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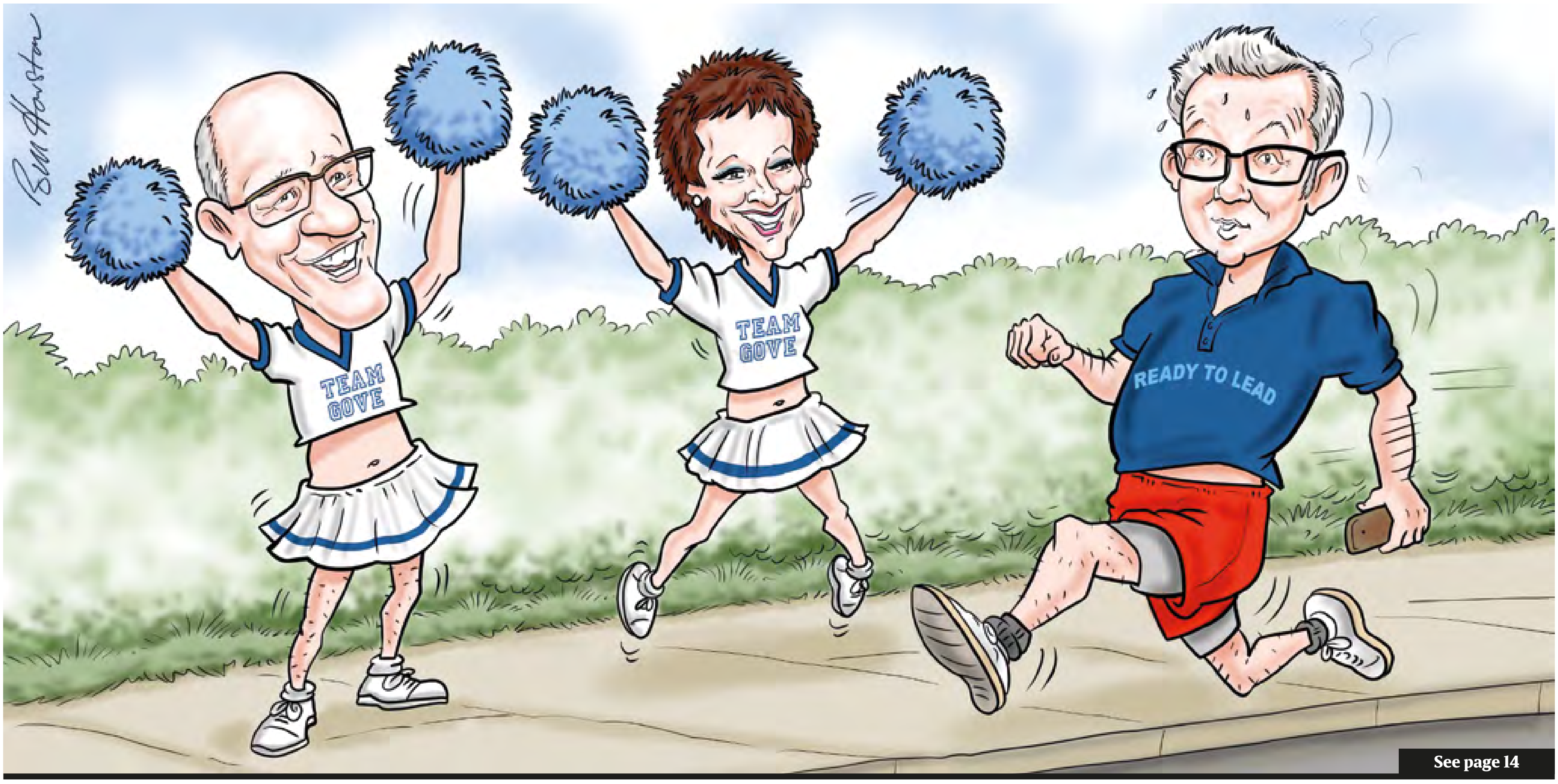
EDITION 283

ESF BLUNDER: 'A F**K-UP OF EPIC PROPORTIONS'

NICK LINFORD NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

See exclusive on page 12



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FE WEEK WINS LOAN LAW BATTLE

- Government amends law following campaign to support failed loan learners
- Secretary of State able to cancel John Frank Training learner debts from July
- Learner describes relief at 'great news' after more than two years of stress

Exclusive BILLY CAMDEN BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

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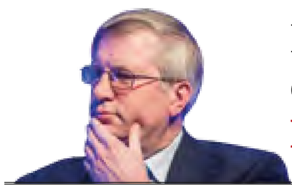

Let's develop a skills ecosystem, emphasising cooperation

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News

DfE amends law following *FE Week* campaign to protect loans learners

BILLY CAMDEN
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From front | Exclusive

Victims of a long-running FE loans scandal are set to benefit from new legislation that gives the education secretary powers to clear their debt – representing a huge win for *FE Week's* #SaveOurAdultEducation campaign.

From July 1, 2019 the government will be able to cancel all or part of an advanced learner loan for learners left in debt when their provider goes bust.

FE Week has revealed horror stories involving hundreds of students suffering from such circumstances since early 2017. Many of them, who were training to be, for example, carpenters or chefs, were left with debts amounting to thousands of pounds but no qualification when providers such as John Frank Training and Edudo suddenly went out of business.

The government refused to write off their loans, even if the learners couldn't move on to other providers.

It sparked the launch of #SaveOurAdultEducation which demanded justice for those affected and has now been hailed as a success by Robert Halfon, who was skills minister at the time and is now education select committee chair.

"I'm delighted that students with advanced learner loans will no longer need to be penalised for the actions of bust training providers when suitable alternatives are not available for them," he said.

"This was something I pushed for as a minister and campaigned for alongside *FE Week*. I really welcome the hard work of Anne Milton and Damian Hinds in making it happen."

After our campaign's launch, the Student Loans Company deferred repayments for the affected learners, but as *FE Week* has previously reported, money has still been taken out of their accounts in repayments.

The provider central to the scandal was John Frank Training. The London-based firm went into liquidation on November 30, 2016, leaving no assets, despite recording a profit of £1.3 million in the first half of 2016. Around 500 learners were affected.

"At the heart of everything we do is the interests of students"

The situation resulted in the Education and Skills Funding Agency reviewing its audit framework for loans-only providers and changes were made, including the banning of subcontracting for these providers.

The ESFA did not report John Frank to the police because no fraud was identified as part of the original investigation.

#SaveOurAdultEducation launch. From left: *FE Week* publisher LSECT's managing director Shane Mann, former top skills civil servant Susan Pember, *FE Week* editor Nick Linford, shadow skills minister Gordon Marsden, David Lammy MP, chief executive of the Workers' Educational Association Ruth Spellman, Rob Marris MP, Kate Green MP, Margaret Greenwood MP and Helen Goodman MP

Asim Shaheen was among the ex-learners at the provider. The trainee chef still had an outstanding debt of £8,000, plus interest, when the firm collapsed and could not find another provider with whom to complete his training.

After being told the news of incoming legislation to protect learners, Asim told *FE Week*: "After more than two years of stress and worry, this is great news and I now expect the government to cancel my loan in full at the first opportunity."

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "In a very few cases, a small number of students with advanced learner loans are unable to complete their course as a result of provider failure. Our priority in these cases is to ensure those students have the opportunity to continue their studies elsewhere.

"However, we recognise that this is not always possible. In recognition of this we have introduced new legislation to allow the Secretary of State to consider cancelling all or part of an advanced learner loan in such circumstances."

Skills minister Anne Milton told *FE Week*: "At the heart of everything we do is the interests of students and learners."

A spokesperson for the Student Loans Company confirmed repayments for learners affected by the liquidation of John Frank Training "have been deferred for a further year until April 2020".

Shadow skills minister Gordon Marsden was a firm supporter of #SaveOurAdultEducation and hosted its launch event in Parliament. He also put in numerous written questions to pressure the DfE into action.

"It's welcome news that finally two years on, the Secretary of State is taking steps to find a solution for the many learners affected by the collapse of their training providers – left with huge debts and no qualifications through no fault of their own," he said.

"It's disappointing that these learners have been left with the stress and worry of having these repayments hanging over them for so long, without adequate solutions coming forward from the department or the ESFA.

"That is why it is vital that Damian Hinds follows through urgently on this new legislation and writes off their debt to finally end the nightmare for these learners."

Amendment of the Further Educations Loans Regulations 2012

2.—(1) The Further Education Loans Regulations 2012(**b**) are amended as follows.

(2) After regulation 24 (overpayments of fee loan), insert—

"**Cancellation of fee loan**

25.—(1) Where this regulation applies the Secretary of State must cancel all or part of a fee loan.

