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MEET THE TEAM



Shane Chowen
EDITOR

@SHANECHOWEN
SHANE.CHOWEN@FEWEEK.CO.UK



Shane Mann
MANAGING DIRECTOR

@SHANERMANN
SHANE@LSECT.COM



Billy Camden
DEPUTY EDITOR

@BILLYCAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK



Jessica Hill
INVESTIGATIONS AND FEATURES REPORTER

@JESSJANEHILL
JESSICA.HILL@LSECT.COM



JL Dutaut
COMMISSIONING EDITOR

@DUTAUT
JEAN-LOUISDUTAUT@LSECT.COM



Anviksha Patel
SENIOR REPORTER

@ANNIESEATING
ANVIKSHA.PATEL@FEWEEK.CO.UK



Joshua Stein
SENIOR REPORTER

@JOSHUA_N_STEIN
JOSHUA.STEIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK



Simon Kay
SENIOR DESIGNER

SIMON@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Got a story?

Get in touch.

Contact news@feweek.co.uk
or call 020 81234 778

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THE LSECT TEAM

HEAD DESIGNER

Nicky Phillips

SALES EXECUTIVE

Tony Hudson

CLASSIFIEDS MANAGER

Clare Halliday

OPERATIONS AND FINANCE MANAGER

Victoria Boyle

EVENTS MANAGER

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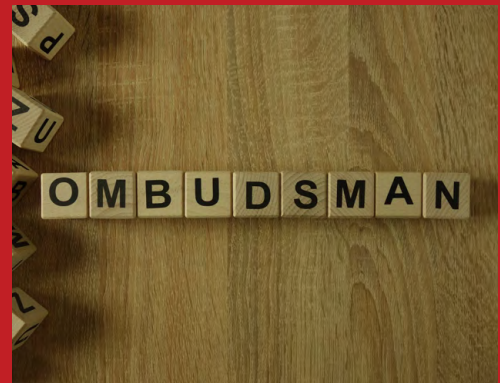
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Learning & Skills Events,
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The Hickman, 2 Whitechapel Road
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NCG leads the way with first indefinite degree-awarding powers

SHANE CHOWEN
SHANE.CHOWEN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

EXCLUSIVE

NCG has become the first further education college group to be granted permanent awarding powers for taught degrees up to masters level.

The Office for Students (OfS) has confirmed that, with effect from June 1, it removed the time limit on NCG's degree awarding powers, making it the first FE institution with indefinite taught degree-awarding powers.

Jon Ridley, NCG's deputy principal for higher education, described the milestone as a "gamechanger" for the organisation, giving it the ability to plan longer term and expand its "full tertiary" offer in Newcastle and beyond.

NCG, formerly known as Newcastle College Group, is one of England's largest groups, with seven colleges across the country under its belt. Its degree-awarding powers apply across all its college sites, though most of them are currently delivered at its Newcastle College University Centre.

Higher education providers are initially awarded taught degree-awarding powers with a time limit. NCG was first awarded the powers by the Privy Council in 2016 until July 2022. This time limit was extended by two years by the OfS in July 2022, and

removed altogether this month.

"NCG has a long, proud history as a provider of higher technical education stretching back decades, and we have been an awarding institution for over 10 years," Ridley said.

"Having taught degree-awarding powers without time limit recognises the quality of our higher education. This is a first for a college-based HE provider and supports our ambition to be the country's leading provider of higher technical education."

This is the latest in a run of firsts for the group's higher education portfolio. The then-Newcastle College Group was among the first FE colleges to be granted foundation degree-awarding powers in 2011. It was then the first FE institution to receive time-limited taught bachelors and masters degree-awarding powers in 2016.

There are other colleges, such as WCG and TEC Partnership, with bachelors degree-awarding powers, though these are, for now, still time limited. And private provider Multiverse received the power to award its own degrees in certain subjects in September, though they too are time limited.

NCG's offer currently boasts a BA(Hons) in fine art, BSc(Hons) in aircraft engineering and an MBA.

"This is a full tertiary solution," Ridley said. "You can arrive here with no qualifications and leave with a masters, on your doorstep."

The final approval for NCG came after a

"rigorous" assessment process with the OfS, Ridley said.

"Do you have the right academic structures, are you self-critical as an organisation, can you uphold the standards of higher education? We've had to prove that we've sustained that level and also grown as an institution.

"It is gamechanger because now we can plan with confidence."

The group's higher education prospectus boasts smaller class sizes and dedicated HE student services as part of its offer, which must be important with two large universities – Newcastle University and Northumbria University – on its doorstep.

Higher education accounted for around £19 million of the group's £136 million total income in 21/22, with learner numbers hovering between 2,300 and 2,400 over the past four years.

For Ridley, being the only FE institution with indefinite awarding powers could catalyse new partnerships with other colleges and providers.

He said: "Our ambition is to grow our partnership work with other colleges and providers, but that has got to align with our values and principles.

"We are going to do degree apprenticeships, we are going to do modular. We are already doing those things. Our focus is on degrees and higher-level study that leads into employment or to better somebody's opportunities."



Students at the 2022 NCG graduation ceremony



Jon Ridley at the Newcastle Aviation Academy

Plan for level 2 business admin apprenticeship back on the table

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

EXCLUSIVE

Employers are making another attempt to get a level 2 business administration apprenticeship over the line, with plans to launch a government petition if officials continue to reject the proposal.

A trailblazer group held a meeting with around 100 employers last week to sound out support for the bid ahead of a formal submission in September.

A survey has also been launched to ask more businesses to back the proposal, working with the provisional title of level 2 "administration assistant", to "demonstrate current business need" to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE).

"We remain open to new standards where they satisfy the necessary criteria"

The institute has batted away proposals for such a course since the popular level 2 business admin apprenticeship under the old-style frameworks was officially switched off on July 31, 2020. Officials claimed that a proposed replacement did not meet the required duration or quality of the new-style apprenticeship standards.

An alternative "public sector organisation administrative assistant" standard at level 2 was put forward months later but was dropped last year after Rob Nitsch, IfATE's delivery director, said it was "some distance off" the quality threshold.

The survey for the latest proposal, which will be for both public and private sec-



tor employers, states that, if the institute "continues to deny the need for a level 2 administration standard, it has been suggested that our next step could be to launch a petition to get a formal response from government.

"We would create a petition that asks for a change to government policy. After 10,000 signatures, petitions get a response from the government and, after 100,000 signatures, petitions are considered for debate in Parliament."

A spokesperson for IfATE said: "Where employers have come forward, we have continued to work with them, and this includes with regard to business administration. We continue to remain open to new standards and the adjustment of all where they satisfy the necessary criteria."

There is a level 3 business administrator standard available, which has attracted over

55,000 starts since its launch in 2017. The standard is currently being revised, including its content, end-point assessment plan and £5,000 funding band.

But employers such as the NHS, councils, supermarkets and police have warned that level 3 is not the right entry point for many business admin apprentices, and the absence of a level 2 equivalent is the "missing rung" of skills minister Robert Halfon's supposed "ladder of opportunity".

The Education and Skills Funding Agency previously highlighted the level 2 customer service practitioner standard as a potential replacement for the level 2 business admin framework, but admitted this would not fit all apprentices' needs.

The level 2 business admin apprenticeship trailblazer group was not able to comment.

News

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Lawyers urge caution as colleges face £100,000 holiday pay ruling

JOSHUA STEIN
JOSHUA.STEIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

EXCLUSIVE

Colleges are bracing themselves for six-figure bills following a landmark ruling that gives all staff equal holiday pay.

But an expert law firm is advising colleges to be cautious as the government moves forward with proposed legislation which could bypass the legal case.

Colleges across England have consulted lawyers since the Supreme Court judgment in *Harpur Trust v Brazel* last July, which ruled that all workers should get a minimum of 5.6 weeks of paid holiday time, regardless of how many hours they work.

The case focused on music teacher Lesley Brazel, who argued that it was unfair she got less annual paid holiday because she worked variable hours each week during term-time.

The decision to rule in favour of Brazel is significant because it means that thousands of term-time workers have been underpaid and could now bring claims going back up to two years.

Large colleges have warned that the ruling will have a “significant adverse impact”, with at least two setting aside more than £100,000 to resolve any claims.

