



THE STAFFROOM

Making friends and allies to crack the work experience challenge

Page 33



How FE could lead the way on gender equality

Page 35



Essential round-up of AAC 2023

Pages 13-24



The fudge-it budget

- Over 50s 'returnerships' spin exposed
- Pension boost for bosses while teacher pay ignored
- Lower inflation still wipes out funding increases

Pages 5-7



Halfon: This budget delivers for FE learners **Page 8**



FEWEEK

MEET THE TEAM



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CORRECTION

In the Priya Lakhani profile, edition 418, we incorrectly stated the £16.5 million loss was a yearly figure, when it is actually the cumulative amount.

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Contents

Watchdog's new deadlines to avoid level 3 results debacle



Page 9

Dispatches from the frontline of FE

THE STAFF ROOM

Got views from the classroom?

Anecdotes about apprenticeships?

Insights into how the sector really works?

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Hunt begins for Ofsted's next chief inspector

Page 12



Our skills system is a long way from meeting the economy's needs

Page 34



Stop relying on more funding. Providers need to solve their own recruitment problems

Page 37

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BUDGET 2023

Pension reform benefits wealthy bosses as FE sector overlooked (again)

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High-earners with fat pension pots will benefit from a multi-billion-pound tax giveaway from this week's budget, as calls for cash to tackle teacher shortages were ignored.

Jeremy Hunt, the chancellor of the exchequer, delivered the blow on Wednesday in his first Spring budget. It is also the first since FE and sixth form colleges were reclassified as part of the public sector.

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said: "Once again college leaders will be rightly dismayed that the sector has been overlooked by the chancellor and are wondering why Jeremy Hunt continues to ignore the central role colleges play in delivering the enterprising, highly skilled, high-growth country he wants to see."

Hunt told the House of Commons that his economic growth plan would tackle labour shortages. However apart from small boosts to promote bootcamps and work academies to lure the over-50s back to employment, he provided no extra funding for skills budgets.

Other enticements for older people included scrapping the lifetime allowance which, from April 2024, will mean people with pension pots worth over £1 million will no longer be heavily taxed on what they draw down on retirement. Labour pledged to reverse the move if it wins the next election and said the "massive tax break" will only benefit the top 1 per cent of pension savers. Among them will be highly paid and long-serving principals, heads and chief executives.

Hunt wants 80,000 more sector-based work academies (SWAPs) across 2023/24 and 2024/25 and an extra 64,000 skills bootcamp places from 2024/25. About £40

million has been allocated to SWAPs over those two years and more than £30 million will be spent on bootcamps.

Extra places on skills programmes are expected to be badged under the government's "returnerships" scheme (see page 6).

Stephen Evans, chief executive of the Learning and Work Institute, said that the latest inflation forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) show that even though inflation is coming down, government spending on skills in England will still be £1 billion lower by 2025 than in 2010.

"Higher inflation than expected at the 2021 spending review wipes out £200 million of planned [spending] rises in real terms," he said.

Jane Hickie, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, said: "Additional funding for SWAPs and expanding supported internships are welcome, although relatively modest. While we're pleased to see investment in extra skills bootcamps, it's disappointing that this does not start for another 18 months.

"Ultimately, we're disappointed at the lack of detailed plan to meet the chancellor's aim to get more people back into work and achieve the stated aim of skills being the catalyst for economic growth."

Investment zones cash can be spent on skills

Rather than invest in skills through increasing funding rates directly, Hunt's plan is to allocate funding for local areas to spend in un-ringfenced pots, such as through the new single budgets for West Midlands and Greater Manchester (see page 7) and 12 new "investment zones".

Dubbed "potential Canary Wharf's", these zones will have access to "flexible grant funding" worth £80 million over five years to "support skills and incentivise apprenticeships, provide specialist business support and improve local infrastructure, dependent on local requirements".

The 12 zones are: the proposed East Midlands Mayoral Combined County Authority, Greater Manchester Mayoral Combined Authority, Liverpool City Region Mayoral Combined Authority, the proposed North East Mayoral Combined Authority, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, Tees Valley Mayoral Combined Authority, West Midlands Mayoral Combined Authority, and West Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.

Intensive English language courses for Ukrainians

In an extension of the support for Ukrainians fleeing the war who have arrived in the UK under the Ukraine visa schemes, the government is providing £11.5 million for "intensive English language courses and employment support" for up to 10,000 people.

Further details, including additional groups who may be eligible for this support, will be published "in due course".

Universal credit training flexibility extended again

The government's "train and progress" policy, originally announced as a six-month pilot in March 2021, increases the amount of time universal credit claimants can study full-time, work-focused courses while still receiving benefits from eight weeks to 12 weeks.

This goes up to 16 weeks if the claimant is on a skills bootcamp. The flexibility has been extended again to April 2025.

Additional £3m for supported internships

Hunt also announced that the Department for Education will invest an additional £3 million over the next two years to pilot an expansion of the supported internships programme to young people entitled to SEND support who do not have an EHCP.



Jeremy Hunt

BUDGET 2023

Hunt's 'returnerships' are just marketing, DfE admits

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The chancellor's "returnerships" scheme has been slammed as "all spin and no substance" after the government confirmed it will only be a marketing brand to signpost older workers to existing courses.

Jeremy Hunt told the House of Commons during Wednesday's budget that education secretary Gillian Keegan "will introduce a new kind of apprenticeship targeted at the over-50s who want to return to work".

"They will be called returnerships, an offering alongside skills bootcamps and sector-based work academies," he added.

However, Treasury documents indicated that rather than offering a new course, "returnerships will promote accelerated apprenticeships, sector-based work

academy programme (SWAP) placements and skills bootcamps" – programmes which have been available for years.

"It's all spin and no substance"

The Department for Education confirmed to *FE Week* that "returnerships" will simply be the term used, through its Skills for Life marketing campaign, to encourage over-50s to take up existing courses.

Accelerated apprenticeships are shorter (by at least three months) than the typical duration of the standard, based on the apprentice's prior learning. Minimum requirements of

an apprenticeship must still be met, including the legal 12-month minimum duration rule.

Skills bootcamps offer free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks with a job interview at the end, while SWAPs are administered by Jobcentre Plus and involve pre-employment training, a guaranteed job interview and a work placement to help prepare those receiving unemployment benefits for new jobs.

Shadow minister for further education and skills Toby Perkins said: "The government's announcement on 'returnerships' is typical of their approach to skills: it's all spin and no substance.

"Our country needs a coherent, joined-up skills system which enables all individuals to make the best use of their talents."

Jane Hickie, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, added: "Ultimately, we're disappointed at the lack of detailed plan to meet the chancellor's aim to get more people back into work and achieve the stated aim of skills being the catalyst for economic growth.

"If the government are serious about supporting more over-50s and those in receipt of universal credit back into work, this will need significantly more investment in skills training.

"A rebranding and promotion of accelerated apprenticeship under the guise of 'returnerships' won't cut it. If this is a budget for growth, it's a budget for growth without skills."



Toby Perkins



Jane Hickie

BUDGET 2023

Mayors hail 'breakthrough' with new devolved education powers

JASON NOBLE

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Greater further education and skills powers have been devolved to two mayoral regions in England but fall short of the authorities' demands.

"Deeper" devolved powers were issued to Greater Manchester and West Midlands combined authorities in this week's budget, which "extends existing devolved adult skills functions to include further areas of post-19 education and skills activity; and provides greater oversight of post-16 technical education and skills careers," according to the government documents.

Currently the two have ownership of their regions' adult education budgets (AEB) and involvement in local skills improvement plans.

Clear guidance has only been published on a handful of areas of greater flexibility.

Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham had called for co-commissioning of T levels and involvement in running job centres, which do not appear in the deal.

The two regions will be able to spend up to half of their free courses for jobs budget on any adult level 3 qualification that meets local skills need.

The government said it plans to remove the ringfencing of cash on the programme in the next spending review period (the current spending review period runs from 2022/23 to 2024/25).

The deals also say that from 2023/24 the authorities can use up to 30 per cent of their skills bootcamp budget on developing new bootcamps needed to meet local need, rising to 100 per cent from 2024/25.

The government plans single capital and revenue funding settlements for the trailblazers in the next spending review period, with a memorandum of understanding to be published in January 2024. Adult skills, including free courses for jobs and bootcamps, are expected



Andy Street

to be included in the multi-year funding settlements.

The two regions will form their own joint governance boards bringing together commissioners, providers, and designated employer representative bodies to "provide oversight of post-16 technical education and skills".

The report said these boards will "utilise all available levers and resources to secure a post-16 technical and vocational offer that is aligned to local skills needs".

Only a few details of what the boards will be involved in have been published as the government says it envisages those boards will evolve over time. Details outlined so far include involvement in linking education to real-time labour market data, developing the all-age careers strategy, signing off the local skills improvement plan from the lead college, and improved data sharing responsibilities.

The regions will also become the "central convenor" of careers provision in their regions, with the aim of joining up existing careers provision such as the National Careers Service and local careers hubs by tailoring provision to local needs.

A new strategic fund pilot is also planned for responding to careers priorities for young people in the two areas. How much those pilots will be worth or what they may entail has not been disclosed.

