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A POSITIVE COLLEGE SECTOR FACES A 'BLIZZARD OF CHANGES'

ALIX ROBERTSON
@ALIXROBERTSON4

The 2016 Association of Colleges conference brought with it a feeling of renewed energy in the FE sector.

While the 2015 event was characterised by a sense of dread ahead of the Budget— with a distinct lack of clarity on a number of key issues – this year's gathering at the ICC in Birmingham, from Tuesday November 15 to Thursday November 17, had a far more optimistic tone.

The AoC's new chief executive David Hughes has undoubtedly added to this feeling of revitalisation. He kicked off the conference on a positive note, and despite acknowledging the challenges brought by the recent "blizzard of changes", reassured delegates in his speech that he has "a lot of hope".

This was reflected through to the closing day – when education secretary Justine Greening and apprentices and skills minister Robert Halfon both stressed their commitment to the sector (see pages four and five).

FE commissioner Richard Atkins also reassured delegates, during his first major speech in the role, that "the sector is doing pretty well", as we have reported on pages six and seven.

This supplement treats you to many other tasty morsels from this year's conference, beginning on page three with a session that brought together AoC president Ian Ashman and TV star Ruby Wax, who gave their thoughts on the vital topic of mental health, an AoC theme for 2017.

Page four features a report on those who were triumphant in the AoC Student Photographer of the Year awards, sponsored by NOCN.

Lord Sainsbury's Review of Technical Education dominates pages 10 and 11, where we hear the DfE's plans for the new 'transition year' and responses from sector leaders.

Pages 12 and 13 are dedicated to a workshop on maths teaching, with three experts talking through the possibility of compulsory maths to age 18.

Finally, pages 14 and 15 provides important information from a workshop on key funding issues. We explore the Education Funding Agency's announcement on the English and maths condition of funding, and the Skills Funding Agency's plans for levy paying employers.

Thanks for reading!

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GRAHAM HASTING EVANS

Managing director, NOCN

Where do we go after area review?

This year's AoC conference quite rightly dealt with the issues of the day, such as area review, mergers, inadequate funding levels and the need for leadership in a time of great uncertainty. But it also started to raise questions about what comes next and how the sector will approach the challenges and opportunities of the coming months and years.

There are three tectonic policy plates all moving at the same time: apprenticeships, technical education and changes in higher education – particularly Level 4 and Level 5. There is a fourth that is going to start when article 50 is triggered – the focus on how to increase productivity through upskilling, so we can compete outside the EU.

Amidst all this, where do we go after area review?

Colleges will have to understand how best to serve their communities and the priorities of the employers within their areas. In that respect there will be no universal answer. Each local area will have different needs and demands, to which colleges must align.

That said, the curriculum shopping list may look a little like this:

Apprenticeship levy

More employers will want to focus their training activity on apprenticeships, to allow them to reclaim their levy. We can also expect employer groups to try to fill those gaps on the list of approved apprenticeship standards which they see as high priority for their businesses.

Colleges will need to understand, from their local employers and LEP, what are the likely demands in their area. From this, they can work out which of the new standards they wish to provide and, where relevant, how they might migrate from the SASE apprenticeship frameworks they currently deliver. They will need to think about new curriculum design, materials, delivery methods and recruiting or re-training their teaching staff, as well as marketing and new pricing mechanisms.

Technical qualifications

The Sainsbury review and the government's response – the Post-16 Skills Plan – together with the changes in HE and move towards Level 4 and 5, present a real opportunity to define FE's core place in communities.

In the medium term, the new technical education qualifications should come in around the end of the present parliament. Colleges need to start focusing on which areas of curriculum they want to deliver, then develop plans to align their provision.

Upskilling

For some employees, there is a need to raise the bar for those with inadequate English and maths. For others it will be what the CBI defined in 2007 as employability skills, such as communication, timekeeping, problem-solving, teamwork, work ethic, flexibility and the ability to keep learning.

In certain sectors, employees will need to obtain a licence to practice outside an apprenticeship requirement.

Employers will also want to upskill existing employees into higher-level jobs, by improving their technical knowledge and use of technology, new materials, methods and equipment.

Managerial skills are another area that is crucial for driving up productivity. So we could expect employers to want to develop their existing managers' skills in respect of benchmarking, business process re-engineering (BPR or 6Sigma), change management, performance management, project management and productivity improvement practice.

In addition, employers might want to develop managers' foundation skills, such as commercial understanding, communication, creativity & innovation, finance, HR and personnel management as well as leadership, negotiation & influencing and personnel management.

It's a big shopping list and individual colleges will not be able to do it all.

But when colleges are trying to position themselves post- area review, the way they approach developing their future strategy and curriculum will determine whether they succeed or fail. There is a lot to play for.

'It's ok to not be ok', Ruby Wax tells delegates

ALIX ROBERTSON
@ALIXROBERTSON4

Mental health will receive some long-overdue attention in FE, at least according to several speakers at this year's AoC conference.

The morning of day two brought with it a session entitled 'colleges mean students', which received some incredibly positive feedback from delegates for its enlightening focus on the matter.

First to speak was the new president of the AoC, Ian Ashman, who revealed that he will dedicate his entire term in office to tackling what he described as a "massive increase" in the mental health support needs of college students.

"This year I want us to work together to challenge the stigma of mental ill-health," he said.

"I want us to share good practice across the sector in supporting good mental wellbeing, and I want us to drive a step-change in the level of support that government and mental health agencies provide to our students."

Mr Ashman identified "poverty", "social media" and "exam pressure" as some of the main drivers forcing the sector towards "a crisis-point in mental health".

He told the audience in Birmingham that a shocking AoC survey on mental health conducted last year revealed that college leaders felt that "local services were simply not providing the support that students needed".

Speaking to FE Week afterwards, Mr Ashman said that the AoC survey had revealed that an astonishing 85 per cent of the college principals who responded believed the mental health needs of their students had gone up.

"At the AoC we're now saying to government, 'you need to make sure that when you're giving guidance to local delivery people you are encouraging them to work with their college'," he said.

By the time of the 2017 AoC conference, Mr Ashman wants to see a number of goals achieved around mental wellbeing.

He said: "I would like to see the government ensures that mental health is being given as much priority as physical health, and that the commitment to spend more in real terms on mental health services is honoured.

"At a local level I would like to see every health and wellbeing board have somebody from FE as a member, I'd like to see every mental health service engaging with its local college, and I would like every college to review what it does to support students with mental health needs."

