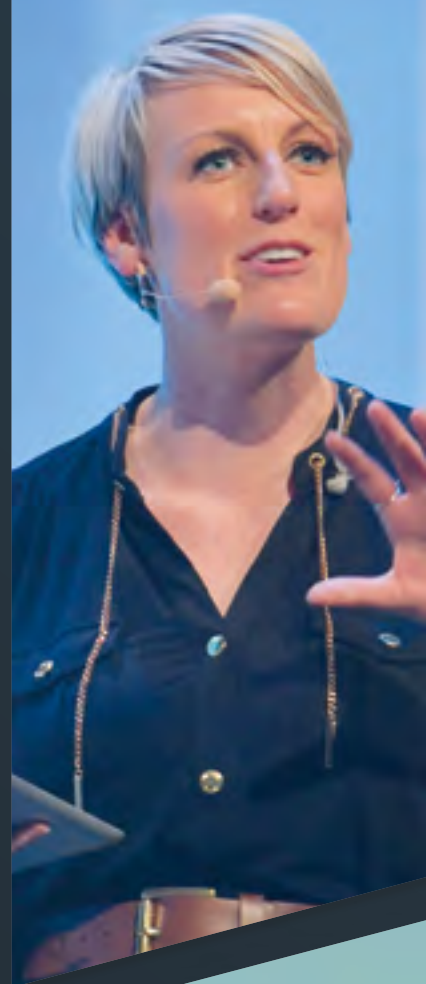


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FE Week

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Colleges in spotlight like never before

The AoC annual conference, coming the week before the budget, was never going to offer anything from the government in the way of new policies or addition funding.

So we will have to wait until next Wednesday to find out what the chancellor says and whether David Hughes was right to be “hopeful” (page 3).

But what really struck me over the two days of the conference (listening to speeches, attending workshops and talking to delegates) was just how many major government reforms rely on colleges to step up and deliver in ways.

This really came across in a well pitched speech from the apprenticeships and skills minister Anne Milton (page 4).

There is clearly recognition within the government that if its radical reform of post-16 vocational education (T-levels) has any chance of succeeding, then a positive partnership with colleges is desperately needed.

Colleges were also challenged (for the second year) by the ESFA's director of funding to win more apprenticeship work from the large levy-funded employers (page 15).

Within a few years, the T-levels and the

apprenticeship levy will make for £1.5 billion of additional funding per year, which is a huge opportunity for colleges.

This goes some way to explain Mr Hughes' “reasons to be upbeat”.

Yet funding is tight right now, so at the conference there was a palpable tension between those principals being optimistic and the others complaining about funding cuts.

The chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, promised Ofsted would keep a close eye on the new apprenticeship providers (page 6).

This is to be welcomed, but has to be matched by the ESFA keeping a firm grip on the appropriate use of the money.

And our interview with the leader of the opposition (page 10) revealed that colleges may be in for a bit of a shock should Labour reach power (and I'm not talking about piles of additional cash).

Jeremy Corbyn made it clear that Labour is looking to weaken the independence of colleges, although time will tell if the plan is really to turn the

clock back to pre-1993 when colleges were under local authority control.

We've also included on page 12 all the AoC award winners announced at the end of the conference dinner (congratulations to them all) along with lots of views and reaction throughout the two days from delegates.

We could not attend all the many and varied workshops, but across pages 13, 14 and 15 you will find some of our chosen highlights.

Many thanks to AoC for having us again as their premier media partner and for running another excellent conference.

And thank you to NOCN for sponsoring this supplement, which I hope you enjoy.

That just leaves me to finish by saying everyone at FE Week will have their fingers crossed for good budget news, which (either way) we will of course report at length in our next edition.

PRODUCED BY

FE Week



Technology and the internet have revolutionised the global economy. If we are to succeed and continue to enjoy a very good standard of living we must be able to provide goods and services that are some of the best in the world. And we have to be able to do that efficiently and competitively. To do that we need a very skilled workforce.

The skills of our workforce in general are lower than our competitors. That is not to say we do not have some very excellent people, just not enough of them. Our productivity is 30% below other major economies.

At the recent CBI Conference there was a unanimous voice from employers, CBI and the OECD that the UK must urgently address the productivity gap; recognising that skills, including digital skills, are the key.

The UK's skills and productivity problems are systemic. Brexit is not the trigger for these problems, it brings it into focus. Over the last twenty years a series of well-intentioned policy reforms have failed during implementation. Resulting in frustration and cynicism. People are saying “its going to fail like ‘diplomas’ did”.

We have an academic system which is excellent, but our skills development system is characterised by a lack of consistency and stability. A-Levels are stable - skills qualifications have not been. Skills Ministers are not in office



GRAHAM HASTING-EVANS

Managing director,
NOCN Group

NOCN'S immediate action plan for world-beating skills

long enough to make a real impact.

The Wolfe, Richard and Sainsbury's Reports have all resulted in the Reform we are trying to implement. This aims to improve, in all sectors, the quality of our apprenticeships and technical education (T-Levels). The policy direction is right. However, Reform is seen by many as separate initiatives. They are not. They are the biggest Reform in a generation. Bigger than other major projects like HS2, Olympics and Nuclear Power.

Unfortunately, we haven't got to grips with the scale of it, but we must. Our

economy will not succeed if we have yet another failed initiative. This Reform must work despite the substantial ‘implementation difficulties’ we currently face.

