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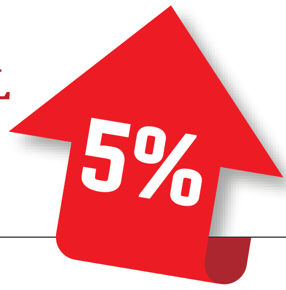

COVERAGE FROM AELP CONFERENCE

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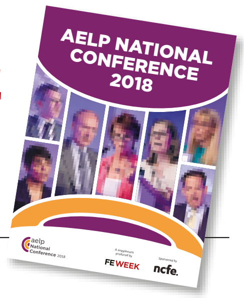

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EDITION 250

3AAA OFSTED INSPECTION 'INCOMPLETE'

› ESFA intervenes at the nation's biggest apprenticeship provider to small employers

› New information 'has come to light' after writing our report, inspectorate says

Exclusive

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See page 3

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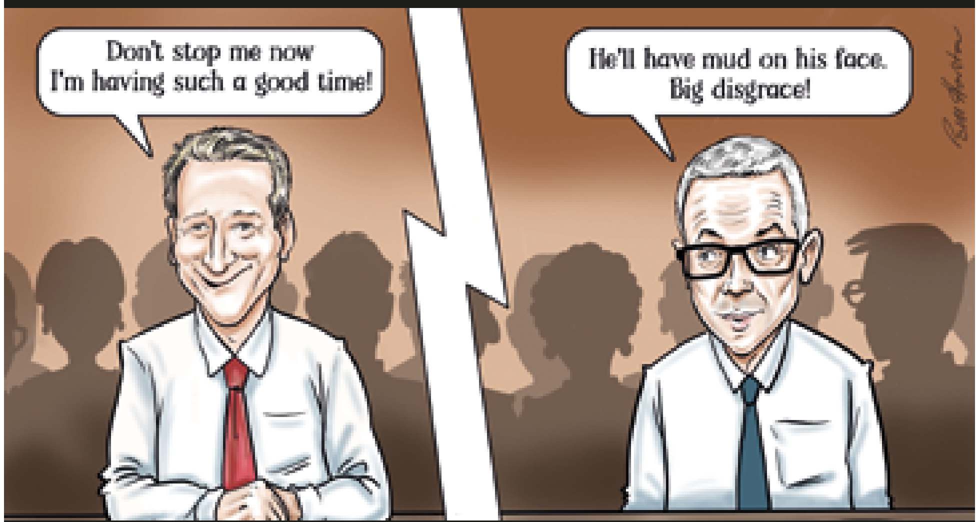

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News

Secrecy surrounds Ofsted's decision to declare its 3aaa inspection 'incomplete'

PAUL OFFORD
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Exclusive

Ofsted's latest inspection of Aspire Achieve Advance – which holds the largest ESFA apprenticeship allocation – is "incomplete" following intervention from the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

The inspectorate had at first confirmed on June 20 that it had inspected the provider, which is commonly known as 3aaa, in May and that nothing was amiss.

"The report is currently going through our normal processes and will be published in due course," a spokesperson said at the time.

But there was a sudden change in the wind a day later, after Ofsted released a second statement to FE Week mentioning "new information".

"Given new information that has come to light, we have decided to declare our inspection of Aspire Achieve Advance Limited incomplete," a spokesperson said.

"In due course, pending further information from the EFSA, we will decide whether we need to return to the provider to gather further evidence."

3aaa did not provide a comment on Ofsted's decision.

Its allocation for non-levy apprenticeships now stands at nearly £22 million, up from £5.5 million at the start of the academic year.

The provider, which specialises in "professional services apprenticeships" has seen significant growth under the leadership of Peter Marples and Di McEvoy-Robinson, its chief executive and director respectively.

Direct ESFA funding increased from just £390,000 in 2012/13 to £3.6 million the following year. It rose again to £12.5 million in 2014/15 and to £21.7 million a year later.

Its apprenticeships include IT, software, digital marketing, accountancy, financial services, business administration, customer service and management.

"We are a national company offering a personalised, local service in 38 locations as we look to partner local talent and businesses together to enhance careers and the economy through workplace training," its website states.

It is also claims to place a "huge emphasis" on employing high-quality, industry-experienced staff which means "we are able to deliver outstanding apprenticeship programmes that are developed with a focus on providing industry led skills and experience".

It has been inspected only once before, in October 2014, receiving 'outstanding' ratings across the board in a report which recognised that "the vast majority of apprentices make excellent progress".

Performance management was "very strong and, linked with excellent communications and robust quality-assurance, enables managers to pursue improvement relentlessly".

Neither the Department for Education nor the ESFA would explain their part in Ofsted's shock decision to delay the latest inspection.

"We don't comment on individual cases nor on any investigations ongoing or otherwise," said a DfE spokesperson when asked about the case.

"If and when we have concerns raised to us we would take the relevant action."

Bids reopen for £13m strategic college improvement fund

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Colleges can bid for the remaining £13 million from the strategic college improvement fund using newly released guidance.

The first round of the fund was launched last year, when 14 struggling colleges shared £2 million.

This announcement invites struggling colleges, supported by a stronger institution, to ask for money to help them improve in specific areas.

The fund will "enable colleges to access resources that they need to improve their provision for students, including the best practice of other colleges, while at the same time mobilising and strengthening improvement in the FE sector".

It's a two-stage process, and applications for stage one are due by July 27.

To be eligible, FE and sixth-form colleges must be rated grade three or four either for overall effectiveness or in any of a number of headline fields, including outcomes for learners, and leadership and management, in their most recent Ofsted inspection report.

A recently merged college will be eligible to apply if at least one of the pre-merger institutions meets this criteria.

The area of improvement must have been identified during a recent Ofsted visit, a diagnostic assessment carried out by the FE commissioner, or another commissioner intervention.

They must have a "suitable approach for addressing this need" and "have the capacity and capability to deliver the improvement activities that they're proposing".

The college will be expected to work with a stronger partner, which will use its expertise to bring about the changes, but they do not need to have identified a partner for stage one.

Partners could be – but do not have to be – a college headed up by one of the National Leaders of FE (NLFE).

These are a group of seven leaders from 'good' or 'outstanding' colleges.

Colleges will be told by August 24 if they've made it through stage one.

Those that make it through to stage two will be given "support from sector experts" to develop their applications in more detail.

The deadline for stage two applications is September 21, with a final decision due by October 15.

The SCIF is one of a number of new initiatives intended to support colleges at risk of failing before they hit rock bottom.

Other measures include the NLFE programme and the FE commissioner's diagnostic assessments which help struggling colleges identify areas where they need to improve.

The FE commissioner Richard Atkins told FE Week that his overall aim with these initiatives is to "try to avoid the catastrophe we're seeing at the moment at one or two colleges" by supporting them at an earlier stage.

The skills minister said that the fund will "enable colleges to work together to improve standards across all colleges".

"We want to improve the quality of education for everyone. It is vital that all further education and sixth form colleges are able to give people the skills and knowledge they need to get on in their life and succeed in the workplace," said Anne Milton.

Mr Atkins said the fund "offers a great opportunity to harness the capacity within the sector".

Bill Watkin, the chief executive of the Sixth-Form Colleges Association, said the fund "represents a real opportunity to benefit from a well-structured and well-resourced quality improvement programme".

And David Corke, the Association of Colleges' director of education and skills policy, has "long called for a peer improvement scheme for further education to match the one in schools" and is "encouraged by the opening up of the eligibility criteria to allow more colleges to apply".

News

Ofsted: Size matters – but it's not always good

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"Big is not always beautiful," Ofsted's main man for FE has warned, admitting he is considering the effect of mega-colleges formed through mergers on quality.

Paul Joyce's admission comes just a week after the nation's largest college group NCG saw its rating slip to 'requires improvement'.

"We are looking at our survey programme as to whether something relating to the merger theme is timely to do," he told FE Week.

"We are concerned at the size of some providers, in relation to poor performance data, so big is not always beautiful."

NCG was downgraded from 'good' in part due to concerns around poor achievement rates.

These were well below average for both apprenticeships and 16-to-18 study programmes.

The report, published on June 21, noted that "executive" leaders had spent a "substantial amount of their time on due diligence" for the group's two most recent members, Carlisle College and Lewisham Southwark College, and reviewing other merger requests.


Paul Joyce

In an interview with FE Week ahead of the report's appearance, NCG's chair Peter Lauener insisted that he had staff looking at quality, but admitted that the main focus had been on tackling financial issues at the member colleges.

"Standards are not where we want them to be," he conceded.

NCG's fall from grace came just eight months after another sector giant, Learndirect, received a damning grade four.

It received considerable governmental special treatment in the wake of the result, leading to questions about whether it, as the nation's largest independent training provider, was too big to fail.

In an exclusive interview with FE Week last week, skills minister Anne Milton conceded that "too big to fail is not an invalid point".

With the growing number of mega-colleges such as NCG being formed through mergers, she said she was "very mindful of colleges being too big to fail. I think we need to watch it."

Large college groups to have been created after the area reviews of post-16 education and training include Capital City College Group, which has three members and a turnover of £80 million, according to 2016/17 accounts.

And if New City College's plans to merge with Epping Forest College, Havering College and Havering Sixth-Form College go ahead, it will have six members and a combined turnover of £108 million.

The trend for colleges to join forces is showing no signs of slowing down, with FE commissioner Richard Atkins predicting around 15 new partnerships this year – the same amount as last year.

Ofsted's policy is to give merged colleges up to three years before they're inspected.

However, Mr Joyce said that while it is "right to give them time to embed their systems and processes" it is also "right that we do monitor them".

