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RETURN OF THE LEARNING ACCOUNTS?



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REVEALED: SECTORS EXCLUDED FROM NEW 'LIFETIME SKILLS GUARANTEE'

- ESFA tasked with picking National Skills Fund qualifications at level three
- Hospitality, leisure, travel, media and sales to be left off the 'valuable' list
- Exclusions described as 'shocking', 'incredibly disappointing' and 'frustrating'

EXCLUSIVE

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Submission deadline: FRIDAY, 18 DECEMBER

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FE WEEK IS PROUD TO BE A MEMBER OF



ESFA to audit university apprenticeships, from April

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Exclusive

Universities that deliver apprenticeships will be subject to Education and Skills Funding Agency funding audits for the first time from April next year.

The first audits could come the same month that Ofsted will be handed new powers to inspect degree apprenticeships.

University representative organisations said their members have been preparing for ESFA audits and understand the importance of ensuring public funding is appropriately used.

Under the current regulatory regime, the ESFA has arrangements with the Office for Students to carry out "assurance" reviews of universities on their register of higher education providers.

But the OfS does not carry out specific individual learner record (ILR) apprenticeship funding audits to check compliance with the ESFA's reporting rules.

The government is currently running a £51 million tender for audit firms to work under a new "framework" that will include expanding the scope of its funding audit work.

Documents for the procurement, seen by *FE Week*, state: "The current scope of the audit and assurance contract in place relate to post-16 education providers but the requirement for these services is now in a wider education provider setting and this new framework will increase the scope to include higher education providers."

The two-year contract set to be awarded from the tender will commence from April 2021.

It follows a number of cases of

FE providers falling foul of the ESFA's apprenticeship reporting rules, which have resulted in significant amounts of clawback demands.

Dudley College, for example, had to pay back more than £500,000 to the ESFA last year after an audit exposed numerous late withdrawals of learners, non-compliance with breaks in learning, and overstated achievement rates.

The college's former chief executive Lowell Williams said it was an honest "blunder" and called for the agency to offer greater support in navigating the government's increasingly complex and high-stakes audit system.

Several dozen other providers were also hit with mystery audits in early 2019 after the ESFA raised concern about the reliability of their apprenticeship data.

ESFA-funded training providers can now be given as little as two weeks' notice of a financial assurance audit and only three days to present sample files.

A spokesperson for representative body Universities UK said their members are "committed to delivering high-quality degree apprenticeships, which provide good value for money, and will work with ESFA to ensure that all processes are followed".

Adrian Anderson, chief executive of the University Vocational Awards Council, added that his organisation "always believed" the ESFA would eventually audit universities that deliver apprenticeships. "UVAC understands the importance of ESFA ensuring public funding for the delivery of apprenticeships is appropriately used," he told *FE Week*.

"UVAC has, for many years, been supporting the higher education sector to deliver higher and degree apprenticeship in accordance with funding rules and prepare for ESFA audit."

In the same month that the ESFA could begin ILR apprenticeship funding audits of universities Ofsted will begin its oversight of all level 6 and 7 apprenticeships – taking on the responsibility from the OfS.

It means that all universities that offer apprenticeships will be subject to Ofsted inspections for the first time.

This move has proved controversial, with MillionPlus, which represents 24 "modern" universities, saying that Ofsted inspections of degree apprenticeships is "worrying and unnecessary" while questioning the inspectorate's expertise to inspect this provision.



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Revealed: The sectors excluded from the PM's new Lifetime Skills Guarantee

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From front

Exclusive

Major parts of the economy will see level 3 qualifications in their sector excluded from the new Lifetime Skills Guarantee, *FE Week* can reveal.

Sectors deemed a low priority with low wages include hospitality, leisure, travel, retail, media and arts, while sectors such as IT, construction and engineering will get the green light.

When the all-age first full level 3 (equivalent to two full A-levels) policy announcement was made in September by prime minister Boris Johnson the government said it would give "adults the chance to take free college courses valued by employers, supporting people to train into better jobs".

Since then the Education and Skills Funding Agency has been working on developing a list of those qualifications that would be "valuable in the workplace" to be funded from the national skills fund, from April 2021.



Kate Nicholls



It is understood, based on accounts from those involved in the process, that the ESFA has determined priority based on the 50 "sub-sector subject area" categories already assigned to the nearly 1,200 full level 3 qualifications currently eligible for legal entitlement funding for those aged 19-to-23 from the adult education budget until the end of this year.

This has led them to exclude nearly 30 of the 50 sector areas, accounting for around half the qualifications, as well as several hundred Access to HE qualifications, on the basis that learners who take out loans can already get them written off if they go on to complete a degree.

As a result, the full level 3 Lifetime Skills Guarantee qualifications are expected to number less than 400 – around a quarter of those 1,200 available from the adult education budget or funded from advanced learner loans.

Exclusion has prompted exasperation from sector bodies, with the chief executive for trade body UK Hospitality, Kate Nicholls, saying how "incredibly

disappointing" it is to see her area barred from the guarantee, especially after hospitality has been "hammered harder than any other by the crisis and needs support to get back up to full strength and contribute to rebuilding the economy".

She expressed hope the government would "open every possible avenue to people looking to join" the sector, adding: "It could be crucial if we want to see hospitality, and the economy, bounce back."

Reacting to our analysis, Federation of Awarding Bodies chief executive Tom Bewick criticised the DfE for coming up with a qualifications list "without any meaningful consultation with the occupational sectors concerned."

"It is pretty shocking, and takes the idea of 'Whitehall knows best' to a whole new level. I can't see how policymakers are any better at second guessing the future of the labour market than those

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who actually work in it.”

He said the Lifetime Skills Guarantee is “increasingly looking like a con trick”, and instead of putting “genuine lifelong learning and choice at the centre the new entitlement for adults, the government seems determined to massively limit the choices people can make by prescribing only a very few occupational routes for people to re-train in”.

Ofqual data on certificates at all levels awarded between July and September 2020, published this week, shows several of the excluded sector subject areas were in the top ten for number of certificates awarded, including sport, leisure and recreation, performing arts and media and communication.

Apprenticeships and skills minister Gillian Keegan told an *FE Week* roundtable last month the qualifications that will be delivered under the guarantee would have to be high quality, have the respect of business and address a “wide range” of labour shortages.

Education secretary Gavin Williamson told the Association of Colleges’ *FE* summit on Wednesday the guarantee would mean teaching skills “that are highly in demand”.

Sector organisations to whom *FE Week* have spoken have protested that their skills are much-needed. General manager of the Institute of Administrative Management

Andrew Jardine said that at first they had been “delighted” about the announcement of the new level 3 entitlement. “We were, therefore, deeply saddened and frustrated, although not necessarily surprised, to learn that the government has not included administration qualifications in the new scheme,” he added.

“Administrative roles may not get the headlines in many organisations, but I don’t know of any organisation that can function efficiently and effectively without them.”

Institute of Travel and Tourism director Peter Robinson said his sector contributes around £60 billion to the economy annually, and the decision to exclude the subjects “highlights once again the failure to understand the high-level skills and knowledge attained through tourism qualifications and the long-term value that these qualified professionals add to the industry and make to the wider economy”.

Creative & Cultural Skills, which advises the arts sector on technical education, has said it is “disappointed specific creative qualifications have been omitted from the Lifetime Skills Guarantee”, but hopes the approved qualifications will help them address their need for business operational skills.

They urged the DfE to “give thought to how they’ll support adults to retrain for the many roles the creative sector will continue to need in a post-Covid world, so as to avoid further perpetuating the perception that careers across the creative industries aren’t valid”.

The arts sector has previously come under criticism from Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman, who accused colleges in January of “flooding a local job market with young people with low-level arts and media qualifications”.

Prime minister Boris Johnson announced the level 3 entitlement with the Lifetime Skills Guarantee at Exeter College in September, saying the qualifications will help people “change jobs and find work in the burgeoning new sectors this country is creating”.

But the list of qualifications has suffered delays, with the DfE originally saying it would be released in October.

Keegan then told awarding organisations and sector representatives at an October

The 29 sub-sector subject areas excluded

Administration
Animal care and veterinary science
Anthropology
Archaeology and archaeological sciences
Architecture
Crafts, creative arts and design
Direct Learning Support
Economics
Geography
History
History, Philosophy and Theology
Hospitality and catering
Languages, literature and culture of the British Isles
Law and Legal Services
Marketing and Sales
Media and communication
Other languages, literature and culture
Performing arts
Philosophy
Politics
Publishing and Information Services
Service enterprises
Social Sciences
Sociology and Social Policy
Sport, leisure and recreation
Teaching and Lecturing
Theology and religious studies
Travel and Tourism
Urban, Rural and Regional Planning

roundtable her department was hoping to release the list “in the next couple of months, and hopefully by November”.