Progress has been far too slow. Even now the Government is planning over the next 6 years to only implement L3 T-Levels, not L2 to L7. We must rapidly step-up the pace – productivity must be addressed in 3 years NOT 6 to 10 years. The five areas we need to make urgent progress on are:

1. Transferring ownership for the Reform

from Government to industry and the employers, through the Institute for Apprenticeships; fully set up the Institute, staffed with people from industry;

2. Upskill the existing workforce. Adult education, embracing digital skills, is critical;
3. Produce career pathway maps across all sectors so we are clear what apprenticeships and T-Levels are needed, how they support and integrate with each, and what are the priorities;
4. Streamline the development process and integrate the target for 30% productivity improvement into Trailblazers and T-Levels; and
5. Step up communications to employers, young people, parents and those in the workforce.

If employers, training institutes (public and private), and assessment and awarding organisations all pull together, we can make this work, fixing our skills problem and creating a winning approach which is stable; establishing a robust apprenticeship system with integrated T-Levels, respected by all and as world beating as our A-Levels and Higher Education.

AoC president 'hopeful' ahead of budget next week

JUDE BURKE
@JUDEBURKE77

AoC's president Alison Birkinshaw has said she's hopeful that next week's budget announcement will include good news for colleges.

FE Week spoke to the York College principal after her speech on the second morning of the AoC conference in Birmingham, during which she vowed to fight for fairer funding for the sector.

"I believe that Anne Milton and the secretary of state are very positive, and behind us, so it really depends on the Treasury," she said.

"I hope that our voice has been heard; I hope it's been heard loud enough."

But she warned that without additional investment it would get "more and more difficult" for colleges to "continue to do their best for their students".

"Some of the bespoke and really niche provision that our colleges do, the provision that makes the most difference to our communities, is going to be under significant pressure," she said.

Provision for young people not in education, employment or training is among the areas that could be placed at risk, she added.

"I don't think we can have healthy communities where we're only funded for what we can just about break even on. I don't think that's acceptable," she said.

"We are there embedded in our communities. We have to serve the needs of our communities and it is going to be very difficult to do that," she warned, unless more cash is forthcoming.

Piling pressure on the government over funding is just one of three areas of her focus areas for her tenure as AoC president.

Another issue that will occupy her time is the policy on English and maths, which she said was "flawed" and was "failing our young people and needs to be dealt with".

"I want to see a much more sensible approach where the curriculum is more wedded to the technical and professional areas of study," she explained.

That approach should be "innovative" and different from both GCSEs and functional skills.

Her third area of focus is the reputation of colleges.

She is to spend her time in office "galvanising" the sector to speak out "with a coherent voice" about "key matters" affecting colleges.

"And I see my role as getting behind that, and being a mouthpiece. It's easier for me to say the unsayable than college principals, because as AoC president I can speak much more loudly," she said.

During her speech, she paid tribute to colleges, and to a number of principals whose legacy "has resonance across the sector", as she called for more funding.

Colleges, she said, had risen to the challenge of implementing "significant changes" – including new funding methodologies, curriculum changes and the area reviews.

"And we do all of this with a general level of underfunding which makes it almost impossible to provide a rich and varied curriculum for our students," she said.

"We redesign our colleges and stay afloat, because we want our colleges to continue to be successful.

"Government must understand that we cannot deliver unless we are properly funded and supported to make our mark on history."

She wants colleges to come together and "speak as one voice" to "trumpet loudly the fantastic work we all do in the sector for all types of student".

"When we are tempted to criticise a local college, or use 'negative' marketing, we should stop and think about our family of colleges," she concluded, "and instead talk about the positive impact we all make, year in and year out."



FE Week's senior reporter Jude Burke interviewing Alison Birkinshaw



Should colleges collaborate or compete?

FE Week asked the AoC president whether colleges aggressively competing against each other – like when the infamous Sunderland College van touted for students outside East Durham College in September after courses had begun (see picture) – was inevitable given the current funding pressures.

She believes colleges should "focus on working together to stress the positives".

Employers "really hate" colleges competing against each other, she said.

"What businesses and employers want

is signposting, and colleges working collaboratively together. That is much more proactive, and much more positive than any example of territorial disputes," she insisted.

"You can talk about the positives of your own college, without criticising another college, and that's really what I was calling for in my speech, to say 'let's work together more proactively, let's look at how we can collaborate and how we can use the positives of our sector'," she said.



Anne Milton pleads for 'partnership' with FE sector

BILLY CAMDEN
 @BILLYCAMDEN

Anne Milton wants a refreshed "partnership" between FE and the government to help with the technical education reforms.

The skills and apprenticeships minister used her speech at this year's Association of Colleges conference to ask sector leaders for closer collaboration – because, she said the past few turbulent years have "put too much distance between us".

"I know that words like 'partnership' and 'working together' come with historical baggage," she told delegates during the session hosted by the BBC's Steph McGovern (see inset). "There have been times in the past when our partnerships have been tested.

"But as we face new challenges, the way in which we work together will also need to change."

Ms Milton insisted that she did not have a "blueprint" for how the partnership between the two parties should work from now on, but discussed three "emerging themes".

The first of these is "support from government, for the sector".

"We are, and will be, asking a lot of you over the next few years. It is only right to make sure that you can get the support that you need," the minister said.

"Wherever we can, we want to deliver that support by harnessing the capacity within the sector. Improvement through collaboration, rather than competition alone. That's what we are doing with the national leaders programme, and through

**"We are,
and will be,
asking a lot
of you over
the next
few years"**

Anne Milton

the new strategic college improvement fund.

"Where that capacity for support does not already exist within the sector, or needs to be strengthened, we will invest strategically in its development."

