



# Association of Colleges

Promoting. Representing. Supporting.

# Manifesto 2015



# Our recommendations to the next Government...

## Supporting student choice

- 1 Careers education and advice
- 2 Education accounts for students aged over 19
- 3 Affordable and accessible student transport

## Sustaining economic recovery through education and training

- 4 Creating a higher technical and professional education system fit for the 21st century
- 5 Preparing young people for apprenticeships
- 6 Assessment which reflects real life
- 7 Continued autonomy to respond to local needs
- 8 Meeting the English and maths challenge

## Creating a fair and effective education system

- 9 Funding which matches student need
- 10 Spending scarce resources sensibly

# Foreword

As we approach 7 May 2015, politicians will tell us all that this General Election is the most important for a generation. We agree. The next Parliament, lasting until 2020, will indeed make huge decisions about the future of our nation, and most particularly about how to balance the books. The Institute of Fiscal Studies estimates that 60% of the cuts in public spending are yet to come<sup>1</sup>. Future ministers will have some very tough decisions to make.

Naturally, we want colleges and their students to be protected from the brunt of these cuts, just as schools and universities have been protected in this Parliament. We say this not only because of the contribution colleges make to the life of their students and the communities they serve, but also because of the wider costs of *not* supporting them adequately. Their vital work helping young people get a place in university, an apprenticeship or a good job; helping adults improve their career prospects by offering training via their employers; and, of increasing importance, providing higher technical and professional skills, are tasks which *save* money and *create* additional competitiveness for individuals, for communities and the nation. Short-term savings in the college sector have considerable long-term, detrimental impact.

It is on this basis we have put together our 10 recommendations. If these are implemented by the next Government, we will create a system in which further education (FE) and sixth form colleges and, most importantly, their students, can thrive and succeed.

To misquote a Prime Minister from the past: 'give them the tools and they'll do the job'.



**Richard Atkins**  
*Association of Colleges  
President*



**Martin Doel OBE**  
*Chief Executive*

A student with long blonde hair and glasses is focused on writing in a notebook. The image is overlaid with a blue semi-transparent box on the left side, which contains the text 'THEME 1 Supporting student choice'. The background is a blurred, high-contrast image of a student writing, rendered in a halftone or dot-matrix style.

# **THEME 1**

Supporting  
student choice

# 1

## Careers education and advice

The next Government should introduce systematic careers education for 11 to 18-year-olds and facilitate a careers hub between schools, colleges and universities in each area, led by the local enterprise partnership.

We have expressed our concern about recent policy decisions, particularly placing a duty on schools to secure careers advice for their pupils, but with no funding attached. We welcome the fact, however, that Ofsted will soon be inspecting schools in relation to curriculum and personal development, within which we assume the provision of careers advice will be included.

The next Government needs to work with schools and colleges to reintroduce systematic careers *education* into the curriculum which should, in effect, become an entitlement for every child and young person. This education should include understanding different types of businesses, how stereotyping affects career decisions, the qualities needed to enhance employability and looking methodically at the choices available and what is required for particular jobs<sup>2</sup>. This systematic provision should be complemented by visits from local businesses, colleges and work experience placements. Such careers education will be particularly important for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The recent National Careers Council report<sup>3</sup> put forward a series of recommendations to improve careers advice. Recommendation 4 of this report is in line with our call for colleges, schools and universities to be incentivised by Government to collaborate and create a careers advice hub in each area led by local enterprise partnerships (LEPs). Local chambers of commerce, JobCentre Plus and local authorities should also be involved where appropriate. LEPs could, for example, choose to use their European Social Fund allocation to support this development. This hub should be the location for anyone seeking careers advice or information about local job opportunities. Building on the success of The Skills Show, it should provide young people with an opportunity to try their hand at various vocational options and also explain the benefits of an academic education and progression to university.

# 2

## Education accounts for students aged over 19

All adult students, whether studying at university or college, should have equivalent access to grants and loans via new education accounts. The Government, the student and their employer should contribute to this account. This would facilitate genuine learning throughout life and bring greater equity between further and higher education students.

