Witness name: David Hughes CBE
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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DAVID HUGHES ON BEHALF OF THE ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES

I, David Hughes, of the Association of Colleges, 10 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1A 2SL. will say as follows:

1. I am Chief Executive at the Association of Colleges ("AoC") which is the national representative organisation for Further Education ("FE") and sixth form colleges in England and is funded by annual subscriptions that they pay. AoC is a company limited by guarantee, not-for-profit but is not a public sector organisation.

2. AoC works with colleges and college organisations in the whole of the UK, alongside other education organisations and has international partnerships but most of its work is in England.

3. AoC staff and college leaders nominated by AoC work with various government departments and organisations to monitor and promote the education and welfare of young people attending colleges with engagement including the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, Ofqual, Office for Students, awarding organisations, Department for Health, Number 10, Treasury and several other government departments.

4. AoC is a representative organisation. The level and frequency of our engagement with ministers and officials in government varies partly because of ministerial decisions. Our main activities in the period covered by the Covid I nquiry were:

    - Interpreting policy, events and government announcements for college leaders.
    - Discussing issues with ministers and officials and participating in various regular meetings alongside other representative organisations and trade unions.
    - Collecting data from colleges in surveys to help interested parties understand developments. These are not statistical surveys. AoC has developed its research capability since 2022 but was not, at the time, a research organisation.
    - Liaison with education trade unions as part of our role as the employer organisation for FE colleges.

5. At the start of the pandemic in 2020, there were 242 college corporations in England, including 167 general further education colleges, 15 specialist further education colleges, 50 sixth form colleges and 10 institutes of adult learning. At the time of the

pandemic, colleges were not-for-profit private sector designated charities, with DfE/Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) as their regulator (in December 2023 they were re-designated by ONS as public sector charities). Colleges are legally constituted as corporations but typically operate from several buildings and campuses. The government initiated a programme of college mergers in 2015 and allowed sixth form colleges to convert to become academies. This has reduced the number of college corporations from more than 400 in 2015 to 225 on the day of this statement. In its 2019 national condition survey, the Department for Education identified 850 college campuses, and that number has largely been maintained despite the mergers.

6. Colleges educated around 670,000 students aged 16-18 years old in 2019-20 and trained 69,000 16-18-year-olds, who took an apprenticeship via a college. Colleges also have large programmes of adult training at all levels, for people aged 19 and over.

Pre pandemic planning

7. Colleges are self-governing corporations with charitable status and are responsible for their own risk management, contingency planning and insurance. Individual colleges have always had contingency plans for disruptive events like bad weather, fire or industrial action that they have experienced and can anticipate but there was no national college planning for pandemic-related disruption or for extended closures before spring 2020. The extended closures of land-based colleges in spring 2001 as a result of the foot-and-mouth outbreak prompted the Department for Education to require colleges to prepare risk registers but colleges were not involved in exercises like Exercise Cygnus organised by the Department for Health and Social Care in 2016. I am not aware of any Department for Education communication about the lessons learnt from that planning.

8. In many areas of college activity, the Association of Colleges provides advice to colleges but, before 2020, we did not provide any pandemic planning materials.

Guidance and policy

9. The Association of Colleges communicates to colleges on a weekly basis and often reinforces important messages from government. The first communications from the Department for Education to colleges about the Covid-19 pandemic (at that point described as coronavirus) were in late January 2020 and AoC included a note about this in our briefings to colleges on Friday 31 January 2020 (DH/01 – INQ000650994). At that time, the messages were solely about travel to or from China and there was no discussion about a national lockdown.

10. Communications from the Department for Education to colleges in February and the first half of March focused on travel to and from countries seriously affected by the pandemic (extending from China to Northern Italy on Monday 24 February 2020) and on necessary action if staff, students or visitors displayed relevant symptoms. The consistent advice in this period was that college leaders should liaise with Public Health England and with relevant local organisations but there was no discussion about extended closures or the need to provide remote education and training until the week commencing 16 March 2020.