Another pilot, called the Further Education Innovation Fund, will fund colleges to "pursue

innovation activities," with the regions, government and Innovate UK working together. No further details have been released.

The deals have generally been welcomed by the sector but still some questions remain until more details are forthcoming.

Professor of government practice Andy Westwood said joint governance of 16 to 19 could be significant because colleges and providers get to play a part, but said the arrangements on the new governance boards will "have to settle down – first in terms of membership and then scope/responsibilities".

"It will have to mean something – and Greater Manchester and West Midlands will be pushing hard via these arrangements to make changes on the ground," he said. "But it's also really important – and good – that providers are included in this strategy setting."

Lowell Williams from Colleges West Midlands said "we broadly welcome the devolution deal", explaining that it will build on already strong relationships locally while the single pot "reduces the bureaucracy".

Anne Dawe, chair of GM Colleges and principal at Wigan and Leigh College said the deal will "create a highly skilled workforce with a curriculum that meets the need for the rapidly changing world of work."

Both mayors hailed the deal, with Andy Street calling it "a major step forward," while Burnham called it "a significant breakthrough" setting Greater Manchester "firmly on the path to become the UK's first technical education city-region".

Greater Manchester elected its first directly-elected metro mayor in 2014 and has an annual AEB allocation of around £96 million. West Midlands secured its first devolution deal in November 2015, with an AEB around £130 million, according to its trailblazer document.

Opinion

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This budget delivers for FE learners and the sector


**ROBERT
HALFON**

 Minister for skills,
apprenticeships and
higher education

FE faces a financial struggle but government is committed to supporting the sector as we build a skills and apprenticeships nation, writes Robert Halfon MP, minister for skills, apprenticeships and higher education

Age should not be a barrier to upskilling or retraining and getting the job you want. The Budget highlighted our efforts to build a skills and apprenticeships nation and get more people into rewarding work, including removing barriers for older workers.

As a 53-year-old myself, I know the value of experience in the workplace. In the modern economy, we need skills and real-world experience more than ever before.

That is why we've launched our new 'returnerships' initiative to encourage workers over 50 to get back into work and embark on exciting new career ventures.

As well as apprenticeships, many of which are a great fit for more experienced workers, this will be backed by a £34 million boost to our successful skills bootcamps scheme. These provide fully-funded, intensive courses in skills for in-demand sectors like digital and green technology, and we've already invested £550 million between 2022 and 2025.

This is fantastic news for adult learners, with 8,000 set to benefit from these transformational courses. We're bringing together existing skills offers to encourage them to get back into work via

a training course. This is about supporting older people with a recognisable path back into work, making sure our existing skills programmes are accessible and provide the skills and support needed to thrive in a job and continue to climb the ladder of opportunity.

This is also great news for the sector. Skills bootcamps, and other adult learning programmes like our free courses for jobs, enable FE providers to broaden their learner base to people who might not otherwise engage with FE.

The Budget also announced an expansion of the Department for Work and Pensions' sector-based work academy programme (known as SWAP). This is about identifying skills needs in a local area and allocating resources to get people receiving unemployment benefits trained up to fill them.

Work placements arranged through the scheme help businesses to recruit talented

workers and get people into rewarding work.

In the Budget, we have also launched a refocused investment zones programme, aimed at boosting productivity and growth in key areas. Coupled with the huge expansion of free childcare to support parents and enable more of them to return to work, we really are delivering for hard working people across the country.

“As a 53-year-old, I know the value of experience”

Our wider skills agenda also continues at pace alongside existing commitments. Earlier in March, I was proud to publish our response on the lifelong loan entitlement (LLE) which will be introduced from 2025. The LLE will transform the student finance system,

empowering more people to study throughout their life, even if they have other commitments like childcare, caring or work.

I also recognise that the FE sector is facing financial challenges, and we have made changes to increase the sector's funding. In the 2021 Spending Review we announced a £1.6 billion uplift in funding for 16-19 provision in 2024-25, compared to 2021-22. Likewise, in the adult education budget we are increasing earnings for providers in non-devolved areas.

We've given an additional £53 million of capital funding to FE colleges in 2022/23 to support them to improve their energy efficiency, and a further £150 million to support colleges making adjustments following the ONS reclassification of the sector.

This is on top of the £2.8 billion investment in skills capital that was announced at the last Spending Review to improve the FE estate and support the rollout of Institutes of Technology and new qualifications such as T Levels, with a 10 per cent uplift to T Level funding for the next academic year, as well as £12 million to help deliver crucial industry placements for learners.

I want to reassure the sector that these funding commitments remain in place. This financial support helps the sector to deliver its vital services and I will continue to work with you to understand how we can support you in building a skills and apprenticeships nation.



Ofqual's new deadlines to avoid repeat of BTEC results delays debacle

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Ofqual has set stringent results deadlines for level 3 vocational and technical education awarding bodies in an effort to avoid a repeat of last summer's delays.

Awarding organisations must also have a senior designated contact for exams at every school and college to quickly resolve issues.

The regulator told awarding organisations in guidance issued on Thursday that they must have agreed with schools and colleges by May 26 which students expect to receive grades on level 3 results day in the summer.

June 23 is the latest date awarding bodies must agree with school and colleges what remaining evidence or information is needed for each student.

The deadline for issuing VTQ results to schools and colleges is August 14 – three days before the level 3 results day when thousands of students find out their A-level, T Level and other level 3 results like BTECs.

In December, Ofqual said it would introduce a checkpoint midway through the summer term to check up on missing units, which is the June 23 deadline, and said it envisaged that final results would be issued to centres about a week before level 3 results day.

Ofqual has also said that awarding organisations must collect and maintain details of senior contacts responsible for delivering exams in schools and colleges, so that errors, issues or clarifications can be addressed as quickly as possible.

It is unclear how many awarding bodies already had this provision.

Awarding bodies will also be required to work with the university admissions service UCAS to track students applying for higher education courses to ensure a smooth transition.

Ofqual said it will shortly launch a VTQ "information hub", which will bring together key information – including the new deadline dates – in one place.



An Ofqual spokesperson said: "The chief regulator, Jo Saxton, came to this post committed to parity of esteem between general and vocational and technical qualifications, and with students as her compass. The deadlines announced yesterday provide key milestones towards delivering this.

In August last year, around 21,000 BTEC and Cambridge Technicals (CTEC) results were issued late, leaving students in limbo.

Ofqual figures published in December revealed that 12,346 level 3 results were affected, and 8,573 level 2 results.

Affected students received blank results slips, triggering a barrage of calls to the awarding bodies.

The regulator launched an investigation and shortly before Christmas published an action plan to avoid a repeat of the failures. They included a hard deadline for VTQ results and a taskforce of senior sector leaders to work on new requirements and refine existing processes.

Ofqual's action plan also set out provision for bespoke training for exams officers, administration and academic staff.

Pearson, the awarding body for the BTECs, and OCR for the CTECs were members of that taskforce but also published their own internal investigations into the summer results failure.

The reviews found that most delays came from missing or incomplete data from colleges and

schools on students' coursework or exams that had not been spotted earlier, as well as more complicated administration processes as a result of adaptations from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Also published in the latest guidance is a list of 14 awarding bodies which have pledged their commitment to the new rules.

According to Ofqual, all awarding organisations delivering high stakes performance table qualifications that attract UCAS points and operate claims-based systems have signed up to the deadlines.

Tom Bewick, chief executive of the Federation of Awarding Bodies – one of the taskforce members – said that he welcomed the action plan and Ofqual's announcement on the deadlines.

"Inevitably it means some significant changes to ways of working but we're confident the plan being put in place is one of ensuring expectations are managed properly; there is clarity about what is required, by whom and by when; and that AOs are able to communicate with centres and stakeholders in a manner that will ensure every student who is eligible for a result is able to receive one without delay," he said.

Bewick added that in addition to Ofqual's work, the federation and Joint Council for Qualifications had set up an operational communications group of awarding bodies involved in the summer results to ensure that communications processes were aligned.



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INSPECTION SECTION

Top marks for 'kind and caring staff' at SEND college

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A Nottinghamshire independent specialist college for high needs students has been hailed for its "highly inclusive and supportive" education in an 'outstanding' Ofsted report.

Portland College, which provides vocational courses, was visited by the watchdog in January and received the top rating in all areas. The report, published on Thursday, improved on the college's 'good' rating from 2017.

The college, near Sherwood Forest, had 216 learners aged 16 to 25 at the time of the visit, all of whom had high needs or education health and care plans (EHCPs), and four learners on supported internship programmes.

Inspectors said that students are greeted by "kind and caring staff" and praised teachers and support and therapy staff for the "calm, nurturing and exciting place to learn".

The report found that staff developed an "excellent rapport" with learners and had a "compassionate approach". Students were taught to manage their behaviour and feelings positively and there was an "unwavering commitment" to their personal development, inspectors said.

"We work really hard every day to ensure our learners have access to the best specialist education and facilities"

The watchdog said that students were taught well about potential risks such as extremist groups which prey on vulnerable learners, as well as sexual health, law, cultural diversity and self-esteem.