Currently, adult students in FE aged between 19 and 24 have very few options to support themselves financially through their learning. Meanwhile, university students are able to access grants as well as loans. Other than apprenticeships, the funding given to adult skills training has declined by 35% since 2009-10<sup>4</sup>. University funding has been maintained and enhanced through the introduction of student loans to cover increasing fees.

It is essential that adults have access to the courses and qualifications they need to retrain or progress in their careers in order to be economically productive. A thriving economy, and the nature of England's workforce, needs people to remain in work later in life. The education and training support system, however has not caught up with these requirements and heavily subsidises university students aged between 18 and 21. All adult FE students should have the same access to student support as university students. This would, particularly help those on low incomes and/or benefits.

This new equality of treatment should be facilitated through a system of accounts for students aged 19 and over to which the Government should contribute both student grants and loans. If a student is in work, and his or her employer is supporting their education, then that employer should contribute too. The individual themselves could also be able to supplement the account. Identical terms should apply to both university and FE students.

These accounts could be actively promoted by Government in recognition of the social value of education, enhancing people's ability to play an active part in their communities and social cohesion.

# 3

## Affordable and accessible student transport

Transport legislation has not caught up with the fact that everyone is now required to participate in education and training until their 18th birthday. The transport rights for 16 to 18-year-olds in education should mirror those which apply to school children so that all young people can choose the courses which best enable them to achieve their potential.

Colleges spend huge amounts of money on transport for their students every year – both from their bursary and core budgets. This money should be directed to teaching and learning. However without transport provision, many students would not be able to get to college in the first place. Meanwhile, local authorities have cut the funding they give to local bus services, particularly since 2010. The Campaign for Better Transport estimates that 2014 is set to be the worst year yet for cuts to bus services<sup>5</sup>. Almost £20 million has been earmarked for cuts from local authority bus funding with potentially more on the horizon.

We believe students should be able to access the best course for them and should not be forced to choose a course as a result of transport restrictions. Taking a course which interests and engages a young person is obviously the best way to keep them in education and maximise their chances of securing sustainable employment, or a place in higher education.

The next Government needs to update the transport rules to ensure local authorities undertake a full assessment of the travel needs of 16 to 18-year-olds within their area and ensure they can access college.

The next Government should also consider creating a system through which older people, with a free bus pass, can 'give up' their right to free travel in order to pass this benefit on to a young person aged between 16 and 18, who cannot afford to travel to college or to their apprenticeship.

A black and white halftone photograph of a person with long hair, wearing safety glasses, focused on working on a complex mechanical device. The person is leaning over their work, and the device has various gears, levers, and a vertical rod. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a workshop or laboratory setting. The overall image has a grainy, dotted texture characteristic of halftone printing.

## **THEME 2**

Sustaining economic  
recovery through  
education and  
training



# 4

## Creating a higher technical and professional education system fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The next Government should reform the higher education system to ensure it can respond quickly in training the engineers, technicians and professionals of the future. Further education colleges should be given the power to award higher technical and professional certificates, in partnership with employers.

The OECD recently reported that England's post-secondary vocational education provision is small compared to other countries at just 10%<sup>6</sup>.

A rebalance towards technical and professional education is vital in ensuring the sustainable growth of the economy. In the past 50 years, there has been a continuous gravitational pull towards academic education and this has accelerated since the conversion of polytechnics to universities in 1993. It is time we redressed the balance. At a time of skills shortages, we know that technical and professional education should be a route that is open to all and not just those presumed to be lacking the capability to go to university.

FE colleges are perfectly placed to take on the role of providing higher technical and professional education; they have dual professional teachers who combine their occupational and teaching expertise with access to industry standard facilities. The Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL) report<sup>7</sup> highlighted these characteristics as key elements of providing excellent programmes of teaching and learning. However, in addition to resources, and in order to achieve true parity with academic education, colleges need to have the autonomy to make awards that are built with employers to meet their needs as well as those of students. This would help address a crippling shortage of skilled engineers and technicians with practical skills and experience.

We call on the next Government to allow those colleges held in high regard by local employers and their community, and who have a solid track record in delivering higher level qualifications, to have the equivalent of degree awarding status. They could then work in conjunction with other colleges to award their own qualifications at Levels 3, 4 and 5, thereby helping people progress. This would be within the context of a new technical accreditation council<sup>8</sup>, operated as a social partnership between employers and colleges.