‘Significant adverse impact’

Since the ruling, workers who feel they are owed holiday pay have been able to approach their employers to claim that money back. Colleges have been preparing for the impact.

At DN Colleges Group, legal firm Eversheds Sutherlands advised the college to “implement compliance” with the working-time directive, but said that it would be “unlikely” to need to engage in collective bargaining with trade unions.

The impact, some warn, will be severe, with East Kent College saying the ruling had a “significant adverse impact” on the group.

Following the ruling, it undertook a “full review” of staff affected and “recalculated staff pay”, letting all staff know the impact it would have on them. The college does not specify how much it paid out to staff.

Meanwhile, Brockenhurst College declared a “potential historical liability” of £150,000, while one of the biggest colleges in the country, Chichester College Group, set aside £140,000, which it says would cover two years of relevant backpay. “It is expected that a payment will be made in the year to 31 July 2023,” it said in its annual report.

FE Week understands that the Association of Colleges took legal advice from Irwin Mitchell on the impact the changes could have, but it does not have an estimate of how much the college sector could have to pay back in total.

University and College Union general secretary Jo Grady said: “For far too long employers have used underhand tactics to deny casualised workers their full holiday pay. This case is one of many brought by the union movement which confirms that, when employers play fast and loose with the law, they will be held to account.”

‘Be pragmatic’

But things have changed. In January, just months after the ruling, the government

launched a consultation looking at pro-rata holiday entitlement for part-year workers.

The proposals, if accepted, would “ensure that holiday pay and entitlement is directly proportionate to the time they spend working”. The consultation closed in March and is set to report back this year.

Irwin Mitchell’s lead practice development lawyer Joanne Moseley told *FE Week* that the move by the government had been unexpected.

Before the consultation, the advice was for colleges to prepare backdated payments. That advice has now changed.

The law firm expects the government to respond to the consultation in the autumn – which could mean any changes come into effect next year.

“Our advice is to be pragmatic,” Moseley told *FE Week*. If a college has already changed its contracts to implement the changes after the legal case, it should stay with that course.

If, however, colleges are in the process of changing the contracts, a different approach could make more sense.

“You might be able to build in flexibility in the contracts of employment, so that you can then reduce the amount of holiday they receive if the law changes.” If a college has done nothing to implement the changes, a “wait and see approach” could be more fruitful, Moseley said.

“What we are saying is that, yes, that’s the law: you are breaching the law. But, if people are not bringing claims, do you want to alert them to this?”

A Department for Business and Trade spokesperson said: “We want to address disparities in holiday pay and annual leave entitlement to ensure any entitlement is directly proportional to the time spent working.

“This is why we launched a consultation on holiday entitlement which ended in March, and we will issue a response in due course.”



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Foul play? Football club sues college

JOSHUA STEIN
JOSHUA.STEIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

EXCLUSIVE

A London college is being sued amid allegations that it ignored a six-figure debt owed to a football club for use of its pitches and coaches, *FE Week* can reveal.

As part of its football apprenticeship programme, Stanmore College students were able to use training pitches belonging to Barnet FC's academy, while the academy provided coaching staff to deliver football skills and fitness sessions to students. The academy also provided learners with analysis and medical services, and managed their matches within an affiliated league.

“We hope that the matter will soon be resolved”

But High Court documents seen by *FE Week* show that Barnet's academy and Amber Football Centre, a community football venue owned by Barnet FC's chairman, alleged that Stanmore College breached an agreement to pay more than £110,000 for those services.

The club has now attempted to sue Stanmore College for £168,180. This comprises three unpaid invoices, interest on the late payment and additional compensation.

After nearly a year of negotiation, the case has been suspended in the hope that it can be resolved out of court – with mediation scheduled for next month.

In email exchanges dating back to 2015, the college's former principal Jacqui Mace and representatives of the football academy agreed that the college would pay the academy to use its facilities via “block pitch bookings”.



Barnet FC's academy then sent Stanmore College three invoices worth a combined £112,900 the following year, to cover the training costs.

Despite the repeated invoices, Stanmore College both “failed and refuses” to pay any of them, the court documents reveal.

Mace left the college in December 2015 amid accusations from the then-FE Commissioner that there was a “lack of confidence in [her] ability to lead the college going forward”. The commissioner also put Stanmore College into administered status at the time due to significant financial concerns.

The college argued that the emails from Mace “do not establish any valid and enforceable agreement relating to the claimants” – insisting the former principal did not make that agreement on behalf of the college. Instead, the college argued Mace sent those emails on behalf of Stanmore Training Company Limited, a college-run firm which provided bespoke training and

apprenticeship services for the college.

That firm was then dissolved in December 2016.

Stanmore College also alleged that the emails do not show “offer and acceptance” of the deal, as the final email just “provided for further discussion” between Mace and Barnet FC's then academy manager, Henry Newman.

Master Iain Pester, the judge in charge, suspended the court case in February so that it could be settled by “alternative dispute resolution” (ADR). Representatives of the college and football club have agreed to a mediation day on July 27, 2023, according to a spokesperson for Stanmore College.

By settling the dispute in this way, both the college and football club will be able to avoid the high costs associated with a drawn-out legal case.

In a joint statement, Barnet FC Academy and Amber Football Centre said they were “not in a position to comment further” as the ADR process is ongoing. “However, we hope that the matter will soon be resolved,” they added.

News

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Council rapped for failing to meet SEND transport costs

BILLY CAMDEN

BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

A mother has been awarded almost £3,500 in compensation after a council refused to pay to transport her son, who suffers with anxiety, to college.

The young adult, who has an education, health and care plan, spent three academic years being driven to and from college by his family as Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council “failed to recognise its duty to arrange free transport”, a report by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman found.

The review also highlighted an inadequate appeals process and poor record-keeping that led to long delays in addressing the mother’s concerns.

The council has agreed to apologise to the mother and reimburse her fuel costs and for the “distress, uncertainty and time and trouble” caused.

Local authorities do not have to provide free or subsidised post-16 travel support but have a duty to “encourage, enable and assist young people with learning difficulties/disabilities (SEND) to participate in education, up to the age of 25”, according to government guidance.

Young people with SEND qualify for free transport where a council assesses that, in order to attend education, they require transport arranged by the local authority.

Ali Fiddy, a solicitor and chief executive of the Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA), said post-16 SEND transport was an area where “most local authorities are trying to cut costs by changing or limiting the offer”.

In a speech at the NATSPEC annual conference this week, she described the issue as a “real lottery” and “worrying issue” for families once their child leaves school at age 16. She said it was “very difficult to challenge” a council when it refuses to provide free travel for SEND learners in further education.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman reported that the young adult

in Stock-on-Tees was originally travelling to college in shared transport, paid for by the council. But, when his mother said it was no longer suitable because of his anxiety, the council failed to “properly consider the mother’s concerns or make other suitable arrangements”.

The ombudsman found the council’s post-16 transport policy “was not in line with its statutory duties”, adding that the council should have provided transport free of charge “if it considered transport necessary”. Instead it required a contribution from the mother.

The investigation also found the council’s appeals process did not follow statutory guidance – it did not offer a hearing at stage two of the complaints process, and then did not direct people who were unhappy to the ombudsman.

Additionally, the ombudsman criticised the council’s poor record-keeping: it did not have a central system for recording decisions, which would have allowed these to be accessed after staff left.

Paul Najsarek, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, said: “The council’s responses to my enquiries, and its current transport policy, leaves me concerned that there are systematic issues in Stockton that may be affecting other young adult learners

who have education, health and care plans.

“I am also particularly concerned that the council is not signposting parents to my office if they are unhappy with the outcome of any complaint about its appeals process.

