

## Education Select Committee Inquiry

### The impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services

The following is a response to the Education Select Committee's inquiry compiled by the Baker Dearing Educational Trust ("Baker Dearing") on behalf of all University Technical Colleges ("UTCs").

#### Executive Summary

- UTCs are government funded schools with a STEM focus. They are employer-led, working in partnership with universities, and in areas where there is an identified need to train young people in the technical entrepreneurial skills and personal and collaborative skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace. **There are 48 UTCs across England.**
- Throughout the recent school closures, **most UTCs delivered live lessons and secured high levels of engagement.** For example, one UTC reports having secured 85-90% engagement of Year 10 pupils across an extended 35-hour week.
- UTC Principals report that despite effective arrangements for home learning, the great majority of their pupils are approximately **one full grade behind their expected position for this time in the course**, equating to at least two months of study.
- There is evidence from across the UTC programme that, as a consequence of school closures, **disadvantaged pupils are further behind with their studies and exam preparation than their peers.**
- The standardisation model developed by Ofqual must be sufficiently robust to ensure that **schools with complex contextual characteristics such as UTCs are treated fairly.**
- In September 2020, the opportunity for 18-year-old leavers to progress to apprenticeships or employment (40% of leaver destinations) will be significantly reduced. **About 30% of Year 13 students surveyed across the programme have stated that they are reconsidering what they do next as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic.** Alternative programmes providing progression for these young people must be encouraged, resourced and promoted.
- In seeking to support all schools in preparing pupils for examinations in summer 2021, **Ofqual's proposed adjustments risk discouraging practical learning in order to protect time for syllabus coverage.** These adjustments risk disadvantaging those pupils who respond to active/experiential learning styles.
- In recognising the potential for further COVID-19 related disruption in schools, whether at a local or national level, the decision **not to publish school performance tables for the summer 2021 examinations must be taken in advance of the new academic year** starting this September.
- In conclusion, UTCs aim to provide young people with an educational journey *with a destination at the end*. At the present time, there is rightly much debate about the widening gap between disadvantaged students and others as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Urgent, co-ordinated measures across all schools and government are needed to address the growing social mobility divide. However, rather than a sole focus on knowledge 'catch up' in schools to tackle this issue, perhaps, now, an equally effective approach is to **pivot the emphasis of education away from knowledge-heavy examinations and towards destinations.** By doing this UTCs have transformed the lives of many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## University Technical Colleges

UTCs are schools for 14-18 year olds and provide a specialist curriculum leading to a blend of academic and technical qualifications. They are established by companies and universities in areas of high demand for talent, providing a bridge between the world of education and the world of work, training young people in the technical entrepreneurial skills and personal and collaborative skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace. There is a strong emphasis on employer engagement, including real-life project-based learning, which engages students and develops their personal attributes.

Each UTC works with a network of local industry partners to design a learning programme which covers not only the core curriculum of English, Maths, and Sciences, but also sought-after technical qualifications taught by specialist staff with industry standard equipment.

By tailoring courses of study for *all* students with a destination in mind, young people at UTCs, especially those with disadvantaged backgrounds, are more aware of the opportunities available to them after completing their studies. Furthermore, regular university and employer engagement empowers *all* students with the confidence to pursue the right pathways for them after leaving their UTC.

Destinations data of UTC leavers at 18 years of age shows that a greater percentage progress to higher apprenticeships, or a lower percentage became unemployed compared with national averages. Last year, NFER (the National Foundation for Educational Research) looked into whether students in areas of high deprivation were more likely to progress to university or other forms of higher study from a UTC when compared with other local schools and colleges. They found that in areas of high deprivation two thirds of UTC students progress to higher education, which is significantly higher than from other local institutions (about half). Thus, UTCs are rightly agents of social mobility.

### **The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment.**

UTCs have in general been highly effective in providing home learning throughout the school closure period. Most have provided live lessons and secured high levels of engagement. One Ofsted Outstanding UTC reports 85-90% engagement of Year 10 pupils across an extended 35-hour week.

However, despite this level of support, the great majority of their pupils are assessed as one full grade behind their expected position for this time in the course. UTC Principals estimate that this corresponds to at least two months of study. In addition, some pupils are even further behind, including a disproportionate number of disadvantaged pupils.

In seeking to prepare current Year 10 pupils for examinations in 2021, there is a risk of devaluing practical learning and skills through prioritizing and protecting curriculum content – as evident in the current proposals for exam adjustments 2020-21. Whilst it is appropriate to consider amending examination content for next year, in light of lost learning, Baker Dearing is concerned to note that Ofqual's proposals remove assessment of all practical skills (such as in science, geography, design technology, engineering etc). This appears to be done with the teacher, rather than the learner in mind. Practical education is front and centre of UTCs and we see first-hand the impact this has on young people's engagement in their studies.