# 5

## Preparing young people for apprenticeships

The next Government should develop a comprehensive pre-apprenticeship, concentrating on the needs of 16 to 24-year-olds, helping them prepare for an apprenticeship and gain the skills businesses need.

The Coalition Government introduced traineeships for both 16 to 18-year-olds and those aged over 19. Colleges have welcomed this initiative and worked hard to recruit trainees and engage local employers, with whom the trainee has to spend some of their working week. Despite this, 80% of colleges say it is difficult to convince employers to take on a trainee and 36% say the same about apprentices<sup>9</sup>.

Meanwhile, the number of 16 to 18-year-olds becoming apprentices has declined. This is because in most sectors businesses are reticent about employing an apprentice this young, especially when there might be someone older available with more experience. In addition, research has shown that only 17% of 11 to 16-year-olds had actually heard of apprenticeships, with the rest, therefore, unlikely to pursue it as an option<sup>10</sup>.

To address this increasing concern, traineeships should be converted into pre-apprenticeship training, specifically created to prepare 16 and 17-year-olds for a full apprenticeship. This training should last two years, be set at Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and include the soft skills so desperately needed by employers. It would, of course, include a work experience element, and build on the concept of study programmes<sup>11</sup> and the raising of the participation age in education or training to the age of 18.

Where particular sectors wish to continue to recruit 16 and 17-year-old apprentices, for example in hospitality, catering or hairdressing, they should be allowed to continue to do so.

However in other areas, such as construction, engineering and plumbing, employers have shown little willingness to recruit people aged 16 or 17. The next Government should work with those sectors to understand exactly what skills these young people lack. This proposal would provide this age group with a genuine alternative to university at the age of 18.

# 6

## Assessment which reflects real life

The way students are assessed in school and college should reflect the fact that we learn in the workplace and at university incrementally, not solely through end of year exams. The next Government should maintain AS Levels in their current form and should allow for rigorous modular assessment in vocational and academic qualifications, alongside final exams.

The Coalition has introduced significant reforms to both GCSEs and A Levels. Many of these changes have been welcomed but the decision to abolish AS Levels in their current form has been opposed by colleges, schools, many universities (including Cambridge) and the National Union of Students. The next Government should halt these reforms and work with the whole education sector to find a way forward.

The current Government has also introduced reforms to vocational qualifications for both 14 to 16-year-olds and 16 to 18-year-olds with the intention of ensuring there is a clear link with employment or higher education.

The changes that both academic and vocational education have in common is the decision to reduce, or even end, modular teaching and assessment. We disagree with the assumption that anything other than an end of year exam means the course is any less rigorous or of a lower standard. Universities, often praised for their high standards, and the position of some in international league tables, consistently use modular assessment alongside final exams. We also learn incrementally in everyday life, particularly in our jobs. Placing total emphasis on final exams often becomes a test of memory rather than understanding.

# 7

## Continued autonomy to respond to local needs

The next Government should continue to allow colleges the freedom and flexibility to respond to the needs of their community and local businesses, rather than setting rules from Whitehall. Calls to reduce autonomy or return colleges to the control of local councils should be resisted by future Ministers.

FE and sixth form colleges are essential in providing education and training to local people. They have been rooted in their communities for decades, or even centuries. This knowledge enables colleges to provide the courses and qualifications which local people want.

However, there are barriers which prevent them from doing so. Over the past 15 years, Ministers have sought to direct what courses and qualifications colleges should provide. For example, they cannot charge a fee for certain adult courses, or are restricted in the fee they can charge for other courses. Colleges know their local market best and should be able to create their post-19 curriculum, and associated fees, accordingly.

Colleges are not-for-profit organisations and are run in the public interest through their governing bodies, consisting of local people and employers. They also answer to government through performance tables and Ofsted. Colleges have demonstrated their ability to work with LEPs and respond flexibly to employers' and students' needs. This partnership should continue to develop, with LEPs, informed by colleges, having a role in commenting and advising on the skills training provided locally. Colleges should be free to respond to the needs of all their communities, regardless of local authority boundaries. Scotland's Government has introduced 'outcome agreements' for colleges and universities to agree with the funding council and Ministers what they will provide for their regions. This model could be used as a starting point to develop an effective system for ensuring responsiveness and accountability rather than funding colleges via 39 LEPs or 150 local councils.