Ruby Wax

Later on, Ruby Wax, the comedian, author and mental health campaigner, delved deeper into some of serious issues around mental health from the main stage.

She spoke passionately about her own experiences, and how isolating a struggle with mental health can be.

She said: "I didn't tell anybody, because I didn't get any cards and flowers when I was in an institution.

"If I'd had a broken leg or I was with child I would have been inundated – but all I got was a couple of phone calls that told me to perk up. Yeah, 'perk up' — 'cause I didn't think of that."

Ms Wax advised against the dangers of hothousing students, and told colleges they needed to better informed about mental health, and better at communicating clearly and openly.

"We've evolved so far with our cognitive abilities but as far as our emotions or our minds, we're still in the swamps," she said.

"If we're going to survive from now on, we have to upgrade our brains as much as we do our iPhones."

Teachers need to be given the capacity to identify when young people are in trouble, she warned.

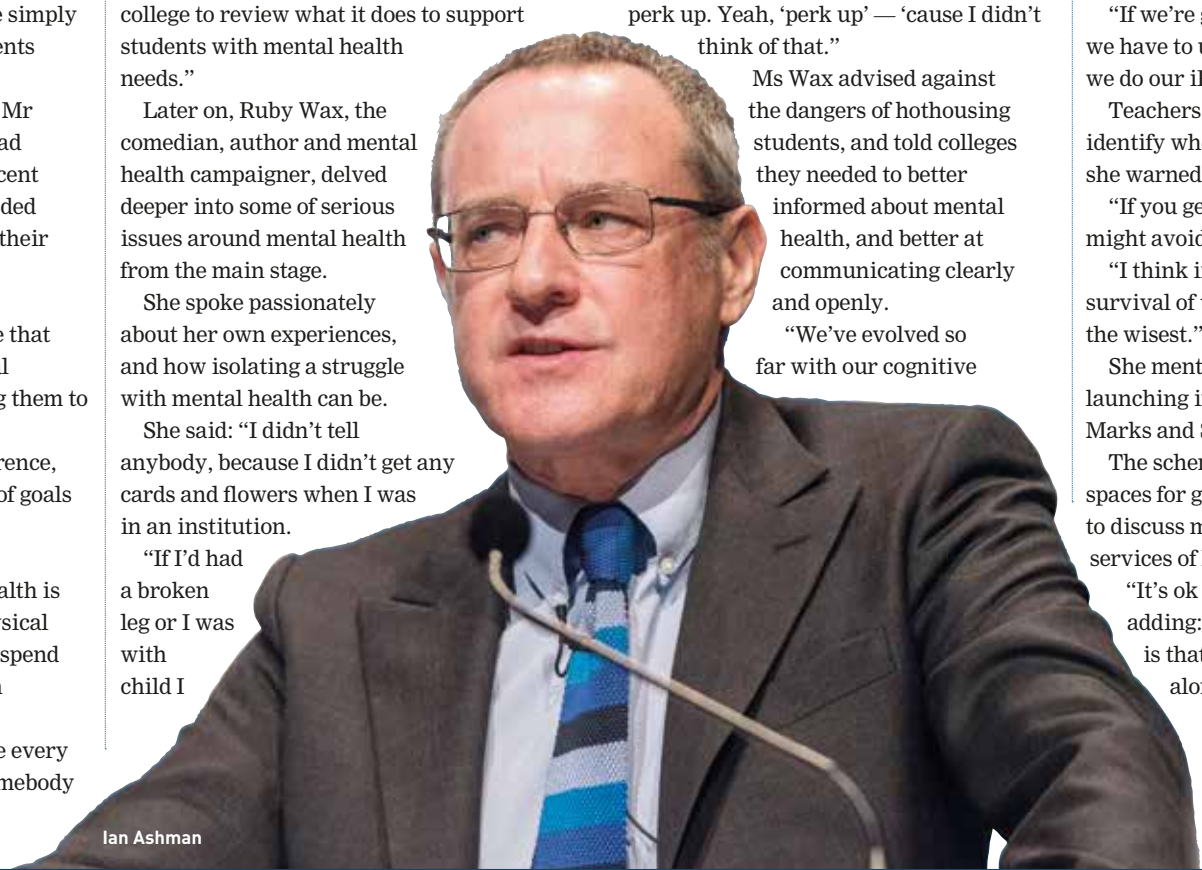
"If you get them help right away, you might avoid having those episodes.

"I think in the future it's not going to be survival of the fittest; it will be survival of the wisest."

She mentioned a campaign she will be launching in January in partnership with Marks and Spencer, called 'Frazzled Cafes'.

The scheme will provide safe, anonymous spaces for groups that want to come together to discuss mental health, and also offer the services of local mental health facilitators.

"It's ok to not be ok," she told delegates, adding: "The most important thing is that you realise you're not alone."


Ian Ashman

Skills minister in a celebratory mood speaks of pride in colleges

PAUL OFFORD
@PAULOFFORD

There was an upbeat speech looking forward to a bright future for colleges from apprenticeships and skills minister Robert Halfon on the closing day of conference.

Mr Halfon, who was given the ministerial brief in July, told delegates that he wanted to see both them and the wider FE sector praised from the rooftops in the years ahead.

He focused on how the public standing of colleges can be improved through better self-promotion and innovative approaches to the challenge laid down by the government to respond to the needs of national employers through new apprenticeships.

"We will raise the prestige of FE by demonstrating to employers the high standard of skills, knowledge and behaviours that students gain, including through apprenticeships."

"My challenge is this: how is the sector going to use this opportunity to market itself, and innovate, to respond to the needs of national employers? I want colleges to be thinking big."

The minister said he was fed up with people criticising their local FE colleges.

"We should be celebrating our FE sector, celebrating our principals, governors, teachers and students," he continued.

Robert Halfon

"We should celebrate the fact that FE colleges can help so many of those on low incomes get the qualifications they need."

The Conservative MP for Harlow also spoke of the pride he has in his local college.

He said: "My views have been shaped by my own local college in Harlow over the years since I was elected as their MP.

"I have been inspired by the transformative effect the college has had on the community itself.

"I believe that colleges are not only beacons of education, but also civic institutions at the heart of our communities.

"That is why I have visited Harlow College 50 times since 2010, and why I intend to visit many more."

Looking at the national picture, he said: "We should be proud: out of 385 colleges, 19 per cent are 'outstanding', and 61 per cent are 'good'.

"But even more significant are the statistics showing the destinations of adult students who complete FE courses: 64 per cent get jobs, 20 per cent go into further learning, and four per cent go on to university.