"If we do have concerns, if for example performance data does cause us a concern before the three-year period, if we get a lot of complaints from students or if there's other reasonable intelligence that the merger is not working, we will go and inspect sooner," he said.

FE Week reported in February on the prospect of Ofsted carrying out campus-level inspections from as early as next year.

A new "campus identifier" data field in the individualised learner record, to be introduced next academic year, is designed to "allow identification of provision delivered across the various sites of merged institutions".

This could pave the way for individual reports on colleges that were previously independent, but which now sit within merged groups.

Ofsted carries out a programme of surveys and thematic reviews alongside its main inspection programme.

This is meant to be an annual programme, but it has now been almost two years since its last FE-specific research, into the Prevent duty, was published in August 2016.

AoC criticises new public sector register of providers

PAUL OFFORD
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Exclusive

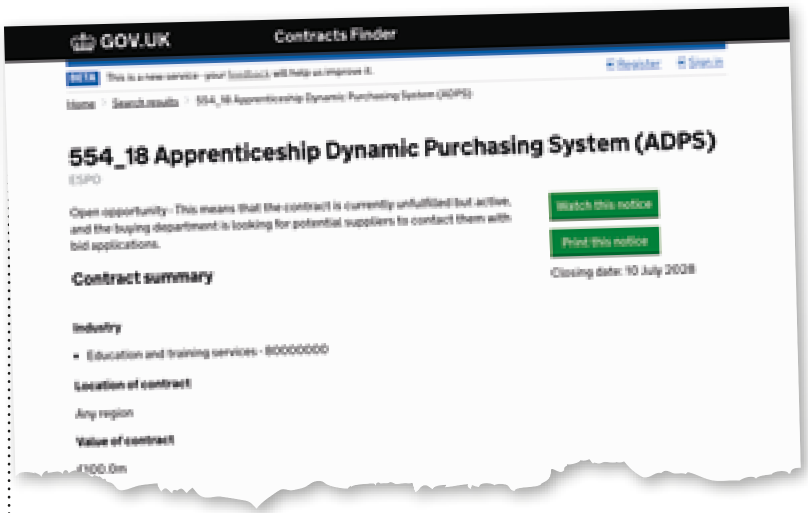
A second register for apprenticeship training providers is being created for the public sector, and the Association of Colleges is furious that its members must pay to reap the benefits.

The apprenticeship dynamic purchasing system has been launched by ESPO, which describes itself as a public sector-owned "professional buying organisation".

Providers must register before they can bid for apprenticeship training contracts with public sector employers across the UK.

These include local authorities, educational establishments including academies, central government departments and agencies, the police, fire and rescue and coastguard emergency services, and the NHS.

Colleges and independent learning providers will pay ESPO a "rebate" if they win a contract, expecting to earn it at least £500,000 from public skills contract funding.



Teresa Frith, the AoC's senior policy manager, is not happy about the arrangement. She has "raised this issue with the Education and Skills Funding Agency and Department for Education and we know that they have taken the issue seriously and investigated".

"It is unfortunate that procurement appears to be the first stop to seek partnerships in delivery where substantial amounts of funding are involved," she added. "Apprenticeships are not widgets to be bought off the shelf of the cheapest bidder."

The dynamic purchasing system will launch on July 11. It will last for at least two years, but can be extended for a further eight. Up to £100 million will be available.

Providers which win contracts will on average pay ESPO 0.5 per cent of the value, through payments referred to as "rebates".

An ESPO spokesperson claimed providers would ultimately save money with its service.


Teresa Frith

She said its "streamlined and standardised procurement system shoulders the administrative burden" on public sector training, meaning providers "don't have to spend significant sums on multiple procurement processes which would increase their costs".

"We expect the rebate paid by suppliers to come out of their budgeted business costs, which includes other core overheads such as office costs and insurance."

However, AELP boss Mark Dawe is not best pleased.

"We don't like charges like this arrangement and we don't like multiple registers but DfE and ESFA have told us these are acceptable so we have no option but to tolerate them," he said.

The ESFA's main register of providers eligible to deliver public and private sector apprenticeships launched in March 2017.

This newer register is seen by some as only the latest example of brokerage, which hives off a proportion of public sector apprenticeships funding.

FE Week reported in March that candidates to train civil service apprentices were told to register with the Crown Commercial Service, and a group of 16 were chosen.

The winners were given access to at least £360 million, generated through the public sector's own apprenticeship levy payments, of which CCS retains a one-per-cent "management fee".

The NHS has also attempted to charge providers around one per cent of the value of their contracts, in another brokerage scheme.

Nottingham city council was exposed along similar lines last summer.

The government changed its rules in 2017 to state that "funds in an employer's digital account or government-employer co-investment must not be used for specific services not related to the delivery and administration of the apprenticeship".

FE Week's understanding is that such charges are permitted if they aren't included in the negotiated levy price, though brokerage fees nevertheless remain a controversial topic throughout the FE sector.

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News

Lowestoft SFC staff striking for six days over merger plan

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Staff at Lowestoft Sixth-Form College walked out on the first of six days of strike action protesting a planned merger this week.

The industrial action involves 20 of the SFC's 70 staff, and is being led by NASUWT. The first walk-out was on June 27 and further strikes are planned for July 2, 3, 10, 11 and 12.

A spokesperson for the teachers' union said this was because grade two Ofsted-rated Lowestoft is "due to merge with East Coast College, which has significantly worse terms and conditions for its staff".

"It is very disappointing that the NASUWT union feel it necessary to take this action and I hope that they will reconsider in the light of the actual terms of transfer that are being negotiated," said David Gartland, the SFC's principal.

"If we proceed with the merger, the terms and conditions of existing staff will not change, and they are protected".

He insisted that all existing staff would move to the grade three East Coast College with their existing pay and holiday entitlement, and would retain their public-sector pensions.

"There are no redundancies expected as a result of a merger, due in part to the lean management structure we already have in place," he added. "Regardless of the outcome of the proposed merger discussions, our aim is to ensure our students continue to have an outstanding sixth-form experience."

Normal timetabled lessons were cancelled on the day of the strike and a series of non-compulsory drop-in sessions have been organised for students instead.

The 2017 Norfolk and Suffolk area review of post-16 education and training recommended a merger between the two colleges, and they announced in April this year that "there has been significant progress towards this proposal".

Following "careful consideration", the SFC launched a public consultation on the proposed merger which ran from March 31 to May 4. The responses and resulting report are due to be published in early July.

A spokesperson for the SFC said a final decision "has not yet been made as to whether the merger will go ahead" and is subject to the board considering consultation responses.

If the decision is made to proceed, the merger will go through on August 1.

The union said it is striking over "transfer of contract of employment with unilateral variation to terms and conditions of service and potential job loss".

Chris Keates, NASUWT's general secretary, backed her striking members.

"These restructuring plans could potentially leave teachers on significantly worse pay and working conditions," she said.

"NASUWT members are not only concerned about their future careers, but also the impact that worsening terms and conditions will have on the future recruitment of teachers at the SFC, which in turn threatens the quality of learning and support for students.

"Due to the hard work and commitment of staff, Lowestoft is the top-performing sixth-form college in Suffolk and Norfolk, with a progress score rated as well above average by the DfE, placing the College in the top five per cent of schools and colleges in England.

"NASUWT members want to ensure that teachers continue to receive the pay and working conditions which will support them to maintain this excellent achievement."

Lowestoft SFC has 743 funded students. Most are on level three A-Level and BTEC study programmes, with others taking level two GCSE and BTEC qualifications.

East Coast College was formed in August 2017 through the merger of Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth Colleges, and now provides further and higher education and training to over 4,000 students.

East Coast College has been approached for comment.

Further education unions write to AoC to justify 5% pay claim

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Trade unions have written to the Association of Colleges to spell out exactly why they have resubmitted a claim for a raise of five per cent for the next academic year.

They originally made the request at a meeting at the start of May, but the AoC said it would not consider a claim while some colleges were still in dispute with the University and College Union.

Later that month the AoC, which represents college leadership, backed down.

"There is a unanimous acceptance among further education participants (staff, learners and leaders), stakeholders and commentators, that there is an urgent need for increased investment in FE staff pay," representatives from UCU and Unison wrote.

"At a time when pay settlements in the rest of the public sector are no longer subject to a one-per-cent cap, there is a real danger that FE falls further behind.

"We call on the AoC to make an offer that meets our members' reasonable expectation for an above inflation pay rise and catch up from a decade of real cuts in pay."

FE staff have suffered a "staggering real-terms cut in pay" of over 25 per cent since 2009.