11. The consistent message from the Department for Education to colleges until Wednesday 18 March 2020 was that they should limit closures of courses and buildings in scope and time. AoC staff provided individual advice to college leaders about the decisions they should take from February 2020 onwards. In the absence of official government communications about the need to anticipate extended closures, AoC did not set up measures to identify or mitigate the impact of a national lockdown on young people in education or training.

12. The Education Secretary made a televised announcement on Wednesday 18 March that all schools, colleges and education settings should close with effect from Friday 20 March but the Department message in the days and weeks before that was that leaders should make every effort to keep schools and colleges open. For example, in his speech to the ASCL conference on Friday 13 March), the Education Secretary said "*The Chief Medical Officer has said the impact of closing schools on children's education will be substantial, but the benefit to public health would not be*". These messages were reinforced when people sought advice from DfE staff. In these circumstances, college leaders did not, as far as I am aware, make detailed plans for closure or remote learning before March. Instead, following the DfE instructions on 18 March. college staff carried out necessary work at great speed to move to a new way of working.

Announcement of the national lockdown

13. The announcement was made in the televised press conference on Wednesday 18 March that colleges, schools and all education settings should close their buildings for normal operation after Friday 20 March. Subsequent DfE guidance instructed colleges to remain open to educate vulnerable children and young people and children of key workers. I was involved in daily conversations with senior DfE officials starting in the week 9 March and AoC staff reporting to me had other conversations about various details, including those relating to remote education options, summer exams, assessment of vocational qualifications, funding, student travel and other issues. As far as I am aware, the first discussion that AoC staff had with DfE officials which referenced nationwide closures took place on Tuesday 26 February 2020 (DH/02 – INQ000650995) but the conversation at that point was on a theoretical basis so that necessary legislation could be prepared if needed. In the event, the government used public health legislation to introduce emergency measures so discussions about education-specific legislation did not lead anywhere. Once education closures were announced, DfE, Ofqual and other agencies were quick to issue guidance and advice which is a sign that they had carried out some helpful contingency planning before 18 March.

14. The Department for Education instructed colleges to close normal operations from the end of Friday 20 March 2020 but some colleges had already closed a substantial number of courses from the start of that week (from 16 March) because of a high level of staff absence.

15. Colleges faced substantial challenges in switching from normal operations to a situation in which a small amount of teaching would take place in-person and the rest conducted remotely. Just about every other organisation made the same switchover in the same few days in March so there is nothing unique about the scale of the challenge faced by colleges but there were some difficult issues:

- The college sector is large and had more than 2 million students learning and training in an estimated 5,000 buildings on almost 1,000 campuses operated by 240 college corporations. Although DfE collects a lot of data from colleges on every student they enrol, this is not available except in retrospect. It is hard to generalise about a complex sector with a very diverse learner population (in age range, level and type of learning and demographics) and the information held at national level is often anecdotal. Colleges support learners from all socio-economic groups but tend to have a disproportionately large number of students from the most disadvantaged postcodes and households. 21% of 16-18-year-olds in colleges received free school meals at age 15 compared to 11% of those at maintained schools and academies.

- The environment in which colleges operate was unstable at the start of 2020. A report published by the Institute of Government in 2017 made the following observation "*The instability in the sector has created a complex and changeable landscape for its users and providers. Currently, 16- to 24-year-olds are presented with a variety of pathways and programmes of different lengths and levels, leading to qualifications with different values in the labour market, provided by organisations of varying quality. The degree of choice varies from one geographical area to another. As some commentators have quipped of the resulting landscape of post-compulsory education and training provision: if you are not confused by it, then you have not understood it.*"

- Because of large numbers of students from disadvantaged households, a significant number of students did not own or have access to IT kit or broadband at home and a few did not have mobiles so access to technology was a problem. Equally, many did not have the quiet, secure spaces at home to engage in learning. Just before the pandemic started, in February 2020, Ofcom published a report on media use and attitudes by children. This reported that 95% of 15-year-olds had access to a smartphone and 70% access to a tablet but that those in social class DE were significantly less likely to possess these than those in social class AB.