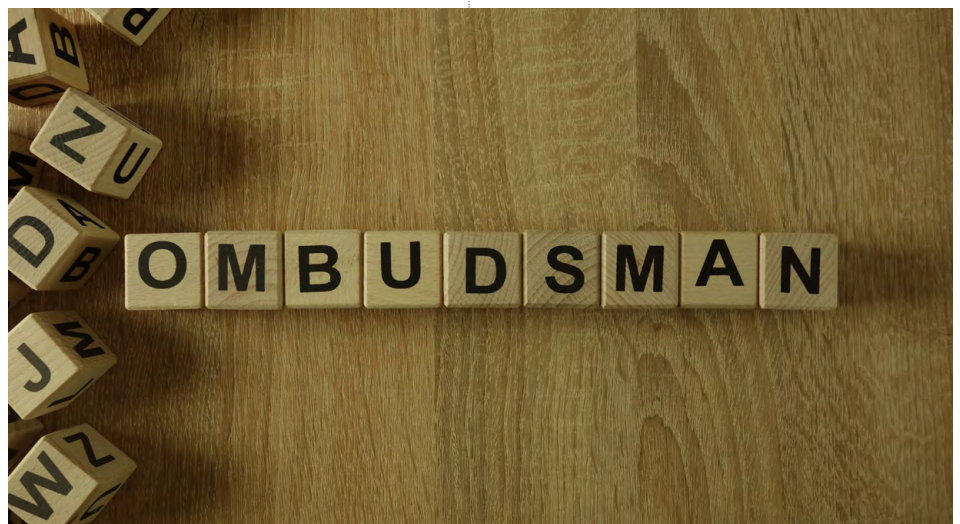
“I am therefore pleased the council has accepted my recommendations to improve its processes and policies to ensure other young adults – and their families – are treated fairly and in line with statutory guidance.”

Stockton-on-Tees council has now agreed to pay the mother £3,432.50.

The council has also agreed to amend its letters, templates and policies to ensure they fall in line with statutory guidance and refer people to the ombudsman, and provide training and guidance to staff responsible for school and college transport on its new policy.

Councillor Bob Cook, leader of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, said: “We recognise the findings of the ombudsman and have offered our apologies to Ms X, who we will also reimburse for fuel costs.

“Steps have now been taken to ensure this does not happen again, including updating the relevant policy and procedures.”



News

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AEB funding review for colleges hit by Covid

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Colleges facing cuts to their national adult education budget allocations due to underdelivery during Covid will have their funding reviewed, the government has announced.

The special review of AEB allocations from the Education and Skills Funding Agency for 2023/24 is planned for colleges and other grant-funded providers that have experienced a significant boost in delivery this year following drops in adult student numbers over the previous two years.

Recruitment of adult learners fell in 2020 and 2021 amid the pandemic and associated lockdowns, forcing many colleges and other providers to underperform against their annual grant funding allocations.

The ESFA released individual AEB budgets

for 2023/24 at the end of March, but multiple colleges found their allocations had been reduced compared with recent years.

The funding taken away from those colleges who suffered with low recruitment in the Covid years – delivering less than 90 per cent of their allocations – was used to increase the budgets for colleges who had overdelivered.

But there are concerns that the 2023/24 allocations will not be sufficient as recruitment returns to pre-pandemic levels. The ESFA has now promised to review those most affected this November.

In an update to the sector on Wednesday, the agency said: "We delivered ESFA adult education budget funding allocations for academic year 2023/24 at the end of March. Some providers received an allocation lower

than their 2022/23 funding allocation. This is because their delivery was below 90 per cent of their allocation over the past two funding years.

"A small number of providers with lower funding allocations will have significantly increased their delivery in academic year 2022/23. This could mean their delivery in 2022/23 exceeds their allocation for academic year 2023/24.

"We will operate a review process for these providers in November 2023."

This process will only apply to those providers who have a "significantly reduced allocation in academic year 2023/24" and can "evidence significant increased delivery in their R14 data return for academic year 2022/23".

The ESFA said it will publish the criteria for this process and further information in the next update of the AEB funding rules "later in June".

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IfATE promises urgent review of occupational standards

JOSHUA STEIN
JOSHUA.STEIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The government's apprenticeship and technical education quango has committed to reviewing "high priority" occupational standards this year.

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) this week published plans to simplify the skills system, in the form of its "A Simpler Skills System" report.

While the proposals were light on tangible new actions to simplify the system (see Tom Bewick's op-ed on page 14), the highlight was the launch of a new occupational maps "service", which aims to make it easier for people to check out options to "train for a job then progress to senior skills levels on tablets and mobile phones".

Alongside this, the institute said it would use "big data to rapidly identify where

change is needed to support the economy, streamline the way we work with employers to develop occupational standards, and prioritise reviews of those standards where change is most needed".

An occupational standard is a description of an occupation. It contains an occupational profile, and describes the "knowledge, skills and behaviours" needed for someone to be competent in the occupation's duties. They are used to design apprenticeships, T Levels and, increasingly, new technical qualifications.

IfATE's report pledged to review standards in occupations "identified as high priority where updates are needed to support emerging skills, so that more people secure

the skills they need to be successful in a future economy" this year.

Chief executive Jennifer Coupland said the institute was working through exactly how many standards to review with the Department for Education.

She told *FE Week*: "We have a matching tool which takes into consideration all sorts of criteria such as regulatory changes, and whether there have been

any technological changes. And the combination of those features pushes the standards to the top of the list for review."

Read the IfATE's simpler skills system report in full [here](#).



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Opinion

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Always check the engine before you blame the passengers


TOM BEWICK

 Chief executive,
Federation of
Awarding Bodies

The core message contained in the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's new "simpler skills system" report is as predictable as it is tiresome, says Tom Bewick

Back in 2001, I was waiting for Estelle Morris, the then education and skills secretary. Despite the conference venue, Church House, being literally just across the road from her department's Whitehall HQ, she was running late.

Her skills minister, John Healey, was about to go on stage but was anxious to catch a word with his political boss. We were launching the new sector skills councils (SSCs) initiative to an invited audience of industry leaders.

"What's our core message?", he asked me.

As a post-16 advisor at the time, I told him: "Well minister, we need to put employers at the heart of the skills system. Sector skills councils will achieve this aim by handing ownership of the skills and productivity challenge over to them."

"Great", he said, "make sure Estelle gets the same message when she arrives."

Ever since that point, we have seen a succession of government ministers and senior officials parrot the same line: "Employers at the heart of the skills system."

The trouble is, the whole thing has turned out to be one massive illusion.

Employers today are no more engaged in government skills

policies than they were two decades ago. In fact, there is strong evidence by volume of firms engaged, not to mention employer investment in workers, that they are even less engaged.

The Labour Force Survey shows a 28 per cent decline in company training since 2005 (11 per cent since 2010).

Some people reading this will remember the employer ownership of skills pilots (EOP). It turned out that firms are great at taking "free money" from taxpayers to boost skills. But they are rather less forthcoming in stepping up and putting in their own cash, as reported by *FE Week* at the time.

In fact, independent researchers commissioned to evaluate the pilots found huge deadweight in the £350 million programme. Only 40 per cent of the original planned starts were met.

It is hard not to be cynical when you rock up at another one of these taxpayer-funded "terrace events" in Parliament, as I did this week.

The core message of the event

on Tuesday, marking the launch of a new report by IfATE on "a simpler skills system", was as predictable as it was tiresome.

Perhaps we should not blame hard-working officials who put together this guff. They are made to "drink the Kool-Aid".

"There is strong evidence that employers are even less engaged"

I liken it to blaming the passengers on a bus that has broken down. You would always look at the mechanical faults in the engine compartment first.

The truth is that civil servants have become prisoners of an ideology that is total nonsense.

Let's start by examining the bold claim that the institute is the "voice of employers in the skills system". For a public body established under the political direction of ministers, this is constitutionally impossible.

IfATE can only ever be the voice of the government of the day. It is the duty of officials to serve ministers in what they want to achieve in terms of apprenticeships and technical education.

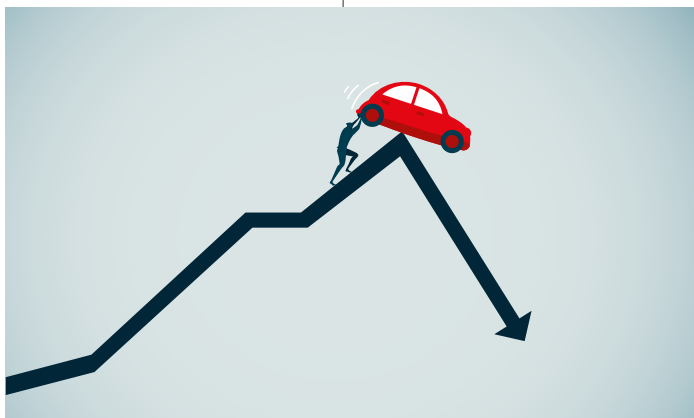
The institute is chaired by a Conservative peer. It has a career civil servant at the helm, as opposed to a celebrated captain of industry.