(2) The circumstances mentioned in paragraph (1) are that—

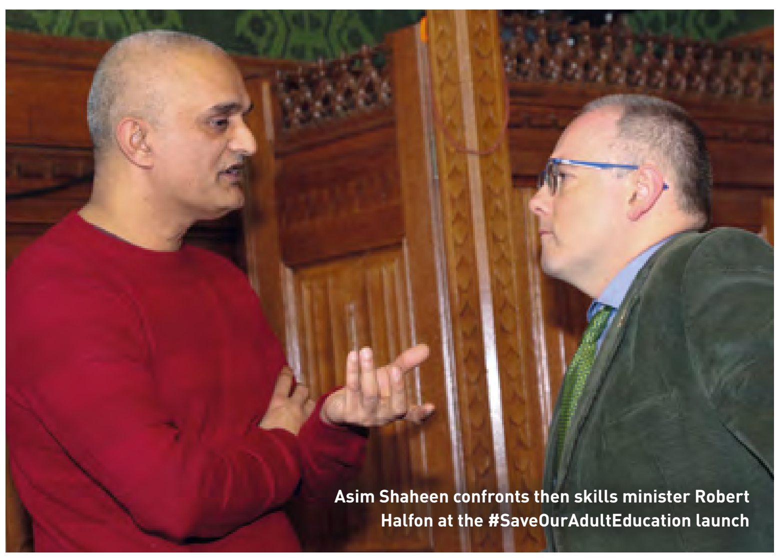
(a) an eligible student has taken out the fee loan in relation to a designated further education course at an institution;

(b) the course to which the fee loan relates is no longer available at the institution;

(c) the student has applied in writing to the Secretary of State for cancellation of all or part of the fee loan; and

(d) the Secretary of State considers it appropriate to do so.

The legislation to protect loans learners



Asim Shaheen confronts then skills minister Robert Halfon at the #SaveOurAdultEducation launch

News

OfS to inspect unregulated apprentices despite Augar Review recommendation

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

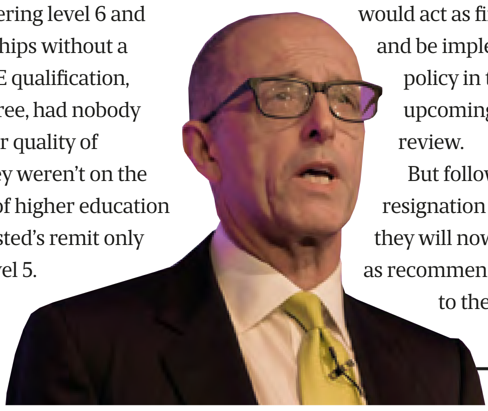
The government has already rejected one recommendation put forward by the Augar Review – by giving the Office for Students responsibility for overseeing thousands of higher level apprenticeships that currently go unregulated.

FE Week revealed in November that firms offering level 6 and 7 apprenticeships without a prescribed HE qualification, such as a degree, had nobody checking their quality of delivery if they weren't on the OfS' register of higher education providers. Ofsted's remit only extends to level 5.

After calls for this gap in oversight to be urgently fixed, and months of deliberation, this newspaper understands the Department for Education has given the job to the OfS instead of Ofsted.

The decision comes despite the post-18 education review panel, led by Philip Augar, recommending that Ofsted should become the lead responsible body for inspecting apprenticeships at all levels.

When the review was announced by Prime Minister Theresa May in February 2018 it was first thought the findings would act as final decisions and be implemented as policy in the government's upcoming spending review.



Philip Augar

But following May's resignation it is expected they will now only be treated as recommendations, much to the frustration of further education leaders, as the review made a strong case for greater investment in the sector.

The OfS decision will act as the first piece of solid evidence that the proposals will fall on deaf ears when the new prime minister is appointed.

The Augar Report, which described the lack of oversight for the higher level apprenticeships in question as an "important gap in coverage", stated: "At present, both the OfS and Ofsted are expected to have the necessary expertise to ensure the quality assurance of apprenticeship provision which we believe is wasteful.

"One regulator should inspect apprenticeship provision at all levels to ensure consistency in standards and in-house expertise.

"We believe this should be Ofsted, thus maintaining a single knowledge hub for apprenticeship quality."

It added: "This would reduce duplication and the risk of providers being overlooked. While we recognise this may not be welcome by some higher education institutions, we believe a sole inspection body is vital when new and untested providers are entering the market and offering provision at a variety of levels."

Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman expressed her deep concern at the issue of unregulated apprenticeships during an interview with *FE Week* in March: "There are places that go completely unscrutinised because they don't come within OfS arrangements and they don't come within our space," she said.

Asked at the time if she would like Ofsted to inspect the provision, she added: "I very much hope people will see the logic in us doing it."

Asked this week if the inspectorate was disappointed that the DfE had opted to give the OfS the job, an Ofsted spokesperson said: "This is clearly a matter for the Department for Education, but we are content with our ongoing arrangements to inspect apprenticeships up to level 5."

FE Week approached the OfS to find out how it plans to regulate the higher level apprenticeships if the provider offering them is not on its HE register, but a spokesperson said they could not comment until the DfE makes a formal announcement.

The DfE said it was planning to announce a decision shortly, but could not say when.

The OfS employs a "risk-based approach to quality assurance defined by a high-quality threshold for entry and regulates all provision at all providers on the OfS Register," a spokesperson told *FE Week* in November.

"Providers who are accepted on to the register will have met a high threshold for quality and standards and will be monitored on an ongoing basis to ensure that quality is maintained."

The Quality Assurance Agency then conducts external annual provider reviews of HE institutions for the OfS, including those that deliver apprenticeships.

However, these are not official inspections of the type Ofsted conducts.

Dozens made redundant as 'good' apprenticeship provider goes bust

JESSICA FINO
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Exclusive

A training provider has gone bust after being "hit hard" by the government's apprenticeship reforms, putting nearly 40 staff out of work.

FNTC Training and Consulting Limited, a provider rated "good" by Ofsted and based in Southampton, was forced to close after suffering losses of over £200,000 last year and ongoing losses this year.

Its biggest challenge has been offering apprenticeship standards in the care sector, which have been allocated a funding stream which "barely covers delivery", according to an email sent to learners and staff by the provider's owner, chief executive and director Elizabeth Young, seen by *FE Week*.

It stated that 37 staff have been made redundant.

The email added that the strategic leadership team was "devastated" to announce the closure after nearly 20 years providing apprenticeships across Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and the Isle of Wight.

"The changes made to the apprenticeship market in May 2017 were monumental, including the introduction of employer levy accounts, mandatory employer contributions and the apprenticeship standards," Young explained.

"These changes, amongst many others, have had a dramatic impact on established providers and resulted in a national decline in the uptake of apprenticeships."

The number of apprenticeship starts at FNTC sharply declined from 550 in 2016-17 to 190 in 2017-18, according to data from the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

It mainly delivered training to the health and social care sector, but also offered courses in business administration and management.

"As an entrepreneur, acknowledging defeat goes against everything I believe in. However, the recent financial losses are unsustainable," Young continued.

"The strategic leadership team is working with the Education and Skills Funding Agency to ensure that delivery to employers and learners is not compromised.

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the employer partners that have contributed to FNTC's continued success since May 2000 and all my staff team for their professionalism, determination and efforts to overcome the challenges we have faced."

According to FNTC's published 2017-18 accounts, the provider was owed £202,128 from Young, and £554,505 from Fawley Independent Day Nursery, which is also owned by Young.

At the time of going to press, several FNTC apprenticeship opportunities at Fawley Independent Day Nursery were being advertised on the government's vacancy website.

Young told *FE Week* the FNTC and Fawley Independent Day Nursery financial information is now outdated, but declined to explain if the amounts have been paid back.

She also said administrators KRE Corporate Recovery LLP were currently handling the liquidation and financial affairs, and that accounts for 2018-19 will be published in due course.

Contacted by this newspaper, KRE confirmed it has been engaged by the directors to wind down the affairs of the company but no formal appointment had taken place at the time of going to press.

Rob Keyes, partner at KRE, said the firm "will be looking into all aspects of its trading activities once appointed", but added "it is too early at this stage to provide you with any further commentary as we are still gathering information".

Last month, the Institute for Apprenticeships decided to keep the funding rates for multiple care apprenticeship standards unchanged despite a robust plea from the trailblazer group which developed the standards.

Officials have since been accused of undervaluing the care sector, with one provider now planning to stop offering the apprenticeships and another

Elizabeth Young

branding the decision a "disgrace".