Second, she said she wants the government to play "an active role", but

was clear that she does not think those in power "always know best", or can do it on their own.

"Just as an active role for government is central to our approach on industrial strategy, we need to adopt the same mindset when thinking about how we achieve the world class FE provision. 'By the sector, for the sector' is not, on its own, always the best response to many of the biggest challenges we face together.

"Together, we have a determination to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead"

"There are some issues where government has a unique set of levers and resources that can help find solutions to shared problems."

Thirdly, she asked for "whole-system coordination".

"We need a better coordinated approach, both within government, and between the government and the sector," she said. "I am looking to the new college improvement board, chaired by the FE commissioner, to help deliver that in strengthening quality, for example.

"We need to ensure that targeted support for quality improvement works in tandem with wider support for FE teachers and leaders. We need to harness the insights from inspection by Ofsted to help identify improvement needs.

"We need to reform the accountability system to make it work better. And we need to ensure that our ambition is matched by providers who are financially resilient."

The minister wrapped up her speech with a message of optimism.

"Partnership is a much overused word. But if meant, if felt by both sides, if it is meaningful, genuine and balanced, it does work," she said.

"This is a hugely exciting and challenging time for colleges and for FE, as it is for government. You want more money and I will always lobby for that. But we are where we are.

"What I know is that together, we have a shared ambition for all of our learners, for all of our communities and for our country.

"Together, we have a determination to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead. Together I know we can make this happen."



Steph McGovern

Q&A with the skills minister

BILLY CAMDEN
@BILLYCAMDEN

The continuing decline in college performance is “not just because of funding”, the skills and apprenticeships minister has said, but she will still ask the chancellor for more money.

More than one third of English colleges are currently rated less than ‘good’ by Ofsted, whose boss refused to rule out funding as a root cause.

The ratings slump continued an annual trend which has seen the number of high-achieving colleges fall by 10 per cent in just three years, after a high of 79 per cent in 2014.

In an exclusive interview with FE Week at the AoC conference, Anne Milton said that money was not the sole reason for the deteriorating performance of colleges and pointed to the need for better leadership.

“I think we need to do a number of things;

it is not just because of funding,” she said. “It is about good leadership, good management within the college.

“We can never have enough good leaders but what I never want to do is forget the fact there are some excellent leaders. What we need to do is spread that good practice, stronger colleges helping those that have struggled, stronger leaders helping leaders that have struggled, stronger boards, it is about giving support.

“What we want is support not criticism, you don’t want to be knocked you want to know how to do it better.”

She “sympathises” with anybody who wants more money but “everybody wants more money”, but although she does not “hold the purse strings” she said she will “continue to knock on the Treasury’s door for money”.

“If we believe in social mobility, if we believe we need more skilled population, we



need to put money behind it and we are,” she said.

Is she disappointed with the slow take-up of the £726 million available to colleges for post-area review restructuring, after FE Week revealed last week that £600 million remains unallocated.

“We are doing a lot of work,” she claimed. “If you are spending a lot of money on restructuring you need to do it well. On the basis that money is very tight it matters that you use it very well. I have been impressed with the amount of work the FE commissioner and his team are doing to make sure we get this right.”

She added that because she is “not a journalist” she “does not get disappointed or particularly happy; I live with what I’ve got, it is as simple as that”.

“If you talk to me about college performance I am not disappointed, that is not the word I would use,” she said.” My reaction to that is what can we do to help them and make this better. I’m a born optimist, I do believe everything is possible.”

Ms Milton also discussed the appointment of Sir Gerry Berragan as permanent chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships.

He had previously been an IfA board member, but she disagreed that his appointment would raise eyebrows considering the six-month recruitment process to appoint him.

“It would be lovely if you could get the right person in a very short space of time but the most important thing is to get the right person,” she said.

“I met Gerry, really impressed. We need to get it motoring we need to get it dynamic and nimble and quick and responsive and I am sure Gerry will do that.”

If you had three minutes with the skills and apprenticeships minister Anne Milton, what would you say? FE Week asked around...



I think she’s genuine about her commitment to FE. So, what is she going to do, practically? We’ve got the talk about partnership, we’ve got the talk about dialogue – it’s really encouraging. Now, how are we going to turn that commitment and understanding she has for the importance of our role into action? What can we do, what can she do, what can we do together?

Carole Stott

Chair of AoC, chair of WorldSkills UK, chair of Bath College



The government can do a lot more to help get the English and maths skills that young people need by improving the range of qualifications we offer. Lots of young people have struggled with English and maths in school, and it doesn’t make sense to keep banging them over the head with GCSEs. We need the qualifications redesigned, so we can actually teach them something accessible.

Andy Dobson

Principal, Kidderminster College



I’d ask her to increase the funding rate for 16- to 18-year-olds, and to free up money. We should be allowed to send it where the demand is; I’m not asking for more money, but if I can’t find 100 apprenticeships, but I can find 100 people who want to study something else, why can’t we move the money to where the demand is?

Graham Taylor

Principal and chief executive, New College Swindon



If I had three minutes alone with the skills minister, this is the question I would put to her: “How would you help ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ colleges remain ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’, with all the focus that is currently put on improving colleges?” I would like to know how she would support that.

Joyti Baker

Vice-principal, East Surrey College



How can we measure the three pillars that Anne Milton talked about today? How can we measure strategic improvement in an actual college? In her speech she mentioned that we need strategic investment to develop the sector, that the government should be playing a more active role, and that we need a better coordinated approach, between government and the sector.