Staff received specialist training in sign language, mental health and neurodiversity



Mark Dale

and were able to identify areas for development by getting to know students well, the report found.

Ofsted said the college's strategy "links strongly to the preparation for adulthood agenda" with health and wellbeing "at the heart of the strategic plan".

Targets were closely linked to learners' EHCPs, and "as a result, learners benefit from a highly personalised and ambitious curriculum and make

excellent progress to achieve their learning goals."

Ofsted found that most students moved on to positive post-college destinations, such as adult day services, supported living, employment or further study.

Governor oversight of the college was found to be "highly effective".

College principal and chief executive Dr Mark Dale said he was delighted.

"We work really hard every day to ensure our learners have access to the best specialist education and facilities, supported by an excellent multi-disciplinary team to meet their individual needs," he said.



Hunt begins for Ofsted's next chief inspector

AMY WALKER
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Ofsted is looking for a leader with "significant experience" at a senior level in schools or trusts to become its next chief inspector. They must also have "a high degree of personal integrity".

An advertisement to find a successor to Amanda Spielman, who leaves this December after seven years, is now live.

"Leader must be able to command respect across all sectors"

A foreword written by Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, says the government wants a chief inspector "with significant experience in the school and trust sector, but who can command respect across all the sectors".

Experience in at least one of the other areas within Ofsted's remit, such as further education, early years and children's social care, is listed as "desirable criteria".

Keegan said it was an "important time" to lead the watchdog, with applicants able to demonstrate the ability to "embed" and "take forward, build on and improve" the new inspection framework.

They must do so while "maintaining and enhancing a strong organisational reputation for valid, reliable, objective and fair judgments".

They must also be able to "adapt to

the changing education" landscape with the "increasing importance" of academy trusts and social care reform marking organisational change for the watchdog, Keegan wrote.

Candidates must also show "excellent judgment under pressure and a high degree of personal integrity, including experience of taking difficult, independent calls in a senior position with high profile".

An advisory assessment panel will recommend candidates to the education secretary, who makes the final decision.

The panel is made up of Dame Christine Ryan, the watchdog's chair, Dr Jo Saxton, Ofqual's chief regulator, a senior Department for Education official and Leora Cruddas, the chief executive of the academy trust body CST.

The watchdog could face changes should Labour win the next election, scheduled to take place by January 2025 at the latest.

Last week, Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, set out the party's intention to reform the watchdog.

Proposals include replacing its current grading system with a new "report card"

for schools and FE and skills providers.

The job advert says the appointee will need to "respond proactively to the direction of government policy and strategy".

Chief inspectors are appointed for a term of up to five years, but Spielman was given a two-year extension after Covid disrupted the roll-out of her inspection framework. This will make her the longest-serving chief inspector.

Applications close on April 6, with the successful candidate taking office on January 1.

Once the government has chosen its preferred candidate, they will appear before the education select committee, which will decide whether to back her or him.

However, the government can ignore the committee, as then education secretary Nicky Morgan did when appointing Spielman in 2016.

The committee was concerned that Spielman, who had worked in finance before holding a senior position at Ark Schools and later chairing Ofqual, had not been a teacher.



Anger as apprentice trailblazers shun fast-track funding review

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Only half of the 20 apprenticeships in the government's "exceptional" funding uplift review will go through the accelerated process.

Jennifer Coupland, chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), revealed earlier this week that employer-led trailblazer groups for 10 of those in scope have opted out.

The decision has left some training providers, who were not consulted, "hugely disappointed" as they struggle to offer the programmes because of high costs.

Those that have declined the offer include trailblazer groups for apprenticeships in painting and decorating, carpentry and joinery and engineering technician (see table for full list).

Coupland also couldn't commit to meeting the May 1 deadline for introducing the new funding bands for those standards that are going through the process. She expressed her own "disappointment" that more apprenticeships wouldn't benefit from the policy.

In November the Education and Skills Funding Agency announced plans to quickly increase funding bands in the hardest hit sectors to recognise the impact of soaring inflation on training delivery, with an ambition to unveil details of the process at the end of that month.

The IfATE announced in January that this "exceptional funding band review" would only apply to 20 "high-volume apprenticeships in skills shortage occupations and priority sectors".

The chosen standards represent about 20 per cent of all apprenticeships starts. Evidence for an uplift was needed by early March and the new funding bands had planned to be implemented by May 1.

IfATE said the exceptional review will not include the full apprenticeship content or end-point assessment review that the ordinary revisions process includes, to help speed up the process.

But Coupland told this week's Annual

Apprenticeship Conference that she could not "sit here and say that it will be May 1 when they will go through".

She said the institute received "different responses" from the 20 trailblazer groups that were identified for the review, where "one didn't want to go for it and another clutch said they would prefer to go through the usual funding band process, because they actually wanted us to review their end-point assessment, the content of the apprenticeship as well as the funding".

Coupland added: "We were disappointed that we couldn't extend the exceptional funding band process.

"We've had to prioritise because that's the thing you do when you've got an affordability question."

Brenda McLeish, chief executive of The Learning Curve Group, was angered by the announcement.

"If we can only get half of the 20 reviewed there is clearly an issue with the process and infrastructure around how the reviews happen," she said.

"In the meantime, providers are opting out of delivering a lot of these standards which are high priority from an employer skills perspective because they just cannot afford to deliver them. IfATE needs to stand up and take responsibility for that."

Sector leaders previously complained that the exceptional funding band review would only apply to new starters and would not address the challenges of training current apprentices.

Challenged on this by *FE Week* after her speech, Coupland said: "It has always been the case that if a funding band changes, it applies to new starters only. That is the situation that we have got for any of these exceptional funding band cases. We need to have it in line with policy and also because of affordability considerations."

McLeish said that the institute should backdate the new funding rates for the 10 going through the exceptional process to the beginning of the academic year. "It would be a small little victory in the midst of all this mess," she added.

APPRENTICESHIPS SELECTED FOR EXCEPTIONAL IFATE FUNDING REVIEW

Apprenticeship	Level	Current Maximum Funding (£)	Typical Duration (months)	Starts in 2021/22
Adult care worker	2	£3,000	12	9800
Lead adult care worker	3	£3,000	18	12080
Chef de Partie	3	£9,000	18	250
Commis chef	2	£8,000	12	1780
Senior production chef	3	£4,000	12	710
Production chef	2	£5,000	12	2420
Gas engineering operative	3	£22,000	18	940
Painter and decorator	2	£9,000	36	710
Advanced carpentry and joinery	3	£11,000	15	680
Carpentry and joinery	2	£11,000	24	4664
Groundworker	2	£9,000	18	580
Maritime mechanical and electrical mechanic	2	£12,000	18	700
Maintenance and operations engineering technician	3	£26,000	36	1510
Heavy vehicle service and maintenance technician	3	£15,000	36	1130
Engineering fitter	3	£21,000	42	830
Engineering operative	2	£6,000	12	1460
Motor vehicle and maintenance technician (light vehicle)	3	£15,000	36	3080
Engineering technician	3	£26,000	42	5660
Autocare technician	2	£12,000	30	1370
Large goods vehicle (LGV) driver C and E	2	£7,000	13	2830

 Opted out of the exceptional funding review

 Continuing through the exceptional funding review

Sources: Apprenticeship funding bands, Education and Skills funding Agency
Apprenticeship starts statistics, Department for Education

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Single awarding body model for T Levels to stay

BILLY CAMDEN
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Ministers have doubled down on a contentious decision to use a single awarding body for each T Level, *FE Week* can reveal.

Jennifer Coupland, chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, told this publication that following discussions about the model, it will be taken forward in the re-procurement for the first wave of the qualifications set to take place this year.

Using a single awarding organisation (AO) per T Level was a recommendation by Lord Sainsbury in his review of technical education, which the Department for Education agreed to take forward. However, its own researchers warned that with no alternative to step in if problems arose with a contracted body, there was a "risk of system failure".

Exams regulator Ofqual also "advised on the risks related to the single provider model" ahead of their launch.

Last week, education secretary Gillian Keegan announced a one-year delay in the rollout of three T Levels to be offered by awarding body NCFE from September 2023 in hair, beauty and aesthetics, in craft and design, and in media broadcast and production.

Another in catering, being developed by awarding body Highfield, has been delayed to 2025 at the earliest.

Keegan said quality issues needed to be addressed.

Last year, problems with the health and science T Level, also awarded by NCFE, led to results for over 1,000 students being regraded.

During an interview with *FE Week* at this week's Annual Apprenticeship Conference, Coupland said the idea of using a single body, which differs from the multi-AO policy for A-levels, was to "ensure quality in the system".

The first T Levels that were launched in

2020 – education and childcare delivered by NCFE, and Pearson's design, surveying and planning, and digital production, design and development – are up for re-procurement in the coming months.

Coupland told *FE Week*: "Those contracts are coming up for review again, and that is going to continue to run a single licencing model, following discussions with the department on the policy. They [DfE] want to continue that approach."

The complexity of T Level design and accountability has come under the spotlight in recent months amid the health and science delays.

Coupland said the delivery system for the flagship qualifications is "complex".