When *FE Week* took the sector concerns to the DfE a spokesperson said the new entitlement “is designed to help more adults to gain the skills that are valuable in the workplace and that will help them to progress.

“We are continuing to engage widely with the sector on the development of the offer and will confirm details in due course.”



Andrew Jardine



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Future college report calls for compulsory membership of 'networks'

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New legislation should force all colleges to be part of "networks" that could follow similar accountability structures as multi-academy trusts, a commission of leading FE figures has said.

Authors of the Independent Commission on the College of the Future report for England say the imminent FE white paper and subsequent legislation should define the principles of a college network that would "have 'teeth'" – ensuring that funding and accountability "ultimately sits at the network level rather than individual college level".

The networks would develop their own strategies to meet each area's skills priorities based on the needs of employers, elected mayors and local government.

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said colleges were keen on the proposal and the commission had reached "a consensus with employers, government, students and colleges about the system needed to get the most out of colleges over the coming years".

But the recommendation, which is one of 11 made in the commission's report (see page 11), has split opinion in the sector.

Writing for *FE Week*, Luke Rake, principal of Kingston Maurward College (see page 26), says "let's not kill off the small specialist, local provider in the pursuit of the Amazon model", while Stuart Rimmer, chief executive of East Coast College (see page 25), insists the networks "could be a step in the right direction".

According to the commission's report, a three-wave approach to introducing the networks would start with existing college groups, then those who volunteer and the final wave might need a chair to be appointed to mandate membership, with the "process to be completed by 2023/24".

During the waves the Department for Education would need to develop and agree "a map of appropriate geographies across



England" for the networks.

The report makes it clear that membership would be compulsory as "alignment between network and institutional strategies is not a matter of voluntarism" and goes on to propose that colleges should only be given funding if there is "alignment of network and institutional strategies".

The chair of a network could act as single point contact with the DfE and funding bodies – similar to regional schools commissioners, which act on behalf of the secretary of state for education to manage academies.

The networks would have "significant implications" for governance, according to the report. It says the model must give governors an "explicit duty" to go beyond individual colleges to ensure that each institutional strategy is "aligned with an overarching strategy for the network of colleges within their relevant economic geography".

The report adds that given the "need for a much more connected and holistic education and skills system", ultimately the legal duty on colleges to develop networks "must be matched by a duty on all other post-16 education providers to ensure that provision complements the existing offer across an appropriate economic geography".

The commission warns that colleges currently operate in a "quasi-market" and are "forced to compete with each other and with schools, universities and independent training providers – driving inefficiency and at times insufficiency of provision across a locality".

Considering this, the report says a new cross-departmental ministerial taskforce and single oversight and funding body should be formed to tackle this "nugatory" competition.

Responding to the report, Association of Employment and Learning Providers managing director Jane Hickie said a "great deal" of collaboration already goes on at local level and what the FE and skills system must be about is "employer and learner choice" so the "statute book has no place in trying to restrict that choice".

Education secretary Gavin Williamson would not comment on the report's individual recommendations but said the DfE's "ambitious" FE white paper, set for publication before the end of 2020, will put employers "at the heart of our plans and work closely with colleges to drive forward the long-term change we need to unleash potential everywhere and that will support our economy to recover and grow".

Future colleges report: the 11 recommendations

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The Independent Commission on the College of the Future published its nation-specific report for England this week following a 20-month review.

It sets out 11 recommendations that it claims “if implemented through the government’s upcoming FE white paper would develop a coherent and connected education and skills system, with employers playing a central role”.

Here is a round-up of the proposals:

1 Cross-departmental taskforce to oversee a new post-16 skills strategy
The commission calls on government to develop a “coherent” post-16 education and skills strategy, with alignment to its industrial strategy – redressing “nugatory competition” that exists between colleges, schools, universities and independent training providers.

This strategy should be “owned” by a cross-departmental ministerial taskforce, including the Department for Education, Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

2 Legal duty for colleges to form ‘networks’
A new “legal duty” should force all colleges to be part of “networks” that could follow similar accountability structures as multi-academy trusts, according to the commission.

It says that the imminent FE white paper and subsequent legislation should define the principles of a college network that would “have ‘teeth’” – ensuring that funding and accountability “ultimately sit at the network level, rather than individual college level”.

The report makes it clear that membership would be compulsory as “alignment between network and institutional strategies is not a matter of voluntarism” and goes on to propose that colleges should only be given funding if there is “alignment of network and institutional strategies”.

3 Colleges as ‘anchor institutions’
The role that colleges play as “place-making” institutions in their communities “needs to become a core element of their strategic remit”, the report says.

New college network strategies will “help to build stronger partnerships with other public and private agencies and civic partners and their wider investment plans locally and regionally”.

This will “seek to ensure a more coherent and connected approach not only on skills and learning but in relation to colleges’ wider civic role, adding value to the existing ecosystem in a range of areas, including business enterprise, public health, lifelong learning, eliminating digital exclusion and supporting social integration”.

4 A ‘statutory right’ to lifelong learning
Government “must set out a new statutory right to lifelong learning” – meaning that lifelong education must be “meaningfully accessible for people, and there is significant work required to redress deficiencies in the existing student maintenance system”.

5 Skills guarantee for a post-Covid economy
The commission says the statutory right to lifelong learning must be “augmented through targeted investment to upskill, retrain and reskill to help individuals find work in higher demand priority sectors, to supplement previous qualifications and to help them maintain relevant skills”.

A “skills guarantee” would then provide “free training to upskill employees at all levels, reflecting national and regional priorities, with maximum flexibility to meet sector needs and to enable upskilling of employees”.

6 A new strategic partnership with employers
Relationships need to be built to ensure that employers are “recognised – and understand themselves to be – a crucial part of the education and skills ecosystem”.

They “must be based on a genuine strategic partnership which appreciates the mutual goals of higher levels of participation in education and training which meet the needs of people and labour markets – with an employer-led system recognising college expertise and leadership in interpreting as well as challenging and stimulating employer demand”.

7 Develop employer ‘hubs’ in colleges
As FE Week reveals on page 13, the government is preparing to launch college business centres in an effort to hand employers greater influence over skills training.

The commission calls on the hubs to be sector/occupationally focused and would: “Lead on higher technical level provision across the local network; play the lead role in providing strategic support to employers across innovation and skills; coordinate engagement with the wider education and skills system, across universities, schools and independent providers, including across progression and articulation, workforce development and stakeholder engagement”.

8 Three-year grant funding settlements
There should be a shift towards three-year, grant funding settlements based on “outcome agreements” agreed at each college network level.

9 Single post-16 oversight and funding body and simplified oversight processes
There should also be the establishment of a “single post-16 education oversight and funding body” – which would seemingly involve merging the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the Office for Students.

The commission says this would help further address the “nugatory” competition between colleges and with schools, universities and private providers.

10 Set targets to increase diversity in leadership
The lack of diversity across the English college sector leadership and workforce must be “urgently addressed”, the commission says, recommending “concerted work” from sector bodies together with DfE.

Last year, FE Week found just seven per cent of college principals were from black, Asian, or minority ethnic backgrounds.

The commission said there must be mandatory collection of diversity data across all levels of the college workforce, and government must set “robust” targets to redress under-representation.

11 £30k starting salary for college teachers
Pay has declined significantly over the past decade and has been a major issue in recruiting and retaining teachers in colleges. There is currently a £7,000 pay gap with school teachers.

The commission proposes setting college teachers a new starting salary of £30,000 – the same wage that school teachers will start on from 2022.