He even struck a conciliatory note with the unions.

"Unionlearn develops the capacity of trade unions and union learning representatives to work with employers, employees and learning providers to encourage greater take-up of learning in the workplace," Mr Halfon said.

"I am proud that this year the government has invested £12 million in this service, which has reached over 2.25 million learners over the last 10 years."

He urged delegates to leave conference with a positive mindset.

"When we leave this conference, let us all play a part in making Britain the skills nation we need it to be.

"I know that the AoC, with the incredible work that it does, will play a major role in this."

Picture this: The best student photography of the year

PAUL OFFORD
@PAULOFFORD

This photo, on the theme of 'how colleges change lives' is what won Edward Thomas the prestigious title of the Association of Colleges 'student photographer of the year'.

The Newcastle-under-Lyme College learner's photograph, was chosen as the best entrant by Michael Pritchard, director general of the Royal Photographic Society.

Edward received his prize, an SLR Nikon camera, at the AoC annual conference in Birmingham.

A second prize of £200 went to Eva Edwards from Newcastle College, with Chloe Cox, from Weston College, coming third and taking home £100.

Edward, who is studying a level three BTEC in photography, said: "I had a few photographs to choose, but this one best fit the theme. It shows that when you're focused on your own journey, everyone else is irrelevant."

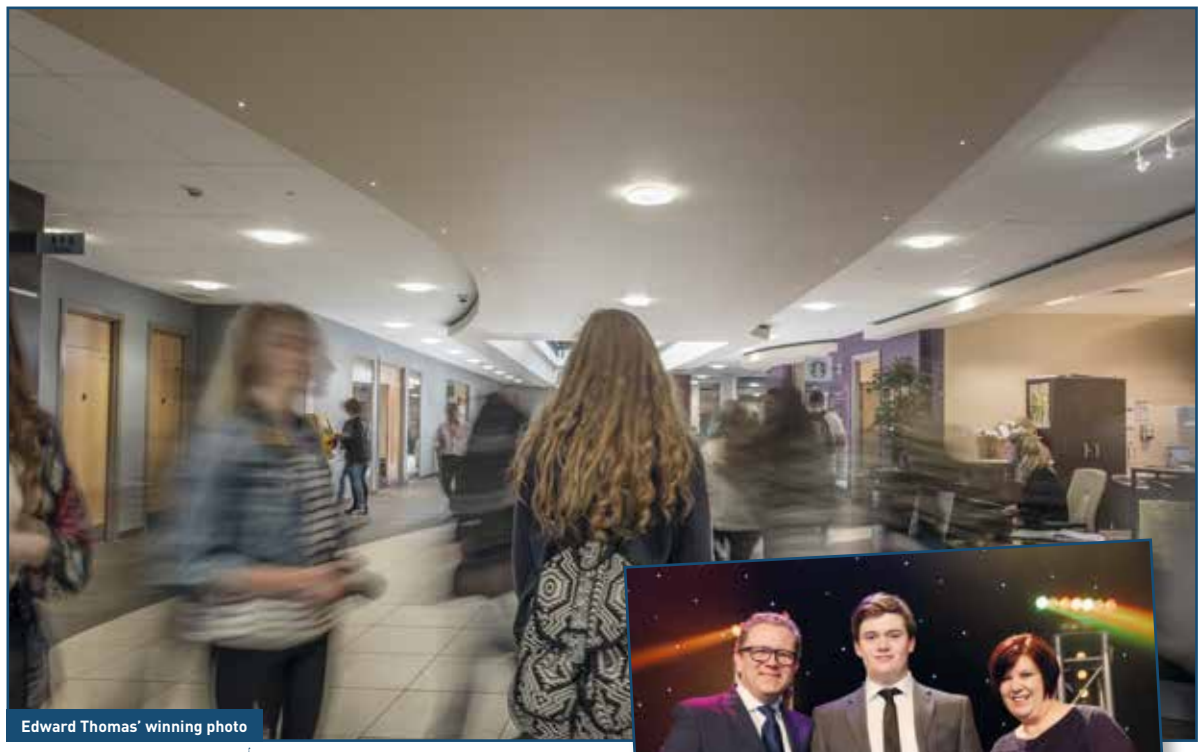
Karen Dobson, principal of Newcastle-under-Lyme College, said: "Edward is a talented student who has demonstrated true creativity with his award-winning entry.

"I am delighted that his work has been recognised at a national level; it is a fantastic achievement and a great accolade for Edward to add to his portfolio."

The national photography competition recognises "outstanding creative talents of students across the country". It is sponsored by National Open College Network.

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said: "This year's entries were of a very high standard with a great sense of creativity and imagination.

"Edward's image is well composed and captures how colleges can change lives for individuals. It is a worthy contender for this national award."


Edward Thomas' winning photo

Student Photographer of the Year winner Edward Thomas, receives his award from comedian Jon Culshaw and Jane Jones, Deputy Managing Director of NOCN, which sponsors the award.

Education secretary highlights maths and English skills as the key challenge in FE

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@PAULOFFORD

Justine Greening

The challenge of improving maths and English results for post-16 students who have failed the subjects at school was a key topic in the education secretary's speech to the AoC.

Justine Greening stressed her commitment to improving standards in FE during her first speech to conference as minister, pointing out that difficulties are faced equally by the government and providers.

She said: "We all need to think quite carefully about how we strike the right balance" on "a system that really pushes people, so we're not giving up on them being able to reach their potential".

"But," she said, "there's a clear sense of getting them from A to B quickly so they're not spending time running upwards against a brick wall that they're not going to get over."

Her comments echoed the ongoing debate over what post-16 students who failed to get a C-grade GCSE at school should study during their FE courses.

In 2014, the government made it a condition of funding that all 16- to 19-year-olds who did not already have at least a C in GCSE English and maths should be enrolled in courses in these subjects.

This requirement was changed a year later so that all of those with a D in those subjects had to do a GCSE course, rather than an equivalent 'stepping-stone' course.

But this year's GCSE results showed that huge numbers of learners aged 17 and older failed to get the necessary C in English and maths – a situation which Mark Dawe, the boss of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, described as a "body blow".

This failure led to widespread calls for the government to scrap its GCSE resit policy, and replace it with a more employer-focused approach, including Functional Skills qualifications, an idea which it is understood the government is considering.

Robert Halfon, the apprenticeships and skills minister, also conceded to delegates that GCSEs might not always be the best option for FE students, in what is being viewed as the strongest indication yet the DfE could be preparing to relax the resit requirement.