Nicola Battle

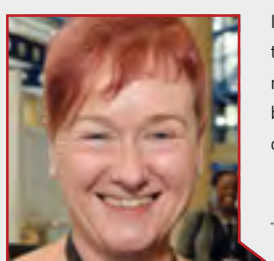
Programme and change lead, Milton Keynes College



Give us much more money, please. We don’t have enough coming. The sector doesn’t have enough coming. We all need more funding to support our work. If I were given three minutes with the skills minister, basically, I would ask Anne Milton “can you please just give us the money that you’re so often promising?”

Will Gordon

Head of finance, Milton Keynes College



I would say “Anne, we know that there aren’t enough 18-year-olds to take up the jobs of the future, so what are your thoughts about adults returning to the labour market - whether they return after illness or because they need retraining - what do you think, given the loss of opportunity for adult learning in the country?”

Jill Westerman CBE

Principal and chief executive, Northern College



For me, it’s all about the future of young people. How are we really going to make the plans that they have really work? I don’t see the detail. It’s very nice to be supportive, which is absolutely great (and that’s what we want), but actually we need to see the detail, and we need to be working on that to make sure that things actually happen, and I hope she can support that.

Pat Carvalho

Principal and deputy chief executive, HCUC (the merger of Harrow College and Uxbridge College)

Spielman: Ofsted's eye will be on untested new providers

BILLY CAMDEN
@BILLYCAMDEN

Ofsted will conduct early monitoring visits at new providers entering the apprenticeship market to sniff out any “scandalous” attempts to waste public money, the chief inspector has said.

In front of hundreds of college leaders at the AoC Conference this afternoon, Amanda Spielman announced new measures to ensure that things like the Learndirect debacle are not repeated.

She was speaking just six months after the launch of the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers, where hundreds of new providers, some with no experience of running apprenticeships at all, were put in a position to receive millions in public cash.

“While it is early days in terms of understanding the volume of new providers entering the apprenticeship market, I do want to reassure you, our existing and experienced providers, that Ofsted will be monitoring these newcomers closely,” she said.

“I can announce today that I have asked my inspectors, over the coming months, to conduct early monitoring visits to a sample of new providers. This will allow us to evaluate how well prepared these providers are.

“With the recent experience of Learndirect fresh in all of our minds, I have no doubt all of you are acutely aware of the risks faced when large sums of money appear to be washing around the system, with insufficient quality control.

“We surely all remember the lessons of the Train to Gain initiative and the problems that were encountered with Individual Learning Accounts. Insufficient oversight and quality assurance undoubtedly resulted in too many poor outcomes for learners, not to mention the scandalous waste of public money.”

She added that when it comes to the new apprenticeship programme, the sector can be “confident that Ofsted will do all within our power to bring any such practice to light”.

And with all of the apprenticeship reforms, she expects that some providers will “adopt different approaches” to delivering qualifications. She told delegates that she had already launched “some pilot inspections” to “test these new ways of working”.

She also announced that the inspectorate was changing its “presentation and use” of performance data.

“I realise that the college sector is full of different measures and that, depending on the provision you offer, some are more useful than others,” she said. “That is why I have asked our data teams to review the

way we present our data dashboards for inspectors to use.

“I want it to be clear to everyone, inspectors and providers alike, which measures are meaningful and significant and which are less significant at an institutional level.”

Ofsted also is reviewing arrangements for its existing ‘support and challenge’ visits to all providers rated ‘requires improvement’, which FE Week reported

last week.

The proposed changes include conducting a single monitoring visit, normally between seven and 13 months after the original inspection. The inspectorate is also proposing to publish these monitoring visit reports, so that “students, employers and the public are aware of the progress providers are making”.

Lastly, the chief inspector lastly told delegates that Ofsted would soon publish a

curriculum and study programme report.

This “substantial” piece of research is based on visits to ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ colleges, interviews with employers linked to those colleges and the views of students at those colleges. From these visits, Ms Spielman said Ofsted has “been able to put together a picture of what the best level two study programmes look like”.

The full research paper will be released “in the New Year”.



Amanda Spielman

Q&A with Paul Joyce, Ofsted's deputy director of FE and skills

BILLY CAMDEN
@BILLYCAMDEN

Ofsted will publish the results of its early monitoring visits to new apprenticeship providers, FE Week can reveal.

We caught up with its deputy director for FE and skills, Paul Joyce, after his boss' speech on day one of the AoC Conference, to learn more about fresh measures for providers entering the apprenticeship market.

"We are intending to publish a monitoring visit report for each of the providers which we visit and will have a number of standard themes, for want of a better word," he said.

"Our intention is to look at all of those published reports and, in effect, collate a report which says 'this is what it looks like', and depending what we find, whether that is

a good or poor picture.

"It is about systems and about how prepared they are. Are the building blocks in place for good provision going forward?"

Ofsted is currently collecting data on how many new providers there are and from that they will decide on a sample number to visit.

"We are going to use any risk assessment information we have got. So for instance, if they were a previous subcontractor, what did their performance look like, things like how many learners they have got on new standards and so on," he said.

When Ofsted has a sample number, it will visit providers over one or two days with one or two inspectors, depending on what they offer and the size of their provision.

The inspectorate wants "to make sure that the foundations, the building blocks of what looks like a good provider, are in place".

"We'll do initial assessment, tracking and



monitoring systems, communications with employers and apprentices," he said. "It is for us to get an early view of what these new providers look like and how ready they are to deliver quality provision."