"We've got a range of organisations with responsibilities with different aspects of delivery. So, at IfATE we contract with the

awarding organisations, they draft the qualification, Ofqual is the regulator of those awarding organisations, Department for Education has got responsibility for industry placements, and for the workforce elements and providers.

"When you understand the system, you can see all how these organisations have got a specific role to play that plays to their strengths. But for someone looking in, it does look complex."

Coupland rejected the idea that the number of organisations that have a role to play was a "contributing factor" in last week's decision to delay some T Levels, or the health and science problems last year. "It was slightly more complex than that," she said.



Jennifer Coupland



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EPA data will finally be public, watchdog says

SHANE CHOWEN
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Outcomes from apprenticeship end-point assessments (EPA) will feature in official government statistics for the first time from this summer, Ofqual has said, but there will be limits to what is published.

Speaking at the Annual Apprenticeships Conference this week, the regulator's executive director for vocational and technical qualifications, Catherine Large, told delegates that new data on EPA outcomes will finally be made public.

"Later this year, you'll see the EPA outcomes data included in our quarterly VTQ statistical release for the first time," Large said from the main stage.

She used her speech to describe a "healthy market" of over 140 regulated end-point assessment organisations and said the body has completed the transition of external quality assurance for 428 apprenticeship standards from other EQA providers,

bringing their total to 588. EQA for remaining standards sit with the Office for Students and IfATE, Large said.

"Together we are achieving full market coverage and a new quality bar has been set," she said.

The marketplace for end-point assessment organisations has grown but it has not yet been possible for apprentices and employers to compare the outcomes of the apprenticeship standards they assess. Ofqual has been collecting this data for four years.

Steve Walker, Ofqual's associate director for apprenticeships and external quality assurance, gave more detail at the conference on what to expect from the first publication of EPA outcomes data.

The stats release, which is scheduled for "between June and July" will report "end-point assessment delivery figures and outcomes distributions".

It is anticipated that the data will show how grade profiles for apprenticeship standards vary across different assessment

organisations. Users should also be able to use the data to compare outcomes by assessment methods, for example computer-based assessments, paper-based, remote or face to face.

FE Week has since learned that there will be limits on what Ofqual will publish this summer.

Ofqual has said that it will only publish outcome distributions where an apprenticeship standard has five or more end point assessment organisations, and 500 or more total EPAs in one year. This is because "statistics could be misleading if computed for small groups of outcomes".

This leaves open the possibility that smaller EPA organisations and those where there are only a few delivering against a standard, will have their outcomes data missing from public view.

Ofqual told *FE Week* that they will "provide different breakdowns of the figures" but was unable to elaborate further at the time *FE Week* went to press.

Marchant wants UCAS apprentice points 'by end of the year'

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Clare Marchant has said it is "doable" for apprentices to secure UCAS points by the end of 2023.

The UCAS chief executive revealed this week that work is underway to ensure that apprenticeships qualify for UCAS points, with an announcement expected by the end of the year.

It follows an announcement last month from the university admissions body that it will expand its apprenticeship offering on its website from the summer. Prospective learners will see different routes into careers side-by-side and can apply for apprenticeships on the site from autumn 2024.

Marchant told the annual apprenticeship conference it was possible that by the end of the year learners could get tariff points

against apprenticeships.

"We've got a team working at the moment to do exactly that. We want to do it right, so we're expecting by the end of this year some progress to be announced.

"In fact, we just met with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education just last week to talk about how to do this together," she said.

Marchant said that Robert Halfon, the skills minister, had written to UCAS in support of the work.

UCAS points are ascribed to post-16 level 3 qualifications to help determine entry criteria for university courses.

Level 3 courses such as A-levels, T Levels, BTECs and Cambridge Technicals all carry UCAS points, but to date apprenticeships have not.

The plans represent another step in UCAS's drive for parity between apprenticeships and other post-16 study routes. It is not yet clear

how many points would be assigned to apprenticeships, and whether they would be equal to other level 3 routes.

The Department for Education said that offering the ability to apply for apprenticeships through UCAS from 2024 is part of a wider ambition to develop a "one-stop-shop" for education and training options that it hopes will eventually include apprenticeships, T Levels, skills bootcamps, higher technical qualifications and degree apprenticeships.



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Labour's Ofsted plans 'logical evolution'

BILLY CAMDEN
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Labour's plans to ditch Ofsted grades in favour of a report card could be the "logical evolution" of how school and college performance is communicated, Amanda Spielman has said.

The chief inspector told *FE Week* it was "completely rational for a potential alternative government to be thinking about things like this", after shadow education secretary Bridget Phillipson set out her reform proposals at the weekend.

Labour has said it will consult on scrapping the current system of four grades, opting instead for a report card that shows what schools, colleges and training providers do well and what they need to do to improve.

The party has not said what metrics will feature on the card.

Quizzed on the proposals this week, Spielman said it sounded "mainly presentational", putting information in a different way.

"It sounds like a sort of logical evolution of everything that gets drawn together in performance tables at the moment."

Spielman said she "constantly talks" about the purposes of inspection "and that how both the inspection that you design – and how you report it – depends on what those policy purposes are".

"It's completely rational for a potential alternative government to be thinking about things like this. I don't think anybody has the slightest discomfort about that."

But she said "we have overall judgments because of the different purposes that inspection is serving".

"There's been... a strong perception that parents want the simplicity and clarity of an overall judgment



Amanda Spielman

in schools, for example, and that governments want handles to justify both incentives...and legitimacy for interventions with poor performers in FE.

"I'm sure that Labour will be thinking about how they would want those to work in a new system. But there are many aspects of inspection that are determined by those policy purposes. So it is rightly for ministers to determine what those policy purposes are."

Spielman leaves the watchdog at the end of this year after seven years at the helm.

Labour's proposed changes will therefore be left to another chief inspector to implement, but Spielman said she was glad to see education issues debated.

"I feel we've had so many years when, between Brexit and Covid and cost

of living, there's been little space for people to think and talk about moving education forward."

Labour has long pledged to re-assess how education providers are graded with Ofsted expected to turn its focus to improvement under a Labour government. The length and frequency of inspections is also expected to be up for review.

Announcing the party's proposals at the annual conference of the Association of School and College Leaders in Birmingham at the weekend, Phillipson said Labour would "bring a wind of change ... and drive forward reform of education and of childcare as part of our mission to break down barriers to opportunity".

She said Labour would consult "very quickly" on the changes if it formed the next government.

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Labour pledges review of functional skills rules

SHANE CHOWEN
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A Labour government will review functional skills requirements in apprenticeships, the shadow skills minister has said.

However, the party won't commit to reversing the government's removal of funding from level 3 qualifications, like BTECs, that overlap with T Levels.

Department for Education rules state that apprentices without a GCSE grade 4 or above in English and/or maths must reach that level 2 standard to achieve their apprenticeship.

Training providers have long complained that the generic curriculum, exam-based assessment and poor funding of the English and maths functional skills courses contribute to the low achievement rate of apprenticeships.

FE Week reported last March that just 52 per cent of apprentices on standards achieved in 2020/21, prompting the then skills minister Alex Burghart to announce a new target achievement rate of 67 per cent by 2025.

In an interview with *FE Week* following his keynote speech at the Annual Apprenticeship Conference earlier this week, Labour's shadow skills minister, Toby Perkins, said that he shared training providers' concerns and committed to a review of functional skills if his party wins the next general election.

He said: "Functional skills should be precisely what it says on the tin. It is my view that maths and English skills are very important, but I don't believe the current functional skills arrangements work. I think they are a reason why there are low completion rates. We will be reviewing the way that works."

Perkins said reversing or maintaining the Conservative's policy of defunding BTECs and other level 3 qualifications that overlap with T Levels "just depends on what is going to happen between now and the next election".

He added that Labour is "not hostile" to T Levels and is "100 per cent in favour" of choice at level 3 for young people. If Labour was in power, Perkins said, it would not be defunding overlapping qualifications.

If Labour does win the next election, which must take place by January 24, 2025, Perkins said his position will be informed by how providers have responded to the level 3 reforms, rather than expecting providers to anticipate Labour's policy.

If Perkins does become the skills minister in January 2025 (although the election is widely expected to happen sooner) he will not have long before at-risk qualifications lose their funding that September.

"We're absolutely clear that the path the government is pursuing right now is a mistake. Now, if in 18 months' time, or in a couple of years, things have gone through and lots of providers have got rid of their BTEC qualifications and people are doing T Levels then obviously we'll be in a different place to where we are today.

"If we're proved correct, and that the move purely to T Levels means that lots of students who could be excluded, then, you know, we wouldn't tolerate that situation carrying on. But it is just difficult to know, given the direction governments are taking, what will the landscape look like by the end of 2024, potentially 2025. You have to look at what you're inheriting. And I just don't think that's knowable at this moment," he said.

Skills and growth levy

Last summer, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer

announced that he would replace the current apprenticeship levy with a "skills and growth levy". It would ringfence half of funds raised through the levy for employers to choose to spend on other forms of skills training.

The policy was criticised for being unclear about apprenticeships for smaller businesses, which are currently funded by larger employers not spending their full levy.