- Colleges offer a wide range of specialist courses, some of which develop technical skills and/or develop hand skills. This made the switch to remote learning difficult even where technology was available. Practical learning of many skills really is a hands-on endeavour.

- Colleges educate significant numbers of students with special education needs (SEN) including (in 2020) more than 20,000 with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). A considerable number of students with SEN learn in the mainstream alongside other students which made the logistics of maintaining education for the former while organising education remotely for the rest quite difficult. As far as I know, many students chose to stay at home.

- Government funding to colleges is conditional on evidence of continuing education participation which created fears that colleges would lose income and need to cut staff costs to avoid DfE sanctions. It was not clear in the days after the Chancellor announced the furlough scheme whether colleges could make use of it for activities not covered by government funding. It took several days for DfE to clarify several financial issues for colleges. The Skills minister, Gillian Keegan, wrote to

college leaders on 20 March 2020 promising that DfE was working on funding and qualification issues. In the weeks that followed, DfE introduced flexibilities in funding rules to avoid clawing back grant, confirmed that colleges could claim job retention payments for staff working on commercial activities, ensured there was access to business interruption loans in certain circumstances and took other measures to assist colleges, for example with accessing IT equipment. However time spent by college leaders resolving finance questions distracted attention from education preparations.

16. The number of operational challenges faced by college leaders in March and April did not leave AoC time to carry out any formal assessment of the impact of the national lockdown on young people in terms of their wellbeing, attainment or participation in apprenticeships. AoC activity focused on helping college leaders work through and deal with these many challenges for their institutions and for them personally. The first months of the lockdowns were very challenging for college leaders and their senior teams, with lots of uncertainty and unprecedented situations. AoC has limited research capacity in 2020. In order to inform policy making and to help leaders understand their position relative to others, we issued a survey of all 244 colleges on 21 April 2024. 125 responses to the survey by 28 April 2024 provided answers to 28 questions on teaching and learning, finance and staffing, oversight of colleges and reopening issues. College leaders provided information on their work to run online courses in areas where this was possible. While scheduled online lessons were possible for many students, courses like performing arts, catering, science, construction crafts and 2nd year of A-level courses were proving difficult to organise.

Advice and guidance to colleges

17. The Department for Education and its agencies (Ofsted, Ofqual, ESFA, OfS and others) provided a large amount of advice and guidance to colleges between January 2020 and June 2022, probably too much. Instructions on important public health questions were generally handed down by DfE with no prior consultation and little advance notice, often for immediate implementation. It was apparent at the time and is even clearer now that several important government decisions were made very quickly by small numbers of people at the heart of government, resulting in even DfE ministers or senior officials, let alone people outside government, having limited input on education issues. However as the weeks went by, DfE made increasing use of online meetings to discuss issues affecting colleges, to hear from people who knew more about how colleges operate and to take feedback on the impact of recent changes. This engagement increased as time went by and created opportunities for AoC to use information from colleges to make marginal improvements in DfE advice and guidance. Events also increased DfE engagement. In the first few weeks of 2020, there was no minister at all with responsibility for skills apart from the Education secretary. Following the 13 February cabinet reshuffle, the Prime Minister appointed a Skills Minister. After a few weeks, the Skills Minister started chairing an advisory group for national FE organisations including AoC. Other meetings chaired by senior officials also started. DfE engagement with stakeholders increased and widened to discuss reopening issues from May 2020 onwards. DfE engagement escalated in the wake of August 2020 exam grading problems and broadened in autumn 2020 to discuss a range of topics including Covid testing, higher education admissions, mental health, remote learning and other issues.