The Education and Training Foundation launched a multi-stage consultation in January, looking at how maths and English Functional Skills qualifications might be reformed.

The ETF was commissioned by the government to carry out the work, which has been collecting views on the way that qualifications should be reformed by 2018.

In a speech reflecting on all of this, Mr Halfon said: "It is clear that we need a credible, high-quality option for students for whom GCSEs are not appropriate or achievable.

"It's vital that these young people are given the support that they need to gain a sound grasp of English and maths by age 18."

In her own speech, Ms Greening also appealed for widespread support with delivering FE reforms, from across what she described as the "technical education family".

The education secretary, who was appointed to the post in July, asked delegates to support the apprenticeship levy launch next April, as well as a slimmed-down, "high-quality" post-16 FE system delivered in the wake of the government's Skills Plan.

"Now is the time to focus on skills and finally put technical education on a par with academic education," she said. "It is going to take a lot of hard work and I hope in time we can create a consensus on how we can deliver.

"I want to see the technical education sector work collectively.

"It will mean FE colleges working alongside new national colleges, helping us to drive up higher-level qualifications for level four and five."

The first two of five planned new government-backed national colleges have opened to students this academic year, after £80 million was allocated by the government for the development of high-level specialist training centres.

Mr Halfon last month officially opened the National College for Digital Skills in Tottenham Hale, while the National College for the Creative and Cultural Industries, based in Purfleet, Essex, opened its doors to students last month.

National colleges "need to be hubs with connections stretching out to FE colleges", she said.

"We need to see how the system as a whole can work together."

New FE Commissioner upbeat on area revi

JUDE BURKE
@JUDEBURKE77

It'll be business as usual on the remaining area reviews and interventions, the new FE commissioner has promised.

Richard Atkins struck a reassuring note on the final morning of the Association of Colleges conference, in his first major speech since taking over the commissioner reins from Sir David Collins in October.

"I think it's a continuing role for this job and for the team," he told college delegates as he outlined his focus and approach to the post, as well as his vision for the sector.

The former Exeter College principal said: "I want as many colleges as possible to be 'good' or 'outstanding', and every time my team is involved in area reviews or interventions, the ultimate aim is to ensure that we have a sustainable sector."

Mr Atkins' appointment as FE commissioner was announced by the Department for Education on October 17 – although the news had already been reported by FE Week in September.

He replaced Sir David, who retired on November 11 after three years in the job.

Mr Atkins told the audience he was in his fourth week in the job – three weeks of which had been "one of those very short apprenticeships we don't approve of" with Sir David as his "master".

He will be leading the area review process as it enters its final months, and will be chairing a number of steering groups in the fourth and fifth waves.

He described the process as "a success" – a belief borne out by the fact that 88 of the 200 colleges involved in the first three waves are investigating mergers.

However he noted: "It is not a silver bullet, this will not resolve all the structural problems in the FE sector."

He also warned colleges not to think that "we survived the area reviews so everything will be fine now for a long, long time".

"The sector's not been like that in the 35 years I've been in it, and I don't think it'll be like that in the future," he said.

He is particularly concerned about the colleges without merger plans "who think that standalone means you won't need to collaborate".

"If you do think you've got through it unscathed and can now continue in splendid isolation, I would caution you against that sort of thinking," he said.

While finances were the driving factor behind the reviews, Mr Atkins said his "bottom line" was achieving high standards across the sector.

"For me it's always about the standards of the institutions where teaching, learning and assessment has the potential to become good or outstanding hopefully as quickly as possible," he said.

Driving up standards is also the focus of the FE commissioner's intervention work with failing colleges.

He said there had been 50 interventions since 2013, when Sir David began as FE commissioner, and there were currently about 20 colleges that he and his team were involved with.

Many of the same issues were cropping up again and again, he said.

"We are still finding the same things now that we found in 2013 – so it really is important to keep sharing the lessons, and to use opportunities like this to talk to other colleges, other principals and keep reflecting on where you are as a college."

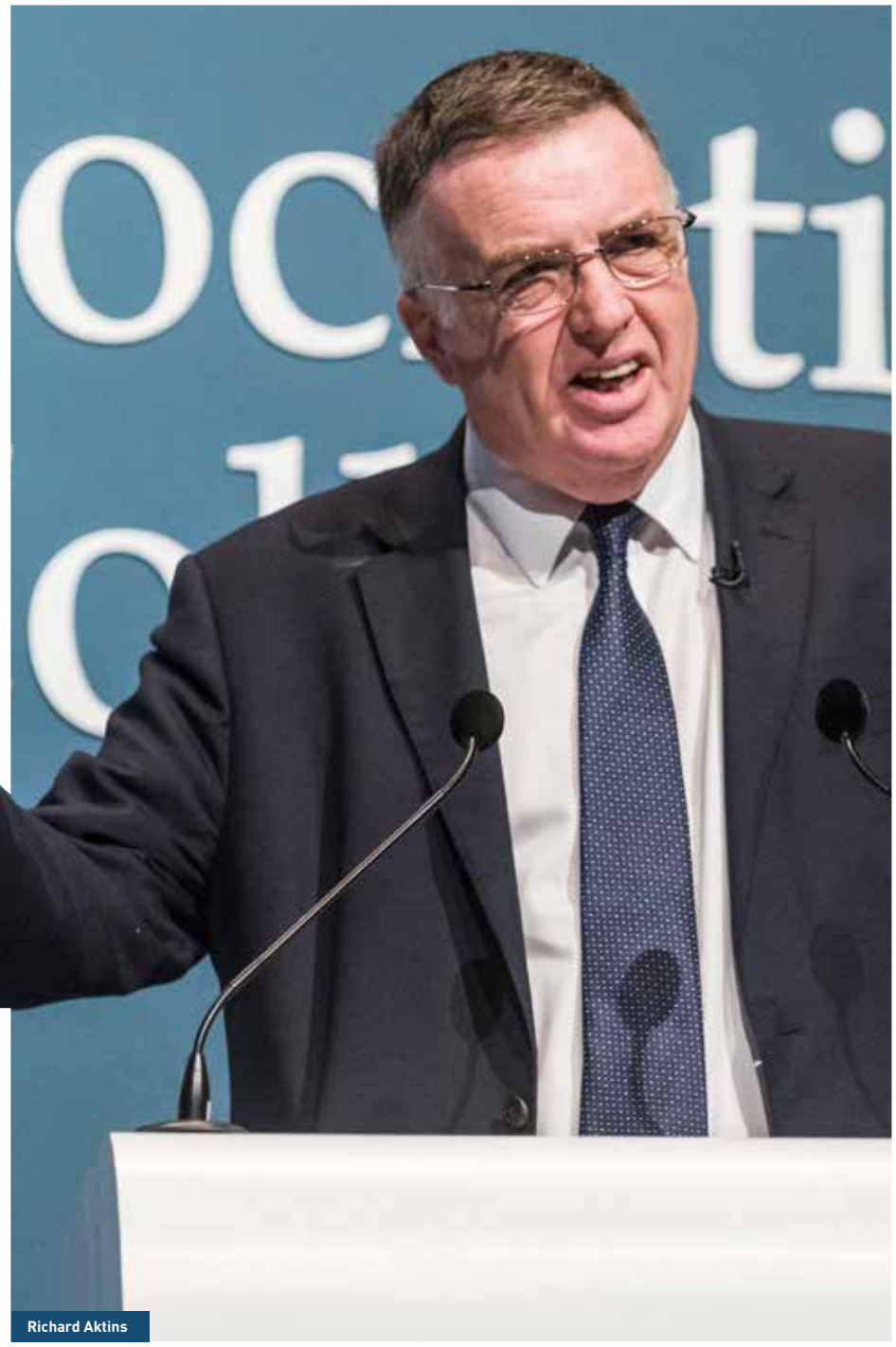
While acknowledging that "it's very serious stuff if we turn up" he indicated that he will be on the side of the sector through the interventions.