Calls to allow for courses other than apprenticeships to be funded through the levy have grown. Even prominent Conservatives like former education ministers Jo Johnson, Anne Milton and Justine Greening have made the case for change.

Johnson has gone on to suggest that the amount employers pay into the levy should be doubled to address chronic underinvestment in training by employers.

Perkins is lukewarm to Johnson's suggestion to increase employers' levy bills.

"I'm always enthusiastic about more money for investment in the next generation of skills. Having said that, I'm also very conscious that there are many businesses who are feeling the pinch right now.

"The changes we are proposing at this stage are about flexibility. But in terms of increasing the tax level tax burdens on business, this moment in time, that is not that is not on the on the agenda."

While the door is closed on generating more revenue from employers, for now, Perkins does want to address falling numbers of apprenticeships at lower levels and to see more opportunities go to younger workers.

"We want to see more levy being spent on entry level apprenticeships. We're committed to degree apprenticeships, but we want to make sure that there's an increase in the number of young people doing levels two and three.

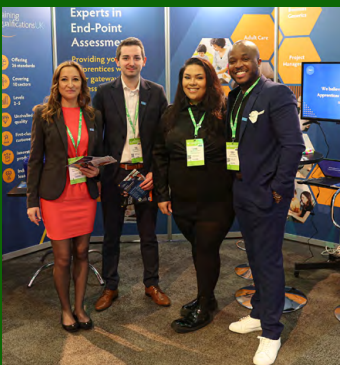
"I think there will be further announcements from us in this space."



Toby Perkins

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2023 FE WEEK & AELP AAC APPRENTICESHIP AWARDS



Apprenticeship award winners 'humbled and thrilled'

JASON NOBLE
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Twenty winners were handed gongs in this week's 2023 Annual Apprenticeship Conference Awards in Birmingham.

Individuals, training providers, employers, universities and colleges were recognised for their efforts in the apprenticeship sector at a special black-tie gala on Tuesday night, the concluding event of the ninth AAC.

The sixth awards ceremony, delivered in partnership with City and Guilds, attracted a record 375 nominations across the 19 categories, with 20 winners announced and five organisations highly commended.

The London Ambulance Service NHS Trust fought off stiff competition to come home with the apprentice employer of the year award.

Darren Avery, strategic workforce development manager at the trust, shared his pride on behalf of everybody in the organisation at securing "an extremely prestigious achievement".

"Our apprenticeship scheme is all about creating a pipeline of paramedics for the future. We've got a great career pathway so we can take someone from not having any clinical experience to becoming a paramedic," he said.

Isa Mutlib was named apprenticeship champion of the year for his work as director of Careers Camp UK – an organisation which helps ensure "early talent have equitable access to high quality careers".

Mutlib said he was "humbled and thrilled".

"There are a lot of young people missing out on opportunities that are available through apprenticeships because of a lack of awareness, a lack of understanding, but also the feeling that apprenticeships are not for them.



Kirstie Donnelly interviewing an audience member



Isa Mutlib



"My job isn't to convert them, my job is to ensure that I can show them that apprenticeships can give them an alternative route to a career. It's the impact of that I feel can be recognised from this award," he said.

Paragon Skills scooped the apprenticeship provider of the year trophy, which chief executive Mark Botha said was "such an incredible endorsement of all the hard work our Paragon Skills colleagues, learners and employer partners have put into apprenticeships in the past year".

Awards were handed out to providers in specific sectors, such as digital, construction, agriculture and hospitality, recognising exceptional efforts in developing apprentice talent.

The evening culminated with the special recognition award for sector stalwart John

Hyde, founder and executive director of HIT training who recently retired after 20 years of involvement with the Association of Employment and Learning Providers.

Shane Mann, managing director of FE Week's publisher Lsect and AAC awards co-host, said: "As chair of the judging panel, I can confirm we were once again overwhelmed by the number and quality of the nominations we received.

"Great apprenticeships don't happen by accident. Our winners demonstrate that excellence happens when dedicated professionals in employers and training providers work in tandem with the apprentice experience at the heart of everything they do."

**SEE THE FULL LIST OF AWARDS
WINNERS ON THE NEXT PAGE**

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2023 FE WEEK & AELP AAC APPRENTICESHIP AWARDS



Full list of the 2023 winners and highly commended

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HIGHLY COMMENDED

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Care Services Apprenticeship provider of the year

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Manchester Metropolitan University

Catering and Hospitality Apprenticeship provider of the year

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Bournemouth and Poole College

HIGHLY COMMENDED

HIT Training

Construction Apprenticeship provider of the year

Sponsored by CONSTRUCTION EPA COMPANY

Clarkson Evans Training

Creative and Design Apprenticeship provider of the year

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The JGA Group

Digital Apprenticeship provider of the year

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Manchester Metropolitan University

Education and Childcare Apprenticeship provider of the year

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Best Practice Network

Engineering and Manufacturing Apprenticeship provider of the year

Sponsored by SIAS

Skills for Security

HIGHLY COMMENDED
MTC Training

Hair and Beauty Apprenticeship provider of the year

Central Training Academy

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Francesco Group Apprenticeships

Health and Science Apprenticeship provider of the year

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CSR Scientific Training

Legal, Finance and Accounting Apprenticeship provider of the year

Workpays

Protective Services Apprenticeship provider of the year

Thames Valley Police

Sales, Marketing, Procurement Apprenticeship provider of the year

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The Widening Participation Recognition Award

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Great Ormond Street NHS

Apprenticeship Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Provider Recognition Award

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Coach Core Foundation

Apprenticeship Champion of the year

Sponsored by TRIBAL

Isa Mutlib, Careers Camp UK

Apprentice Employer of the year

Sponsored by City & Guilds

London Ambulance Service
NHS Trust

HIGHLY COMMENDED
Bagnalls

Apprenticeship Provider of the year

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MARCH

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GCSE English: Teaching Creative Writing

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MARCH

31

Additional Learning Support Network

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Free



APRIL

18

A Beginner's Guide to Assessment

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£25 (£40 non-members)



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"When supporting or coaching staff I now often refer to the training and want to grow staff and impact on our organisation/learners."

"There are several ideas that I am taking back and it certainly encouraged me to reflect on what we currently do."



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Focus: Cost of living crisis



Students are dropping courses to find jobs amid creaking student support services

JESSICA HILL
JESSICA.HILL@LSECT.COM

Demand for financial, mental and practical support has soared as the cost of living crisis bites at home

Josh was a talented bricklaying student with dreams of running his own building firm. Then his mother lost one of her part-time jobs, forcing them to request financial support from his college, Hartlepool College of Further Education. Josh – not his real name – got a part-time cash-in-hand job and, after his attendance started waning and he struggled to focus at college, he dropped out altogether.

Hartlepool's principal, Darren Hankey, says colleges across the country are dealing with students like Josh daily, a claim backed up by our investigation showing how more

students have quit college since the cost of living crisis began, with support staff feeling "overwhelmed" amid spiralling demand for their services.

Soaring demand for support

Every one of the 18 colleges responding to a survey for *FE Week* by the National Association for Managers of Students Services saw demand for their support services rise in the last year, with half seeing demand increase by more than 20 per cent.

Growing demand is piling more pressure on overstretched staff and student welfare budgets. Only 2 of the 63 colleges (3 per cent) that responded to an *FE Week* freedom of information request said they were planning to increase their student services budgets this financial year, with the same percentage cutting the resource and the rest maintaining it for now.

Eddie Playfair, senior policy manager at the Association of Colleges, says colleges are reporting a "massive growth in demand" for support which they are "struggling to keep up with".

"Whether it's mental health or financial support, they haven't been able to grow their support in proportion to rising need," Playfair said.

Lisa Humphries, the new chair of the National Association for Managers of Student Services (NAMSS), says support services are overwhelmed and believes demand has "tripled, if not more" over the past four years at her members' colleges.

She points out that the cost of living crisis is just one of several calamities to hit this generation of young people.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Feature

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Focus: Cost of living crisis

CONTINUED

"It is the year-on-year build-up of the impacts of the pandemic and mental health issues. We literally have to ask ourselves each day, what support can we put in place that is going to have the most impact?"

Rise in drop-outs

More students have dropped out of college since the cost of living crisis began, with five times more students blaming the decision to quit on money worries, our FOI responses show. So far in this academic year, 7 per cent of students have withdrawn. The overall figure was 9 per cent last year, and 7 per cent in both 2020-21 and 2019-20.

But 5 per cent of students quitting this year said that they left for financial reasons, compared with 1 per cent in 2021-22 and 2 per cent in 2020-21.

A higher share of those quitting their courses cite getting a job as their main reason: 12 per cent since September and 14 per cent last academic year, compared with 10 per cent in 2020-21 and the preceding year.

Weston College noted some learners withdrawing from its trade provisions because of the "lure of high hourly wages and the increased demand for low-skilled labour", while Blackpool and The Fylde College told *FE Week* that many of its students were missing classes due to second jobs.

Hankey is concerned that the rise in students dropping out to work "bakes in inequality". He says: "It is nearly always in precarious work – zero-hour contracts with no guaranteed income from one week to the next. Ultimately, this is a waste of talent and, I'd imagine, a practice solely taken up by those from poorer backgrounds."

