



# AAC 2017

## NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EMPLOYERS AND APPRENTICESHIP PROVIDERS

**SOUVENIR  
SUPPLEMENT**

**AAC**  
**2017**  
22-24 MARCH



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# FE Week

## QUALITY ISSUE IS KEY THROUGHOUT AAC 2017

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The FE Week Annual Apprenticeship Conference – now in its third year – shone a spotlight on the importance of quality being maintained and hopefully improved as the system is transformed. Held just days before the launch of the apprenticeship levy – and shortly after the announcement of the controversial Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers – it was a welcome opportunity for attendees to get up to speed on all the latest developments.

This souvenir supplement features just some of the many highlights from the three days.

Quality was the common theme throughout AAC, which saw an array of prominent key note speakers from top politicians, civil servants and more, alongside over 65 in-depth practical workshops.

Kirstie Donnelly, City and Guilds managing director, insisted quality had to be at the heart of reforms, which she fears are being pushed through



too fast, in her speech on the opening day (page 3).

The Department for Education's director of apprenticeships David Hill urged attendees not to "do a deal at a price you can't deliver quality for" (page 4), while Keith Smith, director of funding and programmes at the Skills Funding Agency revealed the agency's "uncompromising" stance towards delivering a "world-class" apprenticeship system (page 6).

Quality was also among the burning issues debated by a panel of sector leaders – you can read what they said on page 5.

An Ofsted double-header on page 7 looks at apprenticeships from the perspective of the education watchdog, while on page 14 Ofqual boss Sally Collier explains the work the exams regulator will be doing to support reforms.

Apprenticeships and skills minister Robert Halfon was unable to attend the conference, due to the terrible attack that took place in Westminster on the Wednesday. His sincere apologies were conveyed by his Labour counterpart Gordon Marsden, who used his appearance on the Thursday to set out his party's five

apprenticeship policy objectives (page 15). Also on page 15, Shakira Martin, NUS vice-president for FE, spoke about the need for apprentices to be properly represented by the Institute for Apprenticeships.

Peter Lauener, shadow chief executive of the IfA and chief executive of the Skills Funding Agency and Education Funding Agency revealed that the IfA board had "seized upon" quality "in all its aspects" in its first meeting (pages 16 and 17).

Page 18 is given over to WorldSkills UK – which represents quality in its highest form, with vox pops and tweets from throughout AAC opposite.

None of this could have happened without the support of our exhibitors and sponsors. Particular thanks to our headline partners AELP, the DfE and City and Guilds, and our conference sponsors Pearson, NOCN and Smart Assessor. And thanks to all the speakers who made time to provide useful key note speeches and workshops. Enjoy!



# 'MAJOR CONCERN' AT HIGH SPEED OF CHANGE

PAUL OFFORD  
@PAULOFFORD

Apprenticeship reforms being rushed through is a "major concern", said City & Guilds managing director Kirstie Donnelly MBE on the opening day of AAC.

She was asked by conference chair Kirsty Wark, for her thoughts on the speed

of change. She replied: "We tend to forget the sector needs time to adjust to the changes, for example with teaching and learning, promotion in the market place. I think that is a major, major concern. "If we don't get it right this time, if we don't build a sustainable ecosystem, what happens next." Ms Donnelly added: "It isn't that the

intent of reforms aren't broadly in the right direction, it is about how well it is implemented. The system will live or die by this. Three years from now, I want to be looking at a situation where we have a stable system, and are not looking to countries like Germany."

Common concerns expressed throughout conference related for example to rushed implementation of end-point assessments, and the new apprenticeship levy, first announced by the government in July and due for launch in April.

This will be set at 0.5 per cent of an employer's payroll, but only businesses with a payroll of more than £3 million will be required to pay.

Ms Donnelly also reflected on a common theme through conference: how standards can be maintained and hopefully improved. "The adoption of a quality model has to be at the heart of any apprenticeship

programme, and it is incumbent on all of us in this room to think about that," she said.

Ms Donnelly was hopeful that employers were starting to work more closely with educators to improve careers advice, and clarify the areas on which they needed apprentices to concentrate, in order to fill future skills gaps.

"We've had a broken careers education guidance system for years, that hasn't been connected with local and national labour market information," she told delegates.

"The good thing about the reforms is that finally the penny has dropped, and I think the sector, even employers, a little reluctantly because they tend to view this as the responsibility of educators, have recognised that if they want the right talent coming through the pipeline, they are probably going to have to engage in education."



## Bumps in the road but a great future ahead

Kirstie Donnelly reflects below on the hopes and concerns for apprenticeship reforms that were expressed throughout AAC 2017.

So another Annual Apprenticeship Conference has drawn to a close and over a thousand delegates from the skills sector have gone home, hopefully more enlightened, and at least a little more ready to deliver the new, employer-led apprenticeship system.

I took to the stage on the first day for my first session with the fantastic Kirsty Wark, full of anticipation, expecting everyone to be energised about all the recent funding changes and RoTAP announcements.

However, my first thought was that the audience seemed, quite frankly, a little flat. I thought maybe it was just me, but as the day wore on the same mood prevailed.

Whatever we may all think of the reforms, they are here to stay for now and do present new market opportunities on our doorsteps. So what was weighing on everyone's minds?

Conversations I had with various people across the course of the conference highlighted that there was a collective feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of change.

This was really evident when discussions about the T-levels generated a response of 'it just isn't on our radar at the moment' from the audience.

A theme that cropped up repeatedly throughout the three days was one of confusion and worry about the big challenges that implementing the new system are bringing.

Representatives from both sides of the equation, employers and providers, were saying that many of them just don't feel ready for the changes.

People often spoke about the speed with which the reforms have been implemented, and the relative sluggishness of the release of information from government.

Many said they didn't fully understand what the changes mean for them and how to adequately prepare for them.

As you would expect, many providers at the conference were expressing concern

about missing out on the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers.

It was particularly ironic that the conference was being held in Birmingham where not one single general FE college had made it onto the register in the first wave.

It is a real worry that there could be a 'postcode lottery' of provision with some learners unable to access good quality apprenticeships just because of where they live.

This simply can't happen as ultimately, we must ensure we continue to have a well-supplied and sustainable market that meets both learner and employer needs across the UK.

There has been such an outcry about this issue that the Skills Funding Agency has agreed to a second round of applications set to close on April 7.

I think this is another lesson in plan more and don't implement in haste, especially if the criteria aren't clear in the first place.

The issue of end-point assessment came up numerous times throughout the conference.

There is a huge amount of concern about the fact that there are so few EPA organisations currently, and about the plight of the poor apprentices with no organisation in place to deliver the final exam.

And another worry, what happens if employers choose not to have an EPA?

Without being able to demonstrate a successful outcome, it will be extremely difficult for an apprentice to prove their level of expertise and parity of esteem with academic achievement becomes even more of a pipe dream.

While I'm on the subject of parity,

another issue that came up time and again, and one that I raised myself several times throughout the three days, was the impact of poor careers advice on widening UK skills gaps and maintaining stubbornly high youth unemployment levels.

This is an issue that City & Guilds has flagged as being a significant risk to the system in our 2015 research Great Expectations. Young people, parents and their teachers currently have a huge bias towards academic education in the UK.

If we are to overcome this we must arm them with impartial information and give them access to employers, so they can see the huge opportunities that studying an apprenticeship can bring.