Opinion

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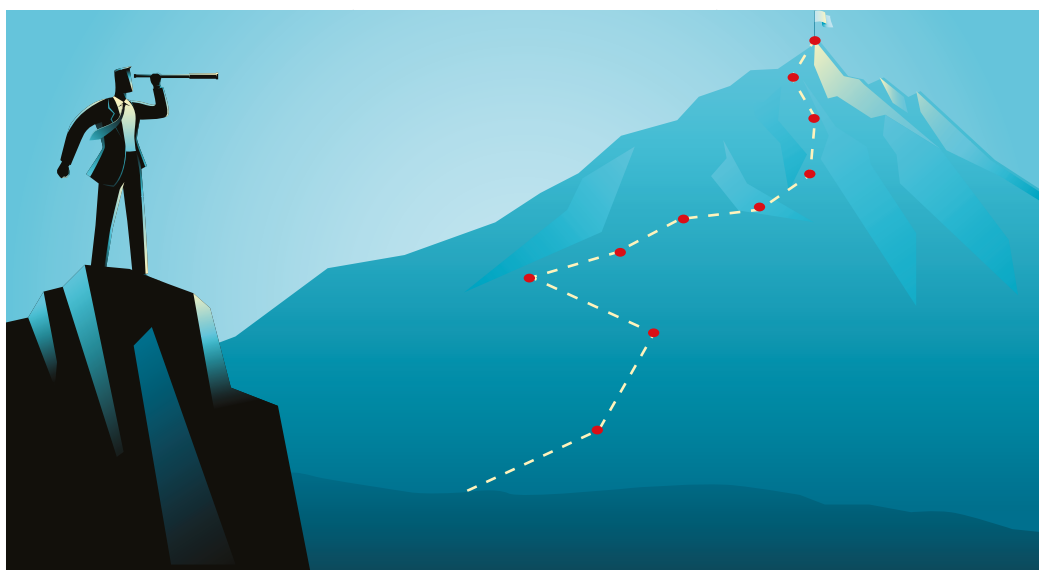
**This is a compelling vision
that should be reflected in
the forthcoming white paper**

The Independent Commission on the College of the Future rightly calls on college leaders to drive forward a positive change agenda, rather than waiting for someone else to tell them what to do, says David Hughes

The English report from the Independent Commission on the College of the Future sets out a compelling vision, one that I hope will be reflected in the upcoming FE white paper, and which I am also confident will lay the foundations for colleges in years to come.

“The recommendations need to be considered in their totality”

The independent commission reached its recommendations and proposals following engagement with people at more than 150 roundtables, with college leaders and academics, unions, businesses, cross-party politicians, stakeholders, government officials and students. They covered large swathes of complex policy and strategy,



with input and agreement on the way forward from a breadth of voices within FE and beyond. The commission also consulted in November 2019 to elicit responses and ideas from a wide range of people.

The vision is supported by a detailed set of recommendations that need to be considered in their totality – with a recognition that amplifying the role of colleges as key strategic partners within the education and skills ecosystem is a collective responsibility for all.

I am glad the commission has challenged us all to think about the role of colleges now and in the future – calling college leaders to drive forward a

positive change agenda, rather than waiting for someone else to tell colleges what to do. At AoC we have engaged members through our policy groups, regional meetings and our board and will continue to ensure members' feedback, through all of the channels available, informs our policy and influencing work.

“AoC will continue to ensure members' feedback informs our policy”

The commission has achieved a consensus about

the future vision and place of colleges and has set out detailed recommendations for how to achieve that. In England, it is clear from what Gavin Williamson said at our FE Summit this week, that the DfE white paper that we expect soon will help move towards that vision.

I look forward to seeing the details of that and working with AoC members to respond to it at the appropriate time. Meanwhile, the commission report will provide food for thought for every college leader, employers and stakeholders interested in supporting colleges to deliver for people, productivity and place.”

AEB tender delayed again

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Exclusive

An upcoming tender for the national adult education budget has been delayed – again.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency had planned to launch the re-procurement exercise, which is expected to follow the same scope as the controversial AEB tender in 2017, in July 2020 but then pushed this back until the end of the year.

But the agency has now confirmed that the tender will not get off the ground until January 2021. Contract notifications are expected to go out to successful bidders by May ahead of their start in August 2021.

The ESFA told *FE Week* that the budget for the procurement will be confirmed

following the upcoming spending review, but the Association of Employment and Learning Providers has briefed its members that it will sit between £65 million and £70 million.

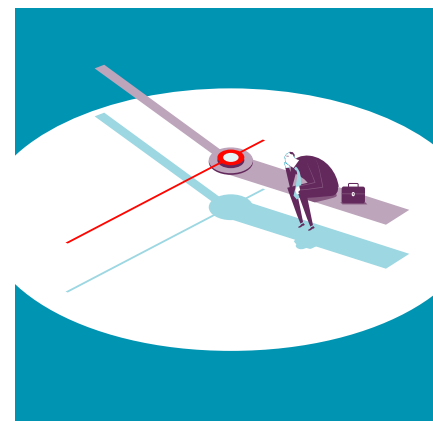
Due to the “uncertainty with devolution and the devolution white paper”, the AELP also believes the ESFA AEB contracts are likely to be an initial one-year deal with an option to extend further if required.

The last AEB procurement was run in 2017 but was significantly oversubscribed, plagued with delays and had to be completely redone after the ESFA realised it was botched.

And when the final outcomes were released most providers had their funding slashed – including one case of a 97 per cent cut.

Providers teamed up to threaten the ESFA with legal action before the agency found additional funding to top up contracts.

Those contracts have been extended



several times but must now finish by the end of July 2021 and there is no provision for carry over.

The upcoming AEB tender will just be for the national budget, not for devolved combined authorities which run their own procurements.

DfE places 100 ads for 12-month contract jobs

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A huge recruitment drive has been launched at the Department for Education to aid its response to Covid-19, with 100 jobs up for grabs.

Job adverts for the 12-month contracts contain limited detail but state that people are being sought to work in “priority roles” that have been impacted by the pandemic and will be deployed “where business needs are greatest”.

The DfE refused to shed more light on what the positions will entail or the areas that will be covered, but it appears they will be looking to poach existing civil servants from other government departments and agencies for a loan spell.

Job adverts for the roles include the line: “Existing civil servants (with manager approval) would have the option of transferring to DfE on loan.”

When Covid first struck, a “small” number of staff from the DfE’s agencies were seconded to the department, including from Ofsted, to keep inspectors busy after the watchdog’s inspection regime was suspended in March.

An *FE Week* investigation in May found that 20 inspectors had been deployed to the DfE to support their social care, early years and further education departments.

All those civil servants who temporarily transferred to the DfE and aided its initial Covid-19 response have since returned to their previous areas of work.

But it wouldn’t be a total surprise to see more inspectors loaned out to the DfE. Speaking at the Schools and Academies Show on Wednesday, Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman ruled out an “inspection frenzy” when normal business for the watchdog is resumed (currently set for the beginning of the new year), suggesting the reintroduction of full inspections could be

“gradual” and thus will not require as many staff.

Candidates to the DfE’s Covid response team are asked to apply for a range of levels.

Twenty-five will be hired as higher executive officers, who earn a salary of £29,363 and typically work across various policy areas, making “significant contributions toward decision-making”, while 39 will be employed as senior executive officers, who are paid £36,498 and often manage teams.

An additional 31 individuals will be taken on as “grade 7” employees who are “responsible for setting priorities, agreeing targets, allocating responsibilities to their team” and are “accountable for outcomes in their policy area”. They receive £49,861 a year.

Lastly, five people will be hired in “grade 6” positions which typically lead “several complex work streams” and are paid £61,014.

Government set to create 'college business centres'

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Exclusive

New college "business centres" will be launched by the government in an effort to hand employers greater influence over skills training, *FE Week* can reveal.

The centres were first proposed by the Association of Colleges in its submission to the upcoming spending review, where they called for a £40 million pilot of such "hubs". They have since gathered support from a commission of sector leaders and Conservative MP Peter Aldous.

The policy comes amid government efforts to move employers to a more central position in directing what further education and skills provision is offered by their local colleges.

The Department for Education has now given the centres the green light but remained tight-lipped about how much they will cost, how they will work and when and where they will launch.

But in a document for new high-level roles in the DfE, seen by *FE Week*, the department says they will be "developing policies to give employers greater influence over skills provision, including development and launch of a new college business centres initiative in the autumn".

The idea has been welcomed by business, with Matthew Percival, people and skills director for the Confederation of British Industry, saying that greater resources and flexibility so employers and colleges could partner "will help to close skills gaps, boost people's life chances and make our economy more competitive".

In its submission to the chancellor's upcoming spending review, the AoC called for a pilot of "college business centres" in a small number of areas this academic year.

These "employer hubs", according to the submission, published in September, would help "overcome the commercial barriers to small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) engaging with education".



The core aims of the centres should be to: "Enhance the capabilities of FE colleges to deliver knowledge-based collaboration with SMEs; generate and disseminate new information about the practical benefits to business; and contribute to stimulating demand to engage in innovation activity."

There is a "significant opportunity" for new business centres to capitalise on existing links between FE colleges and SMEs to "deliver economic impact quickly", as the association says the average college already works with around 600 businesses.

In a report this week on the "English College of the Future", the Independent Commission on the College of the Future also pushed for college employer hubs to "provide strategic support to employers across innovation and skills and convene engagement across the wider education and skills system".