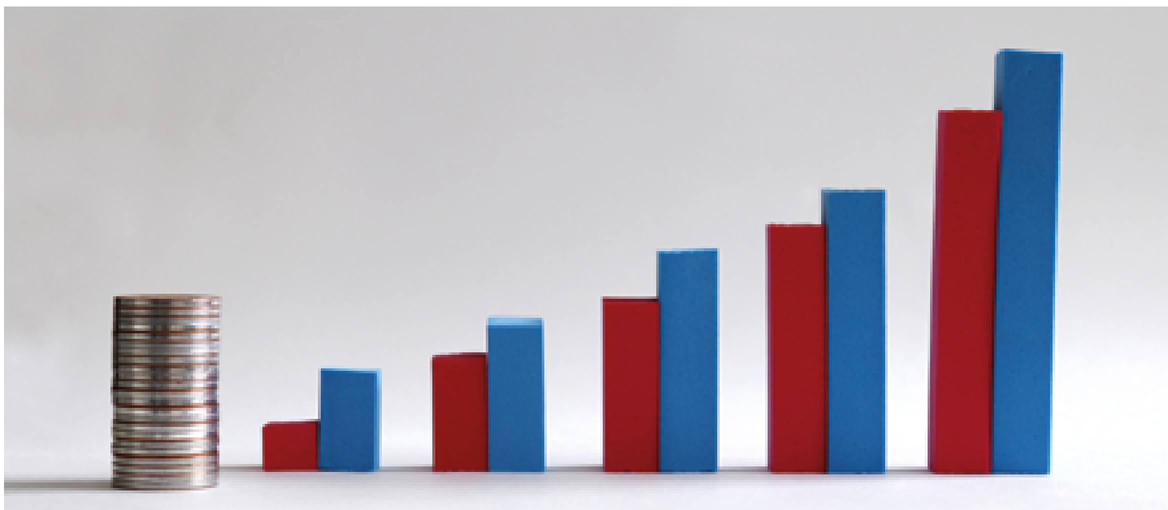
"In cash terms, that means a £2,484 pay-cut on the bottom point, rising to over £9,000 for experienced lecturers and more for those higher up the scale," the letter said. "Many have suffered worse where few or no increases have been awarded over those years."

The unions want a guaranteed minimum increase of £1,500 for the lowest-paid staff where a five-per-cent rise is lower than £1,500.

They also want colleges to pay the living wage of £8.75 (£10.20 in London) and become accredited living wage employers.

Every union representing staff working in FE, which include Unison, Unite, GMB and the National Education Union as well as UCU, previously submitted a claim for a five-per-cent raise or £1,500, whichever is higher, in May.

This has been a summer of heated industrial action, which has seen the unions record a certain degree of success.



Bosses at Capital City College Group reached a deal with staff to end a long-running pay dispute, just days after UCU members voted unanimously to escalate action nationwide if the AoC failed to meet 2018/19 pay demands.

Bosses offered staff a "modest, non-consolidated payment" and more secure contracts.

A payment of £500 per full-time member of staff came in addition to the one-per-cent increase recommended by the AoC last September.

A third wave of action at 10 colleges or campuses over the one-per-cent offer the AoC made for 2017/18 was announced early in May.

But four have now reached agreements, with Sandwell College agreeing a "sector-leading" deal worth more than six per cent over three years.

A strike over job cuts at Bradford College was called off at the last minute, after it agreed to reopen its voluntary redundancy scheme.

"Colleges have some of the most talented and dedicated staff, transforming lives across the UK every day," said AoC boss David Hughes. "We need to do all that we can to recognise, respect and reward them, and we look forward to constructive talks with the national joint forum in July.

"The chronic under-funding of the FE sector is damaging for staff and students – it is simply not acceptable that teachers in schools are earning on average £37,000 compared but only £30,000 in colleges.

"The AoC will continue to work positively with the trade unions to pressure government for proper investment in a sector supporting 2.2 million people each year in England."

Software developer saves Learndirect with takeover

BILLY CAMDEN
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Learndirect has a new owner after a deal was struck by the entrepreneur Wayne Janse van Rensburg to take the reins.

But it remains unclear how many jobs will be saved at the troubled provider, as any government skills income beyond July will be limited to that received by Learndirect Apprenticeships Limited (LDA), which began recruiting apprentices last May.

PeoplePlus Group had been in talks with the owners of Learndirect, Lloyds Development Capital (LDC), but this deal fell through early last week.

LDC then turned to entrepreneur Wayne Janse van Rensburg, who runs a training provider called Dimensions Training Solution (DTS).

He is the managing director of the Stonebridge College Group, which supplies Learndirect with a virtual learning environment known as PEARL.

Stonebridge College Group includes DTS, which he acquired in 2015.

It took just a few days for the Education and Skills Funding Agency to approve the change in ownership on the register of apprenticeship training providers.

LDC may also make a deal to financially support a DTS business plan to own and run Learndirect.

It is understood that the deal means DTS will also take ownership of Pimco 2090, which includes the subsidiary companies of Learndirect Centres Limited, Learndirect Limited and Learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd.

Mr Janse Van Rensburg officially became a director of Learndirect on June 23, according to Companies House.

"The acquisition of Learndirect has protected the future of the Learndirect group and its learners and apprentices," he exclusively told FE Week.

"We have the building blocks through which to deliver a service of the highest quality and respond to the ever changing face of the skills and apprenticeship market.

"The LDA brand will remain, as it is well respected by our employers and recognised as the brand of the largest dedicated provider of levy apprenticeships in the country."

An LDC spokesperson described the situation as a "positive outcome for Learndirect, its employees, learners and partners".

"We wish the team every success under new ownership," he added.

The acquisition follows a devastating year for the nation's largest FE provider.

It started with a legal battle with Ofsted when the provider unsuccessfully challenged its grade four report in the High Court.

The fallout saw the government single it out for special treatment by allowing it to see its skills contracts through to their end – instead of ending them within the usual three-month termination period allowed to an 'inadequate' provider.

It was then subject to investigations from the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee.

Learndirect has since lost its other government contracts, including those with the Home Office and Standards and Testing Agency, to deliver the Life in the UK test and professional skills tests respectively.

In April it appeared that the provider was on the brink of collapse, after a fresh round of redundancies demonstrated that its efforts to generate new business had proved "impossible".

LDA was set up as a separate entity to run Learndirect's apprenticeships division in March 2016 – after it became apparent the provider was significantly falling short of good training.

It began a significant rebrand in September 2017 in an apparent effort to distance itself from its tarnished past by setting up a new website, Twitter handle and logo.

LDA is now accredited by Ofsted as a 'good' training provider, after an early monitoring visit which generated mainly positive feedback, with only a few downsides to its delivery.

Ex-principal paid £80k gardening leave despite financial crisis

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

A former Sussex principal is being paid around £80,000 not to work over a five-month period even though the college is in a financial mess and cutting down on staff.

The University and College Union is appalled, branding the situation "unacceptable".

Mike Hopkins left the top spot at Sussex Downs College in March, placed on gardening leave following its merger with Sussex Coast College Hastings.

He'll receive his salary – which amounts to more than £200,000 a year – until his contract ends at the end of the academic year.

He will also get a payoff of an unknown amount when he officially leaves, as revealed via a Freedom of Information request.

"Cutting jobs and telling staff that there is no money for pay rises while colleges sign off golden goodbyes or hand out huge pay-hikes for some principals is simply unacceptable," said a furious UCU spokesperson.

UCU will now be entering pay negotiations with the college in two weeks' time, "expecting a decent response" to its national pay claim for a five per cent pay rise for staff or £1,500, whichever is greater.

Sussex Downs is expecting to post a £1.9 million deficit this year, and will make an unknown number of staff redundant in an effort to make savings.

FE Week revealed in February that it was one of 12 colleges to receive a secret government bailout at the tail end of 2017 – given £700,000 to survive.

A letter from Mr Hopkins to staff in March stated that to make savings, the new East Sussex College Group would be undergoing a restructure by reducing staff in areas where there was now a duplication of roles.

"East Sussex College Group is required to meet pay costs as a per cent of income of 64 per cent," he wrote.

"Our initial modelling indicates that pay savings to achieve a sustainable business model in line with the transaction unit expectations are some £1.7 million, to be completed by July 2018. This process has already begun with several voluntary redundancies."

In "simple terms", he said there are "two broad categories of savings – firstly, merger savings that result from duplicated posts, and secondly, savings to get each legacy sovereign establishment to the required 64 per cent pay cost ratio".

As Sussex Coast College was already at the required pay-to-cost ratio, the majority of savings were to fall onto

Mike Hopkins

Sussex Downs College, he wrote, which was operating at 73 per cent.

East Sussex College Group would not comment on Mr Hopkins' pay.

Group spokesman Dan Shelley said the merger "will protect the future of FE in East Sussex".

"The East Sussex College Group will focus on improving standards and the quality of teaching to ensure the best outcomes for its students," he said. "By doing this the two colleges will be stronger together.

"We are currently working through a restructuring exercise and are committed to completing this sensitively and internally with our colleagues and unions. However, as a group, we should reiterate that we do not make any comments on the individual pay or conditions of any of our staff."

Fall in level twos sees sharp rise in NEETs at 16

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A sharp fall in the number of 16-year-olds taking level two apprenticeships is being blamed for a startling rise in people not in education, employment or training (NEETs).

Provisional participation figures for 2017 show that the proportion of NEET 16-year-olds has for the first time since the end of 2011, risen by 0.7 percentage points to 3.9 per cent – even though the government raised the age at which young people must stay in education or training to 18 in 2015.

The rise appears to be directly related to the number of 16-year-olds participating in level two apprenticeships.

There were two per cent fewer 16-year-olds overall in England, but the fall in apprenticeship participation was far greater, at nearly 12 per cent, from 23,700 to 20,900. The fall was most severe at level two, at 18 per cent from 18,100 to 14,900.

This means there are now 20 per cent more NEETs aged 16, rising from 19,500 to 23,400.

AELP chief executive Mark Dawe said he had "predicted this would happen when the government announced that we would move to the same funding rate for all ages".

"We also said that £1,000 employer incentive for 16- to 18-year-olds across the length of an entire programme would be insufficient for many sectors," he added.

Stephen Evans, the chief executive of the Learning and Work Institute, said the rise in NEETs is "disappointing", and the fall in apprenticeships among 16-year-olds is "troubling".

"We must do better if we are to ensure that today's young people have a strong foundation of skills and experience on which to build rewarding careers," he continued.