These early visits are not full inspections, but if inspectors find anything that "worries us or there are any concerns" then "obviously we will follow that through".

"If that means we then return to inspect them in a short space of time, we will do so," he confirmed.

Ofsted's handbook states that it will visit any new providers in their first three years but there is no restriction on how early it can do a full inspection.

"We could convert a monitoring visit into a full inspection, but we are unlikely to do so on site, but that doesn't mean that if we find something that learners are at risk in terms of safety, for example, we are obviously going to take action," he said.

He also reiterated Amanda Spielman's view that Ofsted has "concerns" about the expansion of the apprenticeship reform programme.

"With such a significant expansion and such a large amount of public money, quality-assurance arrangements need to be in place, so that is clearly why we are going to do these early monitoring visits," he said.

"We are aware that the ESFA has enhanced the compliance checks for the register and we welcome that," he added. "Clearly it is a responsibility for the ESFA to put people on the register or not. I do think those processes need closely monitoring and, lessons that they learn or information that we can give them through our monitoring should help inform that process. Ultimately we need to protect the learner experience and public money."

Is Ofsted a help or a hindrance? FE Week asked conference delegates...



I think Ofsted absolutely should and could be a source of real help and often is, in terms of focussing and enabling providers to be really clear on their aims. I think it is common that people can feel quite uncomfortable and sometimes scared of them, but it is for Ofsted and the sector to work together to truly make it what it should be, which is a force for improving education across the sector.

Sam Blyth Director of FE, Instructure



I think Ofsted can be both a help and a hindrance to FE providers. Before I was at CMI I was at an FE provider, so Ofsted was quite prevalent in terms of our quality and systems. As CMI we work with strategic partners and as part of the criteria, what is really important to us is what their Ofsted grade is in terms of quality. It is a two-sided thing for me. In my past life it was perhaps more of a hindrance but perhaps the life I'm in now, they may be a help.

Carolyn Connery Interim head of employer and provider sales, Chartered Management Institute



From a governor's perspective, we have been inspected this year ourselves, and it is disappointing to see the attitude they come in with, which has made life extremely difficult for our senior leadership team, who really want to get on with their job. I find the whole experience undermining and I think there must be a different approach that Ofsted can take towards inspections of colleges without the underlying aggression that we appear to have experienced.

Nevil Croston Chair, West Nottinghamshire College



I think quality assurance is a help to the sector. Any independent review is always useful to see the progress you are seeing in your organisation – it is a good health check. I have of course been involved in inspections before and I have always found them to be very helpful. I think all quality assurance keeps you on your toes and my experience is that it has improved what we do.

Iain Hatt Deputy principal, Wiltshire College



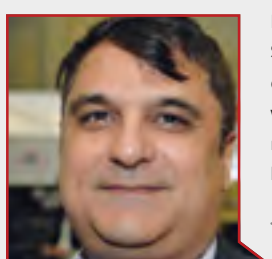
Ofsted are inspecting in line with Department for Education policy and so in that instance they are hamstrung, whether we like it or not. What Ofsted have got to respond to is what DfE makes policy. Sometimes we are perhaps quite unfair on what Ofsted are doing. Is Ofsted helpful? I think they are where colleges are underperforming, but my big concern is the future support for requires improvement providers.

Lindsey Johnson Vice principal, West Suffolk College



In the long run Ofsted is a help. It helps give us a degree of discipline and uniform benchmarking and therefore as a principle it is helpful. There are always way it could be improved and as an adult learning provider, we are always slightly concerned that the framework will fit us so there is always a bit of work to be done for us to show the inspection team we are aware of our particular context.

Nick Rampley Vice principal, Morley College London



I think overall anything that is going to raise standards is a good thing. Some of the ways and the means are sometimes challenging for colleges and put excessive strains on them. I heard about a principal who got a call from an Ofsted inspector who demanded they leave their meeting to see them – that seems to be going a bit too far. Ofsted can be hard on the issues, but they need to be soft on the relationships.

Solat Chaudhry Chief executive, National Centre of Diversity



We were recently inspected by Ofsted and I would say the level of professionalism and the manner of inspectors was excellent. A lot of them were current practitioners and because of that they absolutely understood what was happening within the college sector and the pressures we were under. I think they've really changed the workforce to have a much more human face, which has helped the sector.

Alison Kent Vice principal, Southampton City College

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Labour threatens independence of colleges

JUDE BURKE
 @JUDEBURKE77

Colleges' status as independent corporations could be at risk under Labour's plan for free lifelong learning, Jeremy Corbyn has said.

The service, which Mr Corbyn compared to the National Health Service, would offer "cradle-to-grave education free at the point of use".

The party leader outlined plans for a National Education Service during his keynote address on the first afternoon of the Association of Colleges annual conference in Birmingham on November 14.

And speaking exclusively to FE Week after he came off stage, he revealed that this could see colleges changing their status.

"We feel there's a danger with the independent model of college education that they get too far away from local communities and local education authorities," he said.

"And what we're looking to is a model that will bring them closer to that, but not removing the important connection with local industry," the Labour leader continued.

He and shadow education secretary Angela Rayner will be working on their proposals "over the next few months", after which they would have a clearer picture of the role colleges could play in the education service, he said.

Mr Corbyn was also asked about colleges' accountability during a Q&A with the audience after his speech.

He harked back to the time before colleges were incorporated, in 1993, when he described them as "very much the production of local education authorities".

"They're not anymore, they're often very, very separate – often far too separate," he said.

But he insisted he is "not trying to destroy the independence that's there".