After all, if there isn't a flow of talented young people selecting apprenticeships as their route to work, we might as well all go home now!

A real spark of hope during the conference came from our apprentice panel in our employer conference, Making Apprenticeships Work.

The apprentices talked with such passion about the opportunities their apprenticeships had brought them and reminded the audience of employers why we are all here.

I don't think that any of us would deny that there are still many challenges to overcome over the coming year, but ultimately it will be worth it.

We have to find a way through to make this work because the stakes are too high to get it wrong.

I hope that by the next AAC we will all have come over the hump and the room will be crackling with energy and anticipation for the future, even though we will undoubtedly still be sorting out cracks in the road along the way.

Save the date for AAC 2018

21-23 March 2018

More information and tickets to be released in April.

## WARNING OVER COMPROMISING QUALITY TO KEEP DOWN PRICES

ALIX ROBERTSON  
@ALIXROBERTSON4

Delegates were warned not to compromise on the quality of provision in an attempt to keep prices low, by the Department for Education's director of apprenticeships David Hill.

His speech on Wednesday morning (March 22) provided an update on apprenticeship reforms, which he described as "the most significant change in the funding of FE in a generation".

Mr Hill told providers not to "do a deal at a price you can't deliver quality for".

He gave the advice in response to a question from BBC journalist and conference chair Kirsty Wark, about the risk of employers driving down the price of apprenticeships in the new system.

His comments echoed the introductory presentation from FE Week editor Nick Linford, who walked the audience through the results of a pre-conference questionnaire before Mr Hill took to the stage.

The questionnaire was designed to gauge delegates' feelings about the government's reforms, just over a month before the long-awaited launch of the apprenticeship levy.

Mr Linford introduced the issue of quality - which would become a particular theme of the conference - by explaining that the survey had revealed delegates were most concerned that the quality

### “ Huge opportunity to raise both the number and the quality of apprenticeships

of apprenticeships would suffer in the government's effort to increase quantity.

The results showed that major concerns about apprenticeship quality persist in the sector - with 87 per cent of respondents saying they were very or a little concerned at last year's conference, and 86 per cent saying the same before the event this year (pictured).

"It's up to you to work together to ensure high quality is maintained," Mr Linford advised.

Mr Hill picked up the theme of quality throughout his speech, saying in response to the survey results: "There is a huge amount of change in the system, some of the most important things we are trying to do to entrench quality we haven't yet felt the benefits of, like creating an institute to act as the guarantor of the integrity of the

system - and that needs to come through."

He also commented that the new Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers would bring renewed "quality and rigour" to the apprenticeships market.

In discussing the new register, launched on March 13, he acknowledged that dozens of eligible colleges had unexpectedly not made the cut - but declined to answer a question from the host on whether keeping them off was a mistake.

He did, however, attempt to reassure delegates in the audience on a common point of concern for many, saying that the delayed results of the non-levied allocations for small and medium-sized employers will be released "imminently" rather than "civil-service imminently".

"I am absolutely confident we will make those allocations well before the first of May," he said.

In his speech he also reminded delegates of the four key aims of the apprenticeships programme, which were "to create more apprenticeships", "to meet the skills needs of employers", "to create progression for

apprentices", and "to widen participation".

He thanked the sector for its work in boosting both the number of apprenticeships and their successful outcomes, adding that it is "a period of great change".

He said: "We have an absolutely pressing need to improve technical skills in this country to contribute to productivity and

### “ We recognise that it will take time to deliver

competitiveness, and improving skills is right at the heart of the government's emerging industrial strategy.

"By 2020, spending on apprenticeships in England will have doubled compared to what was spent in 2010/11."

Mr Hill added: "That is a huge opportunity to raise both the number and

the quality of apprenticeships."

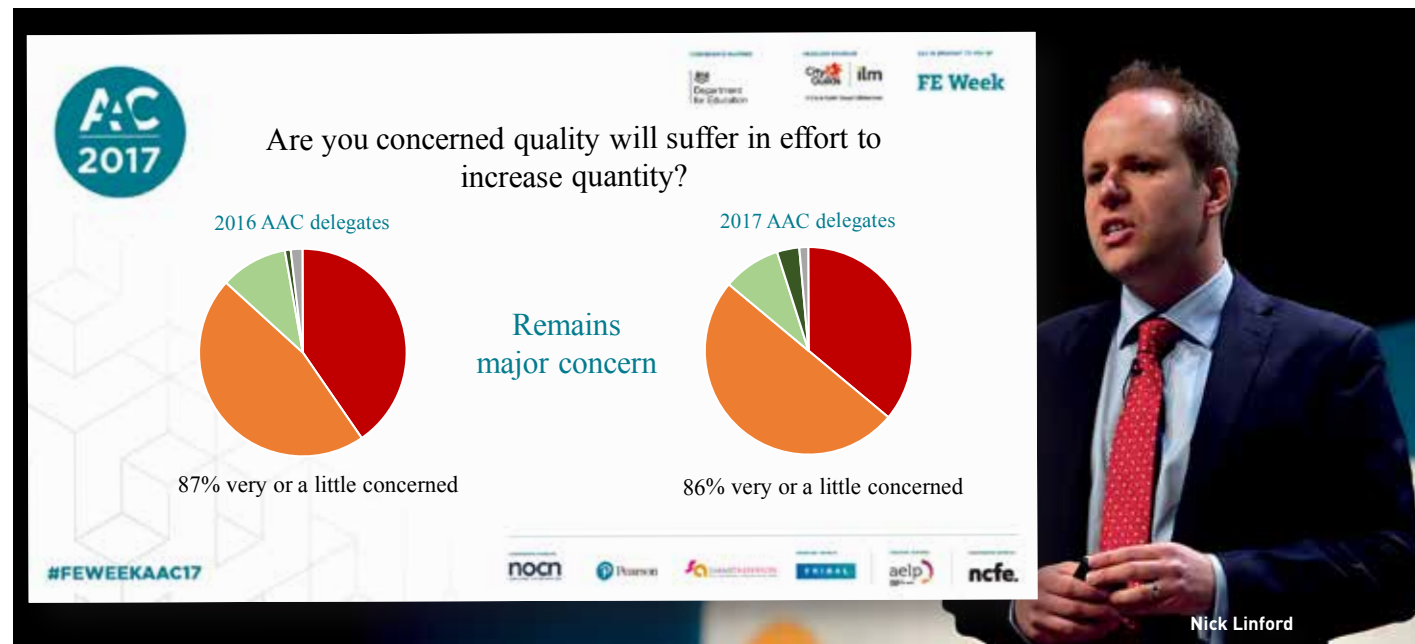
He also highlighted the need to "widen participation" as the apprenticeship reforms move forward, adding that the government would be publishing further guidance "for employers who are keen to create a more diverse and inclusive apprenticeship programme".

Looking forward, he described an "apprenticeship community" of providers and employers, working together to make the reforms a success.

"I know that everyone in the room today cares passionately about apprenticeships," he said.

"There's a tremendous opportunity in these reforms, but I think we probably all also share the view that to get the most from these reforms, we recognise that it will take time to deliver."

Mr Hill concluded by saying: "It's crucial as we go through this transitional period that we work together, learn from what is working and what isn't, and I hope we can do that in the same constructive spirit as we have done over the last year."