A DfE spokesperson said: "We have put in place a comprehensive programme of reforms, both pre- and post-16, to improve the quality of young people's education and support them to participate."

Stephen Evans

News

Highlights from AELP'

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers held its annual conference in London on June 25 and 26. A two-day event, it saw speakers from the

No announcement on scrapping employer fees

Issues with the 10-per-cent fee that small businesses must pay when they take on apprentices have been "noted" but don't expect change anytime soon, the skills minister has said.

There was much anticipation over whether Ms Milton would scrap the fee altogether during her speech, after she told FE Week she was "keeping an open mind" on the policy last week.

She did not rule out binning it, but told delegates she is not sure the co-investment is the real reason for the sluggish apprenticeship starts numbers.

"I'm sorry I've not made any big announcement but I see this conference as an important opportunity to gather your thoughts and feedback," Ms Milton said. "Co-investment for 16- to 24-year-olds, noted."

Addressing the policy again in a Q&A session following her speech, she said: "What one battles with and all governments do is to demonstrate causality.

"I think that is a hard thing here. If you took away the 10-per-cent co-investment there would be less money in the pot to do apprenticeships. You get less apprentices for your money.

"But it is about demonstrating causality and that is the key for me. When you have a lot of other factors out there it is quite hard to demonstrate.

AELP boss Mark Dawe hit back.

"Providers take the 10-per-cent hit so there would be no impact on numbers," he said.

"Numbers are a concern but at the moment it is from lack of demand and we need to change that. We will be in almost daily communication on this matter."

Apprenticeship monitoring visits 'concerning'

The results of the early monitoring visits to new apprenticeship providers are "concerning", Ofsted's deputy director for FE has said.

Paul Joyce blasted many of the newcomers in his speech, asserting that apprentices "deserve better than that".

"Our monitoring visits to new directly funded providers are designed to give an early assessment of the quality of provision," he told delegates.

"I have to say that the outcomes to date are concerning. Around a quarter of the judgements inspectors have awarded have been 'insufficient progress' – meaning that providers are making slow progress and the demonstrable impact on learners has been negligible. Apprentices deserve better than that.

"This is a concern to me and Ofsted continues to work closely with the Department for Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency to discuss and agree arrangements for the quality monitoring of these new directly funded providers."

Numerous new providers have not been up to scratch over the last few months – including Mears Learning, Watertrain Limited, Key6 Group, Mooreskills, and Apprentice Team.

Perhaps the most damning report was for Key6, whose training Ofsted described as "not fit for purpose".

Overall, however, Mr Joyce said the monitoring visits show a "really mixed picture in relation to quality", with some new providers making significant progress and apprentices receiving high-quality training that develops substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours".

"In the best examples, apprentices and employers are extremely complimentary about the high-quality training, excellent resources and the support and guidance provided by experienced training provider staff," he added.

More assessments, but will there be enough assessors?

External quality-assurance is "heading in the right direction" according to the boss of the Institute for Apprenticeships, Sir Gerry.

But Ma Collier, Ofqual's chief regulator, later admitted to ongoing doubts about how well the system is working.

EQA is the process that ensures apprenticeship end-point assessments are consistent and reliable, and that they deliver the right outcomes.

There are currently 10 organisations cleared for it, and there will "probably" be "around 30" in the end, Sir Gerry added.

Nonetheless, the IfA has continued to prove the most popular option with employer groups developing apprenticeships standards.

Legislation passed December allows the IfA to charge "up to £56 per apprentice" for the service "but this is a maximum," Sir Gerry said.

"We will try to get our cost well under that" and ensure "adequate notice" is given to those who will have to pay.

Ms Collier however told delegates she wants to keep tabs on EPA and has fresh concerns about capacity.

"In terms of the ongoing regulation of EPAs, one of the things that we are concerned about at the moment is assessor capability and capacity, and we will have a programme of work to look at this over the coming months," she said.

She also discussed Ofqual's role as an EQA provider.

"As I've said many times – we are not lowering the quality bar, but we are looking at that process from the organisation's point of view," she explained.

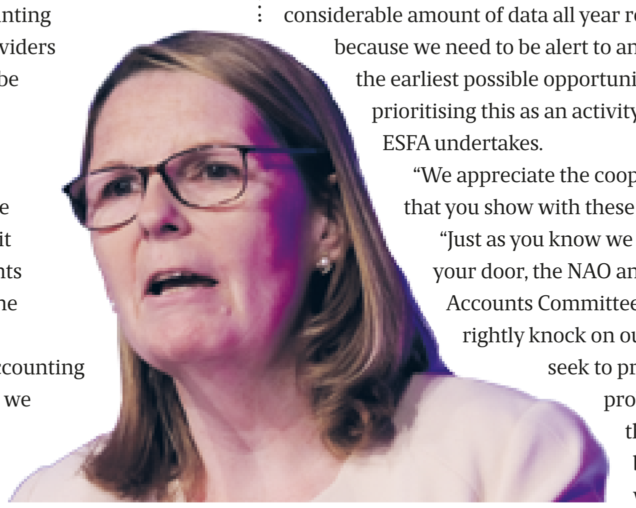
"Can it be slicker, can it be quicker, can it be easier to navigate? And how to support organisation in deciding whether an EQA provided by us is right for them?"

ESFA prioritises funding audits under new chief

The Education and Skills Funding Agency is strengthening its audit and intervention team to ensure its cash is used "appropriately" – as the National Audit Office is likely to come knocking.

Eileen Milner, the agency's chief executive, used her speech to warn providers that they will be investigated and removed from the sector if any misuse of government funds is uncovered.

The ESFA's newly created "market oversight unit", which FE Week revealed was being beefed up last month amid mounting concerns about new providers entering the sector, will be critical.



She admitted that this crackdown on oversight is a pre-emptive measure in case the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee investigate the agency.

"It is my duty as the accounting officer to make sure that we assess and address any risks that may have adverse impact on sustainability and quality in education and skills," Ms Milner said.

"We do this through our provider market oversight function which has at its heart an assurance programme.

"As ESFA-funded providers it is critical that we are able to provide assurance that the funds provided by us are spent and governed appropriately.

"We carry out funding audits and look at a considerable amount of data all year round because we need to be alert to any issues at the earliest possible opportunity. We are prioritising this as an activity that the ESFA undertakes.

"We appreciate the cooperation that you show with these activities.

"Just as you know we knock at your door, the NAO and Public Accounts Committee quite rightly knock on ours. We seek to prevent problems from the outset by working with you."

’s National conference

government and the FE sector debate the burning issues – including apprenticeship co-investment and the quality of new providers. We bring you the highlights.

T-levels ‘will be different from past failures’

The government’s technical education reforms will succeed where past attempts have failed because “we’ve learnt from what didn’t work”, the person in charge of T-levels has promised.

Ms Coupland, the Department for Education’s director of professional and technical education, reassured delegates who have “been around the skills reform loop once before” that things are “going to be different this time”.

She vowed that T-levels would not repeat the catastrophe of the 14-to-19 diplomas, which lasted just five years before being abolished in 2013.

“We’ve acknowledged that we didn’t succeed in the past and we have learnt from the best things from attempts at reform and what didn’t work,” she said.

“One of the main criticisms of the 14-to-19 diploma was its confusion of purpose. The T-level is different. It is very clearly about equipping people for skilled employment, higher-level technical training, or apprenticeships, or related technical degrees.

“Uniting apprenticeships and T-levels through a common set of occupational standards is also very different from the diplomas, which did not recognise that apprenticeships and technical qualifications were two sides of the same coin.”

Another issue with the diplomas was the way in which multiple institutions offered separate elements which then had to be “aggregated back up together”. In contrast, “we’ve designed T-levels to be offered by a single provider”.

Through the T-level panels which will include large and small businesses “we’ve also tried to bring employers into the system at every stage of design and delivery” – whereas under the diplomas employers were only involved at the “beginning of the process”.

Lastly, she believes there is greater need to make the new reforms work because of Brexit.

“The desire for something that will solve once and for all our problems with our skills pipeline and productivity across the piece is ever more pressing,” she said.

Small employers put off by lack of clarity over rules

The continuing “lack of clarity” over off-the-job apprenticeship training may be putting off small employers from taking on an apprentice, according to the shadow skills minister.

Mr Marsden told delegates that the requirement for apprentices to spend 20 per cent of their time in off-the-job training “is essential to high-quality apprenticeships” and needs to be “enshrined in every standard”.

But “the continuing lack of clarity from the Education and Skills Funding Agency and government on what constitutes off-the-job training is causing many headaches”.

This is particularly the case for “small employers taking on apprentices for the first time” and may even be “a factor in nudging them away” from apprenticeships.

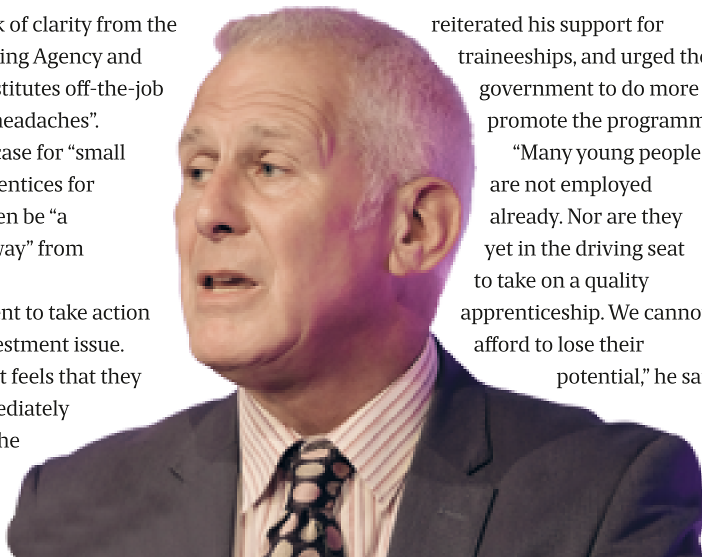
He urged the government to take action on the 10-per-cent co-investment issue.

