



We can't let our young people bear the economic brunt of COVID-19

The 5% Club is a dynamic movement of employer-members working to create a shared prosperity across the UK by campaigning for greater skills training, through 'earn and learn' job opportunities.

After a crisis, the young often suffer unseen from any economic aftershock.

And there is growing evidence that COVID-19 is creating a perfect storm for the most fragile of our children and youth – such that any modest improvements to social mobility of the last decade will be brutally reversed.

How and why will this happen? Because the COVID-19 lockdown creates a perfect storm for young people – a legacy increasingly toxic as disadvantage increases, and one not just of a year's duration, but- spanning early schooling right to transition-into-work – likely to need a generation to put right.

First, the very young: the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) says the pandemic's combination of economic hardship and school closures will have a potentially devastating impact on the poorest of our children. A recent Norwegian study¹ estimates that every week for children shut out of school by COVID-19 can permanently stymie their life chances and earnings potential.

In the UK, voices such as educationalist Sir Anthony Seldon and Professor Sonia Blandford² have pointed out that the need for "home-schooling" only reinforces the advantages of offspring with well-educated, present and engaged parents. Conversely the loss of structure, encouragement and healthy regime from school life is disproportionately hard on those with less stable home environments.

At year-end, a reliance on teacher assessment for GCSE grades, coupled with the loss of final term time, may well work against those who need help most to progress to their next stage – be this an apprenticeship, A levels, technical education or another route. Even those heading towards higher education may not only find that leap harder than ever before, but that all-important work placements are in short supply.

Which brings us to the job-seekers. Because COVID-19 is also a perfect storm for business, despite Government efforts, many will go to the wall. In sectors such as retail, leisure and hospitality, the impact may be irreversible; in all industries, there will be a Darwinian thinning out. And with businesses in survival mode, top priority will be recruitment freezes. All of this will reduce "first rung" opportunities for new starters. There will simply be fewer jobs to go around and the least experienced will be at the back of the queue.

Equally, apprenticeships and graduate programmes are obvious targets for cost-cutting- which directly limits opportunities for those seeking on-the-job training ('earn and learn') routes into a sustainable career. An ISE survey confirms that 27% of businesses plan to reduce their graduates recruitment this year and 23% will cut apprenticeship and school leaver schemes. Even those who are in, or able to secure, apprenticeships may not be able to complete them, with many training providers in difficulty.

The scale and range of these challenges facing our young cannot be over-stated: it is life-defining. We must not look the other way. We need to tap into that incredible spirit of social responsibility that has been so heartening in recent weeks. And we need to carry it beyond the immediate period of the lockdown to secure a strong future for those leaving education in the next few years – not least because their skills – or lack thereof – will shape or hamper our national recovery.

¹What does it cost to close the education sector? Calculation of the cost of infection control measures against COVID-19 for human capital, study progression and productivity

²Author of 'Born to Fail? Social Mobility and the Working Class'





So, what can we do?

This is a complex issue: it needs a multi-faceted approach, with such elements as:

- The Government could adopt the concept of a “COVID premium” for existing Pupil Premium children to receive up to 30 hours’ extra tuition, proposed last week by 50 Northern MPs to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson and already supported by the Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, chair of the Education Select Committee and member of The 5% Club’s Steering Board. A national rollout can be fine-tuned and developed as we go, just as with the Chancellor’s business support schemes over recent weeks.
 - Furloughed, home-bound, ex- and retired teachers could be rallied, just as were NHS staff.
 - Procurement of equipment for online learning should be prioritised by education authorities, just as PPE has been for healthcare.
 - We encourage employers to hold their nerve and look beyond the current crisis, using the furlough scheme where necessary but prioritising apprenticeship, graduate and other earn-and-learn schemes to maintain the talent and opportunity pipeline- not least because it will hinder long-term economic recovery if we do not have the right workforce coming through the ranks.
 - Earn-and-learn routes are part of our fightback to skills, growth and social mobility: but the Government needs to aid employers with both a cash-injection into the Apprenticeship Levy and its overdue reform, or it will become simply a multiplier of failure.
- For this year’s school-leavers and job-seekers, all employers should learn from the most successful recruiters for ‘in the round’ techniques to identify both potential aptitude and positive attitude- assessment days, video interviews, and gamification tests – all of which can be shared through best-practice structures such as The 5% Club by experienced users such as the MoD, an active member.
 - For those currently apprenticing in the worst-hit sectors, the Government should facilitate passporting to allow quick conversion to sectors with similar skill needs- because even while unemployment figures spiral, there will be sectors facing critical skills shortages, which must be signposted to talented young people to enable them to build on the skills they already acquired.
 - Many training providers are struggling for survival, themselves. We cannot revive the economy without training and assessment capability: the sector needs its own rescue package so that apprenticeships and T-Levels can carry on, now and once the crisis is over.

The impact of COVID-19 on today’s young is a ticking time-bomb. We cannot let future generations face possible lifelong setbacks because of this crisis. In 2013 when The 5% Club was founded (www.5percentclub.org.uk), the UK had almost one million young people unemployed: we cannot let our society go back to those days of crippling prospects and structural skills shortages.

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