FNTC's offices are now closed. Affected employers and learners are being encouraged to contact the ESFA which will be managing the transfer of training.

In its last visit to FNTC Training and Consulting in May 2016, Ofsted said FNTC was a good provider that made a "significant contribution to improving the skills and experience of trainees and apprentices".

News

College accused of 'everyday racism' after sacking lecturer

JESSICA FINO
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Exclusive

The new Universities and College Union general secretary has accused the leadership at Sandwell College of "everyday racism" after it sacked lecturer Dave Muritu.

In an interview with *FE Week*, Dr Jo Brady said there is "everyday racism in colleges", and that "we have seen that just this week with someone being dismissed at Sandwell".

Muritu was fired by the college last week for writing the word "racist" on a poster promoting the Prevent strategy.

Despite admitting to drawing on the poster and apologising for his actions, the lecturer was dismissed for gross misconduct on the grounds of "serious damage to college property", "bringing the college into disrepute" and "use of inappropriate language".

The lecturer agreed with Grady's remarks, telling *FE Week* there is a "clear sign of institutional racism" in the college.

"Anecdotally, the amount of case work that we do on members of staff being disciplined shows the people who gets the harshest disciplined are generally black, and generally black women," he said.

Muritu also claimed that, while the college does quite well in terms of diversity among lecturing staff, "if you go any higher into management, it's totally white".

Sandwell College did not provide a comment in response to these allegations at the time of going to press.

But when the news broke of Muritu's dismissal earlier this week, a college spokesperson said: "Although we do not share details of internal HR matters, it is important to note that we recently conducted a thorough investigation into a serious disciplinary matter which resulted in the decision being made to terminate the employment of a member of staff.

"The college has been notified that the UCU wish to enter into a dispute with the college following the dismissal of the staff member. The college does not accept and refutes UCU comments."

The union planned a protest outside the college's grounds on Friday (June 7), demanding the reinstatement of the lecturer.

A petition calling for his reinstatement had reached more than 4,800 signatories at the time of going to press.

Last year, the college and its staff agreed on a new "sector-leading" pay deal – amounting to more than 6 per cent over three years, avoiding a three-day strike.

UCU pointed out that Muritu is the union's local branch secretary, and played a key role in negotiating the landmark pay deal for staff last May.

The maths lecturer is also the former chair of the UCU black members standing committee.

He told this newspaper that the college has been trying to "victimise" him for several years. "I think if any other member of staff would have done this they wouldn't dismiss them."

Muritu claimed his dislike of the Prevent programme was well known at the college.

Prevent, which promotes "British values", requires FE providers to put policies in place to stop the potential radicalisation of learners and exposure to extremism.

The programme has received widespread criticism, and in January this year, security minister Ben Wallace, announced an independent review into the strategy.

Muritu explained that when the programme was made a duty on public sector organisations, the UCU objected to it because it felt it was "targeting Muslim students".


Dave Muritu

"We felt the definition of extremism within the [Prevent] duty is really problematic," he said.

"It's such a loose definition it could be levelled at anybody who shows dissent against government policy or who does not fit the current predominant narrative.

"It could be used to target anybody: trade unionists, people from the left, from environment groups. We just felt it was not appropriate for education because education is a place where ideas are discussed in an open, democratic and trusting environment and I think it destroys the trust because it turns educators into spies on students."

Unveiled: the 17 colleges to share £2.5m strategic improvement funding

JESSICA FINO
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The names of the colleges set to share grants through a government fund designed to support struggling colleges have been announced.

Skills minister Anne Milton this week revealed that 17 colleges will share £2.5million in the third and final round of the strategic college improvement fund (SCIF) that was introduced in October 2017.

A total of 80 colleges across the country have been successful in securing funding since its launch. The fund was originally meant to amount to £15 million but ended up totalling £12.3 million.

Colleges rated "requires improvement" or "inadequate" overall, or for their apprenticeship provision, were able apply for grants ranging between £60,000 and £500,000.

Merged colleges without an Ofsted rating were also able to bid.

Each application had to be supported by a stronger college, rated at least "good" at its most recent inspection.

The government said the scheme would "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".

The Department for Education has also published the findings of its initial pilot. It required 14 general FE and sixth-form colleges to design and produce self-evaluations related to the activities they had implemented.

The self-evaluation reports were all "positive about the programme, and particularly the opportunity to be partnered with another college", according to the research.

The colleges said the fund enabled quality improvement work to be completed "much more quickly than would have happened otherwise", with colleges reporting that they appreciated the development of peer-to-peer relationships between colleges.

However, it also found that targets to improve student retention rates were commonly not met, even though colleges were most commonly able to provide evidence of improving teaching, learning and assessment, developing the student experience and improving the quality of apprenticeship provision.

The Department for Education said today almost three quarters of eligible colleges applied for the fund and 91 per cent of applicants were successful.

"We've seen some great success stories as a result of the programme," Milton said today.

"It's excellent news that colleges are making progress. Many colleges are intending to continue working together beyond the programme's end, which can only be for the good of students."

Bill Watkin, chief executive at the Sixth Form Colleges Association, said he was "sure that many of the relationships established through SCIF activities will be sustained for years to come and students will benefit well beyond the end of this programme".

He called on the government to launch another round of the SCIF in the near future.

SCIF recipient college	Lead partner college
Barnet Southgate College	Activate Learning
Bishop Auckland College	Barnsley College
Cheshire College South & West	Bury College
City College Southampton	Fareham College
City of Wolverhampton	Grimsby Institute of Further Education and Higher Education
Colchester Institute	Northampton College
Coventry College	Grimsby Institute of Further Education and Higher Education
Croydon College	Leeds City College
Derwentside College	Gateshead College
EKC Group	North Kent College
Hertford Regional College	Milton Keynes College
North Shropshire College	Herefordshire, Ludlow and North Shropshire College
Northampton College	Harlow College
Oaklands College	West Herts College
Prospects College of Advanced Technology	South Essex College
Stratford Upon Avon College	Solihull College & University Centre
Swindon College	Cirencester College

PREPARE FOR CHANGE

In March 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) announced funding changes in England, which affect some vocational qualifications offered by all exam boards and are part of larger review of post-16 qualifications.

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News

Speedy Ofsted criticism of provider just months after multi-million pound purchase

JESSICA FINO
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A new provider that was allowed to recruit over 1,000 apprentices before being inspected has been found making "insufficient progress" by Ofsted in a monitoring visit.

Prospects Training International Limited trades as Geason Training and was acquired by Speedy, one of the UK's leading tool hire services companies, in a deal worth up to £26 million in December.

Within the first few months of the takeover the provider has been stung by the education watchdog, which found that only one-fifth of learners complete their programme on time.

Geason started delivering apprenticeships with its own direct contract in 2017, but also had 11 subcontracts worth £4.6 million as at September 2018. These included subcontracts with the country's largest college group, NCG, and West Nottinghamshire College.

At the time of the Ofsted visit in April it had 1,017 of its own apprentices. Inspectors found that leaders and managers do not ensure that the principles and requirements of an apprenticeship were met, with "too many" learners receiving a poor standard of training and having insufficient opportunity to take part in off-the-job training.

They also criticised the senior management team, which has been "too slow to implement effective strategies to ensure that apprentices develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours".

However, Ofsted pointed out the provider has recently recruited a new management team, which has implemented new strategies to improve apprentices' experiences.

A spokesperson for Geason said although it was "extremely disappointed" with the outcome, it would not be challenging the findings.

"The report recognises that actions highlighted during our own self-assessment report have been implemented, and that we continue to make good progress with the current actions contained within our quality-improvement plan," he added.

"Our utmost priority is to continue to support the learning of our apprentices and we are confident of demonstrating the impact of our quality-improvement plan at our full inspection in due course."

The majority of apprentices at Geason study construction-related programmes, with around a quarter studying business-focused apprenticeships in digital marketing, administration, business management, and information and communication technology.

In November, *FE Week* reported that it was one of the providers poaching staff and apprentices from the defunct Aspire Achieve Advance, better known as 3aaa. At the time, it was understood Geason had taken on 3aaa's former quality director and was trying to recruit around 40 other former staff.

FE Week has since learnt that Geason took on a total of 238 of 3aaa's apprentices (see page 11).

Leaders at the provider were found to be insufficiently aware how well apprentices should progress in developing the knowledge and skills they need in order to be successful in their job; and failing to swiftly intervene when apprentices made slow progress,

according to Ofsted. As a result, only one-fifth of apprentices completed their programme last year.

Trainers also did not have a clear understanding of what apprentices knew and what they needed to learn, and their planning of apprentices' training was "poor", the watchdog found.