18. AoC had several roles during the pandemic. We offered information, suggestions and feedback to DfE officials on their communications. We also passed on. summarised and interpreted these messages to help college leaders act on them. AoC has always prioritised good communications to colleges and we made more use of webinars and social media during 2020 to engage leaders. We operated then and now on the assumption that colleges themselves would take responsibility for communicating to students but some of our communications were and are open. In a similar fashion, DfE and other national education agencies communicated mainly to leaders, extended the ways in which they communicated and worked on the basis that institutions would take most of the responsibility for informing students.

19. The speed with which government policy on education and other issues changed in March 2020 and the months that followed meant that AoC staff and college leaders spent a lot of time thinking about better ways to communicate with staff and students, about making sure that official guidance was correct and helpful and about ensuring that different issues were addressed. Communication methods evolved quickly between 2020 and 2022.

Closure of facilities

20. The closure of college facilities over the course of the pandemic followed national instructions communicated by government:

    a. Between March and June 2020, college buildings were closed to the majority of students. The Department for Education instructed colleges to close their facilities for almost all activities after Friday 20 March but to maintain education provision for the vulnerable students (for example those with education, health and care plans) and for children of key workers. The lack of notice for this instruction (announced at a Number 10 press conference on Wednesday 18 March) gave colleges very little time to act on these new rules but the rapid spread of the virus and the subsequent national shutdown announced on Monday 23 March 2020 meant that the number of students attending was, in the main, less than those eligible or expected. The national shutdown continued for several weeks but colleges started planning reopening in April. Government issued planning instructions for reopening on 11 May 2020 which envisaged a return for Year 12 students in early June (at Step 2 of a four-stage plan) but a later announcement delayed the return until mid-June. DfE and Ofqual had instructed education settings and awarding organisations to switch to centre-assessed grades so no exams or assessments were held in summer 2020.

    b. Colleges resumed in-person education and training for all students between September and December 2020 but with reduced timetables in many cases because of the need to comply with social distancing rules and because of higher than normal staff absence (particularly as cases rose towards the end of 2020). Government policy in this period prioritised education settings remaining open but there were various changes in the wider rules (for example the rule of six in September, the three tier system in October and the November lockdown) which had an impact on students, staff and the organisation of education. DfE continued

to collect attendance data, to monitor activity and to issue increasingly specific instructions on the conduct of education. Colleges worked with government nationally and locally in December to set-up Covid testing arrangements in the hope of a spring 2021 return but the 6 January announcement of a third national lockdown resulted in the closure of college buildings to the majority of students between 7 January and 6 March. Colleges returned to in-person education for students under the age of 19 in March and for other groups later in summer 2021 but with various changes compared to the pre-2020 arrangements.

c. College buildings were open for education in the 2021-2 academic year but with some disruption associated with the Omicron strain of the virus at the end of autumn 2021.

21. DfE collects a lot of data on further education students each month via the Individual Learner Record but did not collect data on the number of students attending daily so had to introduce a new weekly attendance survey on education settings. DfE published this data on its research pages as experimental statistics from 21 April 2020

22. Colleges had very little notice of closure before the 18 March 2020 announcement, had limited guidance from government about contingency planning beyond that agreed with local authorities and emergency services for weather events and had plenty of other issues to deal with at the point where national shutdowns took place. Short-notice Ofsted inspections continued until mid-March 2020 and it was not until late March 2020 that DfE confirmed funding rule changes to give college leaders the confidence they did not need to make redundancies to stay solvent. College leaders and staff had to introduce new and mainly online teaching and learning arrangements at great speed in March 2020 including organising in-person education to priority students, remote education to thousands of other students, providing assistance (including technology and financial support) to disadvantaged students, finding new ways to organise staff working remotely (in many cases for the first time in their college roles) and, in providing ad hoc support to NHS efforts.