“Even if the government feels that they are not able to move immediately they need to understand the concerns of providers in this area,” he said. “It’s really not good enough for the minister to say it’s been noted.”

Options that Mr Marsden said “could be at least looked at” include “increasing the threshold of staff” from 50 to 75 for small employers taking on a 16- to 18-year-old apprentice “in order not to have the 10-per-cent training contribution attached”.

The shadow skills minister also reiterated his support for traineeships, and urged the government to do more to promote the programme.

“Many young people are not employed already. Nor are they yet in the driving seat to take on a quality apprenticeship. We cannot afford to lose their potential,” he said.



Post-18 funding review aims to fix imbalance

There is a funding imbalance between academic and vocational routes – and the post-18 education review panel is aiming to fix it.

Mr Augar, who chairs the group, said in his speech that a funding disparity “particularly” in the FE sector was a main theme found in the responses to the post-18 review consultation.

Addressing delegates on day two of the conference, he promised the panel would address concerns.

“Pretty much all of the replies [to the consultation] said funding was too low particularly in FE,” he said. “There was a lot of comment about the bias to the traditional academic route of tertiary education.

“We do believe that there is a skills gap in the country that we ought to try and address.

“We do believe that the current funding model is weighted away from non-traditional students and we do believe the overall system of funding lacks coherence.”

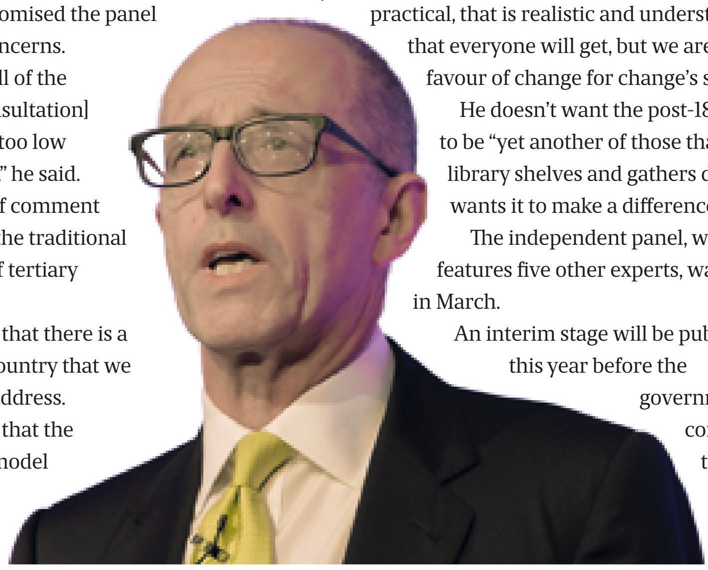
The panel is now trying to come up with a “set of options for the taxpayers, employers, students and indeed for providers”.

“We need to find something that provides and overarching model that will unite all of this,” he continued. “We’re looking for something that is practical, that is realistic and understandable that everyone will get, but we are not in favour of change for change’s sake.”

He doesn’t want the post-18 review to be “yet another of those that sits on library shelves and gathers dust” – he wants it to make a difference.

The independent panel, which features five other experts, was set up in March.

An interim stage will be published this year before the government concludes the overall review in early 2019.



ESFA team to invest in supporting providers more

The Education and Skills Funding Agency is switching its focus from employers to providers, its director of apprenticeships announced.

Speaking on the second day of the conference, Mr Smith said the ESFA plans to “invest much more of our time in supporting you as providers” in the coming months.

“In the last year we’ve talked a lot about employers and that’s been intentional,” he said.

But he insisted the time had now come to shift focus, as “it’s absolutely right that we’re not going to achieve anywhere near the scale of success that we want unless we invest much more in you”.

“With the amount and pace of change we’ve had we’ve not necessarily paid as much attention to some of that as we would’ve liked,” he admitted.

Changes include looking at “how we collaborate differently together” and creating “more opportunities to consult”.

He wants to “look at how we give more certainty to you about the conditions you operate in”.

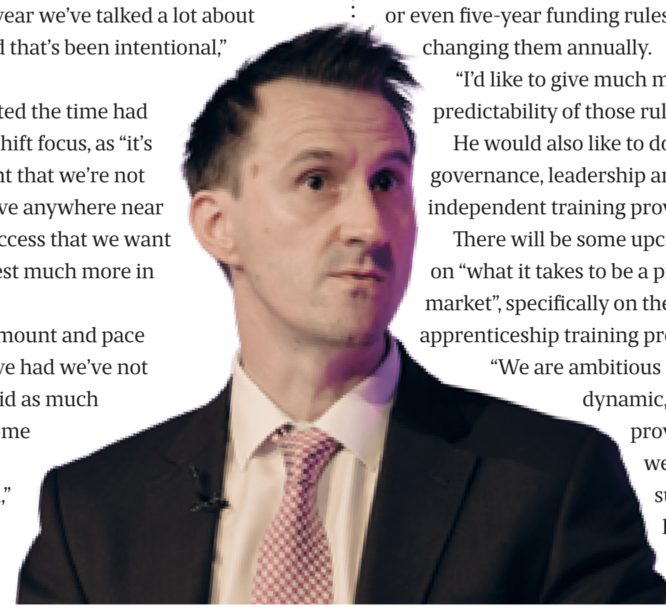
This means exploring the possibility of three- or even five-year funding rules, rather than changing them annually.

“I’d like to give much more longer-term predictability of those rules if I can,” he said.

He would also like to do more to support governance, leadership and oversight in independent training providers.

There will be some upcoming work on “what it takes to be a provider in the market”, specifically on the register of apprenticeship training providers.

“We are ambitious for a healthy, dynamic, responsive provider market but we do want to make sure that’s of the highest quality all of the time,” he said.



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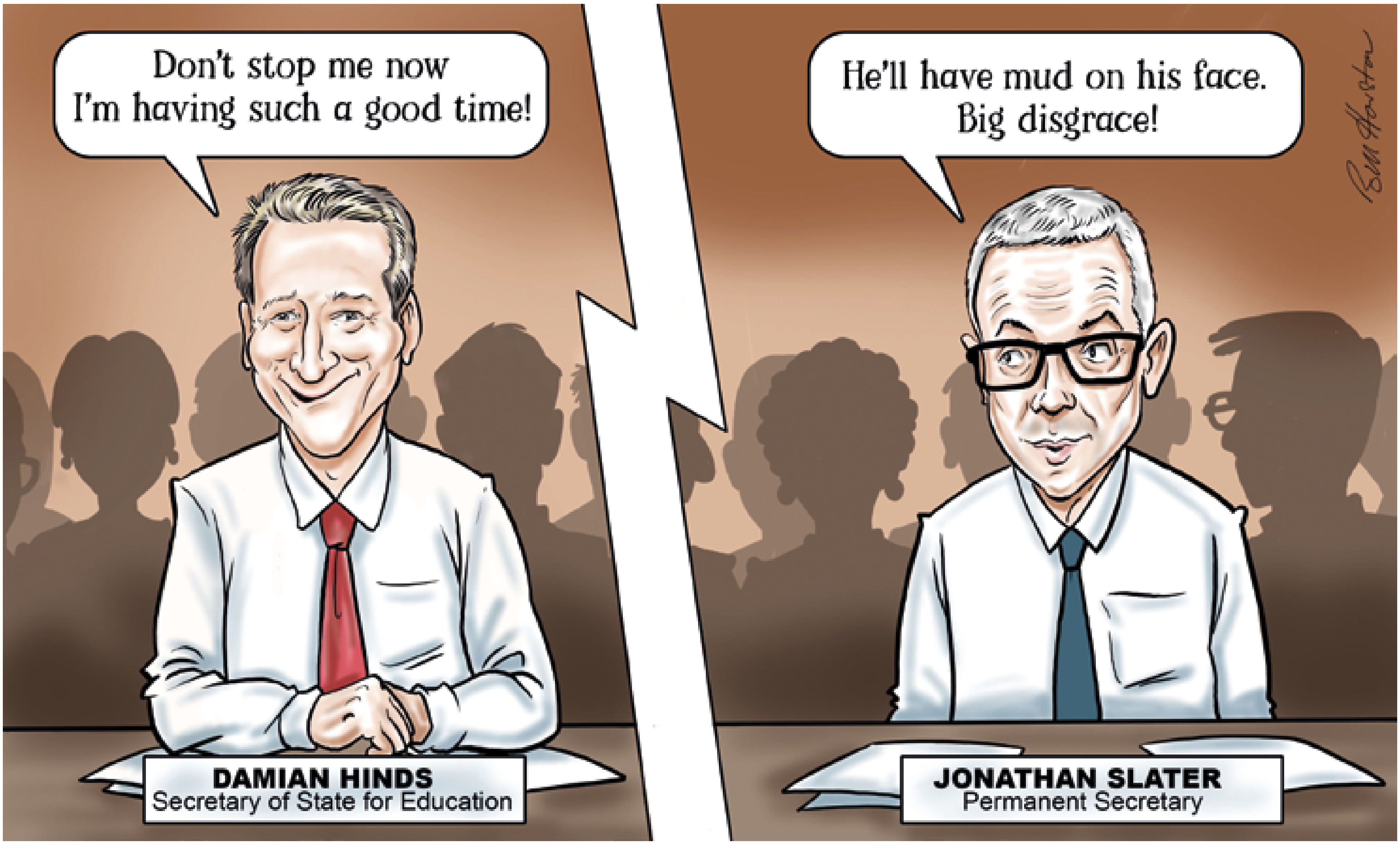

Hinds v Slater: T-level battle goes before MPs

JUDE BURKE
JUDE@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The education secretary and his top civil servant have been at genteel loggerheads this week over the controversial decision not to delay T-levels by a year.