IfATE is neither a representative structure nor is it an independent voice in the skills system. It exists to do the bidding of the governing party. And, in a democracy, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

If the government was really serious about employers being placed in the driving seat – or taking more responsibility for skills development, public and private – we would see some kind of renaissance of the employer-led sectoral approach to training.

I find it amusing, given my Labour background, that I successfully argued back in 2001 that the last people you would put in charge of a skills system are a bunch of civil servants, however well-meaning.

When Estelle Morris finally arrived at Church House, I dutifully relayed the "employers at the heart of the skills system" message. In retrospect, I wish I had just told her Ronald Reagan's famous line about the nine most terrifying words in the English language: I'm from the government and I'm here to help.



Students call for wiser use of money in online exhibition

JOSHUA STEIN

JOSHUA.STEIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

More than 140 students from 51 colleges will have their work displayed as part of a national exhibition that explores the theme of sustainability.

The online exhibition was launched this week by the Sixth Form College Association and features hundreds of films, paintings, podcasts and music pieces. More than 600 young people from Sweden were also involved through their Pengar! project alongside 146 students from UK sixth form colleges.

"Pengar" means "money" in Swedish, and exhibition explores "how the dynamics of money, finance and sustainability are connected, in the past, the present and the future", association chief executive Bill Watkin said.

"The detrimental effect our relationship with money has on human systems, our planet and all living beings is becoming crystal clear," he added. "Money is a tool – abundance or lack of it orchestrates our dreams and aspiration, as well as our fears and nightmares. Ultimately it affects our future."

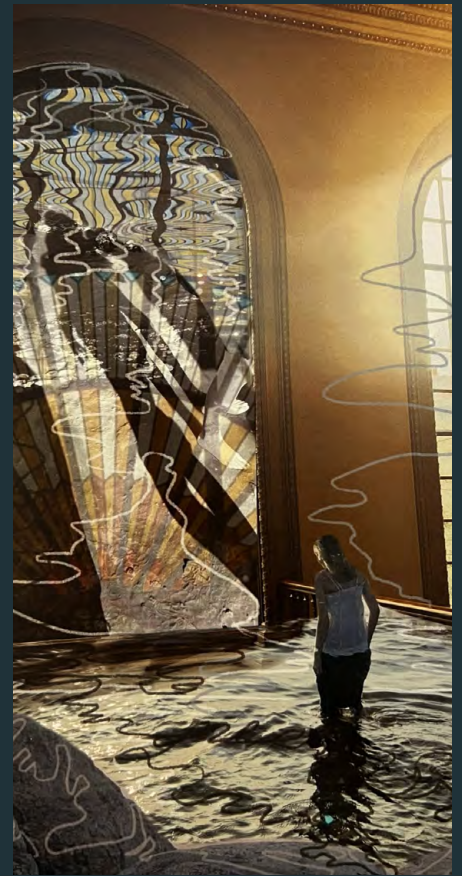
"Pengar! is a project that calls for action, to use money with discernment and wisdom, in service of all living beings and our planet."

Sixth form art focuses on rewilding, plastic pollution and cost-of-living

Students took on some of the most pressing challenges facing humanity, such as sustainability, the need to rewild and modern slavery. Woodhouse College's Harerta Tesfay is one of those whose art, called "Bigfin Squid and it is plastic", on display.

Tesfay said the message of the piece was to call on humans to adapt to "live sustainable lives and combat global warming", just as squid can use their chromatophores to change colour in threatening situations.

"Bigfin Squid and it is Plastic" represents



Captions from top left: "Bigfin Squid and it is plastic" by Harerta Tesfay, Woodhouse College, "Reflections" by Edie Ward, Long Road Sixth Form College, "Work Until You Die" by Sam Clarke, Durham Sixth Form Centre

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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Captions from top: "Fast Food" by Romany Jarretrock, Richard Huish College, "Submerged" by Charlotte Clowes, The Blackpool Sixth Form College, "Under pressure" by Abigail Gonzales, Carmel College, "Utilitarian Urbanwear" by Samuel Man, Loreto College, "The Power of Nature" by Ami Taylor, Trinity Sixth Form Academy

CONTINUED

polluted oceans and how beautiful creatures like squids, who live so far from humans, can be affected by pollution. To live sustainable lives, we must adjust our way of living so that we can save our planet from global warming," Tesfay said.

Romany Jarretrock's piece, "Fast Food", features a woman with her head in her hands surrounded by empty McDonalds cartons. Jarretrock, who is a fine art student at Richard Huish College in Taunton, Somerset, said that, without the convenience of fast food, you are only left with the "damage it causes" to bodies, the environment and life in general.

"The detrimental effect our relationship with money has on human systems, our planet and all living beings is becoming crystal clear"

"It is only when we remove the layer of convenience that we notice the obvious wrongs of this industry. These damages are what I have intended to portray in my painting, to make you look closer to notice the wrongs."

Charlotte Clowes' "Submerged" artwork meanwhile comments on the "devastating use of water in the fashion industry" It features a photograph of a person in a dress submerged in water in a swimming pool.

"Its ambiguity reflects the conflict of young people's feelings around our planet's future, with elements of feeling suffocated and helpless, being dragged down by our obsession with clothing, yet also expressing hope that we are still within reach of safety," Clowes, from The Blackpool Sixth Form College, added.

Though the confines of the swimming pool "suggest security and even the possibility of rescue", they also surround the person in a "man-made environment of treated water far removed from the natural world".

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Employer awards:

- Learning for good work employer of the year
- Apprenticeship employer of the year

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Ministers look at AI and use of pupil data

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Ministers are scoping out how to ensure education providers benefit financially from any future use of pupil data by artificial intelligence systems, *FE Week's* sister publication *Schools Week* has learned.

The rapid rollout of generative AI such as ChatGPT and Google Bard has prompted a scramble across government to harness the technology's power, but also to guard against any risks.

Such "large language models" could quickly process huge amounts of data, which experts say could help schools to understand their pupils better and analyse the impact of innovations.

Third-party organisations, including private companies, can already request data from the national pupil database for analysis.

The development of more and more sophisticated AI systems could make this analysis easier. However, ministers are understood to be concerned about any use of pupil data to generate profits for private companies without any benefit for schools, colleges and pupils.

Baroness Barran, the minister leading on AI for the Department for Education, told *Schools Week* ministers were "absolutely thinking about all of these issues".

"It wouldn't be truthful to say that we're clear on what principles we will follow, but obviously, we are extremely sensitive and aware of the use of individual or aggregated pupil data. That's clearly a real priority that we get that right".

Barran said ministers were asking "a number of questions", including on ownership of the data and "what's it worth".

"It's about as complicated as anything I've ever looked at. But we're working with people who are experts in data ethics and privacy, to really think through these problems."

Ministers this week launched a call for evidence about the future use of AI in education, having already issued guidance for schools and colleges on how to combat issues such as cheating.

Gillian Keegan, the education secretary,

told London Tech Week on Wednesday that AI was "transforming the world", and that education must not be "left behind".

Niel McLean, the head of education at BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT, said there were potential benefits to using AI and pupil data.

"If you build up a really large data model, and you train it using the pupil level data, then you can use that data model to help you understand your students as whole people.

"Everything matters. Their attendance matters, their performance matters, all those sorts of things. You've got a better sense of them as individuals. AI can do that. It can just help you just know your learnings better."

But he urged ministers to think about "four Ps".

"There's an ethics of purpose – what you're actually using this to do? There's an ethics of processes – how is data handled? What's the confidentiality? How secure is it? There's a people side. You want the people doing it to be professional, and feel they're accountable.

"The fourth P that came to my mind is the payback. Having a clear public benefits statement about giving that data to this entity, what does it deliver? And

it shouldn't just be financial return. It should be something that improves things for young people."

But the DfE already faces questions about its approach to data-sharing.