# 8

## Meeting the English and maths challenge

To enable colleges and schools to meet the OECD challenge, the next Government should develop new English and maths qualifications which allow students, aged 16 to 19 and adults to gain the skills that businesses needs.

Only 59% of 16-year-olds achieve a grade A\*-C in GCSE English and maths<sup>12</sup>. The Coalition has launched significant reforms to GCSEs (including to English and maths) in an effort to make them more rigorous and to ensure that they are an accurate portrayal of ability. These new GCSEs will be taught from September 2015 and graded 1-9, with 9 being the highest. Whilst recognising the principle behind these changes, and the intent to raise standards, we believe that even fewer young people will achieve a 'good' GCSE grade in English and maths.

These young people will, however, still need to continue with English and maths after the age of 16 in order for them to understand the application of literacy and numeracy skills (both in and out of work) and to secure a good job. The vast majority will study these subjects in an FE college, often alongside a vocational qualification.

Unfortunately, many young people dislike English and maths, often because of the way it has been taught in schools and because the current GCSE seems distant from the real world outside the classroom.

We are clear that it is not in these students' best interests, especially those furthest away from achieving a current GCSE grade C to be asked to take the GCSEs again and again.

Therefore, the next Government should work with businesses, large public sector employers such as the NHS and local councils, and colleges to develop new English and maths qualifications, which are rigorous and related to the world of work. These qualifications might also be appropriate to 'adult returners', i.e. those people who left school perhaps many years ago but want to improve their English and maths for personal or career reasons.



## **THEME 3**

Creating a fair  
and effective  
education system

# 9

## Funding which matches student need

There should be no further funding cuts to the education of 16 to 18-year-olds and they should be brought within the Government's protective ringfence. The next Government needs to conduct a once in a generation review of how money is spent at each stage of compulsory education to ensure the budget is used most effectively.

On coming to office, the Coalition placed a protective ringfence around spending on the education of 5 to 16-year-olds. This meant that when the Department for Education (DfE) was asked to reduce spending by the Chancellor, it could not cut funding for this age group. Inevitably, therefore, much of the austerity has fallen onto the shoulders of FE and sixth form colleges, whose primary objective is the provision of education to 16 to 18-year-olds. Not only is this situation unsustainable, especially when everyone is expected to remain in education or training, until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>13</sup>, it has caused serious problems for colleges as they seek to maintain an excellent education for their students.

It has resulted in spending on 16 and 17-year-olds being 22% lower than 11 to 16-year-olds and 18-year-olds receiving an even worse deal – despite them often needing additional support. The recent National Audit Office report about the participation of 16 to 18-year-olds in education and training confirms that the DfE core budget for this age group has reduced in 2013/14 by 8% in real terms compared to 2010/11<sup>14</sup>.

There should be no further cuts to spending on 16 to 18-year-olds and, immediately on taking office, the next Government should bring this age group within the protective ringfence. By the end of the first year of the next Parliament, a once in a generation review should be conducted setting out how much is required to adequately educate or train children and young people. The results of this review should be implemented by the end of the next Parliament in 2020 at the latest.

New schools should only be approved where there is genuine local demand because of poor quality provision and/or rising pupil numbers.

The Coalition and previous Labour Government placed great emphasis on creating new schools or allowing existing schools to open a sixth form to enhance choice and competition between institutions. Too often this happened with little reference to local supply or demand which resulted in the replication of courses and qualifications. This was a waste of resource and we welcome the announcement in October 2014 that only schools graded *good* or *outstanding* should be able to open new sixth forms. But they should not stop there.

The incoming Government in 2015 should maintain the higher quality thresholds for new sixth forms, and review any existing sixth forms that are not viable or fail to meet an acceptable standard - in which case closure should be an option.

DfE will be under significant financial pressure in 2015 due to the rising pupil population, increasing teacher pension costs and curriculum reform. We estimate that DfE could face a black hole of some £600 million in its 2015 budget, rising to £4.6 billion by 2018-19<sup>15</sup>.