And last month, at his parliamentary debate on colleges and skills to mark the annual "Love Our Colleges Week", Peter Aldous, a member of the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning, said the centres "should be established" and the departments for education, and business, energy and industrial strategy should "work together to set up specific centres that support employers with expert advice".

Speaking for the government at the debate, skills minister Gillian Keegan called the business centres an "interesting idea", adding there will be "much discussion between colleges, the Association of Colleges, business groups, and the government" in the lead-up to the FE white paper set for publication before the end of 2020.

Exemplifying how the government wants provision to parallel employer needs, Keegan told an *FE Week* roundtable in October that the first, full level 3 qualifications being funded for all adults under the prime minister's Lifetime Skills Guarantee from April would have to have the respect of business and address a wide range of labour shortages.

FE Week also understands that the much-anticipated FE white paper could hand local chambers of commerce key powers over funding and priorities for skills provision in their area.

The DfE has also already launched a Skills and Productivity Board, which it says will provide expert advice on how to make sure courses and qualifications are aligned to the skills that employers need.

A DfE spokesperson said about the business centres: "We are considering a range of initiatives designed to put employers at the heart of our ambitious FE reform plans. We will provide more details in due course."

WorldSkills: UK beats China in first virtual pressure test

FRASER WHIELDON
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The UK's elite squad of skilled young people in electronics has beaten their Chinese counterparts in this country's first virtual pressure test – a new means of training for the international WorldSkills competitions during the pandemic.

FE Week spoke to competitors, trainers and organisers to find out if the innovative model will become the new norm

Five members of Squad UK, based at Gower College Swansea, and five competitors from China in their own country, undertook a "pressure test" on Thursday, pitting the two teams against one another in an electronics skills competition.

Although the competitors were thousands of miles apart, they kept in constant contact over Zoom.

UK competitor Rhys Watts took gold at the event, with Ben Lewis and Liam Hughes taking joint-silver, and China taking the



UK competitors taking part in the virtual pressure test

bronze medal.

This was part of a two-day event hosted by the Department for International Trade, with the first day on Wednesday featuring speakers from the department, Team UK training managers, college leaders and the Chinese government, discussing how best to train for and compete in skills competitions.

Watts told *FE Week* he was "chuffed" to win and to see the work he had put in pay off was a "big achievement for me".

"It went well on the whole. There were a few points where my soldering wasn't going as planned, but then I just took a second and carried on."

Speaking after finding out his team had won the medals, electronics training manager Steve Williams said: "I can get a bit emotional with this sometimes. Seeing the work these guys have put in through lockdown is absolutely remarkable.

"This is the first bit of pressure testing they've been put under and they've risen to the challenge."

The competitors had two hours to make a controller from a kit, which could then

design and run a set of traffic lights.

Williams came up with the task himself, and it was then signed-off by the Chinese side.

He said the skills it called on "directly fits into FE curriculum, whether we're looking at BTEC or another curriculum.

"It fits into what industry is looking for, which is engineers who are IT literate, who are digitally literate and have all the digital skills needed to push the envelope."

He said a task that fits in snugly with the needs of industry was the whole ethos of WorldSkills, getting competitors ready for competitions, but also the world of work.

Each side was judged by experts from their own country, but Williams insisted the standards were "exacting", with, for example, the soldering joints on the competitors' projects being examined under a microscope.

He called the pressure tests "vitality



Parisa Shirazi

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important” because if they do not test the UK’s competitors against other national teams “we are going in cold to international competitions and that’s incredibly dangerous”.

There was a hitch when the computer screens they were using froze, but “generally it went very well,” Williams said.

Training his competitors for Shanghai will now continue virtually: each of them has a fully equipped electronics lab at home and they are communicating through Zoom.

The online pressure test comes after the WorldSkills Shanghai competition was pushed back from 2021 to 2022, and the EuroSkills competition, set to take place in Austria next January, was indefinitely postponed.

Following the decision on Shanghai, WorldSkills UK chief executive Neil Bentley-Gockmann told *FE Week* they were looking at running pressure tests with other countries.

Head of skills development and international competitions for WorldSkills UK Parisa Shirazi said that traditionally, “we would pressure test by taking squad members to other countries to compete with their counterparts”.

But due to the travel restrictions around Covid-19, she said: “We are looking at new innovations and how we can simulate the same experience, the same pressure, with the use of technology.



Steve Williams

“Today marks a really great step for us in how we can then look to adopt the principle of this livestreamed training activity, which enables us to benchmark and compare the standard our young people in comparison to our counterparts across the globe.

“What this gives us a really good proxy so we are then able to establish the distance our students and apprentices need to travel.

“And there are some really insightful lessons we can take away, as we can then say ‘are there differences in our education and training system that we’re maybe not teaching to the right level or standard in comparison to China?’.”

China was a key candidate for the test as their technical and vocational education system has had to adapt to the demands of a fast-growing industry, especially in electronic products.

“This is not something we’ve done before, and there is some real gold dust in that”

So, Shirazi says, WorldSkills UK is looking at what China has done which they could adopt for the UK’s own system.

“The competition,” she says, “is a vehicle. Our ambition is looking at how we can mainstream excellence.”

WorldSkills UK is looking at holding a series of these events next year, with Shirazi saying Wednesday’s mini-conference was intended to “draw from the lessons we have learned about the logistics and operation of putting on an event like this, which we can then replicate across the multitude of skills in our portfolio”.

“We see in the UK, real value in this. For young people and where we can bring together policymakers, industry leaders and education providers across the globe, to collaborate and share practice.

“This is not something we’ve done before,



Rhys Watts

and there is some real gold dust in that, I think.”

An example of this meeting of minds was exemplified in the Wednesday session, where Hao Bin, director general of international affairs for China’s ministry of human resources and social security, which runs the country’s participation in WorldSkills, said he was “honoured” to participate, recalling an old Chinese saying that: “No distance can separate friends and likeminded people.”

Shanghai will be the first time China has hosted the international WorldSkills competition since it joined the organisation in 2010, and Hao Bin said that had “helped to raise our level of vocational and educational training and teaching”.

He explained that his country wanted to learn from the UK as it has been a member of the movement that became WorldSkills in 1953 and has hosted three of the international competitions. “In light of this, there is a lot we can learn from each other.”

Bentley-Gockmann gave a pre-recorded address to the event, in which he said: “I think that this is the start of a forward-looking partnership, where we can forge deeper and closer relationships on exchanging best practice within the world’s skills network.”

News

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Major cashflow problems at mega-college in Nottingham

BILLY CAMDEN

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A mega-college in Nottingham has been placed in formal FE Commissioner intervention after hitting "serious cashflow pressures".

The Education and Skills Funding Agency published a financial notice to improve for Nottingham College on Wednesday.

The ESFA letter, dated July 2020, states that there is a "need for cashflow support in November/December 2020" and there was an agreement that an independent business review (IBR) was required in order to consider the ongoing viability of the college's finances.

A spokesperson for Nottingham College said they discovered over the summer that they were "likely to experience financial difficulties largely as a direct consequence of the

coronavirus pandemic".

"Our cashflow position was particularly exposed, not least because of adverse pressure on key income streams, including higher education income, apprenticeship and other adult income and the short-term collapse of key markets, including the hospitality and tourism sectors," they added.

"We agreed to an IBR to confirm the need for financial support."

The spokesperson told FE Week the college has not required any emergency funding to date but anticipates a "package of support" over the coming months to "ensure the longterm financial stability of the college".

Nottingham College, which has around 16,000 learners, was created from a merger of New College Nottingham and Central College Nottingham in 2017. It has been through

a tough couple of years that saw lengthy staff strikes, votes of no confidence in the leadership and a grade 3 Ofsted report.

Last month the college completed a major £58.5 million build – funded in part by a £3.2 million loan from the Department for Education's transaction unit. Plans are in motion to sell four of its properties to help balance the books.

The college's 2018/19 accounts show a £6 million deficit.

The FE Commissioner has now intervened at the college to assess its "capability and capacity to make the required changes and improvements".

The college has been told to prepare a financial recovery and quality improvement plan, which explores "further staff savings" for 2020/21 and 2021/22.

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Feature

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Are individual learner accounts back on the cards?

JESS STAUFENBERG
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From front

The government is flirting with the language of learner power reminiscent of an old New Labour policy. Jess Staufenberg looks at its chances of making a comeback

For old hands in FE, Boris Johnson's announcement in September of a "Lifetime Skills Guarantee", resourced through a "National Skills Fund", has echoes of an older, more ambitious New Labour policy too traumatising in its failure to seriously consider reintroducing – perhaps until recently.