"It's about having an effective relationship that does maintain the links with LEAs, central government and the employers who are often very involved in the management of colleges," he added.

During his speech Mr Corbyn said the National Education Service would offer free courses to allow people of any age to upskill or retrain at any point, based on the idea that both "the whole of society" and the individual benefit through education.

"It will be a realisation of the fact that every child and adult matters, and that all areas of skill and learning deserve equal recognition," Mr Corbyn told delegates.

The service was one of the Labour party's main FE pledges during this year's general election.

Included was a pledge to scrap upfront fees and advanced learner loans for adult learners wanting to upskill or retrain by



increasing the adult skills budget to £1.5 billion.

On the question of funding, posed by conference host Steph McGovern, Mr Corbyn said the cash would come through "increased taxation on corporations and the wealthiest" at a level similar to that in other European Union countries.

Mr Corbyn also asked the chancellor for "investment in infrastructure, new technologies and people" ahead of next week's budget announcement.

"It's no exaggeration to say that education is in a perilous state: funding has been cut year upon year," he said.

"The government must wake up to the

damage these cuts are causing to colleges and the entire educational system, the damage it is doing to students' learning, and the damage it is doing to staff morale.

"Next week's budget is an opportunity to break with that damaging record – and it must be taken."

Mr Corbyn spoke about the country's productivity crisis which he said was evidence of the "damaging failure" of the Conservative government's austerity drive.

"Consider the fact that in mid-2017, productivity levels were lower than they were a decade ago, despite the huge technological advance of the last 10 years," he continued.

"Increasing productivity is not about squeezing out every last drop of energy from working people," he said.

"It's about investing in people's lives, investing in their education, their skills and their futures – as well as the infrastructure and technologies of the future.

"With increased automation in the workplace, we need to be offering more opportunities than ever before for people to take on the jobs of the future.

"In the 21st century, the economies that succeed are those that invest, most of all in people."

FE Week is the premier media partner at this year's AoC Conference.

Corbyn mobbed at college visit

CATH MURRAY
@CATHMURRAY_

Jeremy Corbyn arrived early in Birmingham on Tuesday, to field questions from students at a city-centre college before delivering his keynote at the Association of Colleges national conference.

Over a hundred students from colleges all over the city packed into a room at South and City College's Digbeth campus, clamouring to pose their questions to the leader of the opposition.

Topics included debt, homelessness and youth involvement in politics – with the Labour leader reminding the audience that “all of our rights come from the struggles of those who went before”.

One student petitioned the Labour leader over the issue of existing student debt, but he refrained from any concrete

commitments, insisting his party “never said we would write off all debt”, while acknowledging it was a “burden” and welcoming ideas for how to deal with it.

He did promise, however, an “increase in corporate taxation” to raise the “about £11 billion” it would take to abolish university fees.

A “big” house-building programme to help tackle homelessness was another pledge, who assured the audience that “obviously means jobs in the building industry”.

The MP for Islington North appeared at home with the jostling crowds, noting he had grown up “not so far away from here” and diving in among students after the session.

“Things can change in your life” was his parting message. “I thought my great horizons at the age of 16 or 17 were to be a farmer, and ended up doing this kind of job”, he joked.



What did conference delegates think of Corbyn's speech, and especially his plans for the national education service? FE Week went asking...



It smacks of madness, high-cost bureaucracy and reversing all the benefits of independence since incorporation. That said, Corbyn spoke very well, and made some good points.

Edward Gwillim

Finance director, Herefordshire and Ludlow College



I think at this stage, it lacks the level of detail needed for me to be able to comment properly about what the plans will mean. I have concerns about the bureaucracy it might create.

Jacquie Carman

Director of finance and corporate services, Halesowen College



I thought for the FE sector - fantastic; for education - fantastic; but realistically, how is it going to be funded? I know he's saying increase corporate taxation, but what will employers and industry think of that? And how would it work in practice?

Shabir Ismail

Deputy principal, Leicester College



When he started talking about going back to becoming part and parcel of state education, and not about independence anymore... we don't want to be part of the council. We've found our way. He brought that up at the end - that was disappointing.

Ann Zinkin

Chair of governors, Barnet and Southgate College



I think it's quite difficult to disagree with anything he said, and clearly he feels very strongly about education. I wonder where the money will come from. I know he was asked that at the end - I don't think what he said will be sufficient.

Marco Macchitella

Deputy principal, Morley College



I think it sounds like a good thing, but whether it's doable - who knows? I think his plans for how it will be funded need to be worked out in more detail. But absolutely colleges will benefit from it - every college will benefit from more funding!

Shagufta Shahin

Vice principal, Barnfield College



If he can deliver on his promises, it will be a great thing for lifelong learning. I was pleased he talked about adult learning, because we all need to be able to reskill. So if he can find the cash, which I'm sceptical about, who doesn't like a bit of apple pie?

Amanda Melton

Principal, Nelson and Colne College



I think it's very ambitious. I think you should aim to be the best, and see where you end up. I think his plans for funding the service are realistic, because the best way to grow an economy is to have a well-trained workforce to supply it.

Palvinder Singh

Vice principal, Kidderminster College

Beacon Awards: Double success for Weston College

PAUL OFFORD
@PAULOFFORD

Innovative and outstanding activities at colleges across the UK have been recognised at this year's AoC Beacon Awards.

The ceremony took place on the opening day of the AoC's annual conference at the ICC in Birmingham.

Among the winners was Weston College, which achieved a double success, winning awards for improving functional, vocational and transferable skills amongst

the disadvantaged and for those with disabilities.