Damian Hinds and the permanent secretary to the Department for Education both faced tough questions from committees of MPs

They were asked about Damian Hinds' ministerial direction to overrule Jonathan Slater's request to defer the launch of T-levels until 2021.

Mr Slater told the Public Accounts Committee he had concerns about the lack of "contingency" built into the T-levels timetable.

But his boss insisted to the education committee that the new qualifications are being introduced at a "good pace".

The first T-levels are being introduced in three subjects at 54 providers.

"It's a big change in programme, a complex set of reforms and any such programme will involve a plan with a series of challenging component parts," Mr Slater said.

"The timetable that we have been set for implementing that works fine, so long as each element of the plan goes ahead without any hiccups.

"Faced with that sort of challenge, you can either stick with that plan, do your very best to make sure everything goes according to plan and there aren't any hiccups – or buy yourself more time in case something does go wrong and build some contingency.

"My advice was to buy ourselves some more time."

Just two days later, Mr Hinds insisted the DfE was "doing things at a good pace".

"This is relatively small-scale beginnings – and this is just over two years away, and we will have a gradual programme of bringing in this entire reform," he added.

Mr Hinds was responding to a question from James Frith, the Labour MP for Bury North, who is worried T-levels will repeat past mistakes with rushed reforms.

"I worry that your permanent secretary saw that and advised against it, and you've overruled him. That willing it to happen will make it so," Mr Frith said.

"No it's not just the case of willing it to happen," Mr Hinds replied.

Mr Frith asked for some "practical evidence" that the tight turnaround would work, such as addressing some of the "practical concerns in the sector" around the availability of lengthy work placements, particularly in rural or coastal areas.

The education secretary said the work placement pilots, currently underway at 21 providers, are intended to "make sure it is possible to build up the availability to address some of these issues".

"You have to have the drive to make this happen," he said.

Mr Slater wrote to Mr Hinds in May, saying he would "advise deferring the start date to 2021" for the new qualifications, on the basis that "it will clearly be very challenging to ensure that the first three T-levels are ready to be taught from 2020 and beyond to a consistently high standard".

This was overruled, in the first ever ministerial direction – when a minister overrules the head of a government department – to come from an education secretary.

T-levels were originally intended to come in from 2019, but in July last year skills minister Anne Milton announced they had been put back to 2020.

A subsequent announcement in October revealed pathways in just three subject areas would go live in the first year.

The remaining subjects will be brought in from 2023.

Both Sir Gerry Berragan, the chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships, which will take over responsibility for administering the new qualifications at some point later this year, and Sally Collier, Ofqual's chief regulator, have publicly worried about rushing implementation.

"You can either make sure there aren't any hiccups - or buy yourself more time in case something does go wrong"


Jonathan Slater

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Our strategy is clear. We want to be an outstanding College.

The successful candidate will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the current challenges facing the College and be in accord with the current strategic development. He or she must also be capable of taking the College to the next stage of its strategic development with leadership qualities that will drive and inspire staff on our journey towards outstanding.

Our Mission and Vision statements, together with other information about the College, can be found on the College website. Visit **www.derwentside.ac.uk**

To apply, please send a CV and a narrative of no more than 1500 words supporting your application to HR@derwentside.ac.uk or HR Department, Derwentside College, Front Street, Consett, County Durham, DH8 5EE.

Closing date for Applications

Applications to be received no later than **5.00pm FRIDAY 27th July 2018**.
Shortlisted candidates will be notified no later than the **15th August 2018**.

Interview date

Interviews will be held at the College Campus on **WEDNESDAY 22nd August 2018**.

WESTMINSTER ADULT EDUCATION SERVICE

Westminster Adult Education Service is the largest local authority adult education service in London and one of the largest in the country. We provide life-changing learning opportunities for our learners through our further education qualification courses, apprenticeship programmes and extensive community based provision. If you want to join an organisation that makes a difference in people's lives, we want to hear from you

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We currently have the following vacancies available:

Part Time Tutors - £27 per hour

GCSE English & Maths, Functional Skills – Maths, English & IT, Accountancy, Business, Teacher Training, Health & Social Care, Community, Family Learning, Floristry, Hair & Beauty and Ceramics (Throwing)

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Learning Support Tutor 0.5fte

Learning Support Assistants

Please visit our website **www.waes.ac.uk/vacancies** where you can find details of these posts and all our current vacancies including ICT Manager, Executive Support Officer, Childcare Worker and Curriculum Administrator.

Director of ICT and Learning Innovation

Sunderland College

Post Ref: 5990. Full Time, 37 hours per week. Permanent. £46,712.42 to £51,033.56 per annum.

Attractive benefits for this post include 35 days' holiday per year plus bank holidays and the opportunity to join the Local Government Pension Scheme.

We are looking for an outstanding, experienced leader who is passionate about excellence and wants to make a difference to our services. Importantly you must have technical expertise, commercial acumen and a strong entrepreneurial vision. You must be able support business efficiency through the best use of ICT, in addition to inspiring the creative use of innovative technology particularly in relation to teaching, learning and assessment.

Reporting to the Vice Principal Finance and Resources, you will be part of the College Leadership Group and work closely with the Senior Team in developing ICT and Innovation across the College.

You will be responsible for developing the College's ICT and Innovation Plan ensuring the plan is embedded. You will contribute to the development and success of the College's Vision, Strategy and Values and want to play a key role in transforming ICT and learning innovation across the College through leadership of pilots and projects linked to best practice adoption of technology.

You should have the ability and knowledge to proactively carry out your duties and will be required to chair or attend regular meetings, carry out performance analysis, prepare and deliver presentations and reports. You will also be responsible for the leadership and management of teams within the College's Information Communication Technology Service, Learning Innovation and Learning Centres.

You will work as part of an experienced, friendly and caring leadership team, and work closely with people from across the College as well as with relevant external stakeholders. Your ability to build and maintain productive relationships is essential.

Sunderland College has an exciting future and we are looking for someone who wants to be part of our transformation. Our campuses are based across Sunderland and Hartlepool and we are the largest multi campus College in the North East. Annually the College delivers education and training to 13,500 students ranging in age from 14-16, 16-18, 19 years and above. Delivery spans all education routes including GCSEs and A Levels, professional and technical education, apprenticeships, higher education and commercial activity.

Applicants should be able to demonstrate, in their personal statement, practical examples of how they fulfil the person specification.

To find out more about this great opportunity visit **www.sunderlandcollege.ac.uk/vacancies** alternatively email **vacancies@sunderlandcollege.ac.uk** or call **0191 511 6046** to request an application pack.

Due to the nature of this post you will be required to undertake an Enhanced Disclosure Check.

All applications must be received by **5:00pm on Wednesday 04 July 2018**

It is anticipated that interviews will take place during the week commencing **Monday 23 July 2018**

We are working towards equal opportunities and welcome applications from all sections of the community. We are committed to PREVENT and safeguarding the welfare of children and vulnerable adults.

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Salary: Senior Leadership Band
Flexible location

The British Council is looking for an experienced Head of School Exams to join the English & Exams Strategic Business Unit (SBU).

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

The Head of School Exams will develop a school exams strategy in line with the global exams strategy to ensure we are positioned for significant growth with our key clients (Cambridge International, Pearson and OxfordAQA).

Reporting to the Head of Client Services you will lead on the development of the schools exams business to maximize our share of the international school exams market and ensure that we are operating to high standards efficiently. In addition to the above you will drive new business development opportunities across all our school exam clients and deliver income and surplus growth in line with ambitious global targets- by maximizing value from existing accounts including winning new business.

For full details please refer to the role profile on our website.

If you feel that you are suitable and would like to be considered for this role, please apply before 23:59 UK time on the 3rd July 2018 using the following link; **https://bit.ly/2loiE5X**

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£70,000 pro rata (Full Time or 4 days considered)

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As Managing Director (Training) you will take responsibility for delivering a quality and cost effective offer and for ensuring that we reach and maintain the highest of standards in all that we do. The successful applicant will have a solid understanding of apprenticeships, first class communication skills and the passion to lead and inspire a team of dedicated staff. Reporting directly to the Board, the Head of Training will play an integral part in formulating and realising the vision and objectives of the organisation.

If you're interested in knowing more about this exciting opportunity or wish to request an recruitment pack please contact **Neil Hulme** on **07702 555800** or email **neil@solvendis.co.uk**.

Closing Date for Applications 9 July (12.00 noon)

RNN GROUP

Vice Principal Innovation and Growth

Salary circa £70k

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We are now seeking a new Vice Principal to drive our innovation and growth agenda to ensure we continue to meet the needs of employers, learners, apprentices and partners. In this role you will make a major contribution to the strategic leadership of the Group whilst leading the innovation and renewal of our curriculum and overseeing our significant apprenticeship provision. This role requires you to be a key ambassador for the Group and use your skills to work with, and influence, a range of stakeholders.

We have retained FE Associates to support us in this crucial appointment.