It added that managers and trainers "rightly recognise" that the initial advice and guidance for most apprentices prior to the start of this new year were poor, which led to a significant majority of apprentices leaving their programme early and failing to achieve their apprenticeship.

But following the implementation of more rigorous checks before apprentices start the programme, there has been an improvement in the experience of most starters, even if just for a "very small minority" of them.

Under Education and Skills Funding Agency rules, any provider with an "insufficient" rating in an early monitoring visit Ofsted report will be banned from taking on any new apprentices until the grade improves.

Easton and Otley College broken up and merged

JESSICA FINO
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A troubled land-based college is to be broken up and merged with two other colleges, following two consecutive "inadequate" ratings by Ofsted.

Easton and Otley College was told to urgently improve its leadership earlier this year after the FE Commissioner raised serious quality and financial concerns.

Just a few of months ago the college, which has nearly 550 staff and around 5,000 students, said it was "determined" to secure its long-term future, after recruiting a new principal and senior leadership team, as well as making "significant" changes to its board. It has also reduced staff costs by £3 million over the past year.

But it announced this week that its Easton campus will become part of City College Norwich, and its Otley campus will join Suffolk New College from next year.

FE Commissioner Richard Atkins has now approved the mergers and has proposed that they be completed by December 31, with a public consultation and an internal business review to take place before then.

The college said it will be business as usual in the meantime for students, with "the highest priority" being that they can complete their studies at their current site.

Mark Pendlington, chair of Easton and Otley College, said it has been "a tough couple of years", with the college trying to make sure that land-based education "survives and thrives well into the future".

"That work prepared the way to attracting strong interest from a number of institutions who wanted to merge with us, and we now have an outcome that promises current and future students exciting new opportunities as they prepare for jobs and careers in the rapidly evolving world of work," he added.

However, Pendlington warned: "Make no mistake, though, there remains much to do and we will continue our focus of building upon the progress already made.

"In agreeing to this merger, high expectations have been set by the college's board and leadership team. Our students and the future health of our growing economy deserve nothing but the best."

And principal Jane Townsend, said: "We now have a clear direction for securing the future of land-based provision in the region.

"My team is fully committed to ensuring that during this period of transition, we will continue to drive improvements in the quality of teaching and learning."

Viv Gillespie, principal of Suffolk New College, said the college is "determined to honour the agricultural and horticultural roots" of Otley, and plans to introduce new land-based programmes – as well as expand in other areas, such as construction.

"We will work closely with our partners City College Norwich, who are merging with the Easton campus, to ensure that high-quality land-based provision in Suffolk and Norfolk is developed further to meet the needs of industries," she added.

Meanwhile, Corrienne Peasgood, principal of City College Norwich, said the college has an "ambitious, robust and realistic plan in place for bringing about the required changes", whilst ensuring current and future students do not experience any disruption to their learning and are able to complete their courses and progress as planned."

The troubled college formed following a merger of Easton College and Otley College in 2012. Ofsted's latest report published in November said its poor-quality study programmes and adult education courses, with low completion rates on both, were the main issues dragging it down.

K College had 15,000 learners at the time but after being given an "inadequate" Ofsted rating it was split. Hadlow College and East Kent College took on its campuses in Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and Ashford; and Dover and Folkestone, respectively.

Struggling national college seeks partners in order to survive

FRASER WHIELDON
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A national college is seeking partner organisations after struggling to recruit learners and scraping through 2017-18 with a government bailout of over half a million pounds.

The National College Creative Industries (NCCI), which opened its doors in 2016, has become the second of the flagship institutions to require a Department for Education hand-out to sign off its accounts as a going concern for last year.

NCCI received £600,000 from the DfE in December, on top of a £1.25 million in working capital loan, £745,000 of which was paid out during 2017-18, with the remaining £505,000 being drawn down in 2018-19.

The DfE has also re-profiled loans and deferred the repayment start date from March 2019 to March 2023.

However, funding support after July 2019 is under review and the accounts state that the college's financial stability depends on income generation through the rapid development of its learner numbers over the next three years.

The NCCI has a target of over 1,000 learners by 2021, but has struggled to attract students to its courses, which include level 3 and 4 diplomas, and apprenticeships between levels 2 and 5.

Over the past 12 months, NCCI only provided to 167 learners, despite telling *FE Week* in October that it was confident 450 learners could be recruited for 2018-19.

The college is now looking for potential partners as part of a structure and prospects appraisal, as revealed in an answer by skills minister Anne Milton to Labour MP Jon Trickett.

An NCCI spokesperson said: "One of the challenges as a start-up organisation is to grow quickly, which is why the NCCI is seeking partners to support this growth.

"By partnering with established organisations already operating in the creative industries sector, NCCI will be able to extend its reach and grow its capacity in line with its strategy and the national college programme policy objectives."

The college is hoping to have partners in place by the start of the 2019-20 academic year.

Prospective partners had five working days to submit their expression of interest. However, NCCI refused to share any additional details of the process or potential partners, as it claims these are commercially sensitive.

The college is based at The Backstage Centre in Thurrock, Essex, which it describes as a "world-class venue". It was allocated £5.5 million from the public purse to launch in 2016-17 and opened with just 16 students.

NCCI's 2017-18 accounts reveal its expenditure – £1.9 million – was 47 per cent higher than its income – £1.3 million – and had generated a deficit of £612,483. It financial health rating is "inadequate".

The spokesperson said the college had a planned operating deficit for the first four years of operation "as part of its start-up status".

The fast recruitment of new learners will not be helped by the news NCCI's classroom achievement rates for 2017-18 were just 50 per cent.

A college spokesperson said it is "fully aware" of the issues around classroom learners' achievement rates, and it took "active steps" to address these issues prior to the start of the 18-19 academic year.

Achievement for 2018-19 is currently sitting at 92 per cent, the spokesperson claimed.

NCCI has never been inspected. An Ofsted spokesperson told *FE Week* the college would be inspected in line with its schedule, but they would not be drawn on timings.

The provider isn't the only national college to have required a DfE bailout: the National College for High Speed Rail (NCHSR) needed £4.55 million to sign off its 2017-18 accounts, as well as a £3.6 million capital loan.

Accountants for NCHSR, which has links to the controversial HS2 project, forecast a £7.5 million shortfall over the next seven years.

In November, the DfE launched a tender for a supplier to evaluate the National Colleges policy to identify what has gone wrong with the scheme. The evaluation started in January and is expected to finish later this month.

News

Growth Company denies conflict of interest in ESF procurement

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

A provider with directors on the board of a local enterprise partnership has refuted conflict of interest allegations after winning nearly all of the £32.6 million available for the area in a recent European Social Fund tender.

The Growth Company Limited, which won £27.6 million in the Greater Manchester area, is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and its LEP.

The provider has six directors who hold various roles at the organisations it is accountable to.

For example, its chair, Richard Topliss, is a member of the Greater Manchester LEP, while one of Growth's directors, Michael Blackburn, is the chair of the LEP.

The provider won all three ESF contracts that it applied for to deliver training in the Greater Manchester LEP.

Multiple providers have been in touch with *FE Week* and complained to the Education and Skills Funding Agency, which ran the tender, to raise concerns about what has been described as a "blatant" conflict of interest.

One college director, who used to work at the ESFA and who wished to remain anonymous, said: "Issues have been raised with the ESFA about the openness and transparency of the processes, and the potential for bias, as several directors sit on both boards, and executives hold portfolios in both organisations."

They claimed that the LEP would have been involved in developing the tender specification and ultimately in awarding the tenders with the ESFA for the Greater Manchester area.

"Despite the ESFA claiming there were adequate confidentiality arrangements in place to prevent any information sharing and conflicts of interest, it does raise questions about the bias and favour," they added.

The Growth Company and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, which is the accountable body for the LEP, strongly denied the allegations.

"This was an EFSA-run process in which the Combined Authority had limited involvement," a spokesperson for GMCA and the LEP said.

"Officers were required to sign and abide by the EFSA's Conflict of Interest declaration and, in common with other areas, provided a short local narrative based around Greater Manchester's clear strategic priorities to support the specification.

"None of the GMCA members involved in the Growth Company had access to tender specification information, nor were they involved in any way in the contract letting process. GMCA were not involved in the appraisal of bids and were only notified of the ESFA's intention to award contracts once the ESFA had made its decisions."

A spokesperson for the Growth Company said it believes the results of the European Social Fund tender come from "our strong track-record in delivering high-quality skills, employment and business support services across the North of England".

"This exercise was competitively tendered and managed nationally by the ESFA," he added.

"Each proposal submitted achieved an identical and consistent quality score irrespective of the geography. With 63 per cent of contract wins and 50 per cent of potential funding coming from outside of Greater Manchester, we are confident that there was no bias in the ESFA ESF tendering process."