The language of Johnson's announcement pricked ears: the government wants to help people "train and retrain, at any stage in their lives"; "end the bogus distinction between HE and FE"; and, perhaps most importantly, "move to a system where every student will have a flexible lifelong loan entitlement".

There will be "change, radical change", thundered Johnson.

Ring any bells? For years, ministers have



Alison Wolf



tinkered with the idea of handing choice and power to the student by giving them access to a "bank" of the loans and grants they can spend on tertiary education.

The idea has had various names – Individual Learning Accounts, as they were under New Labour in the early 2000s, as well as personal learner accounts, individual education budgets, skills accounts, skills wallets – you name it, it's been floated within all three political parties. But a software system open to fraudulent abuse under the ILA system, launched in 2000, caused a horrified Estelle Morris to end them just a year later. Since then, mention of them has largely led to head-shaking.

But alongside the promising language, other moves in the highest echelons of government have not escaped notice. The biggest is, of course, the appointment

of Alison Wolf, seconded from her public sector management professorship at King's College London to be skills and workforce policy advisor to Number 10 at the start of the year. In 2008, during a financial crisis not as bad as the one hitting us now, Wolf wrote plainly about New Labour's ILAs, asking: "As we free-fall into recession, could we please have them back?"

More recently, she told MPs this year: "You have to put far more of the power and decision-making in the hands of the individual." She said the simplest thing would be to "take a flame-thrower" to the many and confusing funding pots for adult education.

Other appointments have also been telling. Keith Smith, the architect of the apprenticeship levy system, which

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Feature

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operates digital accounts for employers, was moved from the ESFA to the Department for Education in April, bringing with him expertise in setting up a big new IT system.

Meanwhile, the Augar review in 2019, which the government shows every sign of largely following, examined the failed ILA scheme and recommended the “gradual” implementation of a similar system that might be “overseen by the established Office for Students and the Student Loans Company”.

Could a single, unified place for the post-18 learner to access education be on the cards?

There have been tentative, but piecemeal, moves in that direction. The current “entitlement” to free English and maths courses has been extended to basic computing skills with new “essential digital skills qualifications”.

Then in September, adults over the age of 23 were “guaranteed” access to a limited number of first, free, level 3 qualifications, from April next year, and modular level 4 and 5 qualifications are going to be designed with employers.

And last month, unspent money from the closed national retraining scheme was folded into the growing arsenal that is the £2.5 billion National Skills Fund.

Many now wait with baited breath, not for the one-year spending review next week (which can't promise much, a multi-year, comprehensive spending review having been postponed), but for the FE white paper this year – will it provide proper detail on the Lifetime Skills Guarantee?

And the question they barely dare whisper – might it even include a pilot of personal, cashable accounts?

Jonathan Simons, head of education at thinktank Public First, says one recent shift has been a willingness among policymakers to discuss learner accounts as a real possibility again. “Even just five years ago, people were too



Stephen Evans

scarred by ILAs. My guess is that's not the dealbreaker now.”

Accounts policies now widely exist, he explains, whether via the Student Loan Company for higher education or for apprenticeships. “The technological advancements have happened, and we've gone over the ILA stuff so much now that the institutional knowledge is there too. And of course, Alison has been writing about this for years.”

The scars of the failed ILAs, which provided a modest £150 per learner and could be topped up, ran deep, says Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive of the Association of Colleges. “They almost became a poster child for bad government. There was no control on what courses could be done or on what organisations could claim the money.” High-street banks, such as the Post Office, refused to run the accounts and so digital services company Capita was allowed to set up a “separate system” for the accounts, says Gravatt.

“That's why it was so open to abuse. It didn't use an existing system. But we have those systems now.”

A series of reports followed. A 2002 inquiry by the then-Commons education and skills committee, chaired by Labour MP Barry Sheerman, blasted the fact that of the 2.6 million accounts opened, the government couldn't say how many had been genuine – and

therefore how much of the scheme's £268 million had been wasted. But Sheerman reminds FE Week that the committee also recommended that the scheme “be rebooted without the fraud [...] it was a brilliant concept”.

A National Audit Office report the same year criticised the lack of proper monitoring, but again praised the scheme's ambition and said, “The government is committed to introducing a successor scheme as soon as possible.” A public accounts committee report in 2003 said the government had reassured MPs lessons had been learned.

But it was never to be. Tom Bewick, chief executive of the Federation of Awarding Bodies, who helped draft the ILA policy as a Labour advisor, says Treasury civil servants weren't quite comfortable with the idea of handing money directly to people instead of institutions, and so were “happy to hit it on the head”. Either way, the ILAs, beloved of Wolf, died.

Yet more recently, the calls for their return have become insistent. In 2016, the Learning and Work Institute (LWI) published a report called *Power to the People: The Case for Personal Learning Accounts* which called for every citizen to have such an account by 2022, allowing five years for implementation and piggybacking on the existing “lifelong learning accounts” run by the National Careers Service.

“The DfE are sold on it from a theoretical point of view”

Stephen Evans, chief executive of the LWI, points out similar initiatives are already running in Scotland (where they are called Individual Training Accounts), being piloted in Wales, and exist in high-performing systems such as Singapore. “Our skills-



Jonathan Simons

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Feature

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funding system is so complicated, people don't understand it and quickly lose the will to live. This is a much simpler way to communicate those things. There's an important communication point here."

Evans sat on both Labour's 2019 commission on lifelong learning – which, rather against the grain of everyone else on this issue, says it won't "risk" a return to accounts – and the Liberal Democrats' commission too. The latter party currently has the most comprehensively thought-out policy around: Daisy Cooper, education spokesperson, confirmed to FE Week the Lib Dem proposal for "skills wallets" worth £10,000 over a lifetime. Evans adds the account could be topped up by the Job Centre, employers or the government, according to someone's circumstances.

An even more ambitious lump sum is proposed in Free to Choose: How Individual Education Budgets can revolutionise tertiary education from think tank EDSK in 2019. Director Tom Richmond makes the interesting point that the Augar review's proposal for a £30,000 loan entitlement for each citizen – a figure touted as the equivalent to four years' undergraduate degree funding under the report's recommended fee cap – only takes into account the tuition fee loan, not the maintenance loan also available to an HE student. Learner accounts that are truly equitable should be around the £75,000 mark, he says.

"If you can only get maintenance support for HE courses then it will leave universities on a pedestal relative to colleges," says Richmond. By contrast, his suggested pot "would send a powerful message to learners of all ages, which simply does not exist right now". Like other policy wonks (and, indeed, Augar's review), Richmond points towards the Student Loans Company as the obvious administrator for

the scheme.

But is it ever going to happen? Those working closest to Westminster aren't yet convinced. "The DfE are sold on it from a theoretical point of view. The difficulty has always been, will they make it cashable?" says Simons. "There are also questions about whether you can commit to this without a multi-year comprehensive spending review."

"It would send a powerful message to learners of all ages which simply does not exist right now"

John Cope, formerly of the CBI and recently appointed director of strategy and policy at UCAS and board member at the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education, says skills education reform is clearly a government priority, "with long-debated ideas around learner entitlements and 'learner accounts' in the mix". In an apparent offer of help, Cope adds UCAS "needs to become a one-stop shop for all options across HE, FE and apprenticeships". But both stop short of saying the government is set to expand the Lifetime Skills Guarantee into a personal learner account revolution.

It's true that there are a host of factors against it, with cost and risk of mismanagement highest up. For all the pronouncements about lessons learnt, only at the start of this year it was estimated that £1.2 billion has been wasted from the apprenticeship levy fund on "fake apprenticeships". The accounts system isn't invulnerable to fraud yet. In its favour, meanwhile, is the fact the government is obviously worried. The number of adults taking out advanced learner loans has fallen for the third consecutive



John Cope

year. A skilled worker shortage is looming because of Brexit. And Wolf, aside from her support of ILAs, is bothered about devolution (telling MPs in February it adds "another layer of bureaucracy and arguing about who gets what"). As Bewick puts it, "if the Treasury is now interested in skills accounts, it's because they want money to increasingly go to individuals rather than the combined authorities".

If the combined authorities are out of favour, perhaps the real question then is, will the Lifetime Skills Guarantee hand money to citizens or colleges? The policy is not altogether straightforward for college leaders: grant funding will be out of their hands. Yet Gravatt is cautiously welcoming, suggesting a "mixed model" of guaranteed core funding for colleges alongside a trial of personal accounts for learners. Echoing Augar, he proposes "a staged implementation with local pilots, to test this out."