A candidate pack can be obtained from: www.fea.co.uk/jobs

Closing date: **Wednesday 4th July 2018 at noon**

First interview to be held **Tuesday 10th July**.

Second interview to be held **w/c 16th July**.

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National role working remotely

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We're looking to further expand our Client Engagement team to achieve our next phase of growth and are looking for a passionate and experienced Apprenticeship expert who can successfully identify and win new client opportunities with large businesses in our core market sectors.

Our Client Engagement Consultant will be responsible for identifying new opportunities/leads with large organisations who will benefit from the high quality Apprenticeship solutions Paragon Skills offer. Building market intelligence, a sound knowledge of our target clients, you'll nurture excellent relationships with prospective client contacts, positioning Paragon Skills as their partner of choice.

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The successful applicant will hold a level 5 teaching qualification, A subject qualification in Counselling at least at level 4, an Internal quality assurance qualification, maths and English at least at level 2 and be currently active in a Counselling Practice.

Considerable experience of teaching adults in Counselling or a related subject.

Closing date: Monday 2 July 2018.

To view Job Description & Person Specification and to apply, please visit: **www.wmjobs.co.uk** and search reference number: BCC000334.

Right to work in the UK documentation will be fully checked for all applicants. All non UK and non EU applicants are required to apply for a Certificate of Sponsorship from Birmingham City Council and must be approved by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) before any employment offer can be confirmed.

Birmingham City Council

hightrees
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Quality & Curriculum Coordinator (Adult Education & Training)

Salary: £27,000- £32,000 per annum (dependant on experience)

Closing date: Sunday 8th July

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Our Curriculum & Quality Coordinator sits at the heart of our biggest team, Education and Training, and is responsible for all teaching, learning and assessment by overseeing the effective design, coordination and implementation of all courses as well as driving quality improvement across the organisation for a range of accredited and non-accredited courses aimed at the local community and other organisations.

The successful applicant will have solid experience in the Adult Education sector, whether in a community setting or an adult education provider, specifically of quality improvement and assurance.

For more information about the role and how to apply, please visit **www.high-trees.org**

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News

EDITORIAL

Ofsted should renege on its merger deal

"Big isn't always beautiful," is something of an understatement coming from Ofsted in the context of FE providers.

The biggest private training provider, Learndirect, was awarded a grade four last year and in recent weeks the biggest college group, NCG, slumped to a grade three.

Despite this, the average size of colleges is only growing as the area review programme has flipped the government from resisting to encouraging mergers.

In London for example, several mega-colleges have emerged through multiple mergers, including United Colleges Group, Capital City Colleges Group and London South East Colleges.

College growth through acquisition continues around the country, and it's often cited as a solution to the perilous state of finances and in the belief that just one more government bailout will be needed.

So you would think that Ofsted would show a particularly keen interest on what impact mergers are having on the quality of provision, on behalf of both the taxpayer and FE learners.

Far from it.

In fact, during the area reviews a deal was struck to suspend routine inspections for at least three years following a merger.

The argument was that it would give the stronger college time to turn the weaker college around before it was judged.

And it would have no doubt been a very attractive deal for colleges that could use the merger to keep Ofsted away, and convenient for Ofsted given fewer inspections mean less pressure on their shrinking budget.

> **"Ofsted should be a brake, not an accelerator, when it comes to the risk of creating colleges that are too big to fail"**

But this inspection delay is exactly the sort of practice that the National Audit Office criticised Ofsted for over the Learndirect saga.

Due for an Ofsted inspection and want to delay it for three years? No problem, just find a merger partner.

So with criticism of NCG fresh in our minds, now is the time for the inspectorate to do its job and end this deal.

In my recent interview with Paul Joyce, Ofsted's FE boss, I pressed him on his "big isn't always beautiful" response.

Surely a significant part of Ofsted's rapidly growing research programme should already be working out how best to inspect merged colleges?

Shouldn't inspectors be spending more rather than less time in mega-colleges?

I am sure the National Audit Office would agree with me that Ofsted should be a brake, not an accelerator, when it comes to the risk of creating colleges that are too big to fail.

Nick Linford, Editor
news@feweek.co.uk

Readers' reply

EMAIL TWITTER FACEBOOK WEBSITE

Three quarters of providers unhappy with non-levy apprenticeship funding

When did it become the #taxpayer's job to train their staff?

@1AnneMcCormack

Learndirect under new ownership just days after PeoplePlus deal falls through

My experience of Learndirect is of a bureaucratic organisation that's overburdened with administrators and box-tickers but no understanding of what learning actually is. They are all forms and no pedagogy.

Randeep Sami

Milton offers no concessions on employer fees at AELP conference

Very disappointing! It wouldn't impact numbers as providers would absorb 10 per cent.

@bmcleish01

She needed to listen to the employers today who gave great honest speeches. Might give a different perspective on what is really happening on the ground, and the issues that we are all experiencing and subject to with IFA and ESFA. Shame on our public sector. I came away very disappointed in them.

Jackie Denyer

£1.3 billion in unspent levy sit in the ESFA books and they want SME's to pay! £1.3billion something doesn't add up - like giving corporations huge tax breaks while nurses rely on food banks - something wrong with this country IMO. For the few not the many!

Mike Daykin

So if the 10% charge is not the reason for low numbers in SME sites what is?

Robert Bird

Anne Milton 'the fixer': I just want to make it all work

Time flies when you are having fun – time for a new minister?

@marches_skills

Skills minister: IfA is better but still not fast enough

It might help if @AnneMilton actually went and spoke with them instead of steering clear for the last year.

@LisaMaple5

Hull College boss on how she plans to transform its fortunes

Waste of time! The damage is done and has been for years. You can't keep making redundancies and still try and fill the place with learners.

@IrwinSji77

Good luck for the future.

@nigel_powley

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Three quarters of providers unhappy with non-levy apprenticeship funding

This new system of funding has been a joke since it was first announced, and has always completely favoured large employers – who have only ever employed 10 per cent of apprentices nationally at most. The new standards and funding changes created by the government and these employers have in all their wisdom seen a massive reduction in apprenticeship vacancies. This was all predicted before the change and in many people's opinion frameworks should have never been changed or discontinued. The government have allowed a minority of apprenticeship employers to completely mess up the system for the other 90 per cent.

Steven Carr

Experts

ANNE CORRIN

Head of professional learning and development, the Royal College of Nursing

Nursing apprenticeships won't work how the government wants

There's a good reason the NHS ditched the old nursing apprentices decades ago, explains Anne Corrin, who insists they're unsafe and harm patients

It's easy to see why apprenticeships hold an attraction to the wider public and, by extension, the politicians they vote for.

The concept of learning by doing, guided by experienced hands, appeals to the British sense of practicality, hard work and entrepreneurialism.

And of course, as more and more students question the value of degree courses, and balk at taking on tens of thousands of pounds in debt, the chance to earn as you learn increasingly seems like the smart option.

But the reality is somewhat different and, for nursing at least, apprenticeships are far from the magic bullet they have been portrayed as. When patient safety is at stake, it's vital that policy is driven by evidence, not nostalgia.

Nursing is facing a recruitment crisis. It's an overused phrase, but with 40,000 vacancies in England alone, it bears repeating. Any serious attempts to address this crisis should be welcomed, but not when it risks jeopardising the quality of care.

> "Hospital-based apprentice training is unsafe and inefficient"

The truth is the current apprenticeship system will repeat the mistakes of the past, putting both patients and apprentices at risk.

There is clear evidence going back decades that degree-based training is safer, more consistent and more inclusive than the old apprenticeship.

Evidence from the Judge Report and Project 2000, two pieces of research carried out in the mid-1980s, found that hospital-based apprentice training is unsafe and inefficient, and does not equip nurses with the necessary skills for the future.

Under the old system, apprentices had to learn from an inadequate number of qualified, registered nurses, which reduced both patients' quality of care and the quality of the training.

We know nurses are struggling to deliver safe care despite their best efforts. There are simply not enough.

As well as adding to individual workload, apprenticeships will pile pressure on overstretched NHS services, as they place the responsibility for training staff on cash-strapped employers instead of universities.

The apprenticeship levy does not cover the full cost of training, leaving trusts to pick up the bill.

Danny Mortimer, the chief executive of NHS Employers, told the Commons health and care committee that the cost is "probably something in the region of £125,000 to £155,000 over the four years of a nursing apprenticeship, and the levy will not capture all that cost".

And it's not as though nursing degree students lack hands-on experience. They already spend half their time in practice placements where they can learn from experienced staff thanks to their supernumerary status.

If they are additional to the staff required on each shift, a factor that allows them time to develop essential practical nursing knowledge and skills.

Degree-level nursing funded through the bursary scheme, has been exceptional at promoting diversity, participation and social mobility. Nursing students are more diverse than other undergraduate groups and usually include more students from low-participation neighbourhoods.

They are also far more likely to be mature students, people with life experience who represent a valuable asset to the profession, especially in areas such as mental health.

But these mature students are the group hardest hit by the government's decision to remove the bursary in 2015, which resulted in fewer applications across the board.

Apprenticeships are not the solution. With just 20 people starting this year, it's certainly not addressing problems of workforce under-supply. And even if the apprenticeship route were of anywhere near sufficient quality, and achieved the government's target of 1,000 entrants a year, it is still not able to take all the mature students put off by the prospect of shouldering more debt.

The university route remains the fastest and safest way into nursing, and while there may be a place for apprenticeships, they must include the full range of clinical placements, and ensure a safe and effective environment where apprentices have the time and space to learn.

Finally, thorough quality-assurance must be in place to guarantee consistency in the skills, knowledge and abilities of all graduates, whatever route they take to become a registered nurse.