UTCs account for a very small proportion of the national entry at both KS4 and KS5. For example, in 2019, students from UTCs represented just 0.67% of the entry for GCSE mathematics. However, this was 3,700 young people. Together the entry from UTCs and Studio Schools represented 0.9% of the national entry for GCSE mathematics.

In response to Ofqual's consultation on the exceptional arrangements for exam grading and assessment in 2020, Baker Dearing sought assurances that a national model of statistical standardisation be cognisant of, and sensitive to, the complex context of UTCs. The characteristics of UTCs (as relatively small schools with atypical curricula and age of entry) bring additional uncertainty and challenge to statistical grade adjustment. The impact of this modelling in terms of fairness will only be evident once grade awards have been published.

For UTCs, the extent to which pupils' progression is likely to be impacted by grade awards will clearly fall within the range of statistical error inherent in the standardisation model. A more significant factor will be the availability of apprenticeships and opportunities for relevant employment with training.

In September 2020, the opportunity for 18-year old leavers to progress to apprenticeships or employment is expected to be significantly reduced. Indeed, about 30% of Year 13 students surveyed across the programme have stated that they are reconsidering what they do next as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Across UTCs, leavers into the work place either through employment or apprenticeship have annually represented approximately 40% of total UTC leavers.

Many eighteen-year-old (Year 13) students will be reconsidering what they do next. Major employers such as JCB, Rolls-Royce, Bentley Motors, and BP have cancelled job and apprenticeship opportunities for this September, as a consequence of COVID-19. At the same time, some young people will consider deferring or cancelling their place at university due to the anticipated inferior experience. Whilst a gap year, either to travel or to gain temporary employment, might have been an option in the past, the quality and quantity of these choices are also affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Since many Year 13 students have not experienced education since late March and have not been required to study for their examinations, their knowledge base undoubtedly will have slipped during the intervening period.

The most recent data from the Department for Education showed that UTCs sent the same percentage of students to university (35%) in 2017 compared with mainstream schools and colleges, and a similar percentage into employment (23% vs 25%). UTCs sent twice the percentage of students into apprenticeships (21% vs 10%) and 4 times as many at higher and degree level apprenticeships as national averages. They also had a lower percentage of NEETS (9% vs 13%).

A valid option for year 13 students now is to return to full time education in September, for a full year. This is in effect a **Year 14** offer. An appropriate curriculum offer would seek to both deepen and broaden their knowledge and skills and, as a consequence, accelerate future progression. Over 58% of (300) respondents to Baker Dearing's recent survey of year 13 leavers stated that they would spend another year at their UTC if it gave them the right qualifications to progress in their career.

Most UTCs could accommodate additional Year 14 students, as they are not yet full. Although the Government currently funds year 14 students at a rate that is approximately 20% lower than that provided for Y13 students, these funds would be received in the same year (if on estimate funding). As a result, schools would benefit financially from this provision. The same would apply to any colleges/schools with spare capacity. Schools and colleges would be encouraged to consider broadening their Level 3 and post-Level 3 offers.

A year 14 programme would be more cost-effective than an apprenticeship guarantee, and would be roughly comparable in cost to providing universal credit payments to young people who are unemployed. Schools/colleges are already set up to deliver such programmes. Across the UTC network, an aggregate of approx. 10,000 spare places is anticipated nationally for the 2020/2021 school year (realistic capacity of c.25,000 vs. 15,000 expected students on roll), so UTCs could accommodate students from their and other Sixth Forms. Courses for which a national shortage is forecast (e.g. digital and STEM) could be prioritised.

Students in year 14 would complete their studies, embed the knowledge which would normally be achieved through examination revision, and have the opportunity to take formal examinations (next

summer or in the autumn). This would be particularly valuable for those students who feel that the results they are awarded this summer are below their expectations. With the right financial support from government, students could progress to a higher level of study (e.g. Level 4 through an HNC qualification). In turn, by working with employers and universities, their progression at school could potentially link to their career aspirations for the following year, thus ensuring that their year 14 is not effectively repeated in a different setting.

Many young people may be inspired to revisit their career or higher education plans as a consequence of COVID-19. For example, the high-profile role played by STEM personnel during the crisis could encourage more students to seek a career in related fields. Taking an alternative, but relevant, Level 3 qualification would be appropriate as a result.

### **The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families**

UTCs are relatively young institutions with an atypical age of entry. All students reaching the end of Key Stage 4 this year will have joined at the start of Year 10. Most UTCs draw students from across an abnormally large geographical area and number of feeder schools.