## PANEL DISCUSS BIG ISSUES WITH APPRENTICESHIP REFORM



GEMMA GATHERCOLE  
@G\_GATHERCOLE

A panel of leaders from across the FE and skills sector came together to discuss the big issues in apprenticeship reform, with the impact of the reforms on social mobility proving a crucial point for debate.

The lack of qualifications in apprenticeship standards was just one aspect of the system under scrutiny from panel members including Mark Dawe, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers; Dr Sue Pember OBE, director of policy at adult learning provider membership body HOLEX; and David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges.

Also on the panel was John Hyde, executive chairman of HIT Training; and Dame Asha Khemka DBE, principal of West Nottinghamshire College, and Institute for Apprenticeships board member.

Responding to a question on whether the lack of qualifications hinders social mobility, and the ability to track progression through apprenticeships, Dr Pember emphasised the need for learners to gain qualifications during apprenticeships.

She said: "It's their passport to another job, it's their passport to leaving an employer and going somewhere else."

Dr Pember went on to question whether the government's position that employers don't value qualifications was accurate, stating that job adverts usually ask for qualifications.

Mr Hughes supported Dr Pember's remarks, but added: "We need more than

just qualifications ... what we need is for people to be able to move beyond and progress".

Dame Asha said: "There's already flexibility in what has been proposed, we have to make it work".

Responding to a question from delegate Chris Jeffery, non-executive director from Skills Group Ltd, the panel discussed the impact of the cuts to apprenticeship funding for vulnerable young people.

Ms Jeffery said her organisation's analysis of the changes to the system, showed they would lose between 60-70 per cent of the funding they currently receive for these learners.

She said: "We cannot afford to work with those young people and provide the support we do at the moment."

Jeffery suggested the funding cuts would affect her organisation's ability to accept vulnerable learners: "We will not risk our quality if we can't provide the right support for people, because we won't get the right results for those young people."

Mr Hughes argued that some of the levy funding should be set aside for more strategic purposes, saying, "we could take some of it to deal with that kind of access support."

Mr Dawe spoke of the minister's ladder of opportunity and the place of social mobility, saying the Skills Minister's "rhetoric is right, the implementation of the policy doesn't match".

Earlier, he said that the policy inherited from the previous skills minister was "was all about the employers and levy payers and higher degree apprenticeships" and not about social mobility.

There was strong criticism from the

panel about the impact of the application process for the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers and the allocation limit being placed on contracts for working with non-levied employers.

Mr Hyde said that 85 per cent of his current business is with SMEs and so the £5 million allocation cap was, in his words, "quite a difficult situation for us" adding: "I don't understand the logic of destabilising the market place among the provider base".

Mr Dawe argued that there should be no favouritism in the apprenticeship system and employers and learners should be able to choose the provider they wanted to work with.

He said it was wrong to ignore Ofsted ratings and urged the government to not try "to distort the market through a procurement process that doesn't recognise quality."

There was some consensus among the panel that it would be wrong for all levy-generated apprenticeship spending to be spent on high-cost degree apprenticeships. Dame Asha called it "a problem".

Mr Hyde said there was "a danger that a lot of existing management training and degree sandwich courses are just going to be replaced by levy funding and it may skew it too far".

He argued for the continuing place of provision at the lower levels and for 16 to 19 year olds.

Mr Hughes urged delegates to use their employer relationships to develop a whole workforce strategy and convince employers to use their levy wisely, giving the message to employers "use it [their levy funding] across the labour force, and to start thinking about how they train everybody,



not just some."

Mr Dawe and Dr Pember were more relaxed about the potential for employers to focus on higher level, higher cost apprenticeships, at least initially.

Mr Dawe said: "Let's get apprenticeships in large corporates established and if they want to do large amounts of management training, I'm sure we could all benefit from some better managers around us."

Dr Pember spoke of the continued uncertainties in the reform programme, saying "we all need to remember that this is a huge change programme".

She focused on the huge increase in apprenticeship spending that is coming in a relatively short time-frame.

In a panel session that was on the theme of leadership, she said that "as a sector, as leaders, we need to be able to manage [the uncertainties]."

## “UNCOMPROMISING” AUDIT AND COMPLIANCE PROCESS UNVEILED



Keith Smith and Peter Lauener

JUDE BURKE  
@JUDEBURKE77

An “uncompromising” new audit and compliance process, and plans for mandatory training for new providers, were unveiled by the Skills Funding Agency’s director of funding and programmes Keith Smith.

Speaking on the second day of conference, Mr Smith said the tough stance was essential to ensuring a world-class apprenticeship system.

“My ambition is for apprenticeships, and the apprenticeship brand and experience, to be the highest valued product and brand – not just necessarily to domestic standards but also to world-class standards.

“We’re not going to achieve that, unless we’re absolutely uncompromising on that apprenticeship experience,” he said.

This stance would be backed up “with real intention, with real action, so that everyone does have confidence that if things aren’t potentially happening as they should, something is actually going to be done about it,” he said.

Mr Smith outlined what he described as a “new approach to compliance”, which might include “how we can bring thematic reviews into the audit process”.

He said the SFA’s current audit process was “too annual”.

“We dip in once a year and we hope everything between that time is happening

as it should,” he said.

In its place, Mr Smith envisioned an approach that looked at the “different stages of the apprenticeships journey.”

The new process would be a “four-step strategy”, he said.

The first step involved “things we’re plumbing in” to the system to “prevent things from happening” – such as controls that prevent employers from spending more than their balance.

The second step was to direct the system, using “more traditional things like the funding rules and the provider agreement”.

The third step was detection, which involved using the lessons the agency had learned from working with HMRC to “understand how we can start to detect better and earlier those things that start to go wrong”.

The final step in the strategy, Mr Smith said, was to take “real action” where problems had been identified.

He said he wanted to use the new approach “as a mechanism to weed out those that fail, those that are letting not just us down but the apprentice down”.

At the same time, it would be a tool to “expose really good practice”.

He conceded that the agency had “not done enough to shine a spotlight on the things that are going really well, the providers that really go that extra mile”.

“We’ve got to do more to give confidence that the system is working, that there’s

fantastic provision out there and that we can share that success,” he said.

“But as I say, that will be underpinned by not accepting and not tolerating failure.”

Earlier in his speech, Mr Smith said that new providers on the register of apprenticeship training providers would have to undergo “mandatory training” before being able to deliver any apprenticeships.

This training would cover “the important points around what it takes to be in this new system”, he said.

The new providers would all then “be case-loaded with an account manager in the agency” for “one-to-one sessions”.

He continued: “Then I expect, no later than three to six months in, that potentially when they start delivering is when we will then start to take that snapshot.”

“It’s going to be potentially a pass or fail judgement

“It’s going to behave potentially a pass or fail judgement,” he warned.

In “the most serious of cases”, for instance if new providers are “taking too long to get up to speed”, he insisted the SFA

“will take action immediately”.

“There’s going to be quite a rigorous process, which potentially in the worst cases is going to lead to these new providers being removed from the register,” he said.

Mr Smith added the agency would be cracking down on deals between employers and providers – such as refunding employers’ 10 per cent co-payment – which he described as “activity [that] has no place in our new service”.

“No provider is too big to fail and no provider is too small to have activity going undetected,” he said.