Policy experts seem to be concerned that, despite flirting with the language of learner accounts, and having got firmly into bed with those who would know exactly how best to implement them, current ministers, like those before them, will fall just short of the mark of delivering a policy that most regard as not only excellent, but much-needed. The Augar review agrees: "We emphasise that, without these changes, neither more flexible provision, nor a major increase in level 4 to 5 uptake, is at all likely." It may be that it needs colleges, more than anyone else, to make the case this time.



Tom Richmond

Editorial

The truth is – college leaders can't agree on what is best for their future



This week the Independent Commission on the College of the Future published their report for England – and despite all the events and consultations since they launched 20 months ago – one recommendation appears to have surprised every college leader I have spoken to.

The report recommended that the law should require “funding and accountability ultimately sit at the network level rather than individual college level”. And, the authors go on to say the “acid test” for their network model is that if the college did not agree to join the network and then agree to the network strategy, they would not receive grant or capital funding.

So what do college leaders think about giving up individual college accountability?

Luke Rake, principal of Kingston Maurward College, writing for FE Week on page 26, thinks there is plenty to agree with in the report but says he cannot see a sensible way to force colleges into networks and that “competition in itself is a good thing, not an evil to crush with the statute”.

Stuart Rimmer, principal of East Coast College, on the other hand, says on page 25 that if these networks mean a loss of institutional independence and a power grab from the centre, then that is: “Good! About bloody time!” He goes on to say it would solve the problem in many

regions which “have been plagued by poor competitor behaviours by ‘robber baron’ principals”.

I speak to college leaders every day, and it is very uncommon for them to have such different views on system change.

This led me to run a short online poll, to which 19 college principal's replied.

Some agreed with the recommendation and said “colleges should be renationalised. Public asset and public goods” or that it would result in “better value for money in capital investment, and staff development and remuneration”.

Some looked for compromise – agreeing with the proposal for colleges to act together but adding “accountability needs to stay with the local, individual college”.

But many more college leaders feared “yet another layer of bureaucracy” or called it an “awful idea” or said, “might as well have the Local Education Authority back”.

Twelve of the 19 principals did not support the network recommendation.

The concern I'm most sympathetic to is that it “would effectively mean that colleges would no longer be independent institutions, and they would consequently be less responsive to local and regional needs”.

On the other hand, David Hughes, chief executive of the Association

of Colleges, says he does not want colleges to wait to be told what to do (see page 12).

So colleges developing their networks, however messy when they can't agree among themselves, could be a better way of taking accountability than risking the education secretary deciding they want to choose who is on the board.

And if giving up independence at an individual college level is the price for getting the Treasury to fund the sector adequately, then could it be a price worth paying?

Strategic or even commissioning roles could be given to the local enterprise partnership or chamber of commerce as part of a network.

This would not be comfortable for some college leaders, but can they all truthfully claim to have embraced employer engagement so far?

The report from the Independent Commission should be taken seriously as it is likely the authors have worked hard to align their thinking with the government.

So the plans in the forthcoming FE white paper should come as less of a surprise now.

The job of a responsible and mature sector is to thrash out and debate the details – something I look forward to doing with you over the coming weeks and months.

Nick Linford, Editor
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Department
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Should colleges be forced into local 'networks'?

For

STUART RIMMER

Chief executive,
East Coast College



Why college networks might be a step in the right direction

The future colleges report's call for a network strategy is eminently sensible as a corrective to failing marketisation, writes Stuart Rimmer

This week the College of the Future report landed, with some thoughtful description of how our sector can drive place, productivity and people. There is much merit in the report, which captures discussions between some leaders over the course of many months. It is often easy within our sector to identify the problems and reasonably straightforward to define our "future perfect". What rarely gains consensus is how we get there.

The key recommendations appear straightforward (even at times obvious): placing colleges front and centre of a national skills revival; calling for a skills strategy; colleges to co-create with employers and provide lifelong learning opportunities backed by funding. This is important ahead of the white paper, although it's fair to say that with a single year spending review, public finances under pressure and DfE political stock being at a low point, it may only signify a direction, rather providing the money or legislation to make it happen.

Contention only occurs where there is no consensus and the report has managed to do this under one of the key recommended elements. It suggests that government must introduce a duty on colleges to develop network strategies across

economic geographies. This in many respects represents a significant departure from current policy, with accountability now prescribed to the network level and a dual mandate for governors towards institution and system. This has been seen by some as a grab of power from the centre, a loss of institutional independence, and confusion of corporation role. It might mean that... and if it does... then... Good! About bloody time!

Many regions have been plagued by poor competitor behaviours by "robber baron" principals. Quasi-markets leave a free-for-all system of small school sixth-forms, poor IAG, local colleges running aggressive campaigns and splitting markets for curriculum leading to confusion and inefficiency. Large employers often need to talk to multiple delivery partners and so find it hard to navigate separate institutions or get consistency of delivery. Area-Based Review went some way to achieving this but did not control transition or core funding to bring college leaders to heel where required.

All the report calls for is a

network strategy – groups or systems of interconnected people coming together. This is hardly radical and is eminently sensible. Where regional colleges and higher education institutions have got together in formal partnerships or mergers they have created a "micro-planned system" and they appear to be working to the greater good, with examples in the West Midlands, Manchester, and Sheffield region, to name but a few.

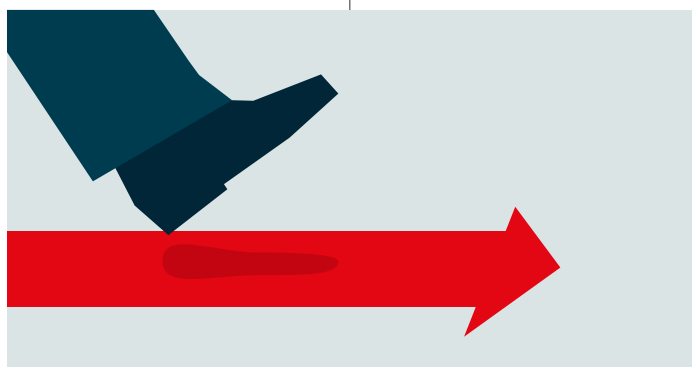
In other parts of the country we have larger college groups (for example, in London region) that "design out" competition through joint planning. Governments have tried through skills advisory panels and skills capital running through local enterprise partnerships to smooth out competition and create regional planning, but many are still ineffective. The report harks back to UKCES outcome area agreements – the linking of regional curriculum deliverables to funding. It is fair that publicly funded work is designed for the public good, by the public through public structures.

There is always a tension

between wearing the institutional hat and the regional network hat. It's time we admitted these tensions exist and the designed formal solutions. The CoF report suggests one way, not necessarily the best way, of doing this.

For two reasons it is far too early to be decrying the CoF report. Firstly, it is only some words on a page to stimulate discussions. It highlights a plan yet to be fully debated, not a blueprint. Secondly, the detail of how this is interpreted by government and translated into policy will take a long time and will likely change. During the interim, as college leaders we should create the space to build consensus on how we will deliver these aspirations. We can do this regionally or nationally. We can do this by further mergers or through formal collaborations. We have choice. Colleges naturally want to collaborate and many are hugely expert in this already and may not need the funding or capital incentives to do so. But to create a world-class and complete system available to everyone in every place, more structure will likely be required.

I have on many occasions called for some form of renationalisation or "un-incorporation" of our sector, based more on a philosophical and political position to provide correction to failing marketisation and to encourage, or demand, collaboration. Regional network strategies could be a step in the right direction.



Should colleges be forced into local 'networks'?

Against

LUKE RAKE

Principal, Kingston
Maurward College



Let's not kill off the small specialist, local provider in the pursuit of the Amazon model

What's really behind the Commission on the College of the Future's recommendation that colleges should have a 'legal duty' to create networks, asks Luke Rake

Like many, I have been waiting with interest for the outcome of the Independent Commission on The College of the Future. The sector has for years been lagging in funding, under-appreciated in Westminster and capable of providing a much higher profile role than the one it currently does.

This is not news, and the commission creates an opportunity for us to position ourselves prior to the FE white paper. However, it also raises huge questions about the sector's future and its structure.

Don't get me wrong, there's plenty to agree with. My work in the sector and as an independent local enterprise partnership (LEP) board member shows there are times when a lack of inter-departmental synergy in government, for example between BEIS, DEFRA, DFE and MHCLG, fails to ensure investment priorities meet the needs of communities across the country.

The recommendation of closer working to ensure sensible and coherent strategy and the drivers of educational provision to match the needs of geographies and learners is thus a good one.