"We are looking for the best solution for learners in that college and that area.

We want to work with you. We're kind of 'how did it happen?' people, 'what can we do to put it right?'" he said.

Despite this intervention work, Mr Atkins was upbeat about the state of the sector.

"Most colleges are doing well. I do not believe the sector is in a complete mess. Sometimes they have financial challenges, some many other challenges, but the majority of them are good or outstanding. Many of the 'requires improvement' are improving, and I think that's a really positive message that can easily get lost in the world," he said.



Richard Aktins

Special on-site edition of p

Richard Atkins reads why Exeter College, which he formerly led, topped FE Week's national performance table. The edition was produced on-site and handed out to delegates

ews and intervention

Atkins speaks to FE Week

Small school sixth forms need to be reviewed, the new FE Commissioner has said – but it's not his job to do it.

Speaking exclusively to FE Week during the AoC annual conference, Richard Atkins said it would be in the "best interests" of young people if the government revisited those school sixth forms with fewer than 200 pupils.

He said: "I think that small school sixth forms should be reviewed. I do."

However he added that "it is not in my remit to take that any further".

Mr Atkins' predecessor Sir David Collins told MPs on the Education Select Committee on October 26 that a review of sixth forms outside the FE sector would be "very helpful", while the outcome of the judicial review brought by the Association of Colleges in early November highlighted in particular the issue of smaller sixth forms.

That review, against a decision made by the Department for Education to allow a new sixth form at Abbs Cross Academy and Arts College in Hornchurch, Essex, forced the government to withdraw its permission after the academy trust behind the school admitted it had not properly consulted on the proposals.

Mr Atkins said there were as many as 1,000 school sixth forms with fewer than the 200-pupil minimum recommended by the DfE.

Many of these are, he said, "unable to provide the wide curriculum offer with the specialist facilities, or the dual-qualified staff that are available at a FE college that is providing a real technical education".

But to include all of these schools in the area reviews of post-16 education and training that he is now leading would be impractical, Mr Atkins told FE Week.

"If it were to be done it would have to be rethought," he said. "This process couldn't cope with that number."

Mr Atkins suggested that any review of school sixth forms would have to happen on a local level, and that there could be as many as 100 such reviews – compared to the 37 area reviews in the current process.

"Any process involving school sixth forms would need to be at a more local level than I am doing," he said.

He stressed that a school review should lead to action, and not just data collection.

"It's got to lead to improvement, and improvement for me would be fewer very small school sixth forms," he said.

paper wows sector leaders

AELP and AoC bosses Mark Dawe and David Hughes check out FE Week

AoC chair Carol Stott with the paper

Apprenticeships are vital, insists BBC broadcaster

Kyle Tagg interviewing Steph McGovern

KYLE TAGG
@KYLETAGG

Business broadcaster Steph McGovern believes apprenticeships are an important way of closing the skills gap.

Speaking at the AoC Conference on November 16, the BBC Breakfast correspondent said that apprenticeships should be treated on an "equal level" to academic options.

"There's a massive problem with apprenticeships in that they are often seen as a lesser education to the traditional academic route," she said.

"I see great wealth in vocational education because it fits the needs of businesses really directly. That's not to say I think the academic route is wrong, I just think they should be treated on equal levels.

"Employers don't just want someone who can pass an exam. They want people who can adapt to change, people who know how to communicate with people."

Having covered the World Skills competition in Sao Paulo last year, Steph witnessed first-hand the UK's attitudes towards skills compared to other countries.

"From a business point of view, the UK was incredibly strong. From a media and political point of view it wasn't so good.

"In terms of other countries, the Russian participants got a message from astronauts in space and team USA got to visit the White House. For me it just felt sad that there wasn't even a minister or significant person from the UK there.

"There was a real level of talent, dedication and skill on show. It just isn't valued enough in this country."

Steph is also passionate about her work in the north-east to try and bring inspirational figures into colleges. She hopes that projects like this will inspire young people to explore more options in terms of their skills and progression.

"Colleges have so much to do already. The way I think it can work better is if they are able to provide role models.

"It's all very well bringing in the boss of a massive company, but the most influential people are the ones you can genuinely relate to. Former students are especially crucial."

As well believing in the importance of alumni, Steph also believes that the decisions young people make now will not be the be-all and end-all.

"The jobs world is changing. Young people are going to dictate what jobs we need in the future. You don't have to decide what you want to do forever when you're 16 or 18.

"There shouldn't be anything that holds you back from whatever career you want to do."

Kyle Tagg is a trainee journalist from Exeter College. The 18-year-old, who is studying print-based media, English language and French A-levels, was at the AoC conference to gain valuable work experience.

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Designing and implementing the Sainsbury Revi

Transition year will focus on 'progression'

ALIX ROBERTSON
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The key purpose of the transition year proposed in the recent review of technical education led by Lord Sainsbury is "progression", representatives of the Department for Education told delegates at this year's AoC conference.

The transition year, which may actually last anywhere from three months to the full 12, is apparently aimed at enabling young people "to gain the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need for progression".