Universal Credit and Child Benefit rates rise by just over 10 per cent from April, providing some reprieve for cash-strapped families. But it will be too late for Josh.

"The current circumstances have deprived the economy of someone who has had the opportunity to make a greater impact snatched away," Hankey says.



Hartlepool College



Darren Hankey

More bursaries for struggling families

The impact of the cost of living is also evident when it comes to demand for bursaries, with all of NAMSS's survey respondents seeing a rise in uptake in the past year, and 61 per cent calling the increase "significant".

Amid soaring inflation, some commented that they were having to increase the household income eligibility threshold to support struggling students and families.

Whereas usually about 60 per cent of Hartlepool's students apply for funding in any academic year, this year 95 per cent applied, with extra demand coming from students in households where parents are working, Hankey says.

This places "extra burdens" on the college in supporting students and processing bursary applications.

Humphries, who is also associate principal for students at the Chichester College Group of seven colleges, says that normally their students would apply for financial support at the start of their course. This year they have seen around a 10 per cent increase in students "suddenly in financial hardship" applying for bursaries mid-year.

Hartlepool usually uses the government bursary funding for the essentials such as students' travel to and from college, food, and key curriculum kit, while trying to keep some back for "enrichment activities" for poorer students such as visits to businesses which "can be invaluable", Hankey says.

But the escalating demand means Hartlepool might have to limit these activities,

or not offer them at all.

Playfair says the £90 million government funding that colleges receive for bursaries is insufficient. "Colleges are spending their bursary fund and having to make difficult decisions. Some colleges talk about using other funds to shore up hardship – they're spending more on transport or food than the allocation they get from government," he says.

Filling the food gap

Although some students' families receive Universal Credit, they are often below the threshold for free meals. But colleges are stepping in to fill the gap.

Thirty-nine per cent of NAMSS respondents now provide a foodbank within their college, all of which have seen increased demand, and half of which have seen a significant increase.

Others have established strong links with local foodbanks.

Playfair says that "many, many more cases of students are relying on colleges for all their main meals, and coming into college even if they haven't got classes because of that".

Colleges providing foodbanks on campus include City College Plymouth, Abingdon & Witney College and Newark College, which has seen a 60 per cent rise in usage in the past year. Newark also provides free breakfasts every day for students and staff, and food bags of ingredients to take home and cook.

One student there described how she usually only eats when she is at college three

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Feature

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Focus: Cost of living crisis

CONTINUED

days a week, and the food bags, which each contain a recipe card for students to learn how to cook healthy meals, is "something to look forward to and [a chance] to eat properly".

How councils are helping – or not

In some cases, local authorities have stepped in to provide extra support.

Tower Hamlets has been the most generous, earmarking £500,000 this year to re-introduce a version of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), scrapped in England in 2011, to support poorer 16-19-year-old students from its borough.

The council received 1,921 eligible applications for the £400 payment this year, of which 1,250 were successful.

Playfair believes now would be a good moment for the government to revisit the idea of reintroducing the EMA in England, which is the only part of the UK not to have it.

"As an anti-poverty strategy, it would pump some money into very hard-pressed local economies," he says.

Some councils have used the household support funding from government, designed to support vulnerable households, to provide meals for college students during the holidays.

But Playfair describes provision as a "postcode lottery", with some learners receiving food vouchers while others

attending the same college but from a different council area go without.

With fuel costs rising, Playfair says some councils are struggling to subsidise students' public transport fares, so some colleges have stepped in to run them instead.

Weston College offers all learners "50 per cent plus" subsidised bus travel via First Bus, as well as providing its own "bespoke transport services". But it has still seen some learners quitting "due to the removal of a small number of local bus services by the local authority".

South Essex College has made Friday a self-directed study day, so that learners can save on transport costs.

How the crisis is affecting attendance

For those students who do make it to class, some colleges are finding they are staying on campus for longer because of the free food and warmth on offer.

The NAMSS survey shows that 44 per cent of colleges provide a warm space or open existing heated facilities for longer hours to help students. Even among those colleges who do not, several said that they had accommodated students on non-timetabled days, and that they had generally seen students generally staying at college longer than in the past.

Penny Taylor, head of Newark College, says that since introducing a daily free breakfast club for students and staff, the college has seen a rise in "attendance, retention and punctuality".

But it's a mixed picture. Humphries says Chichester's seven colleges are all seeing drops in attendance as students are forced to work to support their families or take on more caring



Newark College student Jake Crane and head Penny Taylor participating in the food waste project

responsibilities for younger siblings to allow parents to work more.

Like many colleges, Chichester has extended its opening hours for its warm spaces, after seeing more students "hanging around in canteens and common rooms for longer", says Humphries. "Part of that is because maybe they're not getting heating at home, or parents are working longer hours and they don't want to be on their own at home."

But she warns of the difficulty in paying for staffing costs to cover extended hours, and of colleges' own rising energy bills.

Of all the colleges that responded to our FOI, the City of Liverpool College reported the highest proportion of drop-outs this year at 17.5 per cent. But it is also taking concerted action to support learners.

Its head of student services, Amanda Parker, says that as "more and more students are working part or even full-time jobs alongside their studies", the college has adapted timetables as well as keeping its nursery provision and libraries open later. It provides free breakfasts and has expanded free meals to its adult cohort across the week.

Basingstoke College of Technology is responding to rising demand by organising more food parcels, helping students apply to charitable organisations and accompanying them to citizens' advice meetings.

Playfair believes that going to college is seen as "part of the solution" to the crisis for many learners. "The college becomes more important in their lives because of the support it offers."



Newark College student Rebecca Bickerton

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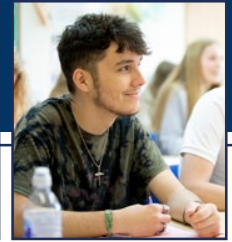
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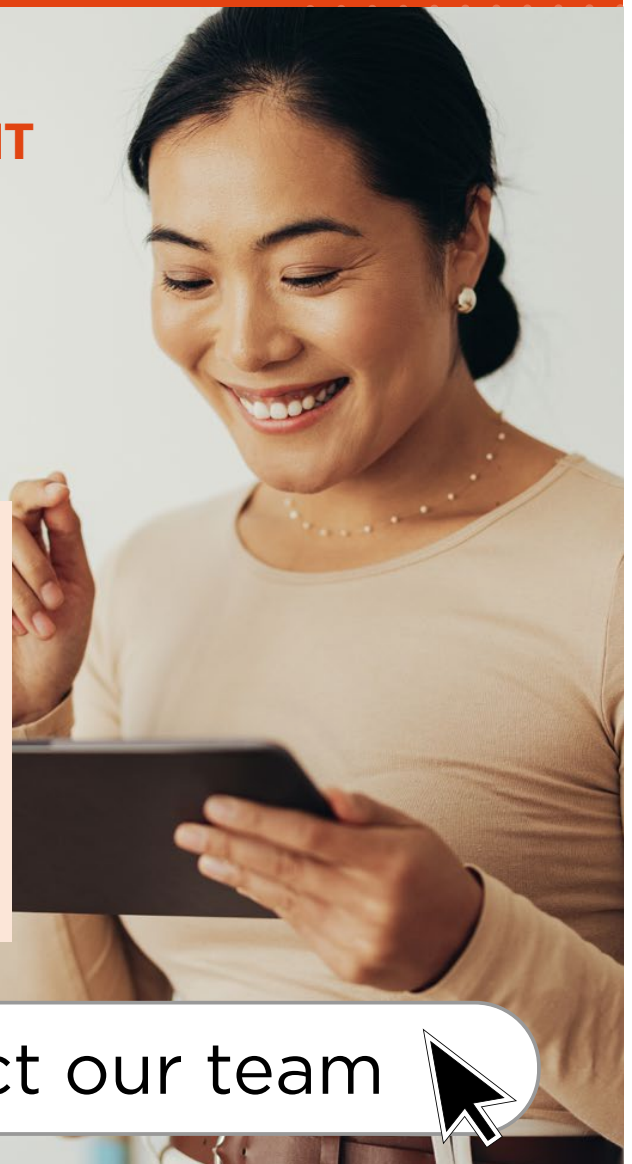
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THE STAFF ROOM

Dispatches from the frontline of FE

Making friends and allies to crack the work experience challenge

With a nationwide mission to increase work placement quantity and quality, it's time for the sector to call in a chit with its substantial network of contacts

"To be a good journalist, make friends." So were the words of my Sheffield College journalism tutor back in 2005. An old-school lecturer and press hack, the truth is my work experience opportunities relied more on his network than any friends that I could make.

A contacts book bulging after years in industry and a course with a strong regional reputation mattered. But, as work experience has now become a major focus in the post-16 education agenda, how can we repeat the trick at a T level scale? I work in education now, but find thinking like a journalist is a useful skill in this regard.

"FE's alumni society stretches into every industry"

Immortalised by The Inbetweeners and etched in our own memories, work experience is the rite of passage of the post-16 student. But, as the T level requirement for 315 placement hours ups the ante for colleges and students alike, delivering both quantity and quality has become one of the key challenges facing skills education.

