IT, in advance of another wave of Covid-19 or a similar crisis.**

Irrespective of access to technology, some children may face barriers to online learning due to a combination of factors including a lack of a safe space, lack of parental support and physical or learning disabilities.

**For the duration of this current pandemic, and in readiness for any future crisis, the government needs to consider its approach to children with SEND.** While those with an Education, Health and Care plan are entitled to attend school during the lockdown period, many families have kept their children home due to concerns for their safety.

In addition, no provision was made for children who were on the cusp of receiving an EHCP before the lockdown.

April 2020