It's also sensible to recommend

greater stability of funding (although it might be better to just say "get the funding level correct"). However, this requires careful managing by ESFA and others to ensure (a) there are opportunities for growth, and (b) a three-year settlement does not allow for crises points at the end of each period where a college requires a major negative shift in its funding position.

However, the headline already creating the most noise is the "legal duty" on colleges to create networks, which must be matched by a duty on other post-16 providers. My worry is that this grabs all the bandwidth.

Why this duty? I cannot see a sensible way to force private training providers, public sector schools and the entertainingly different "incorporated by statute but pseudo-public-sector" colleges into bodies that have legal status. We already have networks that are functional and

effective, whether LEPS, local safeguarding boards, chambers of commerce, etc. So the legal duty is either not required or it's after something else.

"Colleges are a mixed bag – let the customer choose"

Control? Create large regional colleges that service whole geographies. Well, sorry, geography doesn't work like that – people travel all over the place, not according to lines on a map.

Protectionism for colleges? PTPs are a mixed bag, but so are colleges – let the customer choose.

"Securing provision in hard-to-reach areas" – does this mean propping up poor-quality provision, or perhaps forcing those wishing to study level 3 to

study miles from home? That's not going to sell to the student in Cornwall who suddenly finds themselves forced to go 100 miles to study. They'll just stay in school and do A-levels. Seriously, they will. Might work in a city, but let's not forget the rural dimension here.

Larger doesn't necessarily equate to better quality, nor does it equate to more resilient, as the massive bailouts to some very large providers show. Similarly, small does not equate to weak. The challenges in the sector are arguably of leadership and ambition, not scale.

The principle of survival of the fittest does not say anything about size. Competition in itself is a good thing, not an evil to crush with statute. Foxes may eat rabbits, but rabbits are still here and doing very well thank you. True, they might have to run faster, as they are running for their life, not just their dinner. However, competition has enabled both to evolve and thrive in their own niche. A well-run, locally minded provider of any type will always work with partners. This is not vertical restraint or similar, it's just common sense with a hefty dose of moral purpose.

So, let's push for FE to have its place in the sun, but let's also not kill off the small specialist, local provider in the pursuit of the Amazon model. I think people deserve more choice on their high street.



MARY OSMASTON

Co-chair, National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA)



The government mustn't scrap ESOL qualifications but instead, fix the funding

The funding set-up, not the qualifications themselves, is to blame for a lack of take-up, writes Mary Osmaston

When we think of entry level, people with degrees or vocational skills probably don't come to mind.

But there are many such learners studying from entry to level 2 purely because they don't yet speak English well enough to achieve their goals in the UK. They are studying ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages).

And it's not a small group, either. Last year, there were 180,000 enrolments on ESOL qualifications and many more ESOL learners on other English courses.

The Department for Education's current consultation on level 2 and below qualifications "wants to understand how far the current ESOL qualifications meet students' needs and if they might need to be reformed", partly because there are "many more enrolments on entry-level ESOL qualifications compared to levels 1 or 2 ESOL".

Reading the document, we're concerned that there's a lack of understanding of the huge range of backgrounds and ambitions of those learning ESOL, and how complex it is to learn a new language.

The document also betrays a lack of awareness of how the funding regime reduces choice and distorts provision.

ESOL students are a varied



bunch. Some have had little education in their home country and need to spend many hours a week developing study skills and learning English.

Others are qualified professionals who need more English to progress from low-skilled work into jobs that match their skills and aspirations. One thing that unites them is that they recognise that they cannot succeed in UK society unless they improve their English – and fast.

What they want is a programme with specialist language teachers and enough class time to develop all their language skills effectively. Many also need a level 2 qualification for further study or employment but are frustrated when they are enrolled on qualifications such as Functional Skills.

These qualifications are recognised by employers but, as they are designed for fluent English speakers, they emphasise writing skills and leave too little time for essential language

development.

So why are learners not choosing higher level ESOL qualifications? It's not a problem of the qualifications, but of funding.

"We're concerned about the lack of understanding of ESOL learners"

Functional Skills and GCSE are fully funded whilst ESOL is only co-funded. This means many learners can't afford the fees for ESOL. There are also financial incentives for the provider to place students on a fully funded but less appropriate course.

Learners are progressing, but not always to ESOL qualifications. This has led the DfE to ask whether ESOL qualifications are really needed at those higher levels? ESOL is English, after all.

Yes, and no. Learning a new language is an entirely

different – and much more difficult – task than brushing up skills in a language you already speak fluently, and we British should recognise this as we are particularly poor at language learning.

We know that learning a new language takes a long time. Research in Australia suggests that 1,765 hours of specialist ESOL are needed to reach an adequate level of English for employment – 350 hours per level, from entry 1 to level 2. Some may need less time, but many will need more.

So what should the government prioritise here? Most importantly, they need to make sure that all learners can join the right course, regardless of funding constraints.

For most ESOL students that means one that is based on the ESOL Core Curriculum, leading to an ESOL qualification, as that is the best way to ensure a strong foundation in all aspects of English, building important enabling knowledge, such as grammar and vocabulary at each level.

Next, they should ensure that providers offer every level, so that learners of all ages can continue right up to level 2 in an ESOL-focused environment, and finally that ESOL qualifications are better recognised by employers.

The DfE is right to identify that there is an issue, but it seems to me that it is the funding regime that needs revision, not the qualifications.

LEE
PRYOR

Director of apprenticeships and business engagement, Luminate Education Group



Ofqual must work closely with employers for its bigger role in apprenticeships

The new system has the potential to strengthen the employer voice, but needs clear communication routes, writes Lee Pryor

The announcement that Ofqual will now be overseeing a significant number of apprenticeship standards has been greatly welcomed by institutions such as ours.

This is a significant move for organisations that provide end-point assessments and will not only ensure a smoother process but a more cost-effective, simpler and efficient one.

The end-point assessment model has been one of the government's key reforms in recent years. However, we must not lose sight of the need to retain or consider employer choice and feedback in a competitive market place.

Employers need to be involved in developing policy, as they have been at the centre of creating apprenticeship standards in recent years.

Therefore, Ofqual needs to work in partnership with them and end-point assessment organisations to ensure continuity and consistency of the new policy framework.

The wide range of bodies involved over the years has proved disadvantageous to the overall process, so I suggest that a regular review of standards and systems takes place on an ongoing basis.

The assessment process should be reviewed at least every 12 months, to ensure that it is appropriate for new and existing

apprenticeship standards and that all criteria reflect what is valued by employers and respective industries.

This will go a long way in helping address any irregularities or "developmental gaps" within Ofqual's strategy.

It is a known fact that changes to assessment plans have resource implications for end-point assessment organisations as they have to adapt assessment methodologies, tools and guides.

It is important that a pragmatic strategy is applied that takes into account the employer and apprentice needs, as well as the end-point assessment organisation's capabilities.

If Ofqual sets a framework of quality criteria, this could ensure coherence across the wider qualification landscape.

By working with the Department for Education to engage the end-point assessment organisation market early, with forthcoming standards and assessment plans, this could ensure that the

assessment market is viable.

Sir Gerry Berragan, chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, said last year "it has never been more crucial that we ensure we have the best regime possible to assess quality".

"I suggest that a regular review of standards and systems takes place"

I agree entirely with this sentiment. We were in need of a system that doesn't impose an undue burden on end-point assessment organisations and that is easy for all parties to understand and engage with.

The new system has the potential to strengthen the employer's voice in external quality assurance. In the current system, around 30 per cent of apprenticeship standards have an employer-led approach to

external quality assurance.

Ofqual needs to work with employers to ensure they gain the understanding required, and perhaps have a member of Ofqual on the trailblazer group.

This would allow for effective monitoring of apprentice assessment organisations, through external quality assurance organisations and agreeing necessary action on specific cases.

Visibility of apprentices as a whole remains a problem when planning for end-point assessment – so this is an area that needs to be focused on when working with providers.

Ofqual will need to bear this in mind in their future plans, working closely with end-point assessment organisations and employers to ensure that this transition is seamless.

The delivery of this comes at a crucial time for apprenticeships and it is understandable that the transition will require a lot of work from Ofqual, particularly after the results debacle of last summer.

Nonetheless, if we really want a more skilled and efficient workforce, and a robust assessment strategy, more support is needed from the government to streamline the infrastructure and ensure Ofqual have adequate resources to oversee this policy.

It will be great to see end-point assessment organisations and Ofqual working together to create a strategy and policy framework that supports a strong and competitive marketplace of quality providers.