23. The disruption to education resulting from the pandemic and building closures had a profound impact on college students, leaving many short of the progress they should have made in learning, achievement and development. The government provided support in various ways, including provision of computers and free meals, a 16-18 tuition fund from 2020-1 onwards and a Covid package in the 2021 spending review (intended to increase annual teaching hours by 40 a year from 2022-3) but two lengthy periods of closure have compounded long-standing issues in the education of young people and particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds who often lacked the access to IT, broadband and quiet spaces in which to learn. The UK has high rates of child poverty, compared to comparator countries and challenges relating to engagement in education from secondary level upwards. Mental health problems were growing before 2020 but accelerated during the pandemic. There is evidence of learning loss concentrated amongst those students from more disadvantaged families who were already most at risk. AoC worked with DfE and other national organisations to identify the scale of the problem in 2021. The result of this work were decisions to extend the 16-19 tuition fund started in 2020 and to providing funding for increased 16-19 teaching hours from the

2022-3 academic year onwards. In one survey that AoC carried out in April 2021, 77% of the 110 college leaders said that their 16-18 students were performing several months below normal expectations.

Changes in the delivery of learning

24. Colleges run the full spectrum of courses for young people ranging from A level and GCSEs to off-the-job training for apprentices and technical education programmes, including T levels which started in the 2020-1 academic year (in September 2020). Colleges deliver their courses from a range of standard classrooms to industry-specific workshops and settings which mimic the world of work. Their education and training has always been predominantly in-person, conducted and supported by professional staff and often involving specialist equipment. For two decades before 2020, Department for Education funding rules for 16-19 study programmes have emphasised attendance. Levels of government funding limited the technology that colleges could provide to students. As a result of all these factors, there was relatively little online tuition before 2020, though most colleges had developed virtual learning environments to make materials available to support teaching. The national shutdown in March 2020 necessitated a rapid switchover to new teaching methods.

25. The Department for Education collects monthly data from all further education providers via the Individual Learner Record and introduced a weekly attendance return in April 2020. These data collections may provide insight into the provision of further education over the pandemic.

26. Colleges faced several challenges in moving from in-person to online tuition in March 2020 and in later periods. They reported in a short survey that we collected in May 2020 that they were using a mixture of set work, pre-built content and scheduled on-line lessons. AoC ran a remote learning webinar in the first week of lockdown in which we passed on advice that replicating the classroom experience in full would be difficult, if not impossible. In the same survey, 52% of college leaders who responded reported that their under 19-year-old learners were continuing to undertake 75% planned learning to some extent, of whom 10% said all planned learning hours were being delivered remotely. No college reported learners receiving zero learning hours.

27. Colleges implemented a comprehensive but basic shift to digital learning in a few weeks at a time of high national tension and it was unavoidable that this did not always meet the needs of many learners and apprentices who then fell behind. There were particular challenges for young people whose home circumstances made study difficult, for those who lacked the necessary equipment and for anyone taking a course with a significant practical element where hands-on or in-person activity is an essential part of the education process.

28. Individual colleges worked hard to adapt their approach to education and training to meet the needs of their students. Many of these difficulties persisted for a long time after summer 2020 but growing understanding of these issues helped persuade policy makers to prioritise education over other sectors in decisions about ending closures in 2021.

29. Apprentices faced additional challenges because many employers were no longer able to provide the necessary level of experience. For large numbers of apprentices, the company they worked for were making staff take furlough, work solely from home or take redundancy. DfE amended the apprenticeship funding rules in April 2020 to allow longer breaks in learning and there were some assessment changes that made completion possible in some standards. Overall, the pandemic and shutdowns had a significant negative impact on many apprentices. There was a substantial reduction in apprenticeship starts in autumn 2020 compared to previous years with some young people shifting across to education courses.

Student accommodation

30. Around 40 colleges own or manage student residences for their students with a larger number assisting students to find accommodation, for example home stay arrangements for those on international student visas. There is limited national data collected on the management of college student accommodation but no-notice Ofsted care standards inspections have ensured compliance with standards in recent years.