The spokesperson said its board members had "no access to any of the information listed and had no involvement in the national ESFA commissioning process".

A Department for Education spokesperson said it had "no evidence to suggest that there was any sensitive information shared throughout this process".

The European Social Fund is funding that the UK received, as a member state of the EU, to increase job opportunities and to help people to improve their skill levels, particularly those individuals who find it difficult to get work.

Winning providers in this tender, of which there were 47, will help to deliver the training in 38 LEP areas.

The Growth Company win wasn't the only controversial part of the procurement.

The ESFA delayed issuing contracts several times, after multiple providers claimed that the government broke tender rules, namely by excluding the "track record" section when marking bids, while the ESFA has admitted to "errors".

Further questions were asked in March after *FE Week* discovered an "unprecedented" amount of tie-breaks in the procurement.

One aggrieved provider threatened legal action against the ESFA, but decided to drop this because of the likely cost and a fear of repercussions from the agency.

THE SIX GROWTH COMPANY DIRECTORS

Richard Topliss

Chair of the Board of the Growth Company Ltd

AS WELL AS

Board member at the Greater Manchester LEP

Michael Blackburn

Director at the Growth Company Ltd

AS WELL AS

Chair to the Greater Manchester LEP

Sir Richard Leese

Director at the Growth Company Ltd

AS WELL AS

Board member at the Greater Manchester LEP

AS WELL AS

Vice chair at the GMCA

Ebrahim Adia

Director at the Growth Company Ltd

AS WELL AS

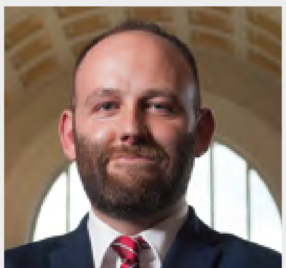
Assistant Portfolio Holder at the GMCA

Arooj Shah

Director at the Growth Company Ltd

AS WELL AS

Assistant Portfolio Holder at the GMCA



Paul Dennett

Director at the Growth Company Ltd

AS WELL AS

Member of GMCA

News

Over 1,300 apprentices left without any provider, 7 months after 3aaa collapse

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

Nearly one-third of the apprentices who were training with disgraced apprenticeship firm Aspire Achieve Advance had still not been found a new provider seven months after its collapse.

Furthermore, questions are likely to be raised about some of the firms the transferred apprentices have moved to, after one was slammed by Ofsted in an "insufficient" monitoring report, four have been rated "requires improvement" and three have never been inspected.

The company, better known as 3aaa, went into administration on October 11 after the government pulled its skills funding contracts following a fraud investigation. The police have since launched a formal criminal investigation.

A total of 4,229 apprentices were left without a place to complete their training, so the Education and Skills Funding Agency immediately began work to find them alternative provision at "high-quality" providers.

FE Week has now learnt, through a Freedom of Information request, that 1,321 of them, or 31 per cent, had still not been found new providers as of May 10.

Of the affected apprentices there were 1,835 non-levy funded. Of these 1,615 have had a transfer "facilitated", while 210 have either completed their programme or withdrawn, and 10 are "still being supported".

In terms of levy-funded apprentices, of which there were 2,394, and where the responsibility to find them a new provider is the employers, 1,073 transfers have been facilitated.

Transferring 3aaa's apprentices proved controversial earlier in the year after *FE Week* revealed that a few providers had attempted to poach staff and learners using underhand tactics. This led to the ESFA warning that they could withdraw funding from any firms found doing this.

An investigation by this newspaper found that some training providers were "misrepresenting their position" in an effort to recruit those affected. Tactics included alleged false claims that the ESFA and 3aaa had asked the providers to take on hundreds of people affected.

Among them was Prospects Training International Limited, which trades as Geason Training. At the time, it was understood Geason had taken on 3aaa's former quality director and was trying to recruit around 40 other former staff.

The provider, which was allowed to recruit over 1,000 apprentices before being inspected, was found making "insufficient progress" by Ofsted in a heavily critical monitoring visit published this week (see page 8).

The FOI obtained by *FE Week* shows Geason took on 238 of 3aaa's apprentices.

Babington Business College Limited, a large provider with government-funded skills contracts worth nearly £10 million in 2018-19 (according to ESFA data), was also one of the providers accused of poaching apprentices.

It took on 3aaa's former operations director, and *FE Week*'s FOI shows it has taken on 347 affected apprentices – the most out of all providers.

Estio was another provider that formed part of *FE Week*'s investigation, and the figures show they took on 113 apprentices.

Elsewhere, Ofsted grade three providers Kaplan Financial Ltd, South Staffordshire College, Skills Edge Training Ltd and Chesterfield College took on 69, 28, 16 and 10 of 3aaa's apprentices respectively.

Presidency London College Ltd, Learnmore Network Ltd, International Correspondence Schools Limited have never been inspected by Ofsted but took on 48, 45 and 29 of 3aaa's apprentices respectively.

FE Week revealed what was behind the government and police investigations into 3aaa in November.

The company, which had 500 staff before it went bust when the ESFA pulled its £16.5 million skills contract, allegedly manipulated Individualised Learner Records to artificially inflate achievement rates by a huge amount and misused employer-incentive grants.

A previous ESFA investigation into 3aaa, carried out by auditing firm KPMG in 2016, had found dozens of success rate "overclaims".

3aaa was co-founded by Peter Marples and Di McEvoy-Robinson in 2008, but the pair stepped down in September during the ESFA's second investigation.

In March, Derbyshire police launched a formal criminal investigation into the provider.

At the time of going to press the police said investigations were ongoing.

Provider	Non-levy transfers	Levy transfers	Total transfers from 3aaa
BABINGTON	269	78	347
GEASON TRAINING	212	26	238
ESTIO TRAINING	61	113	174
QA LIMITED	126	29	155
REMIT GROUP	87	16	103

Source: *FE Week* FOI

Colleges fail to win any OfS mental health funding

JESSICA FINO
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All three college bids for a £6 million fund to help reduce student mental health problems have been rejected.

Instead, ten universities have been chosen to share the cash on offer from the Office for Students, along with co-funding of £8.5 million to develop "innovative" projects.

The call was open to both universities and colleges, and a total of 48 submissions were made.

The OfS wouldn't name the unsuccessful colleges, but pointed out that, of the successful projects, two include FE colleges as partners.

They are Keele University, which will work with Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group and Stoke on Trent College; and Lincoln University, partnered with Lincoln College.

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said he was "disappointed that this investment does not seem to have reached many colleges".

"But," he added, "I am not surprised, because the funding was only for higher education, which is an important but not major part of college provision.

"I'm pleased that some colleges are part of winning projects and I expect them to play a formative part in those partnerships, sharing their good practice with universities."

According to the AoC, one in five young people aged 16 to 24 experience a common mental illness, such as anxiety or depression, every year; and 75 per cent of adults with a diagnosable mental health problem experience their first symptoms before the age of 24.

The proportion of full-time UK undergraduate students reporting mental health concerns when they enter higher education has more than doubled over the past five years, the OfS said.

Hughes said student mental health is a "big priority for colleges" and has had "welcome coverage in recent times".

His association launched a mental health charter last month to challenge mental health stigma, and 24 colleges have "enthusiastically" signed it so far.

The OfS's competition was aimed at generating new approaches which could be used across higher education. Focuses include new forms of mental health awareness training to staff and students, and developing an integrated approach between university- and college-level support services.

Denise Brown, principal at Stoke on Trent College, told *FE Week* that via the project they are working on with Keele University, "we aim to improve support and opportunities through the college to university transition, working collaboratively with local colleges, universities, NHS partners and the local authority to develop a multi-agency 'transitions toolkit'".

"Our commitment to this project includes creating a provision for staff training and education programmes that aim to increase awareness of mental health issues and their impact," she added.

"We are looking forward to dedicating staff time to help develop this transitional toolkit and delivering essential training targeted specifically at benefiting young people in our community."


David Hughes

The eight other universities that will share the £6 million funding are: Newcastle, University of Derby, University of the West of England, Northumbria University, University of Liverpool, University of Nottingham, University of Birmingham and University of Sussex.

Universities minister Chris Skidmore said: "I am pleased the Office for Students is driving forward action on this vital priority, and these innovative projects will help to improve mental health support by allowing institutions to find what really works to help those students in need."

News

Four-letter verdict on colossal ESF blunder

NICK LINFORD
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Exclusive

In what one ESFA official is alleged to have called a "f*ck up of epic proportions", all 80 training providers in receipt of around £300 million of European Social Funding are being investigated after funding claim "discrepancies" were discovered.