For example, the current Year 11 cohort of one UTC has 90 students on roll drawn from 59 educational institutions, those being 26 schools in England, 25 schools abroad and 8 previously home-schooled students. As a consequence, UTCs commonly exhibit significant differences in the entry profile for annual cohorts. These differences are exhibited in terms of ability, attainment on entry, aptitude, behaviour and attendance. Therefore, historical trends, in terms of both attainment and progress, are unreliable.

There is an inevitable risk to student recruitment at UTCs due to school closures and the likelihood of parents being risk-averse to their child changing school in the current circumstances. Furthermore, pupils typically travel further to their UTC, mostly using public transport. There is a cost associated with this that is met by parents.

### **The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)**

During the school closure period, UTC teaching models fell into three categories, with about half of the programme pursuing the first two categories.

These were: (a) an online timetable to be followed throughout with a considerable amount of live teaching supporting a published and scheduled programme of study with supporting online learning resources. Regular teacher feedback both live and electronic; (b) An online timetable to be followed. Published and scheduled programme of study with supporting online learning resources. Some pre-recorded lessons or slide packs. Scheduled face to face sessions with teacher/tutor for monitoring and feedback; (c) Online daily/weekly published programme of study with supporting resources for download. Online submission of completed work and routine electronic feedback from teacher. Possibly occasional live face to face interaction.

All three models require students to log in to their UTC's virtual learning platform on a daily basis, with such being monitored, recorded and followed up as appropriate.

In common with students in mainstream schools, a disproportionate number of UTC pupils from disadvantaged groups have experienced low levels of engagement during the lockdown period. Evidence from UTC Principals suggests that many disadvantaged pupils will have lost around 20% of face to face teaching time normally provided for their qualifications.

Most UTCs have provided an increasing degree of 'live' online teaching over the school closure period. However, this has not been possible for those UTCs where a significant number of students share a

single online device with their siblings and parents in the home. As a consequence, an increasing number of 'live' lessons are being recorded. Furthermore scheduled 'live' lessons are proving a challenge for teachers living in multi-occupancy households, such as those living in Greater London.

Rationalised home learning timetables are generally proving more effective than the original school timetable in terms of:

- reducing the number of pupils falling behind and ultimately disengaging.
- making efficient use of staff expertise (for example a key engineering lesson can be taught to all pupils in Year 10 at the same time by a specialist)
- providing greater flexibility for teachers who are simultaneously supporting their own children 'home schooling'.

Where timetables are manageable and pupil monitoring robust, student engagement is high given the current circumstances (85%+). The one exception to that would appear to be one UTC with a high level of live lessons and very high engagement of Year 10 (95%). However, it has experienced very low engagement from Year 12 (50-60%) since the Easter break as many students have been tempted into part-time employment (supermarket self-stacking, delivery services etc).

UTCs have introduced effective and creative arrangements for supporting students with SEND in the current conditions. Effective training of learning assistants, which builds on their existing relationships with individual students and families, is allowing many of these young people to access their work and keep engaged.

### **What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency?**

The Department for Education and other associated agencies must develop a clear communications strategy. During the current school closure period, significant announcements made have been through media statements leaving school leaders with information that is too late, containing too little detail, and subject to constant change.

Furthermore, Government should address the requirement for additional funding to implement blended learning approaches and recognise the effectiveness of this method of teaching and learning in the Inspection Framework.

In recognising the potential for further COVID-19 related disruption in schools, whether at a local or national level, the decision not to publish school performance tables for the summer 2021 examinations must be taken in advance of the new academic year starting this September. This will provide schools with the confidence to plan effective programmes of study to meet the educational needs of all pupils whilst protecting their mental health and well-being.

It is also vitally important that practical and technical skills as well as active learning styles are protected. The policy of favouring content over skills risks disadvantaging those pupils who respond to active/experiential learning styles. Research identifies that boys are disproportionately represented in that group. Baker Dearing recommends that a gender-equality impact assessment of the proposals should be conducted. Within the Ofqual consultation, Baker Dearing suggested that this could be achieved by offering optional questions rather than by removing the assessment of practical elements (such as in GCSE science, geography, engineering, computer science).

In conclusion, UTCs aim to provide young people with an educational journey *with a destination at the end*. At the present time, there is rightly much debate about the widening gap between disadvantaged students and others as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Urgent, co-ordinated measures across all schools and government are needed to address the growing social mobility divide. However, rather than a sole focus on knowledge 'catch up' in schools to tackle this issue, perhaps, now, an equally effective approach is to pivot the emphasis of education away from knowledge-heavy

examinations and towards destinations? By doing this UTCs have transformed the lives of many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.