31. Colleges faced similar challenges to other residential education providers like universities and boarding schools in dealing with the pandemic, national shutdown, social distancing rules and shifting government guidance.

32. Residential accommodation in colleges is mainly concentrated in land-based colleges, specialist provision and in rural areas.

Provision of practical support to students who were isolating

33. Colleges made a swift and unexpected switch to remote learning in March 2020 while continuing to provide in-person education for a small number of vulnerable learners and children of key workers. They made considerable efforts to reach out to more disadvantaged students, but the lack of time and resources did limit the additional practical support to those who were isolating. Between March and June 2020, government policy forced the majority of the population to isolate with their families or carers.

34. The return to in-person education and training from September 2020 prompted many colleges to experiment with flexible timetables and blended delivery (mixing in-person and online). This proved hard to implement in many subjects and is also difficult if teaching spaces have not been designed for this purpose. Nevertheless, for most of the 2020-1 academic year, this made it possible for colleges to support students who were isolating.

35. We have no specific evidence at AoC about the long-term impact of isolation on the education, achievement, wellbeing or mental health of young people but early research suggests that the Covid experience has had a profound negative impact.

Provision of mental health support to students

36. Colleges have provided advice, guidance and related services for students for many years but have never received funding specifically for this purpose. In recent years, college

leaders have prioritised mental health support to address growing student needs. This has also been funded mainly from other budgets but, following the publication of the transforming children and young people's mental health green paper, some colleges were able to access support from support teams set up across the country. In 2020, government provided national support for education organisations in the form of training and a student space portal but the focus of these initiatives was schools and universities respectively. With colleges largely left to apply their own staff and resources in 2020 and 2021, mental health support to students mainly focused around activities to promote wellbeing, development of mental health first aid, some counselling and help with referrals to other services.

37. There was a big mismatch before the pandemic between demand from young people for mental health support and available services. This gap grew in 2020 and has continued to widen since.

38. AoC supported this work by inviting colleges to sign and implement our Mental Health charter. 170 colleges signed this by 2020 and following the first national shutdown in March 2020, AoC staff ran weekly webinars to help colleges work out how to provide support in the new environment.

Grade calculation

39. Qualifications play a major role in the education system in England for young people, their teachers and the institutions responsible for their education. Qualifications are used as gateways to further study, as licences to enter work, as measures of performance and to calculate funding of institutions. Government policy in the decade before 2020 reinforced the role of external assessment and standardised grading as driving forces in qualification design and use. This created massive difficulties for students, staff and colleges when the stay-at-home order was issued in March 2020, followed quickly by the cancellation of summer exams and assessments. DfE, Ofqual and awarding organisations worked quickly to put in place rules and procedures for centre assessed grades but the limited amount of time to get this right resulted in well-known problems with grading in August 2020 followed by some swift reversals in policy when centrally-prescribed algorithms resulted in unexpectedly large downgrades to results. There has been a lot of focus on grading problems affecting A-levels and GCSEs but the same issues affected the full spectrum of qualifications including technical and vocational qualifications offered by colleges to young people. The August 2020 results turmoil also resulted in increased volatility in student enrolment decisions. The admission and transfer system at age 16 is chaotic at the best of the times because of the absence of rules or systems and because GCSE results are issued less than two weeks before term starts. Grade changes in August 2020 resulted in more young people with strong GCSE grades. This added to the volatility in course decisions. In a normal year, a proportion of those applying to take A-levels at school sixth form or college fail to meet the conditions of their offers. In August 2020, higher GCSE grades meant that more young people met their conditions and this resultd in more people than normal taking A-level and other Level 3 courses. There were also more young people in education overall in autumn 2020. This was a product of a rising cohort of people, fewer apprenticeship openings and limited job or travel opportunities. FE colleges enrolled higher than expected numbers of young people in September 2020 but the unexpected turn of events meant that some of the planning carried out in the

summer months had been inadequate. It was hard enough with stable and predictable student numbers to reorganise space to ensure social distancing. The volatility and unpredictably made it particularly difficult. College rose to the task with the tools they had available to them and worked with awarding organisations, DfE and Ofqual on a second round of teacher-assessed grades in 2021, followed by a phased return to pre-pandemic grading over the next two academic years.