Its 'Creating brighter futures' initiative reflects "the best in adult further education within the community" and "inspires the most educationally disadvantaged to engage, improve their skills, discover and fulfil their potential", judges said.

They were impressed by the college's commitment to "a safe learning environment where all learners are valued and thrive regardless of background and level to meet individual needs."

Portsmouth College took home the award for effective use of technology.

Its 'Curious and creative' project was based on providing all full-time 16- to 18-year-old students with an Apple iPad Mini, "creating a sophisticated yet personalised learning experience".

City of Wolverhampton College was recognised for its careers education and guidance.

The college's 'Hub' project "focused on developing effective careers information, advice and guidance for all young people in the city".

Abingdon and Witney College won the award for practical teaching and learning.

The judges were "impressed by the

college's commitment to developing a moral and social code with the aim of improving employability prospects and leading to an ethos of respect and responsibility".

The winner of the Leading Light Award – which singles out one of the Beacon winners for particular praise – was Truro and Penwith College.

The student video of the year award went to Rachel Irving of Chesterfield College, while the young student of the year, adult student of the year, and apprentice of the year winners are all listed below.



WINNERS TABLES

JISC Award for the Effective Use of Technology in Further Education

Portsmouth College

Award for the Promotion and Delivery of Successful Apprenticeships

Gloucestershire College

City & Guild Award for Staff Development

Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education

Edge Award for Practical Teaching and Learning

Abingdon and Witney College

The Careers and Enterprise Company Careers Education and Guidance Award

City of Wolverhampton College

Skills and Education Group Award for Transition into Post-16 Education and Training

Cardiff and Vale College

AoC Award for College Engagement with Employers

Sunderland College

Award for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Weston College

AoC Award for Mental Health and Wellbeing

Truro and Penwith College

RSM Award for Leadership and Governance

Bridgend College

Gateway Qualifications Widening Participation in Learning Award

Weston College

Radical transformational change isn't out of reach

JUDE BURKE
@JUDEBURKE77

A 10am start time is just one of a number of radical changes put in place at Portsmouth College which have improved both its achievement rates and numbers of learners.

During a workshop session on the first day of the Association of Colleges conference in Birmingham, Steve Frampton, the college's principal, explained what the leadership had done, why they'd done it – and the impact it has had.

"We're now in a position where our student recruitment has gone through the roof, the mental health and well-being of staff and students has gone up, happiness has gone up, we've been able to recruit great staff, we're working better with our community, teaching and learning has improved, attendance has improved and employability skills have improved," he said.

The college won the Jisc award for best use of technology in FE at this year's AoC Beacon Award for one aspect of its transformation.

The impetus for the reform came five years ago, when the college asked its students what they wanted from their FE experience "and we didn't get the answers we expected, to be honest".

The college start time was just one issue raised, while others related to the amount of "trapped time" – long gaps between lessons – that learners had, and whether they were really learning the employability skills they would need for life beyond college.

The first change the college made was to overhaul its timetable – which, it transpired, was first designed in 1967 and had been "tweaked and tweaked and

tweaked, and we'd forgotten what its purpose was".

The new timetable, which Mr Frampton said was the "absolutely critical piece" in the college's transformation, included longer blocks of learning time, as well as a later start so the college was "working with young people, with their brain patterns".

"Young people's brains definitely do not warm up until 11am, yet we were starting at 8.30am," Mr Frampton said.

"Now we're seeing far better usage of time, greater focus, the quality of teaching and learning is better and the curriculum is more dynamic.

"And Ofsted really loved it, much to their surprise, I think."

The second stage of change at the college – the one that one won them their Beacon Award – saw all staff and students given an iPad mini for the duration of their time at the college.

The idea behind this project, he explained, was to help learners' "digital literacy skills, their employability skills, and to be a mechanism to drive up the quality of teaching and learning and assessment".

While all students are "getting the skills they want" and "learning for the 21st century", he said he was particularly struck by the impact the project had on the male students at the college.

"We've got boys engaged in learning that wouldn't have done before, and are actually doing proactive research," Mr Frampton said.

The Beacon Award judges praised the project for the "positive effect it had on learning culture" and the way it had taken the iPads' "learning use to a new level".

Employability skills are the third pillar of the college's change.

Because of the reworked timetable, each learner would have the option of a dedicated



Steve Frampton

half-day to take part in the college's employability programme, "to make sure they get the work placements and work experience they need in order to achieve what they want to do beyond college".

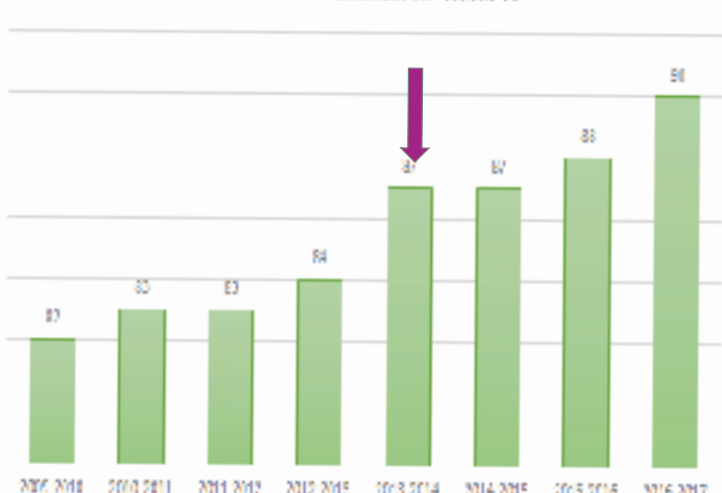
"It's all about how we can prepare them for life after college, stand out in a very competitive market."