SAM PERKS

Disability development officer, AoC Sport

How to support disabled learners with sport and physical activity

For too long it has been too easy to marginalise disabled learners from the kind of sporting activity that we know they'd enjoy. Sam Perks has toured colleges in search of better practice.

Taking part in sport helps to improve your health. It increases happiness and self-esteem, and it reduces anxiety and stress. It enhances educational outcomes: it improves attendance, behaviour and grades, and it boosts employability skills: confidence, communication and teamwork. The impact of participation in sport is even greater for those with a disability.

One in six students in England has a disability or a learning difficulty – that's more than half a million people. Too many of these do not take part in physical activity and sports. A new review by AoC Sport, funded by Sport England and the National Lottery, on the current landscape of physical activity and sport for disabled students has examined why this should be the case.

The four recurring barriers

I have travelled across the country consulting colleges, students and stakeholders to identify the barriers, attitudes and opportunities that help or hinder disabled students in taking part in physical activity and sport. I kept coming across four recurring barriers:

- Workforce – college staff indicated they are not qualified, experienced or confident enough to deliver sport and physical activity to students with a disability.
- Time – staff time is ever decreasing and they do not have the scope to deliver more activities for disabled students. In addition, students' timetables are at capacity and they do not have time to take part in physical activity during their curriculum.
- Facilities – some colleges do not have any sporting facilities on site, while others do but they are in such demand that disabled students can never use them (especially during the exam periods). This said, we would challenge colleges to think creatively about the use of space. Classrooms, dance studios and even corridors can be used to deliver activities to disabled students.
- Attitude – sports and physical activity are seen as nice to do instead of as a necessity, so with the chronic funding and resource cuts in FE, sport is one of the first to be withdrawn.

A meaningful offer

As part of my job, I'm lucky enough to spend lots of time at colleges across England, and I see lots of ways in which they are thinking more smartly about how to deliver a meaningful sports and physical activity offer for their disabled students.

Grantham College uses the learners it has on sports-based courses to deliver activities and events for disabled students. The disabled learners benefit from additional opportunities to be active as well as mixing with their non-disabled peers, while the sport learners gain experience and volunteer hours for their courses – and staff have more time too, as they are not required to deliver the activities themselves.

The 'Ability counts' ambassador programme at Newham Sixth-Form College provides the opportunity for disabled students to gain sports qualifications. Ambassadors learn core skills to help with employability, such as confidence, communication and how to lead activities.

At Nottingham College, literacy and numeracy have been built into activities to showcase that sport and physical activity can improve their disabled learners' education and increase its priority with their senior management team. For example, students play darts to improve their addition, subtraction and numeracy skills.

There is a growing proportion of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties in further education, and more needs to be done to ensure they stay active. As a result, AoC Sport has recently launched a new disability strategy for colleges, called 'Active for college, work and life'.

AoC Sport wants to ensure disabled students have the same opportunities to be active as their non-disabled peers, and will support colleges and partner organisations to achieve this vision.

> "AoC Sport wants to ensure disabled students have the same opportunities to be active"

Colleges are an influential environment to reduce inactivity in over-16-year-olds and this is an invaluable opportunity to make a lifelong change.

ROD BRISTOW

President, Pearson UK

A single AO system simply won't work with T-levels

The system that makes A-levels so revered would work just as effectively for the new technical exams, argues Rod Bristow

The groundbreaking Copyright Act of 1710 was in its long form entitled "an Act for the Encouragement of Learning". The idea behind it was simple, that by protecting the intellectual property developed by authors and publishers, more works that advanced knowledge would be created. The forces against copyright feared that its ownership would limit the promulgation of knowledge. But the argument for copyright was won and Britain became a world leader in the creation of knowledge.

Today, government proposals for the development of T-levels will not allow awarding organisations (AOs) to retain copyright over the qualifications they are asked to develop and deliver.

Our system of qualifications, copyright ownership and competition, while not flawless, works. Teachers can select the A-level course that suits their teaching, and students benefit from the fact that AOs compete to produce the best course. Ofqual ensures that each course meets the required standard and the requirements of universities.

> "Giving each route to only one AO will strip capacity from the system"

And this innovation isn't limited to the course content; it extends to the technology that underpins the assessment. In 2002, when centrally directed changes to A-levels found the system wanting, Pearson invested significantly in on-screen marking technology that helped modernise the exam system when our competitors followed suit. This modernisation wasn't directed by the government but unleashed by competition fueled by intellectual property.

Of course, there are those who say that competition between AOs doesn't raise standards and results in a race to the bottom. They suggest that the UK is out of step with other countries. This is not correct in two respects. First there is no system our size with only one exam board – the risks of single point of failure are simply too high. Second, we have an independent regulator which ensures that while AOs innovate, they never compete on education standards. This national system of independent regulation sets us apart from other nations.

The government is now proposing, however, similar to a proposal it made for GCSEs a few years ago, to allow only one AO per occupational route for T-levels. These proposals are undoubtedly intended to maintain standards, but they will nevertheless overturn the same system that produces the A-levels that are so respected in this country and around the world.

It's not clear why the obvious risks in doing so are acceptable for technical qualifications while they appear unthinkable for the A-level 'gold standard'. In fact, the risks are exactly the same. A single point of failure and lack of innovation are but two. Magnifying them, though, is the fact that giving each route to only one AO will strip capacity from the system.

If one successful bidder fails, capacity in other organisations will inevitably have been lost, leaving nowhere to turn in the event of failure. There will also be advantage to incumbents in any competitive re-tender, since they will already "own" the capacity to develop and deliver. These competitive barriers to entry will over the long term limit competition on value for money.

The current system of competing AOs may not be replicated elsewhere in the world, but there are parallels in the United States where the College Board competes with the ACT. And unlike in the US, the English system of regulation enables productive competition while centrally controlling the obvious potential for damaging competition.

Of course it would be naive to suggest that the current system is flawless or risk-free. But the sort of changes currently proposed significantly increase risk and strip capacity from the system, just at a time when we need capacity more than ever. The government is right to be concerned about competition on standards, but it would be much better to make the system we have work effectively than to make the radical change proposed.

It would surely be relatively easy to make the system that works for A-levels, which involves an independent body defining the curriculum content and a regulator controlling the standards, work equally well for T-levels.

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

Dr Liz Lee

Head of college, Richard Taunton Sixth-Form College

Start date September 2018

Previous job
Deputy principal, Richard Taunton SFC

Interesting fact
Liz, who has a PhD, used to be a midwife.

Dr Fazal Dad

Principal and chief executive, Blackburn College

Start date January 2019

Previous job
Deputy principal, Walsall College

Interesting fact
Fazal is a product of FE: as well as 23 years' experience working in sector, he trained as an electrical engineer at Stourbridge College in the 1980s.

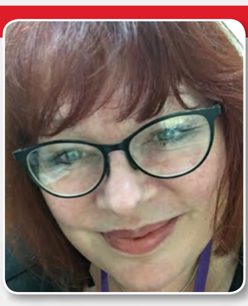
Alex Fau-Goodwin

Assistant principal , Trafford College

Start date August 2018

Previous job
Principal, Bolton Sixth-Form College

Interesting fact
Alex enjoys swapping the blackboard for the black runs at skiing resorts in Europe



Bev Jessop

Principal and chief executive, Queen Alexandra College

Start date June 2018

Previous job
Vice-principal, Queen Alexandra College

Interesting fact
Bev trained as a scenic artist in the 80s and painted scenery in theatres before teaching IT.

Emma Goodlet

Assistant principal, Trafford College

Start date August 2018

Previous job
Head of curriculum, Salford City College

Interesting fact
Emma starred in the first series of *Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* performing a Royal Navy gymnastics routine.

If you want to let us know of any new faces at the top of your college, training provider or awarding organisation please let us know by emailing news@feweek.co.uk

FE Week Sudoku challenge

How to play: Fill in all blank squares making sure that each row, column and 3 by 3 box contains the numbers 1 to 9

Difficulty: Easy

1								8
		4	8	9			1	
9				3		6		
4		9			5	8	2	
	7						6	
	2	1	6			4		3
		3		7				6
	1			6	4	7		
6								4

Difficulty: Medium

		8		1		6		
7			5	4				
			2				9	4
5		7	4				1	
4	8						2	5
	2				5	4		7
3	1				4			
				5	2			9
		9		7		8		

Solutions: See right

Spot the difference
To WIN an FE Week mug

Spot five differences. **First correct entry wins an FE Week mug.**
Email your name and picture of your completed spot the difference to: **news@feweek.co.uk.**

Last Edition's winner: Hannah Dawson

Solutions

Turn the paper around to check if your answers match- but no cheating!

Difficulty: Easy

1	3	6	5	4	2	9	7	8
7	5	4	8	9	6	3	1	2
9	8	2	7	3	1	6	4	5
4	6	9	3	1	5	8	2	7
3	7	8	4	2	9	5	6	1
5	2	1	6	8	7	4	9	3
2	4	3	9	7	8	1	5	6
8	1	5	2	6	4	7	3	9
6	9	7	1	5	3	2	8	4

Difficulty: Medium

2	4	8	9	1	7	6	5	3
7	9	6	5	4	3	2	8	1
1	3	5	2	6	8	7	9	4
5	6	7	4	2	9	3	1	8
4	8	1	7	3	6	9	2	5
9	2	3	1	8	5	4	6	7
3	1	2	8	9	4	5	7	6
8	7	4	6	5	2	1	3	9
6	5	9	3	7	1	8	4	2