Support or guidance from government

40. The Department for Education published a large amount of operational guidance to help colleges deal with the pandemic. This started with targeted information about travel to and from China in early February 2020 and built up over the following months to a vast and often overwhelming array of information covering a range of topics. These efforts were too late for the big switch to remote learning in March 2020 but there was much more useful advice in later iterations of guidance issued in autumn 2020, spring 2021 and later on. There were many gaps in the central government understanding of colleges, how they operate and about their students. Education often works best when key decisions are made by those who are close to the student. Outside the emergency situation of the pandemic, the centralised, top-down and directive model adopted by the Department for Education in a number of areas, does not work well in further education. Nevertheless, DfE often moved quickly to respond to our requests, to correct mistakes and to innovate in how it operated.

41. The UK government provided a lot of support to mitigate the impact of the pandemic-related shutdowns and disruption on young people, including providing continuing core funding to colleges and other providers, adapting the rules to help them operate in the new environment, supplying laptops and technology for onward distribution to disadvantaged students, developing new programmes to provide support and introducing education recovery programmes which, in 16-19 education, started with the 16-19 tuition fund in September 2020 and expanded into a larger three-year programme from 2022 onwards announced in the 2021 spending review. These various efforts were not always wholly successful – sometimes because they were developed at speed – and they could not fully overcome or rectify deep-seated and long-standing problems in English education and society. But without these actions, things would have been worse.

Monitoring and assessment of impact

42. AoC is a representative organisation and, while we carry out research, this was an ancillary activity between 2020 and 2022. AoC staff nevertheless played an important role in gathering information from college leaders on a weekly basis, in discussing issues with government officials, in facilitating quick communications, in explaining a complex sector to anyone who needed to know about it and in working out practical solutions to immediate problems. Our close relationships with college leadership teams allowed us to test proposals and give feedback very quickly to DfE. The pandemic and the response exposed many issues which were previously hidden from policy makers. We continue this work of representation, communication and explanation and can provide more information, on request, about current enrolment, attainment, progression and wellbeing issues. We are an organisation that represents colleges as institutions not college students.

Lessons learned

43. In my view, there are several lessons from the pandemic and the response to it:

- There appears to have been long-term damage to young people enrolled in colleges from the shutdowns in 2020 and early 2021. Our society often gives people just one chance to get things right. The loss of several months of learning and the exclusion from participation in college life were a high price to pay. The government was right from September 2020 onwards to prioritise keeping schools and colleges open but could not avoid the spring 2021 closures and could not easily rectify earlier failures to plan or mitigate the pandemic. The first lesson from these years is that future work should aim to keep education open wherever possible.

- The pandemic and the shutdowns also exposed a number of avoidable weaknesses in the English education system such as the overreliance on externally assessed qualifications which made certification and progression more difficult than in systems with different approaches. Similarly, the complexity of funding, inspection and other rules in English further education meant that college leaders were focusing attention on the wrong risks in March 2020 at a time when they should have been focusing fully on organising a quick and difficult shift to remote learning alongside staff and student safety and wellbeing. Policy makers need to value resilience more and sophisticated methods of control less.

- Finally, the positive, agile and flexible spirit which college leaders, staff and students showed during the pandemic and afterwards continues to provide inspiration. People did what they could, with the information and resources they had available to them. They showed in their actions and decisions an unwavering focus on their students. Some things worked. Some things didn't. Despite years in which funding was reduced and in which important issues neglected, colleges dealt with the issues that faced them. In the years that followed they have moved on to deal with new challenges, including a changing economy, society, climate and world. Not many look back. It is important to learn from the past but only if this helps us think about the future.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: Personal Data

Dated: 6th August 2025