“We’re absolutely determined to make sure, whether you’re big, medium or small, you’re fully compliant with the spirit of what we’re trying to set out.”

Mr Smith was joined on stage for a final Q&A session by Peter Lauener, chief executive of the SFA, during which time the pair answered questions about the new register of apprenticeship training providers.

Speaking to FE Week after coming off stage Mr Lauener said the agency had not modelled the number of providers that would eventually be on the register.

“We don’t have a view of how many will be on there and it is something we’ll have a better fix on over time,” he said.

“I think it would be unhelpful to have a view at this stage, not least because we have the levy coming.”

## OFSTED FOCUSING ON QUALITY WITH 20% OFF-THE-JOB REQUIREMENT

ALIX ROBERTSON  
@ALIXROBERTSON4

Ofsted will focus on quality of provision when inspecting the 20 per cent off-the-job training required in apprenticeships, rather than penalising providers for not delivering the exact amount.

Paul Joyce, the education watchdog’s deputy director for FE and skills, reassured delegates that Ofsted was “aware” of the 20 per cent rule, but its scrutiny was “not about auditing”.

Speaking on day two of the conference, he stressed that one of the most important apprenticeship funding rules from May is the requirement that off-the-job training amounts to 20 per cent of the apprentice’s contracted employment hours across their whole apprenticeship.

However Mr Joyce said: “I am far more concerned with what the impact is on the quality.

“If it transpires that the provider is, for example, if they are doing 19 per cent as opposed to 20 per cent, but inspectors

are finding high quality provision, then clearly we are going to reflect that in our judgements.”

Only if the regulator had “concerns about the quality of progress”, would it “look a little bit further” at the off-the-job training requirement, Mr Joyce added, reiterating that “to audit and police” the 20 per cent rule was not Ofsted’s job.

Picking up the conference’s quality theme in a different way, Mr Joyce also said he was “surprised” that some providers graded ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted had not made it onto the government’s new register of apprenticeship training providers, which launched in March.

He said: “I was surprised by some of the register outcomes and particularly from a quality perspective.

“I would absolutely personally stand by the inspection decisions we made.”

He added that although discussions have taken place about the different “inspection or regulation and responsibilities” of organisations involved in the apprenticeship reforms, he did not “anticipate any other body other than



(L-R) Kirsty Wark with Chris Jones and Paul Joyce

Ofsted coming in to do inspection”.

Mr Joyce addressed concerns raised by Ofsted’s chief inspector Amanda Spielman, in an FE Week interview, over the impact that the volume of additional providers admitted to the new register would have on Ofsted.

There are currently 793 apprenticeship providers in scope for inspection, but RoATP is already nearly doubling that, with 1,473 organisations given the green light from May.

“It’s clear there are a lot of would-be new entrants, a lot of people with very limited experience,” Ms Spielman said in her interview with FE Week editor Nick Linford.

“What that will actually translate into in terms of getting contracts and actually starting to provide apprenticeships isn’t entirely clear.”

Speaking at the AAC, Mr Joyce said: “If the chief inspector is worried then I am worried.

“What I would say is that we have been and continue to have very positive and productive discussions with the Department for Education about our resources.”

In a question and answer session earlier in the same day, Peter Lauener, outgoing shadow chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and chief executive of the Skills Funding Agency and Education Funding Agency, had also commented on what the increased numbers of providers might mean for Ofsted.

Mr Lauener, however, commented he had “no concerns”.

He said: “We have got absolute faith in Ofsted’s judgments as they inspect work-based provision and practice.”

## TOO MANY APPRENTICES NOT GETTING TRAINING THEY DESERVE

ALIX ROBERTSON  
@ALIXROBERTSON4

As many as 90,000 apprentices did not get the standard of training they deserved in 2015/16, said an Ofsted representative leading a conference workshop.

Chris Jones, Ofsted’s specialist advisor for apprenticeships, told delegates in the session on Wednesday that providing quality training for apprentices was “a moral imperative”.

The 67 providers rated ‘inadequate’ or ‘requires improvement’ for apprenticeships in the last academic year had fallen short of this goal, he warned.

And over a third (37 per cent) of the 181 apprenticeship programmes inspected by the education watchdog last year were described as “still not good enough”.

For this academic year, Ofsted has so far published 80 reports in which apprenticeships were graded.

Of these, Mr Jones said, 44 per cent had seen their

grades decline and 29 per cent had stayed the same.

Only 23 per cent - less than a quarter - actually improved, while the remaining four per cent were being inspected for the first time.

Mr Jones expressed concerns about this trend, at a time of transformation for the apprenticeships system.

He said: “We’re seeing an increase in the number of providers that require improvement, and this is at a time of changing the system and preparation of moving from frameworks



Chris Jones

to standards.

“If we’re seeing a decline in a system that we know about, then perhaps we’ve got some projections of concern about the future as we’re moving into the new world.”

Mr Jones also placed emphasis on the importance of the relationships between providers and employers in the new system.

He advised delegates that “in the new world where the employer is king” the regulator’s focus on the relationship between provider and employer would have to be “heightened”, in order to “determine whether or not it is leading to the quality apprenticeship provision that is hoped for”.

He reiterated a point made by FE Week editor Nick Linford, in his opening speech of the conference.

Mr Jones said: “What Nick said this morning about that relationship - if you’re being driven down on price and that makes you as a provider feel that you can’t deliver that quality, walk away.

“We want to be able to see that apprenticeships do lead to sustainable employment for apprentices, but also contribute to the growth of the business ...

as part and parcel of consistent and well planned workforce development strategy.”