This emerged from a break out session on 'designing and implementing the Sainsbury Review transition year', which took place on day one of the conference.

The session gave delegates an insight into the DfE's perspective on the transition year, and saw Gill Cowan and Sue Clarke – both 16-19 policy and technical education advisers at the DfE – explaining their perspective and talking through the audience's expectations and queries.

Lord Sainsbury's report, published in April, recommended that "individuals who are not ready to access a technical education route at 16 (or older if their education has been delayed) should be offered a flexible transition year tailored to their prior attainment and aspirations".

It added that "all young people should have the opportunity to benefit from technical education – including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)".

He also acknowledged was that "there will be some who will not be ready to access technical education when they complete compulsory schooling at 16".

In these cases, the report suggests students "should be offered this transition year to help them prepare for further study or employment", which the government should work on designing to ensure "the key objective for the year remains to provide tailored provision that has a sharp focus on basic skills and on progression".

Ms Clarke told the audience at the breakout session on the topic that the transition year will be aimed at young people "who will not have reached the benchmark, minimum standard" for progressing onto a level three programme.

She added that the year will feature "catch-up provision to enable them to make a positive choice onto their next step".

"We see the transition year very much as a stepping stone, and these are 16-year-olds so we would be expecting them to stay in some form of education or training for two years," said Ms Cowan.

She added: "One of the key elements of the transition year will be core skills; it'll be improving English and maths but also getting the maturity and levels of behaviour that are needed in order to progress."

Ms Cowan explained that the DfE had commissioned independent consultants to research current provision in this area, as recommended by the report, which had revealed "enormous variation" between progression rates across the country.

"The current policies must be working in some areas but equally not working so well in others," she said.

Lord Sainsbury

The research selected particular areas that might help students who need a transition year – including pre-enrolment activities at colleges, tailored learning to ensure that the appropriate support is ready and in place, flexibility such as the freedom to move during the year from level one to level two, opportunities to enter the workplace, and careful monitoring of progress.

Ms Cowan said: "A lot of young people will absolutely thrive when they get into the college environment and away from the school environment, and may well be capable of moving much more quickly.

"If a student is ready to move on in six months and there is an appropriate opportunity for them to move into, then we would strongly be encouraging that."

However, she added, getting the right support in place for the students was "absolutely critical", as was "making sure that support staff and teaching staff were communicating with one another".

Ms Cowan concluded that the "single most important element" for supporting a successful transition year was "having the right staff in place".

The right tutors, she said, could help to identify behaviours early if students were at risk of dropping out and could also help to contextualise learning across the whole curriculum so that students really "understood why they were there".

Sue Clarke

Gill Cowen

ew transition year - making it work for students

Andy Forbes

Sue Rimmer

Delegates have their say

Following the DfE presentations, delegates in the audience at the session had their chance to comment on the reforms.

Sue Rimmer, principal and chief executive of South Thames College, was positive, saying: "I really welcome the research in this area, because I think it's a really important aspect of implementing the Sainsbury Review."

Ms Rimmer questioned the level at which students should embark upon a transition year.

"Pre-level three – we have students who are entry level, level one and level two, and they can often take a long time to progress through to level three," she said.

"It says entry level and level one, but the way that I'd read the Sainsbury diagram was as preparing people who haven't come out of schools with a level two to get it and move on to level three – have I misunderstood?"

"It would depend on where level two sits in each of the routes," replied Ms Clarke, "because some people will step off from level two and some people will need to do level three to become occupationally competent.

"The focus is catch-up for level one and to achieve level two where possible within as short a time as possible – but we also recognise that it could take people two years just to get to the starting point of a level two."

Ms Cowan highlighted a potential overlap with traineeships, who said that students who need a year to boost their skills but are not interested in progressing onto a technical route should complete a traineeship instead.

"Lord Sainsbury looked at the transition year as a route particularly into the routes [the 15 technical pathways proposed in his report]," she said.

"If students are focused on the labour market then we would like to see them go into a traineeship rather than spend three years churning round different level one courses."

Ms Clarke added that the DfE will also be looking at the possibility of extending pre-19 traineeships to a longer time-frame, to better fit the college calendar.

Karen Spencer, principal of Harlow College, then said she was encouraged that some techincal routes will start at level two because some disciplines, such as carpentry or hairdressing, do not have direct entry at level three. She said: "When does a student need to do a level two that is more general, in terms of a transition year, and when do they need to start a pathway?

"We all have students that are ready to start the level two technical pathway, but we also have students that might more easily fit into a transition year."

"If you were to extend traineeships you would need to look at the funding for them," she continued. "Funding does drive behaviours."

Ms Clarke replied by referencing a comment from the former skills minister Nick Boles, in his foreword to the Post-16 Skills Plan.

"When the government accepted all the Sainsbury recommendations it was 'we accept them all unequivocally, within the funding constraints'," she said.

"If we've got this vision of a Rolls Royce, the challenge is that we've got the funding for a Mini at the moment."

She added that "no one size will fit in terms of these individual students – it's going to be a bit messy."

Ms Cowan said that it is a "chicken-and-egg situation" and "it will be clearer once the routes are more developed".

Andy Forbes, principal of the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London, spoke out against the name "transition year".

"It seems to me to be a sort of remedial year, a sort of remediation for youngsters who are behind," he said.

"Another possible model would be a career development year – where do you think this is heading?"

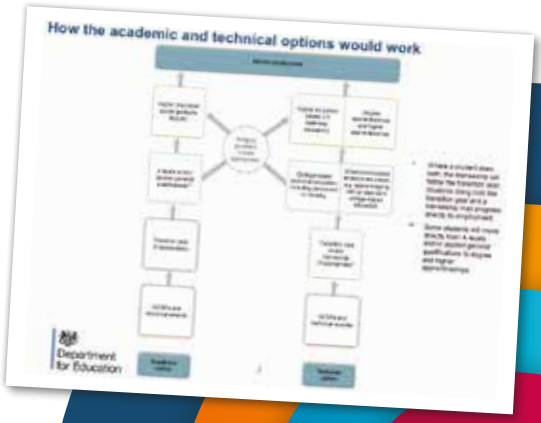
Ms Clarke responded that "a positive approach to career development is really what we are talking about".

She said: "'Transition year' was just a working title in terms of policy.

"It is catch-up, but if it can be branded appropriately, because it is about doing the things you need to do in terms of career."

However, she raised concerns about the potential for "gaming of the system", saying: "I would really worry that people left the session today saying 'this is a way of getting money back into the system'.

"But if you have the evidence that the student is making the progress within that time-frame, the system should accept that."