In light of the pressures to save money and raise standards, a different approach is needed for the education for 16 to 19-year-olds. The next Government should only allow a new school (including studio schools and university technical colleges) to open if it will genuinely meet demand and/or cater for rising pupil numbers. Government should always insist on public consultation when new or expanded schools are proposed. Any school or sixth form should be required to demonstrate, in advance, how it will provide value for money. The nation can no longer afford new 'boutique' schools<sup>16</sup>.

The next Government should tip the balance more towards collaboration, rather than encouraging competition. Central and local government should encourage such relationships by allowing flexibility and providing schools and colleges with the tools to do this rather than seeking to control and direct their actions in detail.





## Endnotes

1. Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2014. *IFS Green Budget press release*. [http://www.ifs.org.uk/pr/Green\\_Budget2014.pdf](http://www.ifs.org.uk/pr/Green_Budget2014.pdf)
2. Career Development Institute, 2013. *The ACEG framework for careers and work-related education*. [http://www.thecdi.net/write/CWRE\\_User\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.thecdi.net/write/CWRE_User_Guide.pdf)
3. National Careers Council, 2014. *Taking action: Achieving a culture change in careers provision*. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/355473/bis-14-1080-taking-action-achieving-a-culture-change-in-careers-provision.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/355473/bis-14-1080-taking-action-achieving-a-culture-change-in-careers-provision.pdf)
4. Association of Colleges, 2014. *Autumn Statement. A submission from the Association of Colleges*.
5. Campaign for Better Transport, 2014. *Tell your MP*. <http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/save-our-buses/tell-your-mp>
6. OECD, 2014. *OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training - Learning for Jobs*. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/oecdreviewsofvocationaleducationandtraining-learningforjobs.htm>
7. Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning, 2013. *It's about work... Excellent adult vocational teaching and learning*. <http://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/fedora/objects/eg:5937/datastreams/DOC/content>
8. Association of Colleges, 2014. *Breaking the Mould, Creating higher education fit for the future*. <http://www.aoc.co.uk/system/files/Breaking%20the%20Mould%20-%20Creating%20Higher%20Education%20fit%20for%20the%20Future.pdf>
9. Association of Colleges, 2014. *Survey of colleges providing training for local businesses*. <https://www.aoc.co.uk/system/files/Colleges%20providing%20training%20for%20local%20businesses%20Oct%202014.pdf>
10. Freshminds, Association of Colleges and Find a Future, 2014. *Careers Guidance: Guaranteed, summary report of online survey*. <http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Freshminds%20Summary%20Report.pdf>
11. All 16 to 19-year-old students take a study programme which reflects their prior attainment, education and career goals. The programme should include substantial academic or vocational qualifications; work experience; and continuation of English and maths where they do not hold a GCSE graded A\*-C in that subject.
12. Department for Education, 2013. *School Performance Tables*. <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>
13. Association of Colleges, 2014. *Autumn Statement. A submission from the Association of Colleges: 17 October 2014*.
14. National Audit Office, 2014. *Participation of 16 to 18-year-old participation in education and training*. <http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/16-to-18-year-old-participation-in-education-and-training.pdf>
15. Association of Colleges, 2014. *The Department for Education Budget after 2015*. [http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/AoC%20paper%20on%20the%20DfE%20budget%20May%202014\\_2.pdf](http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/AoC%20paper%20on%20the%20DfE%20budget%20May%202014_2.pdf)
16. Association of Colleges, 2014. *Autumn Statement. A submission from the Association of Colleges: 17 October 2014*.



**Photographs courtesy of:**

Stratford-upon-Avon College

The Sheffield College

City of Oxford College

Oldham Sixth Form College

Bridgwater College

Barnet and Southgate College

Burton and South Derbyshire College

Stoke College



Association  
*of* Colleges

© Association of Colleges

2 - 5 Stedham Place, London WC1A 1HU

T: 020 7034 9900 W: [www.aoc.co.uk](http://www.aoc.co.uk)

E: [publicaffairs@aoc.co.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@aoc.co.uk)

 @AoC\_info  Association-of-Colleges