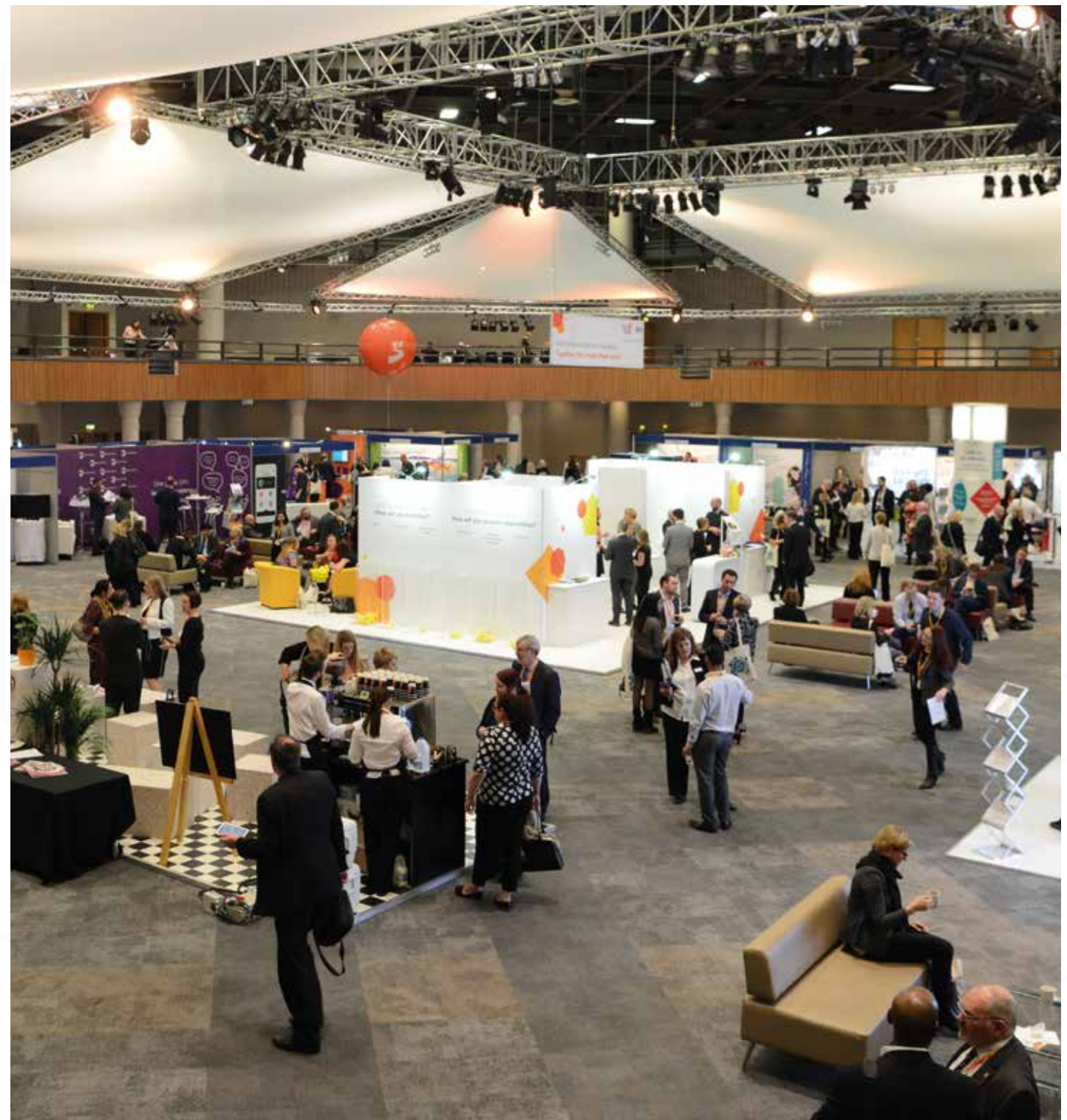
He also gave delegates attending the session an outline of which features can help apprenticeship delivery, and which hinder the process.

He said that apprenticeships work best “when leaders and managers work well with employers” to ensure the “structure and delivery of apprenticeship programmes” are effective, and help apprentices to work to a high standard and contribute in the workplace.

Contrastingly, apprenticeship provision suffers where “apprentices merely validate the skills they already have”, or when “employers and providers do not have a clear skills and career development plan”.

If the sector in question has “very high staff turnover” this can be another problem, he added, as it may “lead to low achievement rates”.

Weaker characteristics in providers that require improvement or are ‘inadequate’, Mr Jones said, included failure to improve apprentices’ skills in English and maths, a lack of clarity around how work can be improved, and poor attendance or punctuality.



Pictured clockwise from top left: Main auditorium; the queue for delicious coffee, sponsored by AELP, delegates networking and signing in; exhibitors' stands; FE Week editor Nick Linford; discussions with exhibitors; Bridget Stockdale, sales executive at Lsect, speaks to a delegate. Inset: Packed main hall



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A City & Guilds Group Collaboration



Pictured clockwise from top left: Shane Mann, managing director of Lsect, at the gala dinner; FE Week editor Nick Linford pauses for a selfie with his team; Carole Stott, chair of the Association of Colleges, WorldSkills UK competitor Elijah Sumner, and Ben Blackledge, director of education and skills competitions at WorldSkills UK; and the FE Week team (bottom) Victoria Boyle, Alix Robertson, Bridget Stockdale, Jude Burke, Shane Mann, Lydia De'Ath, Gemma Gathercole, Frances Ogeferere. Inset: Federation of Awarding Bodies chair Paul Eeles

Pictured clockwise from top left: Delegates hit the dancefloor; the Little Big Band perform at the gala dinner; the drinks reception; Kirstie Donnelly, managing director of City and Guilds, and conference host Kirsty Wark enjoying their hot-off-the-press editions of FE Week. Inset photo: Bej Kaczmarczyk, director of Learning Curve Group

## OFQUAL BOSS: LACK OF EPA ORGANISATIONS 'NOT IRRESPONSIBLE'

JUDE BURKE  
@JUDEBURKE77

It is "not irresponsible" for apprenticeships to be launched without an organisation in place to deliver the final exam, according to Ofqual's chief regulator.

Sally Collier made the remarks in response to a question from host Kirsty Wark on the final morning of conference, following a speech in which she had outlined Ofqual's role in apprenticeships.

"No, I don't think the DfE is irresponsible," the exams watchdog boss said when probed by Ms Wark on the subject.

However, she conceded: "I think in an ideal world you'd have all the pieces in place before you launch the thing."

Ms Collier insisted that the lack of an assessor in place to carry out the final apprenticeship exams wasn't an issue.

"The employer groups absolutely know what they want – the plans are out there, the specifications are out there," she said.

When questioned about there being assessors in place for just 50 per cent of approved standards, Ms Collier said: "I don't know if that's enough or not."

"All I know is that the ones that we're looking at are coming through the system thick and fast now, and they will be regulated by us and they will be good

quality," she said.

Ms Collier compared the lack of an end-point assessment organisation to a learner starting GCSEs without knowing which exam board would be assessing them.

"They need to know that at the end of that, that someone is going to be saying, is the Pearson standard the same as the OCR standard the same as the AQA standard," she said.

She continued: "We haven't got teachers saying, well I don't know how to teach maths, because they do know how to teach maths, what they don't know is the specifics of that particular board."

Ms Collier, who was appointed chief regulator in April 2016, also said that apprenticeships did "not necessarily" need to include qualifications.

"What is important is what employers want," she said.

"The Institute for Apprenticeships will have a role to say, are the apprentices getting what they want?" she continued.

"It's my job to say, if there is a qualification, we can regulate it."

Earlier in her speech Ms Collier said that Ofqual would bring its "hard-won and longstanding expertise in assessment" to apprenticeships, along with "a range of regulatory tools and powers".

One aspect that Ofqual would be involved in was external quality assurance, Ms Collier said, as one of four

options for Trailblazer groups developing standards to choose from – alongside the Institute for Apprenticeships, professional bodies and employer groups.

In addition, she said: "If an end-point assessment is offered by an organisation that we regulate, we will regulate that end-point assessment as if it were a qualification."

She added that Ofqual had "a responsibility to make the system work as a whole".

**"I think in an ideal world you'd have all the pieces in place before you launch**

"So if a professional body is chosen to be an EQA provider, then we are reaching out to those professional bodies and saying, come on, join up with us and we can bring the all-sector expertise and our regulatory expertise together to make the system work better," she said.

Another aspect of Ofqual's role was as

regulator of apprenticeship assessment plans, Ms Collier said.

"The good news is that all the Trailblazer groups know exactly what they want to achieve," she said.

This included "what good looks like" and "what the end-point assessment should cover", as well as a desire for the "assessment to be reliable, year after year".

"Where they need a bit more help on is the how," Ms Collier said.

That included getting the "differentiation from testing for a merit and a distinction" and getting that "reliably across the country".

Balance between "objective and subjective assessment" was also a key issue, as was the "overall balance of types of assessment", she said.