As a result, contract compliance for the 2014 to 2020 ESF programme has been thrown into doubt.

In early April the ESFA wrote to providers with concerns that evidence was missing from learner files.

FE Week has seen a copy of the ESF contract which states that where a learner is enrolled on to a course involving a regulated qualification, then the "evidence requirement" for a start payment is registration to an awarding body.

On 1 April, the day after contracts had ended, the ESFA wrote to all providers as part of a "nationwide exercise across all ESF contracts" with concerns that this evidence was missing from learner files.

They requested that a small sample be checked within two weeks because: "We have become aware of discrepancies with the evidence held to support the claiming of a start payment for a Regulated learning aim."

In April the ESFA did in fact find a significant amount of non-compliance which led to a follow-up email in early May requesting "further investigation at all providers."

"You are now required to complete a 100 per cent check of the aims and record what evidence you have available for Awarding Body registration, along with the date of that registration," providers were told in an email dated May 2, with a May 28 deadline to complete the exercise.

> "We have become aware of discrepancies"

Despite the highly unusual nationwide compliance checking of all records, the DfE told *FE Week*: "As part of our business-as-usual closure checks we validate data and sample compliance check the providers claimed activities."

And initially the DfE said the checks were not about funding compliance, claiming: "The purpose of these checks is not to cancel funding for any providers and we do not anticipate receiving any money back from providers."

However, the DfE appeared to backtrack when *FE Week* shared the ESFA email sent to all ESF providers in early May in which it said "where the evidence is not available you will need to remove these claims."

Having reviewed the ESFA email, a DfE spokesperson added: "When we finalise the contract for closure we do not anticipate we will need to claw back any funding as we have worked with providers to try and ensure this is not the case. However, if an external audit confirms irregularities we will of course claw back funds."

FE Week has spoken to several providers affected, who claim the ESFA had not been clear enough in the contracts or previous audits that they would need awarding organisation registration evidence to justify start payments.

The ESFA has since strengthened the wording in contracts starting April 2019 ensuring that learners are registered with the awarding body prior to the start claim being made.

But it is understood that for the contracts to March 2019 there are likely to be millions of pounds of start payments for thousands of learners who did not finish their course and for whom they were not registered with an awarding organisation.

The ESFA said in their communication with providers in early May that they would need to remove these claims and it remains unclear whether this has been done and, as a result, what scale of funding claw-back could follow.

Education & Skills Funding Agency

European Union
European Social Fund

Funding Rules
2014 to 2020 ESF Programme
ESF Specifications Deliverables Evidence Requirements
Version 3

RQ01 Regulated Learning	**START PAYMENT** – Registration / Application to awarding body. **ACHIEVEMENT PAYMENT** – Any of the following evidence: Internal Verification Report – direct claim status ONLY; External Verification Report showing participant. Certificate from the Awarding Body; Application for the certificate to the Awarding Body; Awarding body results list.

From: ESFA [mailto@education.gov.uk]
Sent: 02 May 2019
Subject: RQ evidence assurance through contract closure

Hi

As you will be aware from the RQ01 sample check you were asked to complete recently, an issue around the claiming of RQ activity before the contractual evidence is in place has been identified and this now need further investigation at all providers.

It has been agreed that for closure of contracts that ended 31st March 2019, for aims with a start AND achievement, the MINIMUM acceptable evidence is an achievement certificate (or Awarding body achievement notification), which we will, in this instance, accept as evidence in support of both start and achievement claims. However, for aims where a start payment has been made but No achievement – the ONLY evidence we can accept is evidence of registration/application to the Awarding body as per the evidence requirements.

Attached are spreadsheets with details of all learners on contracts ESF-2215 and ESF-2217, with RQ claims where the learner has withdrawn before completion. **You are now required to complete an 100% check of the aims and record what evidence you have available for Awarding Body registration, along with the date of that registration.**

The learners/aims are from the full contract term, therefore for learners within year 2018-19, where the evidence is not available you will need to remove these claims from the ILR submission. For previous years a Supplementary Business Case to remove funding will be required.

The deadline to return these spreadsheet to me is COP on Tuesday 28th May 2019

Regards
ESF Management & Delivery Advisor

News

'There's more than one way to be a gen sec': New UCU boss up for the challenge

FRASER WHIELDON
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Exclusive

The new University and College Union boss has backed herself to successfully lead the organisation despite never having run an organisation before, saying "there is more than one way to be a general secretary".

Dr Jo Grady, a former student at Wakefield College, was announced as the new leader of the UCU last month, having been elected with 64 per cent of the vote on a record turnout of 20 per cent.

She defeated the UCU head of policy and campaigns Matt Waddup and the president of the University of Liverpool UCU branch Jo McNeil to the job, which came with a salary of £107,448 in 2018.

Grady will be taking a leave of absence from her role as a senior lecturer in employment relations at the University of Sheffield once she becomes general secretary in the summer.

Her background sets her apart from the previous UCU leader, Sally Hunt, who retired due to ill health in February after having served as a general secretary since 2002, firstly of the Association of University Teaching, then of its successor organisation, the UCU.

Grady, meanwhile, has a less prominent track record, having served on the union's national disputes committee for the universities pension scheme, and as a co-branch secretary for Leicester UCU and as pensions officer for the Sheffield branch. However, she insisted she is not disconcerted by becoming general secretary of the union that has around 200 staff and 120,000 members, saying: "Yes, it's a responsibility and a privilege to become general secretary, but I'm not daunted because I think I have been elected with a big mandate and increased turnout by members who are eager for change."

On what qualifies her for the role, Grady said she had been on the frontline of delivering education, and to reach her current position she had to gain experience of managing budgets and people, and negotiating changing structures. All of this has helped her develop the skills of diplomacy, organisation and communication that are "essential" for a general secretary.

Dr Jo Grady

"The general secretary is more than just a manager of a large organisation, they are the head of the union and I think that's an important and serious political role," she said.

Grady, 35, who has been described as the grassroots candidate, said she was "comfortable" working with the community of politicians and government departments, as well as university and college management.

Asked how her leadership approach would differ from Hunt's, Grady said she wanted to break down silos and bring in a more "inclusive" way of doing things.

A lot of members had felt "dislocated" from the decisions the UCU had made, she said, and it had been "really difficult to feed into what the union is doing".

When she successfully ran for the national committee, members had thanked her for explaining what the national committee does for them.

"Until you become a general secretary, you do not have the experience of being a general secretary," but "there is more than one way to do that job, and ways to make sure you do see your membership a lot and speak for your membership a lot."

She wants to bring in the experiences of "sidelined" members, such as those who work as casual staff, by making the union more inclusive and transparent, through publishing minutes from the national executive committee and setting up task groups on issues such as the hostile environment and migrant members.

"I'm not daunted because I think I have been elected with a big mandate"

Her specific priorities for the further education sector include trying to get more funding to spend on classroom teaching, rather than on new buildings, and tackling everyday racism in colleges. She said the latter could be seen in the case of Dave Muritu, who was suspended as a lecturer at Sandwell College after writing the word "Racist" on a poster for the Prevent strategy.

Grady said if he had been dismissed after apologising for defacing the poster it was difficult to see the college's decision as anything other than "victimisation of a trade union officer".

She is hoping to meet Muritu at a demonstration outside the college this week, after members threatened to strike if he was not reinstated.

Tapping into that belief in solidarity among union members was something Grady said was part of the secret of her success. "When you directly campaign with and to people, when you are honest about what you are asking them to do… that involves raising expectations of what we can achieve and not just accepting the managed decline of our sector, people respond to that.

"It's a really exciting time for the union and there's no reason to be daunted. I think this election really shows everyone is pulling together," she concluded.

What Jo Grady's manifesto promised to do for FE

- Subscription reform – Grady wants to introduce special rates for workers who do not have a fixed monthly income and consider ways to make membership more affordable for people who work in further education, to rebuild its membership in that area.

- Capping her own salary increases – Grady has promised to ensure her salary does not increase any higher than the most recent national pay offer in further education.

- Fighting fund – Grady has promised to donate a portion of her salary to the fighting fund, which is used to support members through strike pay, for example. She will also publish the amount she has donated.

- Hostile environment – Grady has pledged to set up a dedicated task group to look into surveillance and security issues at colleges and universities; this is in response to initiatives such as the "right to work" checks on non-EU staff and students.

- Grady will appoint national "branch coordination" officers for anti-casualisation, to tackle insecure employment.

- She also wants to weight pay claims more progressively, in favour of the lowest-paid staff.

- Grady wants to create positions for specialist, full-time equality casework officials.