General further education might



DAN PHILLIPS

Interim head, Institute of Professional Studies, Hull College

not often claim an alumni society, but its reach stretches into every industry, office and business. If you know where to look and are bold enough to ask, it is amazing what can be found.

Much like the no-nonsense advice of that wizened newshound-turned-teacher, the strategies for success have budged little: committed phone calls, worn shoe leather and a social media presence are the routes to lighting up that network with opportunities.

And it turns out that people like helping our students. In our department of business, IT and social sciences, the dedicated work of teaching staff has put together a network of policing, legal and court contacts as well as a plethora of businesses across accounting, marketing and IT services.

That is a great first step, but the key is to establish a strong range of "repeat business" work experience placements. This comes down to three factors.

Promote your courses

Businesses don't know your latest offering; why should they? But one LinkedIn post might be all that it takes. Broadcasting the talent of our students led us to having a law

firm on board, keen to involve our Applied Law group in their work.

They offer advice on the range of careers and routes that the profession offers, and they ensure our students make connections alongside their work experience placements, giving them the "inside scoop" on the reality of law with the firm.

It helps them too; their assessment speaks for itself: "I don't know why we haven't started working with you sooner."

Keep tabs on job opportunities

Firms face a tough jobs market and connecting them to the groundswell of talent at the college produces lightning-quick email responses. Work such as apprenticeships and trainee posts is often cyclical in big companies, so HR departments are the first people to contact.

For example, a chance search brought up 10 trainee posts in one local accountancy company. It took just one email to create a connection to real work in a local business that our students may

never have considered or heard of.

On top of that, they came in to talk to our business students about what accountancy is really like, and even gave our Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) group a chance to hone the applications.

Get out of college

This might be the information age, but face-to-face contact at local business events, conferences and recruitment fairs cannot be beaten for expanding your network. The job of good management is to grow those opportunities and crucially find out what skill shortages

there are in the local economy.

Chance conversations are a rich avenue of research and development, whether they lead to work experience, job

posts or introductions into industries. One of our ex-students now runs a cybersecurity company. Your alumni will be doing amazing things on your doorstep too, and feed right back into this virtuous cycle.

Our work has always been more than delivering qualifications alone. If a student is qualified with skills that an industry needs but does not know where to start, then the job is only half-done.

Growing our students' work experience and their contacts book means they can write their own story once they leave.



Opinion

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Our skills system is a long way from meeting the economy's needs

GRAHAM
HASTING-
EVANSChief executive,
NOCN Group

The levy and other reforms have failed to deliver an apprenticeships system that works for those who need it most or for the real economy, writes Graham Hasting-Evans

Going back to a time before all the reforms which began 10 years ago, we had around half a million apprenticeship starts. Many of these were young people commencing their careers in SMEs at level 2, and some at level 3.

One of the principal aims of the government's apprenticeship reforms was to increase the number of starts to 600,000 per year and to offer all young people the opportunity of a higher-quality apprenticeship.

Ten years on, it is great to see the increase in level 4-and-above apprenticeships; this should help towards increasing productivity. Policy improvements such as flexi-apprenticeships, accelerated apprenticeships and occupational traineeships, now integrated into study programmes, are also welcome developments.

However, the number of apprenticeship starts in the past 12 months was just 349,200, of which only 77,520 were by young people aged 19 years and under. This is a long way from the ambition set out for these reforms.

Just as worrying is the decline in level 2 starts, when there are still nine million jobs (28 per cent of the total) in the economy at level 2 or below. Many of these are crucial sectors in the context of the challenges we face as a country on net zero and

social care.

Then there is the non-completion rate, which is just as concerning as the reduction in starts. This drop-out rate at level 2 is high across all sectors; over just a few years, construction level 2 achievements have declined by nearly 50 per cent, and in health and care to one-third of where they were when the levy came in.

Red lights for green skills

To achieve net zero, every job will change and 60 or more new occupations will be developed, among them construction for new assets such as non-fossil fuel power stations and retrofit of domestic and commercial property. Yet a recent NAO report, Decarbonising the Power Sector says the government has not yet established a delivery plan, and therefore we cannot be confident that net zero is achievable.

Key to the implementation are green skills, and some international comparisons indicate that we are falling behind on these. While we have access to good, high-level technical

skills, and are starting to see the innovation come through in design and manufacturing, the problem is that the construction workforce that will build and install net zero assets and retrofit our 29 million properties is the level 2 workforce.

“We need a skills system that can flex”

In construction in 2021/22, only 4,680 completed level 2 apprenticeships against an average demand of some 30,000 annually. Meanwhile, the alternative qualification route could be at risk from the DfE's funding reform of level 2-and-below qualifications. Alarm bells should be ringing!

Our skills system, which is designed for larger programmes such as apprenticeships and T

levels, is just not suitable for the dynamic and ever-changing situation of green skills and digital innovation. We need a skills system that can flex, like the more agile systems based upon modularisation and micro-credentials happening in Europe, the USA and Far East.

An aging system

We face similar problems in our response to an aging population. Most informed views describe our social care system as “broken”.

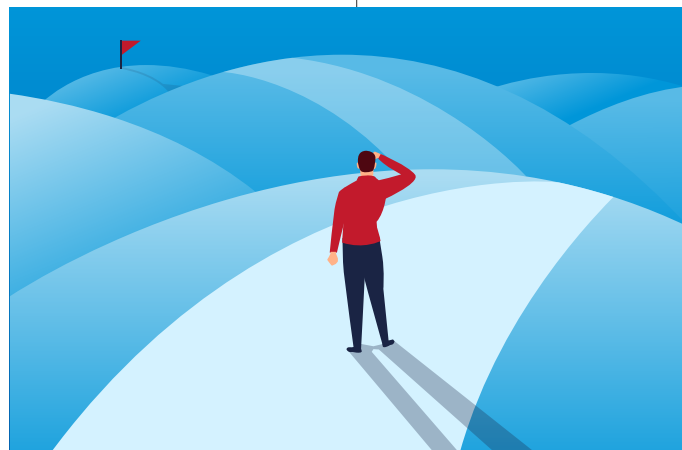
In a sector with 1.65 million jobs, over half of employees have no relevant qualification, and 21 per cent are qualified at level 2 or below. Arguably, these are poorly-paid jobs, and on any given day there are over 165,000 vacancies, which is only forecast to get worse.

Turnover rates are 29 per cent on average and as high as 50 per cent for younger workers. Despite this high demand, only 9,430 level 2 achievements were recorded in 2021/22.

It is the same problem for social care as with net zero: a failure to properly invest in the skills for a level 2 workforce. Worryingly, policy is only heading further away from facing up to this.

We do not need to start again with the skills system, but we must urgently consider properly funded modularisation so it can support dynamic developments in new sectors and upskill some 30 million employees in the existing workforce.

The levy and our qualifications are simply not designed to meet the biggest challenges we face.



Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

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The FE sector has a key role to play supporting gender equality in the workplace. Here's how.



**KIRSTIE
DONNELLY
MBE**

CEO, City & Guilds

Kirstie Donnelly sets out the case for further education to go further to support young women into higher-earning careers and three steps to start delivering gender equity

In the wake of International Women's Day, it is important to remember that the debates, conversations and celebrations of this one day inspire us to keep striving to resolve the societal inequalities faced by women. Bringing about positive change is year-round work.

In the further education sector, we work with many young women during crucial, formative years as they develop skills and forge careers. This means we have a great potential and opportunity to influence their lives for the better and to promote a more equal society.

Certainly, there is plenty of progress still to be made. Our recent research, Youth Misspent, surveyed 5,000 18 to 24-year-olds and found that, despite having high ambitions, young women are often left trailing behind men when it comes to achieving them.

And this only entrenches as time progresses. Structural barriers embedded into our current careers, employment and childcare systems limit the earning potential of women and their ability to achieve their ambitions.

Our research found that among 18 to 24-year-olds, inequalities are already emerging. While young women (23 per cent) are more likely to already be working than young men (20 per cent), men



are more likely than women to have already purchased their own home (11 per cent vs 6 per cent). Men are also more likely to already be earning above the average salary of £28,000 (17 per cent vs 8 per cent).

There are many reasons why these inequalities start to appear so early in young women's lives and careers. One area the FE sector should pay close attention to is the tendency for women to choose lower-paid industries compared with young men, who pursue careers in higher-paid sectors such as financial services and construction. This has a huge impact on future careers and salaries and exacerbates the gender pay gap.

Recent research published by the Living Wage Foundation found that jobs held by women account for almost 60 per cent of all roles paid below the real living wage. Women are also more likely to be on zero-hours contracts, trapped in low-paying, insecure and precarious jobs.

Providing equal opportunities to education is not enough; we

need to go further than that. We can and should play an important role supporting women into the higher-paid careers and industries where they are currently under-represented and unlock their full economic potential. There are several ways we can do this.

First, we should ensure that colleges are equipped to provide supportive careers advice and skills mapping to help women understand all the opportunities in front of them. They should be encouraged to defy stereotypes and expectations, considering jobs in better-paid but often male-dominated sectors.