Ultimately, Ms Collier said, "the IfA has got a big and hugely important job to do – we stand ready to play a part in that system".

"But at the end of the day what really matters is that those three million apprentices that come off these schemes can go into their lives and say this matters, this is valid.

"It doesn't matter where I take it. It doesn't matter what I do next. This serves me well for the rest of my life. And that's why we're pushing hard to make this work."



Sally Collier

## NUS CALL FOR LEARNERS ON IFA BOARD

PAUL OFFORD  
@PAULOFFORD

The NUS vice-president for FE, Shakira Martin, made a strong case for direct representation for learners on the Institute for Apprenticeships board during a question and answer session on the main stage at conference.

The government committed before Christmas to establishing an apprentice panel for the IfA – which will play a key role in policing apprenticeship standards – following pressure from NUS and the Labour Party.

However, while the apprentice panel will report directly to the IfA board, there are currently no plans for apprentice representation on the board itself.

When asked for her views on this at AAC, Ms Martin said: "I do welcome the apprenticeship board, we did work real hard for that."

But she dismissed any assertion that placing apprentices on the main IfA board would not work, either because of legal issues or any lack of suitability for such a senior role.

"Allowing apprentices to take ownership of apprenticeships is important," she said. "We can give them the tools [through training] to feed well into this process."



Shakira Martin

The IfA apprentice panel was announced by sector minister Robert Halfon, during the sixth sitting of the public bill committee for the Technical and Further Education Bill.

He said the government would expect the institute to invite apprentices to establish an apprentice panel, "which would report directly to the IfA board".

"The panel would be made up of

apprentices from different occupations and experiences," he added.

"The panel would decide for itself which issues to focus on, and it will challenge and make recommendations to the board."

Ms Martin was also asked at AAC if she was convinced by government assurances that more vulnerable people with mental health issues, and those from BAME and other minority backgrounds,

will be supported and incentivised onto apprenticeships.

She replied with a resounding "no".

"I will be confident once apprentices are at the centre of what we are working with – working in partnership with employers and training providers who really hear their voices," said Ms Martin.

"They [the apprentices] know what the barriers are, and it's no good unless we are speaking to them directly."

Ms Martin, who was elected as NUS VP for FE in April 2015, when she replaced Joe Vinson, added: "There is a feeling at the moment that conversations that are going on, are not involving apprentices."

"How can we be sure there are a lot of young black women, working class people, get into hair and beauty, for example? How can we ensure that small businesses now take them on?"

FE Week reported in early March that Ms Martin is standing for NUS president in the union's April 2017 elections. She said at the time she would bring "vibrancy, fire, energy" and innovation to the role if she wins.

If she scoops the role of president, she will be the second ever VP for FE to be elected as the leader of the students' union, after Toni Pearce, who was VP for FE from 2011 to 2013, and made the jump in July 2013.

## MARSDEN ANNOUNCES KEY OBJECTIVES FOR APPRENTICESHIP REFORMS

PAUL OFFORD  
JUDE BURKE  
@PAULOFFORD  
@JUDEBURKE77

Five key policy objectives to ensure that apprenticeship reforms will be a success for years to come were communicated to delegates by shadow skills minister Gordon Marsden.

During his speech on day two of conference, Mr Marsden emphasised his support for technical education and hit out at "the lack of adequate resources" the government is putting into the new Institute for Apprenticeships.

He said: "What I really wanted to do was to set out a positive vision for where we're going with apprenticeships, but also to point out some of the challenges.

"We are embarking on constructing a skills system that could and probably should last for a generation.

"We not just making it for ourselves, but for a generation of people probably over the next 15 or 20 years, so we need to get it right."

He stressed the need to "equip not just young people but also older ones" with the skills they need – through retraining – to succeed in a world in which "adaptability to innovation, automation and whole

new ways of imagining will be key to individuals' life chances".

Mr Marsden set out five policy objectives, committing his party to:

1. Targets to increase apprenticeships for people with disabilities, care leavers and veterans.
  2. A system of traineeships to work as "an official pre-apprenticeship programme".
  3. "Specific support" to cover apprentices' travel costs, which he said currently run to an average of £24 a week – a quarter of their earnings if they're on the minimum wage.
  4. Devolving apprenticeship funding to local combined authorities or metro mayor regions, provided they have a strategy to achieve it.
  5. Incentives for large employers to "overtrain apprentices to fill skills gaps in the supply chain and the wider sector", perhaps including subsidising the administrative costs of that training.
- Mr Marsden tried to convey an overall message of hope, having paid tribute from the stage to the victims of the Westminster terrorist attack the previous day, in which four people died.

He told delegates: "This day, of all days, we should celebrate the positivity and life-

affirming value of apprenticeships."

He made the decision to travel to Birmingham only at the last minute, and extended apologies from his ministerial counterpart Robert Halfon, whom he said had been disappointed not to come.

"Though we may have our disagreements and challenges, we share a passion for this area, for the achievements it can bring, for the contributions to local communities – not just their economies, but their sense of social cohesion, not just to pay packets



Gordon Marsden

but to a sense of achievement of multiple skills and experiences."

Mr Marsden also warned of the threat posed by Brexit to technical workers, pointing to a skills shortage in the construction industry, which he said was at risk of losing 200,000 jobs.

"The world has now changed inexorably. "We need not only to scale up areas of traditional apprenticeships in manufacturing and industry, but also grasp the potential for great expansion, including for high-quality apprenticeships in the service sector," he said.

"There are growing demands in social care, leisure, and visitor services, as well as digital and creative industries, and we must do everything we can to meet these.

"Increased automation is changing the world of work and jobs. That is why the service sector will be so crucial."

He warned that the Local Government Authority was afraid the levy would cost them up to £207 million every year, but wants the money it will raise to be pooled locally so councils can "create apprenticeships to fill local skills gaps and meet local employers' needs".



# IFA ASSURANCES OVER INDEPENDENCE ON EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

JUDE BURKE  
@JUDEBURKE77

Senior leaders at the Institute for Apprenticeships sought to reassure delegates about the independence of its external quality assurance role.

Peter Lauener, the IFA's shadow chief executive, was joined on stage by Mike Keoghan, deputy chief executive, and Ana Osbourne, deputy director approvals, for the final session of the three-day conference.

Mr Lauener, who, it was revealed on March 28, will retire once a permanent chief executive for the institute is in place, said he "would feel much more uncomfortable if it was our own staff" who would be carrying out external quality assurance of apprenticeship end-point assessment, "but we're going to contract that out".

His remarks came after he and Ms Osbourne had been asked by host Kirsty Wark how the IFA – which has overall responsibility for EQA – will regulate itself when it is the chosen option for quality assuring the final exams for a particular standard.

This is a pressing issue, given that FE Week analysis revealed in March that the IFA is the most popular single organisation

chosen for this task – despite the body's intention to be the "EQA of last resort".

But Ms Osbourne stressed that "in the way we structure ourselves as an organisation", the institute would "make sure we've got Chinese walls" between the two different EQA functions.