Compulsory maths up to 18- does it add

ALIX ROBERTSON
@ALIXROBERTSON4

The question above was key for delegates before lunch on day two of the conference, as they listened to three experts in the subject make their cases.

Catherine Sezen, a senior policy manager at the AoC who deals with 14-19 and curriculum, introduced the discussion.

Laying out the current situation, she said: "There are a number of simultaneous policy recommendations that impact on post-16 English and maths, but perhaps even more so for maths."

She pointed to a new review by professor Sir Adrian Smith, which weighs up making the study of mathematics from level two compulsory for all young people between the ages of 16 and 18 (see box out), and to the Education and Training Foundation's reform programme of maths and English functional skills.

The first phase of this programme is now closed, after it consulted more than 1,000 stakeholders on the changes needed to make maths and English functional skills qualifications more "robust" and "credible".

The Foundation is currently developing new curricula, ahead of the introduction of the revised qualifications in September 2018.

On top of these points, Ms Sezen added, other key issues include the way in which maths and English are being approached in the new apprenticeship standards, and the fact that colleges are struggling to find maths teachers in competitive markets with tough competition from schools.

Adrian Smith

She raised questions around recruitment, saying: "Do you offer a golden hello? Do you offer an enhanced payment? How does that work in terms of the context of FE?"

Finally, she addressed the Sainsbury Review and the

Panellist 1: Robert Barbour

The Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education "strongly supports the principle of maths for all post 16", according to Robert Barbour, a member of the board.

He said: "Quantitative skills are becoming increasingly important, and they are critically important for the futures of our young people."

However, he acknowledged, "we start from a very low base".

"Historically England has been an outlier, with typically about 20 per cent the population studying mathematics post 16," he said.

A recent survey showed that in a third of other jurisdictions "all young people" were studying mathematics after 16, while in "the vast majority" this figure was over 50 per cent.

He highlighted the "vast problem" of teacher supply as his primary concern, saying nothing "of significance" will happen until this is addressed.

"In schools, the census and the teacher supply model show a shortage of 5,500 mathematics teachers," he said.

"Some schools are fully staffed – others are absolutely desperate for maths staff."

He added that "the post-16 compulsory resit for those who haven't gained a grade C" is aggravating the problem, "requiring us to think of the order of about 600 full-time equivalent teachers".

"If we were to make, say, core maths compulsory post 16 we'd be talking about a further 2,000 full-time equivalent teachers needed.

"My concern is that the number one issue that we face in education is the recruitment, the retention, the professional development of STEM teachers, and I'm particularly concerned with mathematics."

Panellist 2: Karen Spencer

Karen Spencer, principal of Harlow College, told the audience that the ongoing struggle to deliver maths effectively made her feel "like I've gone back in time 20 years".

She said that she had recognised early on in her teaching career that GCSE qualifications were not the right thing for many students.

"I ended up on a committee in what was QCA [the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority] working with Alison Wolf on the study programmes, and we actually went through and invented a whole suite of different qualifications called 'freestanding maths qualifications'.

"We packaged those and Michael Gove with one fell swoop removed them."

However, she added, it is important to learn from the past.

"I do think maths is important for all," she said.

"I think the way that the FE sector has picked up the baton with both maths and English is testament to its recognition that over a lifetime a young person who achieves their GCSE is better off."

Looking forward, Ms Spencer said, the curriculum is a key challenge.

She said: "The curriculum that we've got is not right for the vast majority of young people, and we see that coming through our FE system every year.

"There are staggering volumes of student coming into our sector – which must raise the question of what's happening earlier – have we got those qualifications right for those young people?"

But re-examining what happens post-16, she added, cannot be done "in isolation from what happens in early years, primary and secondary".

d up? Panel of experts give their views

Post-16 Skills Plan.

"Here I think there is an opportunity for further discussion of English and maths, because they're looking at requirements per technical route," she said.

"Do you need the same maths to be a hairdresser or a beautician as you need to be an engineer, a graphic designer or a chef?

"We'll see," she concluded. "Those are some of the opportunities that we have to actually impact on the type of English and maths that will be being taught from 2020."

Study on how to improve maths provision

Professor Sir Adrian Smith, the vice-chancellor of the University of London, a statistician and a former civil servant, has been given the job with the job of reviewing ways in which to improve the study of maths from 16 to 18 by the government.

Announced in the Budget in March, Sir Adrian's work will look at whether it is feasible for more or even all students to continue to study maths to 18, with a focus on producing a larger teaching workforce in the future.

But colleges have struggled to find enough maths teachers to meet the demands of the current condition of funding, and the take-up of the new core maths qualification has been limited.

This AoC conference hot topic discussion looked at the current barriers and how to move past them.

Panellist 3: Anna Bellamy

Anna Bellamy, a maths teacher at Gloucestershire College, focused on the students' perspective as her "main concern".

She said: "I am very aware of the policy requirements and of the problems we have teaching the subject, but in my research I am concentrating on what it is we are actually doing to the students."

Ms Bellamy referred to a research project she is currently working on, looking at effective teaching of GCSE resits.

"If you think of your Esol [English as a second language] students, your access students, your evening classes – the pass rate for 16-to-18 is embarrassingly low."

Her study revealed the strongest predicting factor for pass rate is "not free school meals or age", but "the vocational course the student is on".

She added: "If you're a hairdresser or a bricklayer, your chance of passing is somewhere around five per cent.

"If you are a business student or IT student your chance of passing is much closer to 50 per cent – we are creating a mathematical underclass."

Ms Bellamy said that as a teacher she has "a massive problem" with suggesting to students "you're not good enough because you don't have that C grade – which is irrelevant to you as a person or to your profession".

"We have a problem with how we see 16-to-18 year olds," she concluded.

"The time has come to start looking at them in the broader social context and stop treating them as if they were our own children, who are just going to follow the academic route."

"This was a riveting session. The three presenters tackled the problem with precision and deep experience, from different standpoints.
But the consensus about the need for practitioners, providers, awarding organisations, and policy-makers to get a long term grip in the maths challenge was palpable.
AoC should be congratulated on the quality of the session, and should do all it can to develop policy that is draws on the points made in the session."

Seb Schmoller

TOP CIVIL SERVANTS FOCUS ON M

Condition-of-funding threshold will be maintained through 2017/18, says SFA

JUDE BURKE
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Peter Mucklow

The five-per-cent threshold of tolerance on the condition-of-funding rule will be extended into 2017/18, the director of young people at the Education Funding Agency has said.