A damning audit by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in 2020 found the department broke data protection laws in how it handled pupil data. The full report still hasn't been released.

It was also reprimanded over a "serious breach" that allowed a company providing age-verification for gambling companies access to the personal information of millions of young people.

Jen Persson, from the campaign group DefendDigitalMe, said the department should "publish the evidence of today's data reality before getting ahead of itself with imagined futures. The 2020 DfE ICO audit must be published in full, with a timeline for what remains to be done.

"And the DfE must commit to giving families control over the current commercial re-uses of their own and their children's information from the millions of named records in the national pupil database, that few know exists."



Gillian Keegan

News

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How Ofsted's new complaints procedure will work

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
NEWS@LSECT.COM

Ofsted is consulting on a new complaints procedure following prolonged criticism and its acceptance that the current system is "not working".

In January, *FE Week* revealed that senior leaders were reviewing the process to make it more human and less bureaucratic.

Pressure for change has since been ramped up amid the fallout from the death of headteacher Ruth Perry.

Ofsted's complaints policy was in the spotlight again last week as apprenticeship provider UKTD Ltd remarkably overturned its published 'inadequate' judgment following a botched inspection last year.

Now Ofsted has revealed plans that would see it throw out its current system of internal reviews and allow leaders unhappy with how their complaints are handled to go straight to an external adjudicator.

If approved, the changes will replace the current procedure that was put in place in 2020.

Here's what you need to know...

1 Formal 'checks' with leaders during inspections

Ofsted said its inspectors already routinely check with leaders throughout an inspection if they have "queries or concerns".

The watchdog has proposed formalising this by asking inspectors to check with leaders at specific stages of the visit, "where appropriate".

These stages will be...

- during the pre-inspection notification call or when an inspector arrives
- at the end-of-day meetings
- at the final feedback session

Ofsted said inspectors could then address any issues raised at the time, rather than after the inspection has taken place.

2 Direct line to a senior inspector

Providers will be given a "new opportunity" to call Ofsted on the day after their inspection to discuss "any unresolved issues". It is understood this has been piloted in one region of England already.

The watchdog said this may include raising informal concerns about the process and its "likely outcome", queries about what happens next or highlighting "information that they feel was not fully considered".

Ofsted said these calls would be directed to senior inspectors "relevant to the type of inspection, but separate to the inspection in question".

The inspectors "will then discuss any issues with the provider so that they can be resolved at the earliest opportunity".

3 Two routes to address concerns

At present, complaints about Ofsted follow a four-step process.

The first step is raising concerns informally shortly after inspection. The second, if issues are not resolved informally, is a formal complaint. The third is an internal review and the fourth is an external complaint to an official adjudicator.

Ofsted is proposing a new first step, with two routes. Leaders can either highlight "minor points of clarity or factual accuracy", which will be considered "promptly" before the report is then finalised.

The watchdog said it expected "the vast majority of providers to follow this route".

However, those that do will "not normally have a later opportunity to raise a formal complaint or challenge", which is a change from the current approach, though Ofsted will consider each provider's circumstances.

The other option is a formal complaint.

4 An inspector calls...

Formal complaints will be investigated by a member of Ofsted staff "independent of the inspection".

This will involve a phone call to "explore their concerns fully and, where possible, resolve issues quickly". Principals/CEOs can highlight information they feel was "not fully considered".

There will be four possible outcomes to an investigation...

- No change to a report
- Changes to a report's text only
- Changes to a grade, including overall effectiveness
- The inspection is deemed incomplete

and confirmation of a further visit to gather more evidence

Ofsted said it would also revise complaint outcome letters to be "clearer for providers about the reasons for decisions made".

5 Internal review process scrapped

Ofsted said it believed its proposals would help to achieve a "right first time" approach and "strengthen" complaints-handling arrangements.

As a result, the watchdog plans to scrap internal reviews of how it handles complaints, which currently form step three of its process.

Under the current scheme, schools, colleges and providers have to go through this internal review before they can ask for an external, independent review.

Under the new scheme, providers concerned that their complaint did not correctly follow the right process would be able to go directly to the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted (ICASO).

This will "reduce the burden on providers raising concerns", the watchdog said.

"Instead of the current escalated levels of review, Ofsted will consider any formal complaints once, and thoroughly."

6 External reviews of closed complaints

Ofsted also plans to introduce periodic reviews of how it handles complaints.

This will be done by taking a sample of closed complaints, which would be submitted to a panel of external reviewers, which will include external representatives from the sectors that Ofsted inspects.

They can "provide challenge and transparency on how we have handled complaints about our work".

Have your say by September

The consultation, which opened this week, will run until Friday, September 15.

Ofsted said the "information you provide us with will inform our new post-inspection arrangements and how we handle complaints about our work."

"We will publish on our website a report on the outcome of this consultation in due course."



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Interview

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PRYCE‘If I started now, I’d
have been sacked
about three times’JESSICA HILL
JESSICA.HILL@LSECT.COM**Jessica Hill meets Ian Pryce, who retires early next year after 24 years at helm of the Bedford College Group**

Ian Pryce believes FE “hasn’t been good” at telling the story of how 30 years of college independence from government changed it “out of all recognition”. The chief executive of the Bedford College Group, is determined to

redress that in his final *FE Week* interview as he approaches retirement.

There is a perfect synchronicity to how his career matches that 30-year golden era.

Pryce, 64, started out in 1992 at the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC, forerunner to the Education and Skills Funding Agency), just as it was launched to replace local authorities in distributing funding to colleges.

He is now entering retirement as colleges have been reclassified as public sector entities and, as a consequence, lose the borrowing and spending

freedoms independence has given them for three decades.

Pryce believes independence made the sector financially prudent and unleashed a wave of innovation, but fears reclassification will reverse those advances. He sees this as a “serious mistake”.

The surreal interview

Pryce’s career in FE began with a very different sort of interview; in a desolate building with one other person present and no furniture. So

Interview

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strange was the set-up that Pryce “wondered if it was actually something real”. In the middle of a room sat Sir Robert Gunn, the chair of the new FEFC who Pryce had previously worked under at the East Midlands Electricity Board. Pryce had never set foot in a college before (aside from a concert), but Gunn persuaded him his new venture – to create a new national college sector – would be “really exciting”.

It was the start of a career journey for Pryce, who went on to become one of FE’s longest-serving leaders with 24 years at the helm in Bedford.

His previous role had been as a financial controller for East Midlands Electricity, which put him in good stead as an FEFC regional finance director, as both roles were “about freeing people up to be in charge of their own institution”.

Like colleges, Pryce had also quit the world of local government finance. His first job was as a trainee accountant under Derek Hatton, deputy leader of Liverpool City Council, when finance officers were tasked with trying to keep the city afloat by any means – including leasing car parking meters to a bank in Japan.

He recalls how when colleges were first “released from the shackles” of local authorities they were keen to distance themselves from their former gamekeepers. There ensued a “rupturing of relationships”, later regretted.

Financial freedoms

Prior to independence, colleges’ funding was a patchwork quilt across the country with some getting five times more per student than others (the winners were those best at negotiating with their local authority).

Pryce slammed this as “clearly unfair and a bad use of national resources”.

Among the “transformative changes that we now take for granted” is the concept of funding following the learner through the national funding formula, which Pryce credits with creating fairness.

The mandate from government was for colleges to boost their numbers. But that growth had to be “very financially efficient”; “growth money” came at a “lower marginal rate”.

Pryce said it felt like “we were trying hard to give colleges the freedoms given to the old polytechnics”, which had just been made independent universities. Whereas college leaders previously lacked choice over which courses they could run, they were handed “significant control over their curriculum, their strategic intent...and were involved a lot in defining quality.”

Crucially, colleges were given control of their own assets, enabling them to “knock their buildings down, build them up and borrow on them” which facilitated the sector’s rapid growth.

Crucially, they could borrow from banks to “accelerate” projects.

“You don’t get many chances to make mistakes any more”

Pryce believes college buildings “significantly improved” in the 10 to 15 years after incorporation while schools – which remained beholden to the purse-strings of government – had some “very poor” estates.

It wasn’t all plain sailing. College leaders now required new skills in how finances and estates were managed, and how colleges should market themselves. Some thrived, others did not. But the new corporate culture made colleges “more responsive” to what students wanted.

