



Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister 10
Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

Wednesday 14 April 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

RE: Skills reform agenda

Your speech last September at Exeter College announcing the Lifetime Skills Guarantee showed that you appreciate the need we have in this country for an urgent and profound boost to technical education if we are “not just to come through this crisis, but to come back stronger, and build back better.”

You recognised that “we’re not giving anywhere near enough of the right kind of training or support to the fifty per cent of young people who don’t want to go to university, and so we’re depriving them of the chance to find their vocation and develop a fulfilling, well-paid career.” We agree with you in the college sector and stand ready to act.

Your decision to make the speech at a further education college and your frank statement that “for the last few decades, alas, we have been hamstrung as a country... by our failures in technical education” gave college leaders great hope and expectation. Since then, the Skills for Jobs White Paper published by the Education Secretary and his strong personal support for this agenda have backed up your leadership. After a decade or more of neglect, colleges are beginning to believe that the future really could be better for them, their students and communities and for the employers they work with.

Your own and the Education Secretary’s commitment to a better future for colleges could not be clearer. It goes without saying how much we welcome that. Your appreciation of the urgency for change and investment is also clear. Ultimately, delivering on this agenda requires three things: a focus on delivering a cohesive process of systems reform, in partnership with the sector; ensuring that this is effectively joined-up with relevant departments across Whitehall, including crucially with DWP and BEIS; and ensuring that the agenda is supported by adequate investment over the long term.

However, turning the tide after decades of neglect is not easy. The decision last month to clawback funding for adult education clearly showed how dysfunctional the current relationships, regulation, accountability structure and funding mechanisms are for colleges. I have written to the Education Secretary on this today, detailing the damage which that decision will do to the capacity of colleges to deliver on your ambitious agenda (I attach a copy). This will potentially damage delivery on the post-16 education and skills which are central to rebuilding the economy and which tens of thousands of young people and adults will need if they are to find success in the labour market. The confidence of college leaders

that positive change is coming has also been hit by a decision taken so late in the year and which simply does not appreciate the overall position, challenges and potential of colleges.

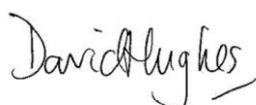
I am writing today to urge you to continue your leadership on the much-needed reform agenda. Report after report, including crucially the Augar Review and the Skills for Jobs White Paper, has set out the compelling case for colleges to be trusted more, to have a new regulatory and accountability regime, for the funding system to be made simpler and for colleges to have more collective autonomy to determine and meet local learner, community and employer needs. Achieving that will take enormous skill, determination and commitment from your government.

I know we will see leadership from the Education Secretary, but he will need support from the Treasury and from other government departments, notably DWP and BEIS if the vision for a world-class technical education system, led by colleges, is to be realised. Your leadership to bring those departments together will be critical, as will your determination to ensure that the investment follows the systems and relationship changes.

Colleges are unique and wonderful institutions. They are flexible, responsive and deliver high quality outcomes for learners and employers. They have shown during the pandemic that their unerring focus on students will always guide them through the toughest of challenges. They stand ready to deliver your ambitions on technical education and skills, with others, and they want your support, a better regulatory system, simpler accountability and funding and a more trusting relationship with government. Ultimately, they will also need the investment to meet needs; an investment which will provide profound and long-lasting returns for the economy, for communities and for every voter.

We are working closely and constructively with DfE ministers and officials on this and would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss this further with you or your officials.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Hughes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line under the name.

David Hughes
Chief Executive, Association of Colleges