The changes have all had a positive impact on the college's attendance rates, achievement rates, student numbers and more – but for Mr Frampton it's about more than just the figures.

"Most importantly, young people and parents in our community think we're on the right agenda," he said.

Impact on attendance

Curriculum Attendance Trend %



Impact on Student Achievement

• Headline Performance Data 16-18 Level 3

Headline Performance	2011/12	2013/14	2015/16	2016/17
Achievement	79.8%	82%	85%	89.4%
Retention	90%	93%	95%	96%

• Male and Female Performance 16-18 Level 3

Achievement Rates	2013/14	2014/15	15/16	16/17
Male	83.3%	82.8%	82.3%	86.6%
Female	88.9%	85%	87%	91.8%

Expect between 10 and 20 Institutes of Technology

JUDE BURKE
@JUDEBURKE77

The change in focus for Institutes of Technology from FE to HE in the Conservative manifesto in May confused many in the sector – including, as it turned out, the team working on the policy.

Elizabeth Cuthbertson, a deputy director for skills provider base at the Department for Education, told AoC delegates on Tuesday afternoon that her team had been “equally surprised” by the change in direction.

“We had to understand where it could have come from. We had to understand if this was truly where ministers wanted to go and what was driving it,” she said.

As it transpired, one of the main reasons was a desire by top brass, including those at No.10 and the Treasury, to “confer prestige” on IoTs by borrowing from the status of universities.

“We’re trying to broker a new collaborative approach across FE, HE and

employers,” Ms Cuthbertson said.

The policy the team is now adopting an approach of “evolution not revolution”, which will see around 10 to 20 new institutes. They are aiming to open the first few in 2019.

These will be on a “regional or sub-regional” level, she said, and would be developed “at scale”.

“We want the scale to be there, because we recognise you need to corral learners at level four and five. It’s a market that needs to be created,” she explained.

An IoT might be a “genuinely new institution” or it could be based within existing providers.

“We’re not looking for a rebadging exercise, we’re looking for something that’s a distinct evolution from what we’ve got,” she insisted.

Around 100 expressions of interest have been submitted, but these are expected to drop off in the call for proposals, which is due to open by the end of the year.

One of the aims of the recently announced review of technical education at levels four and five will be to “help build



Elizabeth Cuthbertson

the future curriculum and content” the IoTs will deliver, according to Ian Caplan, the DfE’s deputy director for skills strategy and adult education policy, who is leading the review.

He said these levels suffer from low awareness and low take-up, as well as competition with degrees at level six.

The “complexities” at levels four and five mean that it “would not work” to simply

“apply the same basic principles” set out in the Sainsbury report for levels two and three, and “stretch it up and call that our level four and five reforms”, he said.

However, he gave little detail about what the review would involve – beyond an aim to have the recommendations implemented in time for the first T-level students to progress onto the reformed higher technical-level courses.

Lessons from the T-level work placement pilot

BILLY CAMDEN
@BILLYCAMDEN

Persuading students to take 10-week work placements is a struggle, according to one college involved in the T-level pilots.

Lisa O’Loughlin, principal of The Manchester College, told the AoC conference about the issues she has faced in running one of the government’s work placement pilots.

The sector has already been vocally critical of the government’s desire to have all T-level students embark on at least 315 hours of placement. Many believe that not every region would be able to sustain placements in every area, while others worry about significant travel costs.

This, however, is the first time that student resistance to the rule has been discussed.

“Talking and coaching the learners to have aspiration for a work placement has been a challenge,” Ms O’Loughlin told delegates.

“We work with some really deprived communities but actually coaching learners ahead of the work placement to understand what is expected of them is tough.

“It is work readiness that we’re battling

with, but getting them to feel confident to take that leap over an extended period of time to have engagement with employers has involved more work than we originally anticipated.”

Staffing issues have become another unintended barrier, she explained.

“It requires more staffing than we expected. Even just the preparation work to get our learners ready and the mentoring to make sure everything in place is a challenge and requires investment.”

Some students are having difficulty balancing placements with part-time jobs.

Twenty-one FE providers are currently testing out “high-level principles and models” for the proposed placements, and work gets underway at the beginning of this term, ending July 2018.

The DfE expects 180,000 work placements per year when T-levels are introduced in 2020, each with an average length of 50 working days, within a range of 45 to 60, lasting a minimum of 315 hours.

Officials have so far been clear on their

approach, insisting “no work placement, no certificate”.

This was reiterated at the conference by Kate Haseler (pictured), a senior policy advisor to the Department for Education.

Many leaders from colleges are lobbying to get plans changed as they believe it will limit young people’s choice as it stands.

But Ms O’Loughlin did deliver some optimism, and urged FE leaders to start preparing for it sooner rather than later.


“What I would say though overwhelmingly is that we have learned so much already. We always knew it was going to be a challenge because we knew we had to start the learning now, we didn’t want to be at the end of that race and at the end of 2019/2020 saying ‘how do we gear up?’ and not have that learning,” she said.

“The institutional capability we are developing through this experience is strong.”

Ms Haseler told delegates during the session that the consultation on T-levels would be published soon, and said the DfE wants to hear all of the sector’s concerns and overcome them.

“The T-level consultation will be launched very shortly, that is government speak but it will be very shortly,” she said. “Ultimately we really care about making this work on the ground for you so please do engage.”





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