There was also a “lot of competition” in those early days between colleges in some of the big cities. “People were stealing each other’s students because they could. The government didn’t mind that, because they wanted that competition on quality.”

Feeling valued

Pryce believes the still prevalent myth that colleges are for those who “didn’t do well at school” and are mainly about “evening classes” was truer in those first few years than now.

But when the Blair years began in 1997, just after Pryce joined Bedford as finance director, government funding taps really started flowing,

with “a big drive on community engagement and adult education”.

Colleges sat under the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills between 2007 to 2009, and being tied in with innovation and universities gave them “a lot of engagement” with ministers.

Then in 2010, their mandate to widen participation was turbocharged when the education participation age was raised from 16 to 18.

Schools didn’t lower their entry criteria to more pupils; it was colleges that went on to become the most popular destination for 16 to 18-year-olds.

It was in the 2010s, when colleges lost their “special status” and became “providers”, that the tide started turning on them.

Per student 16 to 18 funding fell by 14 per cent in real terms between 2010–11 and 2019–20, and the government became more “hands-on” in its management, but without the nuanced understanding of colleges to do so effectively.

Treated as schools

Since FE was handed to the Department for Education in 2016, Pryce believes the government has treated colleges “too much like schools”.

Reclassification “seals a change to treating us like a big school”, whereas under incorporation colleges were treated as “small universities, which we are”.

He points out that contrary to perceptions, most college students are not 16 to 18; “the average age is about 40”. And whereas schools average 400 students, colleges have about 10,000.

He credits education secretary Gillian Keegan and skills minister Robert Halfon with being “certainly on [FE’s] side”. But nowadays, he believes that “almost doesn’t matter” because if the Treasury says no, “that’s the end of the game”.

Pryce also believes that Keegan’s own, relatively positive experience of having done some form of an apprenticeship has led her to overly focus on that agenda. “The danger that if you know too much about a subject then you don’t take in some alternative views.”

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Pryce in 1998...

He questions what the government “really wants” from colleges now, other than “just giving employers what they want” which fills him with disillusionment. “I don’t know what that means anymore.”

Possible benefits?

Pryce reluctantly admits there could be upsides to reclassification. One is “the possibility” colleges could be brought under similar overall teacher pay thresholds as schools, which would mean more generous pay awards.

Staff salaries were “cut back hard” under independence, and Pryce believes lecturers are now “fed up” with seeing their school counterparts being paid £10,000 more than them.

Another potential upside is that reclassifying colleges as public assets distinguishes them from private training providers, which he says are not “assets for the community” in the way that colleges are.

“Rightly, they can pick the things they want to do, whereas we should always serve the community first...therefore we should be funded differently. Being classified differently to private training providers might help us with that.”

Fears over reclassification

But Pryce believes there are many more downsides to reclassification.

As he understands it, the purpose behind it was to give the government the power to dismiss a college principal and governing body. But it has become a “classic sledgehammer to crack a nut” with its myriad of other consequences.

Pryce knows of one college group that has recently taken a loan from the government under the new public sector borrowing arrangements, but has “only been given enough to keep afloat”, creating a “financial headache”.

Banks used to ensure colleges were borrowing more than they needed. Now colleges will have to put in bids to the government for

capital funding. Pryce warns it will be the bigger colleges with established bid teams – like his own group – that will benefit, rather than those with the greatest need.

There is also a “fear of interference” from civil servants who “generally don’t stay in jobs very long”, which will lead to less innovation.

And time-pressed civil servants will be hard-pushed to respond to all the requests that will come from colleges. After all, colleges now have to seek permission for severance packages, and for ex gratia payments, even of small amounts, which “slows things down” and “takes away that freedom to manage”.

Pryce also fears the government is not putting “anything like enough aside to even maintain” the £10 billion of college assets, which means some buildings could become “unsafe” over time with neglect.

College finance teams are also now facing the dilemma of how to treat surpluses that are “not really ours”. And there is the “tricky” challenge of bringing accounting

timelines in line with the government’s.

He also questions whether the sector will be able to retain quality governors. “What’s the attraction of being a governor, if almost every decision you want to make has to be rubber-stamped by department officials who perhaps don’t know much about FE?”

Principal changes

As he departs after 24 years as chief, Pryce cannot imagine any college leader today being able to stay in the job for as long as he has.

“If I started now I would have been sacked about three times on the way! People were pretty forgiving. You don’t get many chances to make mistakes any more.”

But he leaves the sector with his reputation still high – and his musical talents noted (he once performed Dolly Parton’s Jolene dedicated to Justine Greening, the former education secretary).

The £10 million budget he had when he started is now £80 million, and his 250 staff list has grown to 1,800. Pryce found colleges “absolutely fascinating” when he started out, and still does today. “I’ve always liked being in the centre of stuff.”



...and Pryce now



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Closing date: **9am Monday 10 July 2023**

Interview date: **Friday 21 July 2023**



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Interview date: **Mon 3 July 2023**

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Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

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THE STUDENT COMMISSION ON RACIAL JUSTICE

THE STUDENT COMMISSION ON RACIAL JUSTICE has published its 2023 **Manifesto for Action**. Over the next five weeks, its commissioners will set out its five key priorities and recommendations exclusively for *FE Week*

We need a visible culture of inclusion that celebrates diversity and normalises conversations about racial justice



DE'ANDRE MORRIS

Student, Solihull College and University Centre

The invisible curriculum must be as inclusive as what happens in the classroom, writes De'Andre Morris

I'm 19. I study performing arts at college and I've experienced racism since primary school. Since then I've experienced micro-aggressions and other racially motivated behaviours, not just to me but to friends and family. Education must do more to be part of the solution.

One of the key areas of investigation for the Student Commission on Racial Justice is a crucial aspect of college life: events, social life, and college culture. Our recommendation is a simple one: celebrate diversity and normalise racial justice conversations.

But just telling you how to improve the culture within colleges doesn't matter without understanding why it is important. The truth is that colleges lack cultural education. Despite living in a diverse country, there is poor cultural visibility, making minority students feel that their voices do not matter.

The cultural life of a college affects us all. It forms a sort of invisible curriculum that teaches many minority students that they are not safe, that they do not matter, and that the perpetrators' lack of education is an excuse for their

racist words and actions.

Too many of us have experienced verbal or physical abuse within education, from students and staff. We are victims of stereotypes and worse, which add up to a common experience of living in a discriminatory culture.

“Too many of us have experienced verbal or physical abuse”

One ongoing refrain is that things are “not as bad” as they were 50 years ago. Fine, but this tells us more about how bad things were then than it does about how good they are now.

Our society is becoming more culturally and racially diverse,

but understanding and respect are not keeping up. Most find it a “difficult conversation”, and all of this goes back to education. Educating people in their formative years about different cultures and racial backgrounds fosters more understanding, and a willingness to tackle that difficult conversation. Students want more opportunities to do this, as well as more visibility for their own cultures.

Education institutions need to do more to eliminate racist behaviours. On my course we often learn about different cultures and perform stories that represent many walks of life. We have deep conversations about identity, society and culture. This is not a common enough experience. In fact, only 50 per cent of students surveyed by our commission said staff encouraged them to talk about

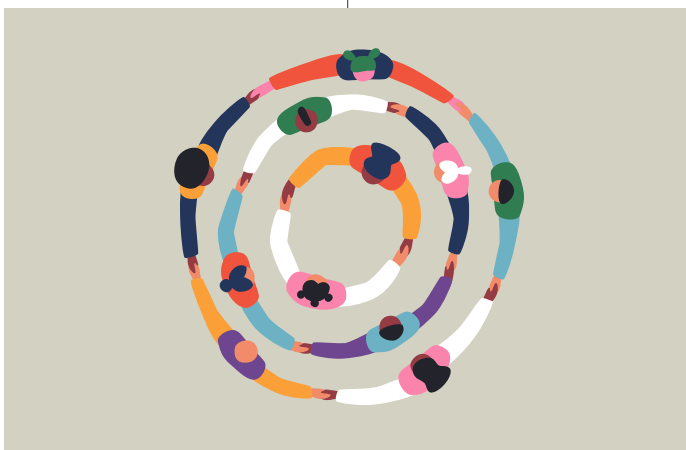
major events in the news related to race. This should be a given, no matter what you study.

