

# Education

## 'Give Covid generation extra time to learn'

By Alex Spencer

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Pupils should be offered an extra year in education to catch up with the learning lost during lockdown and Covid-19 absences, according to a University of Cambridge researcher.

Prof Anna Vignoles, who studies how we can improve students' academic achievement and help them develop the skills they need in the labour market, warned that without this help many students could suffer long-term impacts.

Prof Vignoles voiced her concerns ahead of her keynote speech at Form the Future's virtual conference, supported by the *Cambridge Independent*, which is the largest gathering of employers and school leaders in Cambridge.

"I think it is safe to say the young are going to pay a very heavy price over the next few years for what has happened with Covid and the question is, from a policy perspective, what can we do to minimise that impact? Obviously everybody has suffered during Covid but I guess what we should be worried about with the young is the effects can be quite long term," she said. "Unless the vaccine arrives tomorrow, students will be having quite a

disrupted year of learning and then there is what happens when young people leave the education system and that's going to have a major impact."

This loss of learning, which could continue for several months yet if children have to self isolate, must be addressed, said Prof Vignoles.

"Imagine Christmas turns out to be bad and kids who leave school this year have been three months out of school. That's not inconceivable. I do think if you miss three or four more months of schooling this year, combined with what was lost last year, I can't see any alternative but to acknowledge that generation will have pretty much missed a year of schooling and the solution would be to give them more time.

"They are going to need a lot more than a slight bump in school funding to sort that out. We are going to have to seriously think whether or not they are going to have to do an extra year. Not in the sense of holding kids back and making 19-year-olds stay in sixth-form. But we are going to have to think of ways to give them more opportunity to catch up and give them the learning they have lost."

One suggestion was to turn to FE colleges for help with a bridging year between school and university to help students cover areas of learning they

have missed, but only if they are given extra resources.

Prof Vignoles commended the government for its reading catch-up scheme in primary schools, but was particularly concerned about inequalities faced by older students from poorer families during lockdown who may have struggled to access home schooling.

She adds that children who missed the most learning and are about to leave school to find a job

will face a very difficult time.

"If the economy picks up over the next two years what tends to happen is employers employ the new graduates that are coming into the labour market and those who tried to enter the market at the bad point never catch up because they get overlooked," she explains.

New job training schemes and careers advice could help, according to Prof Vignoles, but at the moment the focus must be on keeping schools

running for everyone and offering extra support with home learning – whether that is access to tech or more teachers to provide online resources while classroom teaching continues.

"The challenge we have is it's not enough to just throw money at it – where would we do that, where would the teachers come from? How can we do this in a sensible way?

"What is clear is at the moment resourcing in schools is not really sufficient to keep them open and manage Covid, teaching both pupils in the classroom and those who are self-isolating. So there are things going on now that we could do more to support schools with.

"In previous recessions if a young person tries to make the transition into the labour market at the wrong moment, as in when a recession hits such as the early '90s or the great recession of 2008, you can see the effect a decade into their career."

If she were advising the government, what would she say?

"We need to recognise that education is an investment in the future, not least in the future of our economy. What we are doing now to deal with the immediate impact of Covid and what we are going to do over the next few years is vitally important when it comes to education and we are not going to solve the problem without spending some money on it."

■ Form the Future's annual conference, will take place virtually on December 1 from 3-5pm. Registration is at [eventbrite.co.uk/e/125513619615](https://eventbrite.co.uk/e/125513619615).

■ The conference is supported by Athena Leaders, Cambition, the *Cambridge Independent*, EIT Food, Kameo Recruitment, Lexington Comms, Shifties, The Cambridge Building Society and the University of Cambridge.



Prof Anna Vignoles