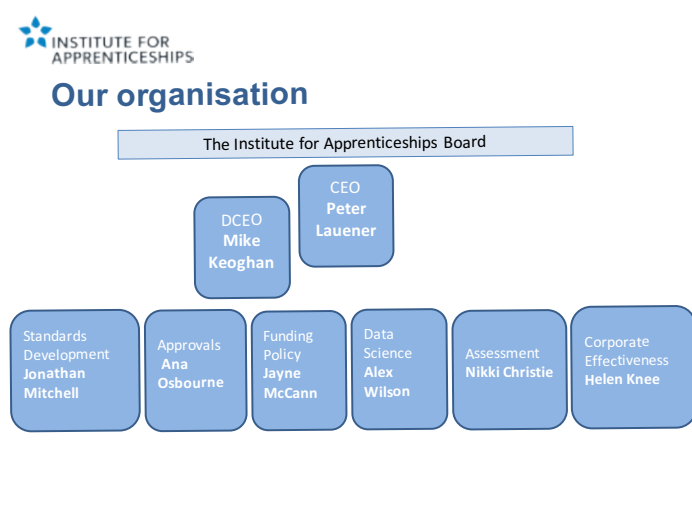
Earlier in the session Mr Lauener said the IFA would be running a tender – which was likely to happen "shortly after" the body launches on April 1 – "to make sure we've got the resource in place" to deliver EQA "where the institute has been named".

He added: "It is something we're discussing with Ofqual to make sure that we have a consistent set of arrangements across the board."

On the matter of end-point assessment – another hot topic – Mr Lauener said he did not agree with HOLEX boss Sue Pember's remarks that it was "diabolical" for an apprentice to start on a standard without an organisation in place to deliver the final exam.

"I think that overstates it", he said, and instead described it as "not ideal".

"We were criticised, and I think rightly, for the fact that some of the standards, there were starts on some of the standards where there was not an end-point assessment organisation appointed," he said.



But he insisted the situation was improving.

"We have EPA organisations appointed which cover 95 per cent of starts" on standards – of which there were "about 4,000", Mr Lauener said – "so there's a small gap and we expect that gap to be filled over the next few weeks".

Earlier in his speech, Mr Lauener had spoken about the IFA and its work.

The new body's senior leadership group, revealed by FE Week at the beginning of March, is "a very powerful team", said Mr Lauener, and "everyone is raring to go".

He revealed that the institute's board – made up of representatives from providers and employers – had already met for the first time.

That meeting was a "stocktake and a look forward – what are we here for and how are we going to work – and it was a very successful occasion," Mr Lauener said.

"The one word that they seized, and are determined to focus on, is 'quality' in all its aspects," he said, before adding: "I think we've got some great experience on that board."

While there are no apprentices on the



IFA board, there is an apprentice panel, "because again this is not just about employers, it has to be about the apprentice experience," Mr Lauener said.

"And that apprentice panel has already met two days ago, has been welcomed and are looking forward to working as part of the institute's governance," he said.

Mr Lauener stressed that the IFA would

not "be coming in as a bull in a china shop and saying everything that's happened up until now is clearly all wrong, we're going to do things in a different way".

"We need to make sure we pick up the baton in the right way," he said, before outlining some of the challenges the new body would face in its work.

These included the time it took for a standard to be developed, which "a lot of people" had said "takes too long".

"We do think we need to keep it as tightly managed as possible, identifying the issues as soon as possible," he said.

Another issue the IFA would have to deal with was the overlap between different standards – which he conceded had sometimes happened "in the early stages".

He estimated there needed to be "somewhere in the regions of 700 to 800" standards "because it links to the number of occupations".

Mr Lauener also touched on the "second phase" of the IFA's work, which will be to oversee technical education alongside apprenticeships.

"Getting to the point where we have



that overall system that doesn't just articulate between apprenticeships and technical education but provides those

clear pathways to higher level technical education is the opportunity and the challenge," he said.

## ADMISSION THAT SYSTEM TOO SLOW WITH DELIVERING STANDARDS

ALIX ROBERTSON  
@ALIXROBERTSON4

The reformed apprenticeship system is currently too slow when it comes to delivering new standards, representatives from the Institute for Apprenticeships admitted.

Ana Osbourne, deputy director approvals at the IFA, acknowledged that Trailblazer groups have had to wait "weeks and weeks and weeks" for a decision from government on whether their apprenticeship standard is ready for delivery.

The comments were made during a workshop, on day three of conference, on the role of the IFA in driving quality of apprenticeships.

She said the IFA had "a commitment about ensuring that the time taken to develop standards and assessment plans is shorter" and "the timescale to approve things is shortened too".

"We recognise that Trailblazers do it in conjunction with their day job – so having to wait weeks and weeks and weeks for a decision from government is not the best way, when we are effectively making them stall in the progress they are making," she said.

However, Ms Osbourne added: "I can't say that this is going to happen in the first year."

She said one of the aims of the IFA going

forward would be to "ensure that in the digital area we keep Trailblazers up to date".

This would be different from where they are now, she added, saying "it kind of goes into a black hole and then they don't see it for a couple of months".

Ms Osbourne outlined both the positive and negative feedback from the institute's draft operational plan and strategic guidance, published in January, during her presentation.

Strengths included the introduction

of technical education alongside apprenticeships, as a responsibility for the IFA, and the potential for the levy to improve employers' commitment to the apprenticeship programme.

But concerns remained around issues such as reliability and consistency of end-point assessment organisations, and the IFA's role in the external quality assurance process.

She said the heads of the institute were "also concerned" about EPA in particular,



adding: "We have some ideas about how we will do that but we want to work with you."

Ms Osbourne encouraged listeners who attended the workshop to understand that the IFA is still only "in set-up mode", despite there being just a few weeks before large employers will begin spending their apprenticeship levy money on providers' services.

Mike Keoghan, deputy chief executive of the IFA, who delivered the workshop with Ms Osbourne, told delegates that it was "a start-up, which is quite unusual in government".

He added: "We have an organisation that starts basically from two or three people and scales up to probably about 80 and maybe more when the technical education functions come on.

"There are quite a lot of start-up type activities that have to go on ... it is very much a green-field operation."

In his keynote address on final day of the conference, shadow chief executive of the Institute Peter Lauener again reinforced the IFA's position as a "start-up".

He said: "Let me be frank, colleagues in the room need to remember we're a start-up.

"We've spent a lot of time in the last few weeks thinking, is our IT system going to work? Where are our desks going to be? Have we got enough staff to start on day one?"



Peter Lauener

# WORLDSKILLS HERO TELLS HIS INSPIRING STORY

**BILLY CAMDEN**  
@BILLYCAMDEN

Former WorldSkills hero told the inspiring story of how his journey to Sao Paulo with Team UK set him up to start his own business and even hire his dad as an employee.

Elijah Sumner delivered the motivating speech in the main hall on the final day of conference, as he urged delegates to enter young people into the elite vocational competition.

Held every two years, WorldSkills is the largest international skills competition and involves around 1,000 young people, aged 18 to 25, coming together from all over the world to compete for medals in more than 40 different skills including electrical installation, welding, web design, cooking and bricklaying.

Elijah competed in WorldSkills 2015 in automotive technology, securing a medallion of excellence.

The competition saw Team UK scoop an impressive three gold medals, four silvers and two bronze, as well as 21 medallions for excellence.

The haul of nine podium-place medals, was two up on WorldSkills Leipzig two years ago, when Team UK claimed two golds, one silver and three bronze, along with 17 medallions of excellence.