Improving college culture isn't restricted to the classroom. We recommend targeting your events and activities too. You could create a calendar of significant cultural events that reflect the diversity of modern Britain, and involve your students in the design and delivery.

You could hold regular campaigns on racial justice, exploring topics from current affairs to the impact of micro-aggressions. Black History Month is a good start, but remember that celebrating Britain's diversity is everyday work.

Having said that, celebration days work. My personal favourite is to establish a culture day, which many students reported as a positive part of their college experience. A culture day creates a space for students to celebrate their own cultures and those of their peers. At my college, we attend in clothing that represents our cultures, wave our many flags, and enjoy food and music from around the world.

There is nothing invisible about racism – only what we choose not to see. To create a genuinely inclusive society, we have to choose to see it, and each other.



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THE STAFF ROOM

Dispatches from the frontline of FE

As providers we must embrace our role in making apprenticeships more inclusive

A rise in the popularity of apprenticeships must be matched by increased efforts to make them more accessible to neurodivergent learners, writes Mesay Gashaw

The popularity of apprenticeships has soared since the introduction of the levy in 2017. Nevertheless, it is disconcerting that neurodivergent students have limited accessibility. To fix that, we need to start by shedding light on the challenges they encounter.

“Current programmes remain intrinsically generic”

Lately, there has been a significant shift in the mindset of many learners, who are now favouring apprenticeship as their preferred path for progression. Students can earn while they learn, gain industry-specific skills and avoid the burden of student loans. Successful completion leads to a recognised qualification and enhances job prospects. And they are accessible to a wide range of learners from level 2 to level 7, making them an appealing and well-defined pathway.

But what of the 15 per cent of the population thought to be neurodiverse. Education has been working for decades to improve inclusiveness, but there is still



MESAY E. GASHAW

Lecturer, course leader and lead internal verifier, London South East Colleges

plenty of scope for improvement. Apprenticeships also involve employers, many of whom have never engaged in this kind of work. Are they ready to meet the standards we set, let alone to help us to keep driving those standards up?

Neurodiversity varies from person to person and represents a spectrum of needs, from hidden disabilities to more severe impairments. But our current programmes to support learners to find apprenticeships remain intrinsically generic. Indeed, my experience indicates that they are devoid of factoring in the spectrum of needs of neurodivergent learners.

A one-size-fits-all approach is clearly inadequate. Neurodivergent learners need personalised guidance and support to make informed decisions about their education and career paths.

Another key barrier is systemic. Higher-level apprenticeships are, to all intents and purposes, off-limits for many neurodivergent learners who have completed level 3 vocational courses and struggled to achieve a grade 4 at GCSE or a level 2 in functional skills for maths, English or both.

Mencap has suggested that, where there is no industry standard regarding English and maths, neurodivergent learners' abilities to meet the requirements of the job should be reassessed. This is certainly an area where FE providers could work with employers to increase access. In the meantime, however, the rigid criteria means many neurodivergent learners remain ineligible for the level 3 and higher apprenticeship opportunities.

Support networks are a third barrier. Lack of tailored support and industry standards often result in learners turning to their parents or other sources for guidance into work, but these support networks can be limited – not least with the information required to navigate the complex apprenticeships system and put them on a level footing with their peers.

According to Scope, the disability employment gap is 29 per cent. This is even more pronounced for neurodivergent learners from

disadvantaged groups. As a recent Guardian article highlighted, people from BAME backgrounds continue to face barriers to accessing apprenticeships – even without learning difficulties.

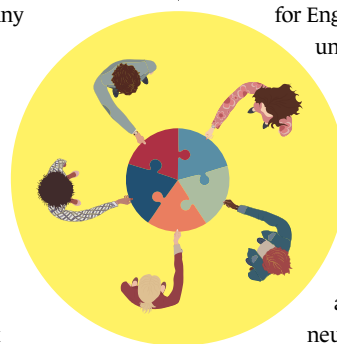
The rise in the popularity of apprenticeships, and the distinct advantages these qualifications confer, require us to think carefully about how our improving culture of inclusion can grow to encompass the specific demands of these qualifications.

Part of that is up to the DfE, who as part of their SEND and AP review must surely also revise the current Specification of Apprenticeship Standards

for England'to remove unnecessary restrictions.

But there is a lot that we can and should be doing to offer personalised and sufficient assistance for neurodivergent students. We must establish policies that guarantee equal access to support and guidance, based on needs.

And we must work with employers to make apprenticeships more inclusive. Big employers such as Microsoft, Ernst and Young, JPMorgan Chase, and GCHQ are at the forefront of this work, but the many SMEs who form the backbone of apprenticeships and the economy need our help to follow suit.



Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

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If you feel that your college could be vulnerable, then trust your instincts. Get ahead of the curve and run an SPA


IAN VALVONA

Former chair,
Richmond-Upon-Thames College
and Kensington and
Chelsea College

The college-led structure and prospects appraisal has lost popularity – but could be just the ticket to taking back control, says Ian Valvona

Workload has sped up for college boards. Accountability agreements, local skills improvement plans, annual conversations with the DfE, external governance reviews. Meanwhile, worries about quality, finances and big estates plan haven't gone away.

You've been worried for a while that something could go wrong. Then something does. The DfE conducts an assessment through the FE college team and its last recommendation is a commissioner-led structure and prospects appraisal (SPA). That's it. You've lost control of your future.

How did it come to this? The board is split, maybe feeling blindsided. It's not much use now, but you're having strained conversations about how you could have headed off this situation.

The answer is a college-led SPA. An SPA is a process to follow if you are considering anything from major structural change to a significant alteration of your delivery model. It doesn't have to be focused only on merger.

Outcomes might include federation or looser collaborative models, withdrawing from or locally merging key areas of provision or, of course, no change at all. If you've got a nagging doubt

that your college could be vulnerable, then trust your instincts. Get ahead of the curve and get answers for yourself. Run an SPA through a committee that reports to the board.

At the very least, it will be useful as you approach your next annual conversation with the DfE. Something in the back pocket. It's ten years ago now, but the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) guidance for colleges on how to conduct them is still relevant.

Another good reason is that reclassification could still result in further centralising behaviours from the DfE in response to almost palpable anxiety around colleges' financial grip. Now feels like the right time to take back some control.

I believe the two London colleges I chaired between 2018 and 2023 were well served by commissioner-led SPAs. They were in almost uniquely difficult circumstances, but merger was the necessary outcome for

both. Nevertheless, I sometimes wonder what their futures might have been if they had determined to take control of their own destinies.

I also wonder what steps leadership in local colleges could have taken collaboratively to preserve, enhance and protect the leadership bandwidth that we know is so precious in the sector.

“Get ahead of the curve and get answers for yourself”

Just as important to protect are the people who embody that bandwidth. One of the main worries for chairs today is their duty of care to their principal and chief executive. The Association of Colleges is rightly speaking up about these pressures. Collaboration and mutual support are surely central to the response, however

it's formalised (or not).

The DBIS guidance details a few triggers chairs should consider for commissioning a college-led SPA. Interestingly, it doesn't prominently pick out large capital estates schemes. In my experience, however, any significant capital scheme should almost automatically warrant board consideration of a college-led SPA. It's no coincidence that my last detailed estates conversation with a college leader segued imperceptibly into musing about merger.

The role of the board, and the chair in particular, is key. Harder-edged structural changes that come about outside of intervention are invariably driven by the chief executive, sometimes communicating with the DfE/FEC. It is all conducted in highly private ways. That's understandable, but chairs and boards really need a greater role up front.

Perhaps I am tripping over process, but I believe it's important (and uncodified) process. In local and regional contexts, college-led SPAs could be discussed transparently first by chairs, and then commissioned to chief executives by chairs and their boards.

It would require groups of like-minded chairs and boards, prepared to put aside competitive instincts. Ultimately, they own the blueprint for FE education and training delivery in their local areas, and do so in the best interests of all students and their whole community.



Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

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Why Manchester's proposals could lead us straight MBacc to square one. It's vital that we make more structural changes


MARIUS S. OSTROWSKI

 Executive director,
Lifelong Education
Institute

Greater Manchester's reforms are a step in the right direction but the journey has much further to go, writes Marius Ostrowski

The Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham recently unveiled plans to introduce a Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) with the aim of shifting the city's educational focus towards more technical subjects. Where the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) sets learners up to progress on to A Levels and university, the MBacc is intended to dovetail with a more vocational route in post-16 learning, including T Levels and progressing through the skills sector.

“It is the best alternative so far to the EBacc”

The MBacc is a good example of what can be done by local authorities using the new powers granted to them through devolution. It promises to better match the skills demanded by jobs to the supply of relevant qualifications in a way that reflects local idiosyncrasies. Burnham's seven proposed “career gateways” are calibrated to the strongest areas of the Greater Manchester economy.

With its focus on the 14–19 age bracket, the MBacc also



breaks somewhat away from the “state of play” in policy discussions around technical skills. It recognises that the path to higher technical qualifications is laid early in our educational trajectories. It also represents the best-developed positive alternative so far to the EBacc framework, long criticised for its academic skew.

By tying together 14–16 secondary education provision with the early stages of post-16 tertiary learning, the MBacc creates a smoother pathway through the complex climbing frame of qualifications. This allows learners to more easily navigate the step up into training and upskilling after school. Apprenticeships or vocational certificates and diplomas are no longer add-ons or afterthoughts, but a natural and pre-planned continuation.

Yet despite these clear areas of promise, the MBacc does not really touch some of the most

fundamental problems of our education system.

Writing in these pages, Burnham was quick to say that he did not envisage EBacc and MBacc as “two rigid, parallel routes but an approach with as much commonality as possible”, with plenty of opportunities “to switch between the two”.

He is right: our system needs deeper integration and it is crucial to elevate technical training to the same status as academic study. But the MBacc's presentation as an alternative to the EBacc looks set to perpetuate the false rivalry between these two learning tracks. The proposals are open for consultation, but it is unclear whether enough groundwork has been laid to set up a genuine alternative. And besides, schools will continue to be held accountable for EBacc results.

Meanwhile, any consideration of what happens after learners

turn 20 is missing. Many of the skills they need are precisely those offered by the MBacc qualifications. The MBacc must fit into a much larger programme of lifelong pathways in technical learning and skills training.

A final missing piece in the proposal is the voice of learners. It is hugely promising to see such strong support for the scheme from businesses, colleges and the combined authority. Yet the scepticism among learners towards the “WelshBacc” hangs over the MBacc. Stakeholders will have their work cut out to ensure the MBacc has the visibility and take-up appeal it needs to succeed and that careers advisers can avoid presenting it as a poor relation.

If Westminster can learn anything from the proposal, it is that its EBacc calculation (and with it Achievement 8 and Progress 8) is increasingly out of step. It should include more technical options, giving learners more choices between and across academic and vocational subjects for longer.

And for local authorities with devolution deals, fostering local education partnerships that allow learners to “mix and match” academic and technical learning could be just as productive as the MBacc, without the fanfare.

Greater Manchester can justly claim to be leading the way towards a new approach to technical learning. But it does not obviate the need for much larger structural changes.

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

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Mind the gap: we need to re-envision an adult skills sector where every learner can learn, grow and contribute


**IVJYOT
OBEROI**

 Analyst,
Government
& Enterprise,
Social Finance

New research reveals seismic changes in job supply and employee demands with considerable repercussions for adult education, writes Ivjyot Oberoi

The workforce and learner landscape is rapidly evolving, driven by factors such as demographic shifts, technological advances and the changing dynamics of the global economy.

In 2015, people aged 60-plus represented 12.3 per cent of the global population, but by 2050 this will have increased to more than a fifth (21.3 per cent). Plus, more and more people are moving towards entrepreneurship, favouring its autonomy and flexibility over traditional employment.

It is increasingly clear that our current systems – those that govern work and education, and the intersection of the two – are at odds with these changes. There is a change in how we learn, upskill and consume information. The adult education sector must adapt to fill this gap with new, innovative ways of delivering training.

For a recent report for the City of London, Social Finance conducted research into global skills trends and best practices and came across the following workforce and learner demographics.

An ageing population at risk of exclusion

Although working longer has financial and non-financial benefits, recent digital and

technological advances mean older people are at higher risk of being excluded from work. Regular boot camps on developing skills for older adults in lifelong learning centres could optimise the demographic benefit.

The spring budget showed the Treasury is aware of this with its "returnships" to motivate adults over 50 to rejoin the workforce. Elsewhere, India-based Magic Billion offers certified training to local talent, helping to bridge skills gaps in nations with older populations. Collaboration with this kind of global expert could offer a temporary stop-gap and prevent an economic slowdown that skills gaps bring.

Non-linear career paths

The notion of a career for life is waning, replaced by the rise of non-linear careers. Millennials in particular are leading this change, with more than 21 per cent in the US having switched jobs in the past year, a threefold increase compared to non-millennials.

In the UK, millennials have

held as many jobs as 55-year-olds have in their entire careers. This trend is fuelled by a quest for better salaries, personal growth, work-life balance, and monetising hobbies. But job insecurity, the disappearance of industries and lack of progression also force frequent employment changes. Covid-19 has accentuated this trend.

“53 per cent of young people want to set up their own business”

Other systemic problems mean those spending significant time out of the workforce – for parental leave or because of contact with the criminal justice system – continue to face challenges when re-entering employment. For instance, only 23 per cent of those released from custody are employed six months later.

Whatever the reason, supporting such transitions with high-quality education and skills training at every life stage is crucial and requires collaboration between private trainers, employers, and government. Enhanced data collection would also help to track the challenges of those available to rejoin the workforce and refer them to existing services.

The age of entrepreneurs

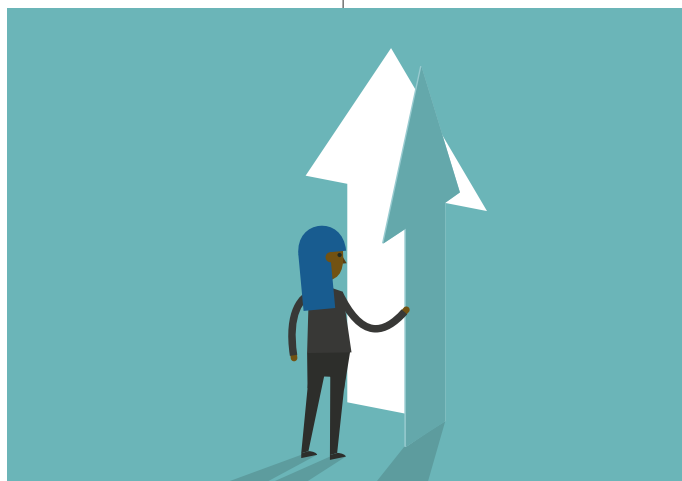
Entrepreneurial activity among young people in the UK has doubled since 2000, with 53 per cent expressing a desire to set up their own businesses, which includes turning hobbies into careers. Yet there's a noticeable lack of training and support to capitalise on this upsurge.

Programmes such as The Prince's Trust's Get Into offer potential solutions, with its hands-on training to support budding entrepreneurs. Likewise, Senart's young creators programme offers invaluable mentorships.

Local government bodies can play a crucial role by fostering such practical learning programmes with the private sector.

We need to re-envision an education sector where every learner, regardless of age or circumstance, can learn, grow and contribute. To do that, we must respond to the trends shaping not only industry but the aspirations of individuals.

Our report showcases various examples of how collaborative efforts are effectively narrowing the skills gap, and we must learn from their successes.



Bulletin

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Gillian Day

Director of Finance and Resources, JTL

Start date: April 2023

Previous Job: Director of Finance & Corporate Services, The Housing Ombudsman

Interesting fact: As a linguist, Gillian has lived in both Spain and France and, when a student at university, used to earn a bit of extra cash by making and decorating wedding cakes

Movers & Shakers

Your weekly guide to who's new and who's leaving



Michael Wood Williams

Chair, Gateshead College

Start date: April 2023

Concurrent Job: In house corporate counsel and investor

Interesting fact: Michael worked as a professional skier and climber for ten years in the Austrian Alps

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