Providing this early on in their education journeys – and even working with local schools to reach younger students – will ensure that they are equipped with the skills and confidence needed to progress and flourish in their later lives.

Second, it is important to recognise the power of strong mentorship. In colleges, consider reaching out to networks of previous alumni to set up mentorships with current

students.

These mentors can be male or female – what's important is that they can be valuable role models and help aspiring young women by providing advice, counsel and a support network for their development.

Third, we should work with employers to make industries less gendered and support those in typically male-dominated industries to make their roles more appealing to female candidates. That could be through careers education events, changing recruitment processes, improving flexibility, offering paid internship programmes for young female talent, or bespoke training opportunities.

“Equal opportunity to education isn't enough; we need to go further”

We can also support employers to put in place specific support for women as they begin new careers in these sectors.

Ultimately, to support women in their careers and tackle these inequalities, we need to think about equity rather than equality. That means recognising the structural barriers that women face and ensuring they have access to tailored support to help them to enter high-earning careers, embrace their full potential and balance the gender success scales for a fairer future.

Opinion

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Budget 2023: A competent affair but with glaring missed opportunities


**JOHN
COPE**

 Former ministerial
adviser and
education expert

John Cope distils Wednesday's announcements to find a budget lacking in expansive vision and visible expenditure, but with encouraging resolve for existing reforms

I can't be the only one who found this week's budget a refreshingly competent and much-needed return to serious government. For education and skills, it was apparent that this budget wasn't a fiscal splurge but was about targeted interventions that either reduce the cost of living or grow the economy. Or in the case of the generous childcare announcement, both

It is worth remembering that the autumn statement had already delivered an extra £2.3 billion for schools and that the previous spending review committed to a £2.3 billion increase in the 16-18 education budget between 2019 and 2024. Many will argue that this simply isn't enough, but public finances remain stretched.

So, what does it all mean for skills?

Holding firm on the levy

Groups like the CBI have been expending huge political capital on trying to dismantle the apprenticeship levy, often on the premise that "billions are handed back every year to the treasury". When the policy was introduced, there was indeed an underspend, but that is no longer the case. Indeed, we have a serious shortage of apprenticeships so reducing funding by diluting the levy into a "Flexible Skills Levy"



would be misguided.

While the levy could be improved in many ways, it is inescapable that it has doubled the funding available for apprenticeships over the past decade and created stability. It has also driven up quality through the 20 per cent off-the-job requirement and new employer-crafted standards.

"The apprentice minimum wage remains a major barrier"

The actual elephant in the room is that employers' investment in training continues to stagnate and is now half the European average. Less than 20 per cent of 25- to 64-years-olds hold a vocational qualification and off-the-job training (a good proxy for quality) has declined for years. This is a key cause of our long-standing low productivity and growth and leaves millions stuck in low-skills

jobs and with low job satisfaction.

A missed opportunity

The budget contained a £27 billion tax cut for business through "full expensing", allowing companies to claim a 100 per cent deduction from their profits when they invest in capital such as machines, offices or vehicles. This is combined with a £500 million package of tax deductions for research and innovation.

Imagine how powerful this approach would be if it applied to investing in the workforce. For larger employers, it is not the upfront cost of training that acts as a barrier but the need for a solid, long-term business case. Generous tax credits would drive employer investment to the levels we desperately need, incentivise employers to look to colleges and training providers for short courses and maybe, just maybe, end efforts to dismantle the levy.

Smaller firms face a different challenge: cash flow. Upfront grants to take on apprentices or invest in high-quality training could make all the difference here. As Chancellor, Rishi

Sunak established a £3,000 cash incentive to take on an apprentice during the pandemic. Between 5,000 and 10,000 apprentices were taken on in each of the 18 months the scheme ran. This relatively small investment should return, and a similar scheme could have been transformative.

Returners, retrainers and the minimum wage

I'm not convinced "returnership" is going to catch on as a term, but the concept is spot on. A lot of detail needs to be worked through but "earn while you learn" works as effectively at 16 as it does at 60. For this reason, a "retrainership" for those wishing to change careers would have complemented the "returnership" idea well.

The apprentice minimum wage remains a major barrier. At just £5.28 per hour from April for the first year of an apprenticeship regardless of age, it rules out adults without independent means. The living wage for everyone else over 23 from April is £10.42. A nearly 50 per cent pay cut rules out swathes of potential returners and retrainers. The apprentice minimum wage should have gone, replaced with the living wage every other worker earns.

Overall, what this budget lacked in vision and funding, it made up for in focus and stability. There is scope for much more, and not all of it dependent on the treasury, but in the meantime sector leaders will be pleased to see inflation – and their costs – decline.

Opinion

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Stop relying on more funding. Providers need to solve their own recruitment problems


**ALEX
LOCKEY**

Founder, Bolt

There are measures which FE providers can take to improve recruitment that don't rely on extra funding from the Treasury, writes Alex Lockey

The recent announcement to raise the FE teacher training bursary level is headline-worthy, but it won't dent the recruitment and retention problems faced by the sector. Providers should aim to solve their own problems rather than wait for more funding from the DfE.

Bursaries are finite in number and locked to subject areas. They are also laced with qualifying criteria. With the FE sector vacancy rate more than double pre-pandemic levels, the bursary improvement is welcome, but it will have a negligible impact.

The FE sector has the evergreen challenge of hiring experienced people from industry. Salaries in FE rarely outpace what is obtainable in industry occupations. The knee-jerk response from lobbyists is to appeal for more funding so that providers can pay higher salaries.

This is not achievable across all industries and provision. The toughest vacancies to fill in FE are the same as those in industry; areas of economic demand where there is a shortage of experienced candidates.

For example, the median salary for a software developer in the UK is £65,000. According to our platform, however, the average salary for a software development coach or lecturer is £38,039. The average salary for a bricklayer is £53,528, but our website shows

the average for a bricklaying lecturer is £30,883. The list goes on.

The struggles do not end there. In comparative sectors FE is the poor relation.

“The bursary improvement will have a negligible impact”

Secondary teachers earn more than FE lecturers. Those working in learning and development earn 33 per cent more than their counterparts in FE. Then, there is intra-sector competition between ITPs, employer providers, colleges and universities.

Now for the good news: the FE sector has bags to offer professionals moving from industry. It just requires a thoughtful and creative approach to unlock this value.

Post-pandemic, there is a huge shift in what jobseekers prioritise. Much of the workforce is unwilling to compromise on work/

life balance as they did before.

With this in mind, increasing the flexibility of working conditions is very attractive. Worth considering are remote or hybrid working, four-day working weeks and flexible hours. Extended holidays, buy-back schemes and sabbaticals are common in the private sector.

Colleges could utilise existing infrastructure to mitigate living costs by supporting employees with subsidies for things like food or childcare.

Providers could leverage their proximity to industry to forge recruitment partnerships. I loved the recent example in the LEC report of Burton and South Derbyshire College's recruitment partnership. Providers could find further inspiration on what is important to jobseekers by examining what top employers use to enhance their employer value propositions (EVP).

Social conscientiousness is at an all-time high. Working in FE is a fantastic way to contribute to “something bigger”, but I am often shocked to see how few providers talk about this in their recruitment literature. Few providers invest in EVP enhancers

like B-Corp status, despite qualifying.

Finally, lightening the load on lecturers would benefit the sector as well. Agile approaches and more efficient organisational structures would make the job more enjoyable.

Enabling educators to focus on imparting their knowledge – rather than weighing them down in bureaucracy – is key to avoiding attrition.

Ideas like these are rarely cost-neutral, so where does the investment needed come from? One option is to stop relying on staffing agencies when direct sourcing is a viable alternative. With advancements in recruitment technology, it is easier than ever before.

There are stark comparisons to draw with the NHS with regard to over-reliance on contract staffing agencies. Like the NHS, diverting agency spending would allow reinvestment into HR resources. We could also improve compensation packages (salary levels or benefits) in problem areas.

This will not happen overnight and will need an introspective approach. There has to be an appetite to change the status quo, rather than waiting for more funding, or outsourcing recruitment by default.

Senior leaders should invest more in HR and talent acquisition strategy. In doing so, they would find that their recruitment challenges would dissipate. Over time, both FE jobseeker sentiment and the level of new entrants to the sector would improve.



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Lisa Humphries

Chair, National Association for Managers of Student Services

Start date: March 2023

Concurrent Job: Assistant Principal: Students/Customers, Chichester College Group

Interesting fact: Lisa returned to work at Chichester College 20 years after her time there as a student and student president. For the last 10 years, she has spent two weeks every summer volunteering in Kenya with staff and students on education projects.



Ciaran Roche

Public Affairs Manager, AELP

Start date: March 2023

Previous Job: Public Affairs and Prospect Research Officer, University of Salford

Interesting fact: Ciaran is fascinated by all things history, the older the better. If you want to get him talking ask him about Herodotus or Roman coins; if you want him to keep quiet, give him a book.



Chris Rose

Marketing Director, HIT Training

Start date: March 2023

Previous Job: Head of Marketing, HIT Training

Interesting fact: Before working in marketing Chris had a career working and managing in pubs and hotels where he also trained as a barista.

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