

## **Briefing for Westminster Hall debate on the role of colleges in a skills-led recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak**

**19 October 2020**

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### **About the National Engineering Policy Centre (NEPC)**

The NEPC is the unified voice for 43 professional engineering organisations, representing 450,000 engineers, a partnership led by the Royal Academy of Engineering. We give policymakers a single route to advice from across the engineering profession. We inform and respond to policy issues of national importance, for the benefit of society.

### **About EngineeringUK**

[EngineeringUK](#) is a charitable organisation, which works in partnership with the engineering community to inform and inspire young people and grow the number and diversity of tomorrow's engineers. We also produce a range of research reports exploring educational pathways into engineering and barriers to participation. Our aim is to grow the collective impact of work across the sector to help young people understand what engineering is, how to get into it, and be motivated and able to access the educational and training opportunities on the way.

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### **COVID-19 and engineering**

The coronavirus pandemic has brought into sharp focus the vital role that engineers play in tackling the big challenges we face as a society. Engineering is a varied, stimulating and valuable career and we need to work harder than ever to ensure that it is accessible for this generation of young people – for their own life chances and so that we have a diverse and insightful workforce that enables the UK to recover from the economic downturn, thrive, and improve societal and economic resilience as well as environmental sustainability. We need engineers to enable the UK to become the green science superpower that this government wants to build.

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### **Recommendation**

**We ask the government to maintain its pre-pandemic commitment to uplift further education funding** and take a strategic subject-based approach to further education, ensuring sufficient capital investment and funding for high-cost, wealth-creating subjects such as science, engineering and technology. We ask that government not do this at the cost of high-cost laboratory-based subjects in higher education.

## The importance of colleges for the engineering sector

The UK government has several ambitions on net zero, infrastructure and digitalisation. Associated with that, it has an ambition as to what our economic recovery should look like. These ambitions require skilled engineers to deliver them and are threatened if we do not have the number and diversity of people with the right engineering and technical skills to do so. The pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in school-age education, hugely disrupted further and higher education, and risks reducing the diversity of young people going into engineering.

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*In 2018/2019, just over 188,600 people aged 16+ achieved a level 1, 2 or 3 qualification in an engineering-related subject at a college.*

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The NEPC, of which EngineeringUK is a part, believes that the UK must now plan for its long-term engineering and technical skills needs with an education system fit for the future. It must do this not only to ensure that the UK has the workforce to enable us to recover from the economic impact of the pandemic, but also to ensure that we have the right skills to deliver on the ambitions to level-up.

Colleges are and will continue to play a vital role in training the engineers of tomorrow to help deliver on all those ambitions. They are an important part of the puzzle, enabling young people from all backgrounds to access a career in STEM through vocational courses as well as apprenticeships. In 2018/2019 alone just over 105,900 16 to 18 year olds<sup>1</sup> as well as just over 82,700 people aged 19+<sup>2</sup> achieved a Level 1, 2 or 3 qualification in an engineering-related subject at a college in England – around 188,600 people altogether. Compared to that, there were about 165,000 students studying engineering and technology at university in the same year<sup>3</sup>. Colleges, together with schools and other providers, will also play a vital role in delivering T-levels, which have started to be rolled out this year.

### Funding for colleges

In the further education sector (sixth-form colleges and further education colleges), funding declined by 18% per full-time student between 2010 and 2019, with money received for every enrolled student cut in real terms from £5,900 to £4,960 during this period<sup>4</sup>. This has led to the financial health of colleges deteriorating significantly during this period.

However, more recently there have been several government announcements focused on increasing funding for this sector including:

- £1.5 billion over five years to refurbish further education colleges.

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<sup>1</sup> EngineeringUK (2020), Engineering UK 2020: Educational pathways into engineering, p.68

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-achievement-rates-tables-2018-to-2019>

<sup>3</sup> EngineeringUK (2020), Engineering UK 2020: Educational pathways into engineering, p.105

<sup>4</sup> <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/16-19-education-funding/>

- £2.5 billion for the National Skills Fund to improve adult skills and boost STEM teaching with capital investment for up to eight new Institutes of Technology and 11 maths schools.
- An increase of £400 million for the day-to-day running of colleges (2020/2021)<sup>5</sup>.

All these announcements were made before the pandemic.

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Further relevant recommendations are set out in [Engineering a resilient and sustainable future](#), the engineering profession's submission to the 2020 Spending Review.

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For more information on our research, go to our website [here](#).

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budget-2020-documents/budget-2020>