- She believes the national bargaining frameworks should be expanded to include issues such as sexual harassment and transgender rights, and maternity and paternity rights.

News

Skills minister backs Gove to be next prime minister

BILLY CAMDEN
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The skills minister Anne Milton is backing Conservative leadership contender Michael Gove to be the next prime minister.

She believes only the former education secretary offers the "serious leadership" that Britain needs.

While Gove said earlier this week that he would spend £1 billion extra on schools if he wins the race, he has so far been silent on his plans for further education.

When asked about his thoughts on investment in FE, a source close to Gove simply said: "Michael will be reading the Augar Review with interest."

The Augar Review of post-18 education was announced by current prime minister, Theresa May, in February 2018 and reported last month. It included a raft of recommendations for greater investment in FE.

Despite Gove not having thought up any policies for the sector, Milton, commenting in the London Evening Standard, said: "Michael Gove is ready to unite our party and our country, ready to deliver and ready to lead."

> "Michael Gove is ready to unite our party and our country"

She added that the current environment secretary can "master the details of a brief" and lauded his "insight, passion and strength", as well as his record fighting for "better schools" during his time heading up the Department for Education, between 2010 and 2014.

Her backing came after schools minister Nick Gibb also said Gove was the best person for the job. Education secretary Damian Hinds has been quiet on the matter so far.

As reported by *FE Week*'s sister paper *Schools Week*, Gove's pledge for schools falls well short of the amount needed to plug the funding gap left by real-terms cuts in recent years.

Fellow candidate Boris Johnson also pledged money for schools, saying he would ensure every secondary in England gets at least £5,000 per pupil. This could, however, amount to as little as just under £50 million extra funding – or a 0.1 per cent increase in overall school spending, according to analysis by *Schools Week*.

Former skills minister Matt Hancock is also running in the leadership race. Whilst he pledged an additional £3 billion a year in funding for primary and secondary schools in a bid to outspend his rivals, he has, surprisingly, not promised anything for further education.

FE Week has attempted to contact Johnson and Hancock over a four-day period to ask what they had planned for FE, but neither responded.

Elsewhere, education select committee chair Robert Halfon has announced his backing for Sajid Javid to be the next PM.

Writing for Conservative Home, the former skills minister said he has been friends with Javid for over 30 years. They ran the Exeter University Conservative Association together.

"But an amigo is not enough of a reason to choose a Conservative leader," Halfon added. "I am not supporting him just because he is my friend, but because I genuinely believe that he would serve our country and party well as prime minister – especially in these difficult times."

> "An amigo is not enough of a reason to choose a Conservative leader"

Javid has also not pledged anything for FE. The only leadership candidate to have done so is Esther McVey. The MP for Tatton said she'd invest an extra £1 billion in the sector, adding that FE has been "particularly affected by cuts to education since 2010".

"The £1 billion extra I pledged even before the Augar Review will make a radical difference, widening routes into the workplace and expanding vocational education," she continued. "Of course there is more work to do on reforming post-18 education but this will be an important start, bringing positive benefits to schools across the country."

The other Conservative leadership candidates include Dominic Raab, Jeremy Hunt, Andrea Leadsom, Esther McVey, Rory Stewart, Mark Harper and Sam Gyimah.

At the time of going to press, Johnson was favourite to be the next prime minister at odds of 4/6, according to betting company William Hill. Second favourite was Gove at 11/2, while Hunt was third at 7/1.



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News

EDITORIAL

It is easy to conclude that the DfE are not serious about apprenticeship quality

This week we report that the Department for Education will announce that the Office for Students, not Ofsted, will inspect the quality of all level 6 and 7 apprenticeships.

It comes after *FE Week* exposed the fact that thousands of apprentices were at providers where Ofsted had to exclude them from inspection because they were on standards at level 6 and 7 with no degree element, and therefore had no regulator responsible.

It was a situation that irked the chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, who recounted a story of joining an inspection where these learners were off-limits.

But despite Ofsted wanting to take responsibility for monitoring the quality of popular apprenticeships, such as the level 7 accountancy at providers like Kaplan Financial, the DfE has seen fit to call on the Office for Students – even if the provider offering them is not on its HE register.

Given the timing, in that the announcement has not yet been made, this appears to be the first major rejection of a recommendation within the Augar Review.

The high-profile report published last week recommended that "Ofsted become the lead responsible body for the inspection of the quality of apprenticeships at all levels".

And for good reason, describing the Ofsted and the OfS sharing of responsibility as "wasteful", that it risks providers being overlooked and fails to ensure consistency.

They rightly go on to say that "a sole inspection body is vital when new and untested providers are entering the market and offering provision at a variety of levels".

Without wanting to sound unkind, the OfS seem completely out of their depth in the non-degree market, which might explain why they have so far been reluctant to actively take up their apprenticeship responsibilities.

And the only argument I have heard so far against Ofsted taking the responsibility is that "this may not be welcome by some higher education institutions".

If the government is serious about a high-quality apprenticeship system then it is blindingly obvious they should not burden the OfS with responsibility for something they are totally ill-equipped to manage.

Rejection of this Augar Report recommendation makes a mockery of common sense.

Let's not make this a case study of poor policymaking, worthy of featuring in the level 4 policy officer apprenticeship standard.

The sector and apprentices deserve better than policies that simply seek to save the blushes of some university vice chancellors.

Nick Linford, Editor
news@feweek.co.uk

Readers' reply

EMAIL TWITTER FACEBOOK WEBSITE

Dozens made redundant as 'good' apprenticeship provider goes bust

Really sad to read this today. FNTC were a really good training provider with a good reputation. Tragic news for training in the south.

Michael Steel

Absolutely shocking and so sad. When is the ESFA and IfA going to realise that the funding is destroying quality providers. It is my belief that care apprenticeships have been "overlooked, undervalued and underfunded".

Jackie Denyer

West Notts College university centre less than half-full three years after opening

This is because Nottingham has a rich HE offer from existing universities. Sheffield is on the doorstep too, so why throw away money on building an HE centre when existing classrooms go under-utilised?

Another vanity project, aka the college rebuild, apprenticeship centre and stage schools.

Mike Daykin

Theresa May: FE has been 'overlooked, undervalued and underfunded'

About time someone appreciated FE. Without both schools (education) and colleges (skills) we will have challenging times ahead.

Damian Duffy

Post-18 education review: The 9 main recommendations for FE

One thing I definitely support is bringing back full level 2 and 3 legal entitlement for all 19+ and not just 19 to 23.

There are a number of 24 and above adults who need that full qualification to progress in employment, or to even get a job, and so making these full qualifications in level 2 and 3 fully funded will be a great boost to these learners, and then to the local and national economy.

Ben Sonoiki

Some good news in here for levels 2 and 3 provision but with the political turmoil, will this ever be legislated?

Richard John Firth

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Post-18 education review: The 9 main recommendations for FE

There has been some positive rhetoric in response to this report but with an outgoing PM, a supportive outlook for FE and skills may not have the weight we need behind it to positively affect improvements. Let's hope we'll see some action from the next government, but can we try to minimise widespread disruption – please!!

Noel Johnson

Experts

SAM PARRETT

Group principal and chief executive, London & South East Education Group

What we can learn from the sad story of Hadlow College

Many of the recommendations in the long-awaited report from Philip Augar should be implemented now to protect the future of FE, says Sam Parrett

FE Week billed it the "biggest FE story of the decade" (May 23), but the news that Hadlow College had been put into administration is also one of the saddest the sector has seen for some time.

These have been dark times for further education recently, so the publication of the long-awaited report by Philip Augar could not have come along at a better moment.

The report is the first government-backed review into FE and higher education across all post-18 education. It shines a light on many important issues, making welcome recommendations for ministers to take forward to enable FE to thrive.

It's clear that every college in the country is operating in tough financial conditions and it's certainly not an easy time for any of us. Yet we all work hard to find ways round the challenges because we all know that FE matters, so the call for a re-balancing of

> "The report could not have come along at a better moment"

spending between further and higher education should give us all reasons to cheer.

Augar's recognition of the huge economic and social benefits that our sector delivers is also welcome. FE, after all, gives opportunities to people of all ages and from all walks of life to meet their learning and career goals. This in turn benefits social mobility and economic growth, so it's encouraging to see Augar noting FE's impact on wider society.

It's also right that the government should not provide access to an unlimited pot of money to continuously bail out poorly run organisations. That said, the implications of an FE college being put into education administration are huge and go way behind the financial, as Hadlow painfully illustrates.

Hadlow has been part of many people's lives: from farming open-days, to the setting up of a free school to meet local rural demand for primary places to "outdoor classrooms" in its extensive rural setting. Students and staff are spread across campuses in Kent and southeast London, so the insolvency decision will reverberate far and wide.