The announcement was made by Peter Mucklow, who is also the sixth form colleges commisioner, during a talk on funding issues at the Association of Colleges conference on November 16.

He said that ministers had taken the decision in recognition of the "huge effort" made by colleges and other providers on English and maths.

The condition-of-funding rule states that any 16- to 18-year-old student who does not have at least a grade C in English and maths, and fails to enrol in the subjects, would be removed in full from the funding allocations for the next-but-one academic year.

But in September last year the Department for Education announced that it would not fully apply this rule for the 2016/17 allocations, which were based on enrolments for 2014/15.

It said the penalty would be halved, and only apply to providers where more than five per cent of relevant students (by value) did not meet with the condition.

Mr Mucklow told delegates that this tolerance would now also apply to 2017/18 allocations, based on enrolments in 2015/16.

He said: "We said we would keep that under review, and ministers have decided to extend for 17/18 that threshold of tolerance, so that it applies in exactly the same way in that year.

"The level of compliance across the whole of the English and maths condition of funding remains at 97 per cent, in terms of that 15/16 performance.

"So it's recognising that huge effort that colleges and other institutions have gone to ensuring that students have that opportunity and ministers decided to extend that tolerance into the 17/18 allocations year."

Mr Mucklow's talk, part of a double header alongside Keith Smith, director of funding and programmes at the Skills Funding Agency, focused on college finances both for young people aged 16 to 19 and adults.

"Pretty much everything is two per cent down" in terms of 16- to 19-year-olds for 2016/17, Mr Mucklow added.

The overall reduction of 2.2 per cent, or £119 million, in programme funding for that age group reflects "that correlation between programme and student numbers" which were down by 2.8 per cent, compared to 2015/16.

In contrast, adult allocations for 2016/17 were up on 2015/16, Mr Mucklow said.

The adult education budget for 2016/17 was £908 million, based on contract values, compared with £900 million actual delivery for the previous year, while apprenticeships allocations were up from £250 million to £307 million.

"I think it's worth reflecting that for the first time in some time we are seeing an overall increase in the spending power and earning power of institutions in relation to the adult education and training," Mr Mucklow said.

"That's something we haven't been able to say for many years."

In fact, "the majority of colleges are getting some increase" across the 16-to-19 and adult allocations combined.

It wasn't all good news, however: the EFA director warned that the number of FE colleges making an operating loss was expected to hit almost 50 per cent for 2015/16.

The projected figure of 48 per cent was up from 38 per cent in 2014/15 – although he claimed that the final figure, based on actual financial records submitted in January 2017, would be "slightly lower".

"Nonetheless, we expect it will be an increase on 38 per cent," he said.

"That's still an extremely significant proportion of colleges which are making an operating loss at a time when we know that we aspire to colleges being able to make a surplus and have something to invest."

The number of colleges in 'good' or 'outstanding' financial health fell between 2014/15 and 2015/16, with a corresponding rise in those rated 'satisfactory'.

But, he said, "we've not seen that exponential rise we might have expected" in colleges rated 'inadequate' for financial health, despite the many funding cuts in recent years.

"I think that's testimony to the action that colleges and governing bodies have taken, and the particular decisions that they have made," he concluded.

MAJOR COLLEGE FUNDING ISSUES

Around 400 employers to pay bulk of levy

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The bulk of apprenticeship levy costs will fall on just a few hundred of the nation's largest employers, the Skills Funding Agency has revealed.

This shockingly small number – representing just 400 firms – was revealed during a breakout session on funding issues at the Association of Colleges conference on November 16.

Keith Smith, director of funding and programmes at the SFA, said that while 20,000 employers were expected to be in scope of the levy when it launches in April 2017, just "400 employers are paying about half of the entire levy".

"The top 400 carry a big load," he said. "Some of those bigger employers will be paying over £30 million a year, in terms of the apprenticeship levy."

These figures were also cited by Peter Lauener, head of the SFA and the Education Funding Agency and shadow chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships, during his conference session on November 17.

"I don't know the precise figures, but it's around 20,000 levy payers. If you look at it in a bit more detail about 450 of those will pay about half the levy," he admitted in response to an audience question.

Mr Smith added that more than half of these 400 employers had fewer than 200 apprentices at the moment, while some had none.

"This is going to create a significant market shift for these employers and their interests around apprenticeships," he said.

"Then we need to… understand a bit more about the employers that we're talking to, what sectors they are in and how well our current system is set up to respond to the market need," he continued.

It is hoped this would lead to a shift in the sectors that are likely to recruit apprentices. The education sector will be the "single biggest sector that's going to be involved in the apprenticeship levy".

"In terms of understanding the employers and the sectors that you're in, this type of market analysis is really important to understand what you're doing, who you're pitching to and where you're going," he said.

Many colleges tend to work with smaller employers, he added, while the "big national employers" use private training providers.

He urged the audience to think about "the configuration of college structures post-area review" that would enable them to "respond to some of the national employers and national deals coming through".

"What matters to them [employers] is that they [providers] can give a whole business coverage," he said.

You've got employers in your area, actually go to their annual accounts and have a look and in some cases do the chasing."

Keith Smith

Julian Gravatt

All well and good – but who will be paying?

A leading skills civil servant was unable to say which employers would be paying the apprenticeship levy – despite urging colleges to focus on those businesses.

Keith Smith, director of funding and programmes at the SFA, told delegates at the Association of Colleges' annual conference on November 16 that it was "not as simple and straightforward as being able to just publish a list".

He said that while the SFA knew which companies would be paying the levy when it comes into effect next April, the agency couldn't share that information as it was "a tax matter".

Mr Smith was responding to a question from an audience member, Chichester College's principal Sheila Legrave, during the breakout session on funding issues.

She told Mr Smith that not knowing which companies would be subject to the levy meant she was "left scrabbling around trying to work out who is actually paying it".

Mr Smith explained that the SFA was talking to levy-paying employers about whether "they'd be happy for us to share their information more widely across the sector" but that "those conversations are patchy – some for obvious reasons are a little bit relaxed about that, others are not".

He added that there were "companies out there that do know" and "some databases that operate in the commercial sector, particularly those that offer tax advisory services" that would be able to provide this information "if you're willing to make a small investment".

But he acknowledged: "There's no really easy answer, or easy fix for this."

Julian Gravatt, the AoC's assistant chief executive, who was chairing the session, advised colleges to do some research of their own.

He said: "I would advocate if you know you've got employers in your area, actually go to their annual accounts and have a look and in some cases do the chasing."

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