Using his own experience as evidence of the benefits of the competitions, Elijah told

AAC delegates how his life transformed following the WorldSkills process and even led to him being able to employ his father after setting up his own business.

"At the time of starting the process, my manager spotted a huge difference in me and commented how beneficial the skills competitions were to the company," Elijah said, who was on level three apprenticeship in automotive technology at Halfords Auto Centre in Pontypridd, Wales, at the time.

"It made me not only a good apprentice, but a great, desirable and employable apprentice."

He said he trained similarly to an Olympic athlete, training every weekend and evening for two years to hone his skill.

"I also had to have the mind-set of a champion. I had to exercise more and learn harder techniques to perform under pressure.

"It obviously all paid off as I won gold while out in Brazil. It was an amazing experience."

Speaking about how the competition set himself up following gold, Elijah said: "I can honestly say my life wouldn't be the way it is without skills competitions and WorldSkills.

"It accelerated my career progress and allowed me to set up my own business at the age of 20.

"I wouldn't be standing here in front of you with the confidence to speak in front of so many people if it wasn't for going

through the skills competition process.

"I've had too many job offers to count since the competitions."

After completing his apprenticeship, Elijah then went on to pursue his dream of opening his own business and set up an auto electronics garage, Cardiff Bay Motors, diagnosing and repairing electrics in cars.

Elijah explained: "I have my own business that I started last January, specialising in electronics. We go from garage to garage, so we fix the problems

the garages can't. I employ my father at the moment which he doesn't like to say, he likes to say we 'work together'.

"He's not the best, but you can't really turn your father down can you? So I encourage and say 'you are doing a good job dad, keep it up and keep trying'."

He finished by urging all the employers and providers in the room to put forward their students and apprentices to sign up to future WorldSkills competitions.

"It is never too late to get involved," he said.



Elijah Sumner

# CALL FOR MORE PROVIDER INVOLVEMENT AS ABU DHABI SELECTION LOOMS

**BILLY CAMDEN**  
@BILLYCAMDEN

A panel of WorldSkills UK representatives urged more providers to get involved in vocational competitions as they alerted delegates to the next big date for Team UK: team

selection for WorldSkills Abu Dhabi.

A squad of 85 competitors are all vying for a place at the next global competition, which takes place in October this year.

Experts, team leaders and the bosses of WorldSkills UK headed to Loughborough last month for an assessment weekend where they carefully considered who in

each skill is worthy of a place on Team UK.

This was followed by a March 'choices' event, resembling a mini Skills Show, where the final team for WorldSkills Abu Dhabi will be announced.

Delegates at AAC were shown a preview of what could be achieved, in a video of Team UK's success stories from previous WorldSkills competitions.

"Every time I watch that film I find it very moving, very inspirational and I watch it with a big smile on my face - it is just terrific," WorldSkills UK director Ben Blackledge told the conference.

"It is a massive advert for what an apprenticeship can do, and for the importance of skills and benchmarking how we fare against other world class countries."

Carole Stott, chair of WorldSkills UK, urged more providers to get involved so standards can be raised across the whole FE sector.

"Having elite skilled people work in the team is one thing, but the real goal in this is getting that skill across the system," she said.

"We work in partnership with the sector to reach that world class standard to which we are trying to get the competitors.

"We need more people here today to get involved in the competitions and working with us. We have regional, all the way to world competitions. Bringing more people through that process will raise the standards in the country as a whole."

This year's WorldSkills competition will mark the first time it has been hosted by a Middle Eastern country, although Abu Dhabi itself is no stranger to skills competitions.

The 44th WorldSkills will be held in the Adnec (Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre) - a venue that has hosted both the Emirates skills competition and the Gulf Cooperation Council regional skills competition.

It is one of the largest exhibition centres in the Middle East at 133,000 sq m, or the size of around 20 football pitches.

The event will take place on October 14-19, 2017, when temperatures can hit 43C (the same month in England averages around 12C).



Carole Stott

# VOX POPS AND TWITTER VIEWS



**Kirstie Donnelly MBE**  
@MDcityandguilds

A big thank you to a few ISB colleagues, for earlier today. @Impmister @DominicGill7 & Mark Maudsley #feweekaac17



6:38 PM - 24 Mar 2017

**Dr Fiona Summers**  
@FionaYMCAawards

Final session at #feweekaac17 with Institute for Apprenticeship senior staff. Excellent conference @FEWeek Thank you, thank you!



2:23 PM - 24 Mar 2017

**Fiona Aldridge**  
@FionaAldridge

Hearing about @Kent\_cc Assisted Apprenticeship Programme-creative recruitment approaches supporting people with LDD to succeed #feweekaac17



11:19 AM - 24 Mar 2017

**Nick Linford**  
@NickLinford

Thank you to everyone involved! Enjoy the weekend and keep being fabulous. #feweekaac17 #FEparty #LoveFE



2:44 PM - 24 Mar 2017

**Paul Turner**  
@EduTurn

The IfA senior management team being grilled by the superb @KirstyWark before delegates take over #FEWEEKAAC17



2:19 PM - 24 Mar 2017

**Tribal Group**  
@tribalgroup

It's arrived. First to receive FE Week. #feweekaac17



10:41 PM - 23 Mar 2017

**Michelle Davies**  
@Shelldavo8

Busy break time at the #feweekaac17 @ICC\_Birmingham lots of new faces all getting prepped for the reforms #levy #apprenticeship



2:48 PM - 23 Mar 2017

**ilm**  
@ILM\_UK

The SFA panel taking lots of questions on the off the job training conundrum #FEWeekAAC17



2:09 PM - 23 Mar 2017

## In your own words: What do AAC delegates think



Yes, I do think there will be a race to the bottom by certain organisations. I do have grave concerns about subcontracting provision that's now become prime leader, and that they will be trying to shortcut providers that do care about quality.

**Sharon Rogers**  
Lakes College, Contracts manager



What we're finding, from the fine dining, top-end market of the hospitality industry, they want good quality training and they're prepared to pay for it. Fast food, or where profit margins are very low, they want to get as much money for their buck as they can and they are driving the price down and some providers are going in on very low prices. But we're not in that game - we're at the top end of the market, and we want to train.

**John Hyde**  
HIT Training



I think that there have always been issues around quality, and I think that where something in an employer's remit then the possibility is that they will force down price - or indeed they'll start their own organisations and force down price within their own organisations, and I think quality will suffer.

**Robert Howlett**  
Head of faculty, South and City College Birmingham



No. I don't think there will be a race to the bottom. I think that employers are a lot more in tune with what a quality apprenticeship is and I think they'll recognise price associated with quality and may be more open for discussions around negotiated prices towards the top of the funding band rather than racing to the bottom.

**Lindsey Whitehead**  
Director of apprenticeships, Newcastle College



In terms of price, we're a levy-paying employer, so for us it's more important that we get quality. We have got a lot of levy money to spend so we want to make sure that the quality of the provision we've got is good so we're happy to pay for it. We're hoping that the model and the quality control systems that we've put in place will monitor that effectively and we'll get what we want.

**Helen Boden**  
Apprenticeship manager from Interserve Support Services



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**What's your biggest challenge?**

SASE to New Standards:  
**When will you transition?**

Attracting Apprentices:  
**Where will they come from?**

End-Point Assessment:  
**How will you prepare apprentices?**



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