Take this huge resource away and a gaping hole in the landscape will appear. I am a local resident and the college matters to many in my community, including my neighbours and the families of my children's friends.

Hadlow needs to become a beacon of success once again for the local community; I have high hopes of such an outcome from the FE commissioner as the guardian of all that is good and is to be celebrated about the sector.

> "Could the era of increased independence be at an end?"

Sadly, there is a danger that the Hadlow debacle puts FE at risk of returning to a more shackled existence after a decade in which it has enjoyed a certain amount of freedom and flexibility. Could the era of increased independence for colleges be at an end?

One can only hope not because while mistakes have clearly been made, we know that FE matters and that, in most regards, it works. Don't take my word for it; read the Augar report and its recommendations, which should be implemented swiftly and efficiently.

This includes conferring a protected title on colleges, providing FE with dedicated capital investment and an increase in core funding for 18-year-olds.

We must also hope for a more streamlined strategy to be developed across HE and FE, which will protect our sector in the longer term. Perhaps then, the true value of a college like Hadlow and many others like it, will be fully understood and preserved.

PROFESSOR EWART KEEP

Director of SKOPE, Oxford University

Let's develop a skills ecosystem, emphasising cooperation

As we contemplate the future of the skills system, let's think in terms of devolution and localisation, says Ewart Keep

The Skills Commission is currently engaged in an inquiry into the future of the skills system. How do recent policy developments, such as the expansion of the apprenticeship scheme, the devolution of the Adult Education Budget (AEB) and the imminent introduction of T-levels, join up on the ground so that we build a system that responds to local needs and national priorities?

The theme is a topical one, since combined authorities and some local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) are contemplating how to move away from competition and a fragmented marketplace of delivery towards local systems of education and training (E&T) that encourage collaboration, and perhaps elements of specialisation. For example, the North East LEP has set up an FE Careers Hub shared across all the colleges in its region.

Some are also starting to go one stage further and experiment with the notion of a skills ecosystem. The idea is to link up different policy areas such as economic development, business improvement and support, and efforts to improve job quality and in-work career progression for low-waged workers in order to find solutions to long-standing employment and skills problems. An example would be efforts to develop new progression pathways for low-paid workers and support these through new packages of training. So what stands in the way of these developments?

The first and most obvious barrier is the flow of public funding, which sees resources largely following individual student choice via various ESFA tendering processes or via employer choice in the apprenticeship marketplace. This set-up stokes competition between providers to obtain students, a process which it is assumed will drive improved performance but also creates fragmented markets. Some combined authorities which are commissioning the devolved AEB are experimenting with a more cooperative and unified systems-led approach – perhaps

> "The present funding set-up creates fragmented markets"

supported via some kind of block grant funding to providers.

Moreover, in some localities, FE and other E&T providers have chosen to work together and organise collectively rather than compete. The UK Innovation Corridor's Regional Skills Concordat, for example, sees a group of colleges around Peterborough and Cambridgeshire working across local authority and LEP boundaries to map skill needs and build shared programmes that can aggregate skill demand and supply across institutions. They are generally acting despite of, not because of, nationally established incentives.

A second set of problems is caused by the government's tendency to draw up place-blind, one-size-fits-all national programmes without involving localities or providers in the design. The lack of input on the ground means that too often national priorities disrupt local priorities and relationships, yet ministers expect these solutions to be adopted whether localities want or need them.

Changing the nature of dialogue with central government departments is a major objective for some of the combined authorities, LEPs, colleges and their representatives. They want to see national policy capable of being tailored to meet local circumstances and to have a more equal relationship with Whitehall, replacing the existing master-servant model. Given the culture of Whitehall and the constant turnover in civil servants as they move posts, this challenge is likely to take time.

A final problem is time: national and local politicians work on very short time-scales and want quick wins. There is the risk, for example, that central government may attempt to judge the results of the devolution of the AEB too swiftly, with the danger that transitional arrangements are given too little time to bear fruit. This danger is all the greater given that the devolved AEB is a relatively small pot of money that has to be stretched across a wide range of competing demands.

Devolution and localisation really matter. Outside of city states, such as Singapore, there are almost no successful national E&T systems that do not incorporate a greater degree of local accountability, innovation and control than England. We need to learn to make localism work for everyone.

MICK FLETCHER

Founder member of the Policy Consortium

Communities pay the real price when an FE college shuts down

Spectacular failures could be the cost for a more innovative FE sector, says Mick Fletcher. But is it a price worth paying?

Hadlow College is the first to experience the Department for Education's new college bankruptcy regime, but we can be fairly certain that it won't be the last.

After all, the government wouldn't have bothered to develop the regime were it not convinced that others will find themselves in similar circumstances.

Nor is it an issue confined to FE; there is considerable speculation over which university is likely to be the first to fail financially, with unofficial lists of those most at risk circulating privately around the higher education sector.

Why has it come to this? Why in the world's fifth largest economy are we contemplating the financial collapse of major public institutions for the first time? It simply cannot be an outbreak of incompetence among senior education managers, but a conscious political choice.

The systematic underfunding of the FE sector is only partly to blame. A "well run" institution in our present world can always shrink its offer to students to match its income.

It may call it "increasing efficiency", but the truth is that it is only achieved by reducing choice and services, which is why part-time and adult learning have collapsed and full-time students receive a scandalously low number of taught hours.

Underfunding leaves less room for error or for too sentimental an approach to marginal provision – but ultimately most colleges will not go bankrupt, despite all being subject to the same funding regime.

The real reason for increased bankruptcy is simply that we have chosen to run our public services this way. The belief is that the spur of competition and the threat of bankruptcy serve to discipline public institutions and encourage them to innovate and focus relentlessly on efficiency and customer service. The fact that some colleges will "crash and burn" is seen as a price worth paying for a more dynamic and creative college sector. That's how markets are said to work.

> "Ministers prefer the stern discipline of bankruptcy"

There is some truth to be found in this analysis. Colleges have certainly been innovative, although perhaps not to the extent that sector leaders like to claim. Constant assertions that colleges are "revising their business models" and "becoming more commercial" often feel more like ritual incantations than practical proposals.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this was the hype of the ill-fated Gazelle Group, which was founded in 2011 to promote enterprise in colleges only to collapse five years later in financial confusion.

Risky ventures such as investing in delivery overseas have been at least as common as genuine innovation, and in a few cases innovation has shaded into fraud.

Nevertheless most incorporated colleges have proved to be responsive and resilient institutions, investing creatively in new facilities, forming new alliances and in some cases, like Hadlow, going far beyond merely running classes.

Inevitably, and as Hadlow has shown, this freedom to innovate has led to some overreaching themselves and bankruptcy or bailout will be the choice. Ministers prefer the stern discipline of bankruptcy.

This works as a discipline in the private sector because it is a sanction on the owners; they lose control of their businesses and assets in favour of their creditors. There is no equivalent body of owners in the case of public services.

It is true that well-paid (and in some cases excessively well-paid) senior executives lose their jobs, but the real price is paid by communities that lose access to a public service when their local college closes.

If a retail store such as BHS closes the shareholders lose, but we can shop elsewhere; if the only college in town closes, then it is the students that lose out. An underfunded FE sector may need to shrink, but the random consequences of managerial miscalculation are not a good basis for determining where.

Bulletin

Movers & Shakers

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

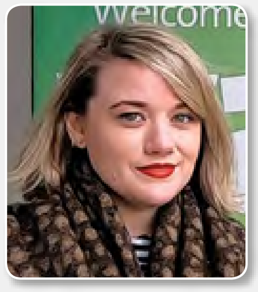
John Westhead

Director of training services, St Helens Chamber

Start date May 2019

Previous job
Head of operations and learning, Training 2000

Interesting fact
He coaches children's football in his spare time



Jo Grady

General secretary, University and College Union

Start date Summer 2019

Concurrent job (on a leave of absence)
Senior lecturer in employment relations, University of Sheffield

Interesting fact
She has a personal alcohol licence, so she could run a pub

Jacqueline O'Donovan

Vice-chair of diversity and inclusion group, Strategic Transport Apprenticeship Taskforce

Start date May 2019

Concurrent job
Managing director, O'Donovan Waste Disposal Ltd

Interesting fact
She took part in Channel 4's The Job Interview in 2016

Corrie Harris

Principal, Moulton College

Start date July 2019

Previous job
Vice principal, Bedford College Group

Interesting fact
She enjoys a game of golf, as well as a cycle ride

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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

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

Difficulty: Medium

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

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: Mo Dixon

Solutions

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

Difficulty: Easy

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

Difficulty: Medium

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