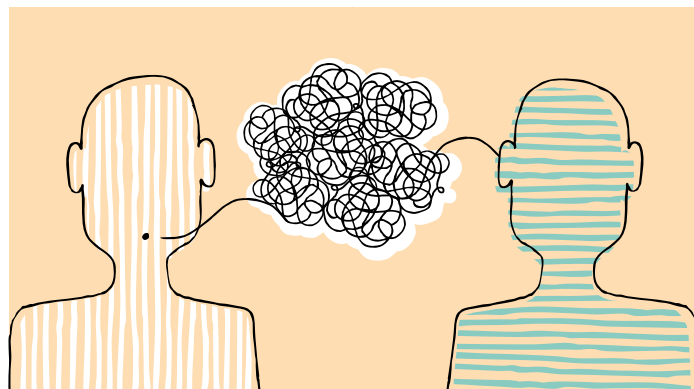
TOM BEWICK

Chief executive,
Federation of
Awarding BodiesBeware the 'tidy mind'
when considering
funding below level 3

Ministers must listen to the sector carefully if they want to avoid a post-16 quals fiasco, says Tom Bewick

After months of phoney war, the Department for Education has launched its second round of consultation on which regulated qualifications below level 3 will be assigned public funding in future. The battle lines are clear: the education secretary, Gavin Williamson, argues that there are a "ridiculously large number of qualifications". To the tidy mind in Whitehall, it is time to simplify the landscape and make the offer for learners "clearer" and much "easier" for employers to understand. At one level, it all sounds rather benign.

Except, the experience of early August should be fresh enough in ministers' minds to make them pause for thought. They should wonder whether the post-16 review could end up being the nemesis of their own career prospects if they get it wrong. After all, the Conservative Party manifesto on which the election was won last December said that policy needed to move away from "Whitehall knows best". The fall of the "red wall" seats has meant the "levelling up" agenda now has a vocal political faction, sitting on the government benches in parliament, in ways not seen before. These MPs will be looking for visible signs of the commitment to create real ladders of opportunity. In every community,



particularly for those outside social mobility metropolitan hot-spots, policy will be judged on whether it actually narrows the gap for people who have been economically marginalised and left behind.

It is curious, then, why political alarm bells are not already ringing in Sanctuary Buildings. The impact assessment of their plans for post-16 qualifications, drawn up by DfE senior officials, lays it all out in quite stark terms. For example, the ESFA estimates that nearly two-thirds of current quals below level 3 for 16-19-year-olds would not be eligible for public support in future. The estimated impact on reduced enrolments, therefore, for those on the traditional academic track (where A-levels are the predominate qualification), is 16 per cent. The impact assessment even admits something ministers have so far denied in public about the rationale for these reforms: artificial market manipulation. Because qualifications that compete with 24 T Levels will not be publicly funded in future, the document says blithely: "Low

competition on the technical route should help to support the delivery and take up of T Levels."

"The impact assessment even admits the real rationale: artificial market manipulation"

For those who have traditionally pursued a vocational technical qualification at level 3, the impact on reduced enrolments for this group could be as high as 62 per cent. In other words, the current ministerial fiat that says 16-19-year-olds will have to take either an academic (A-level) or a technical (T Level) route in future will largely be achieved only by wiping out nearly two-thirds of current provision for this age group.

Beyond the cold statistics, this could result in a real human cost, of significantly less choice in the L3 market in future, with the potential

to significantly drive up the number of NEETs. You can already see the constituency case work increasing. MPs' surgeries deluged by aggrieved learners and parents who will feel they are being treated like square pegs being bashed into policy round holes. "Why should my daughter have only the choice of A-levels or T Levels?," could become a common refrain.

The situation gets worse for adults and SEND learners. Nearly one-third of technical qualifications currently available at level 3 (31 per cent) for this group "may not fit into the future landscape", officials admit. For students from SEN background, the impact assessment concludes that these students could end up being "more strongly negatively impacted by being unable to achieve level 3 in the reformed landscape".

When Dame Glenys Stacey, the interim chief regulator at Ofqual, was asked about what went wrong with the exams fiasco this summer, she said the whole system had made "a fundamental philosophical mistake". When you look at the potential adverse impact on life chances and equalities in the post-16 qualifications review, ministers will not be able to claim this time round that they were unaware of the consequences. They have been warned.

Crucially, it is the job of everyone working in the skills sector to point out where these reforms may not live up to all the hype.

LILLIAN
GREENWOODLabour MP,
Nottingham SouthThe government's attack
on the Union Learning
Fund is purely political

As a former trade union education officer, I saw the real difference this fund makes, writes Lillian Greenwood

"We must invest in skills, we must invest in further education". This was the prime minister's message to the country when he launched the Lifetime Skills Guarantee on September 29.

Yet less than a month later the government wrote to the Trade Union Congress (TUC) to tell them that funding for the highly effective Union Learning Fund (ULF) would be scrapped from the end of March.

In the middle of a pandemic that is wreaking havoc in the jobs market, scrapping funding for a programme that helps people retrain and gain new skills is nonsensical.

Established under the Labour government in 1998, ULF's aim was to work with employers, employees and learning providers to encourage greater take-up of learning in the workplace and develop the capacity of trade unions.

At the time, I was a trade union education officer for Unison in the East Midlands and saw for myself the difference the ULF made to our members, particularly those who had left school without qualifications.

People who thought learning was not for them gained the confidence to give it another try and it's no exaggeration to say it

transformed lives.

I saw hospital cleaners and council refuse collectors discover a love for learning and use that discovery to encourage their workmates too – becoming Union Learning Reps and working with their employers to spread the word.

I saw workers gain promotions, go from basic skills to higher education and burst with pride as they received their certificates in front of their friends, family and colleagues.

For over 20 years the ULF has enabled millions of people to improve their skills and progress at work.

Meanwhile, a new report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Social Mobility Foundation has found that adult education is associated with higher wages and an improved chance of moving job.

Today, the fund supports around 200,000 people a year to learn and develop new skills. It is

supported by over 700 employers, including such well-known brands as Tesco, Boots and British Steel.

The ULF costs the Treasury just £12 million a year and in return the fund delivers a £1.4 billion boost to the economy through increasing jobs, wages and productivity.

"I saw hospital cleaners and council refuse collectors discover a love for learning"

Support to retrain and gain new skills has never been more important. By the end of the year, an estimated one million young people will not be in education, employment or training. They face an uncertain jobs market and uncertain future.

The prime minister's Lifetime Skill Guarantee does not provide

any funding until April 2021, but funding for new opportunities is needed now.

Unless the government takes urgent action to ensure people at risk of unemployment and those who have lost their jobs during the pandemic can access training, we risk leaving them without new skills, without new opportunities and without the chance to find new employment.

Against such a critical backdrop why would the government scrap a fund that its own evaluations say is effective?

Answers lie in the Department for Education's letter to the TUC in October explaining the decision to close the fund. It read: "We are investing much more in adult skills retraining, and doing so through a broad offer, rather than a small, dedicated fund promoted through the union network."

Put simply, the government's objection to this effective and cost-efficient programme is that it is managed by the unions.

I was proud to lead this week's Union Learn debate in parliament and Labour MPs from across the country urging the government to rethink this politically motivated decision, which is not just an attack on unions, but on workers up and down the country wanting to learn new skills and support our economic recovery.

The government's attack on the ULF shows Boris Johnson is more interested in playing politics than improving people's life chances.





READER'S REPLY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
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Lifetime skills guarantee: fresh setback to list of free level 3 quals

The list of high economic value level 3 awards is important, but it is student support that will be the vital element in helping these adults succeed. Need to know whether they will be able to continue with Universal Credit, or will they get a grant to live off?

Sue Pember, Twitter

We should name, but not shame, the colleges that are getting bailouts

They should absolutely be named and shamed. There are huge amounts of taxpayers' money being thrown at failing providers. They deserve to know who is spending it and on what. Leadership and governance are generally poor across FE, but in some colleges it is dire. Bailouts should only be provided where leadership and governance are outstanding and where every penny can be accounted for and measured in terms of the impact on students. Anything else is a waste as it will simply be mismanaged along with the original allocation.

David, website

Government careers agency fails to persuade majority of schools to engage with FE and HE

This is disappointing to read. Time for change and to up the ante and give the Baker Clause some bite for non-compliance. A failure to comply should become an automatic limiting grade at inspection.

Simon Ashworth, Twitter

REPLY OF THE WEEK

DfE to move army of cost-cutting advisers into FE



This is surely not right. Further education has been underfunded for years. Cost cutting will break it totally. Students on what are full-time courses that used to amount to four days in are now down to half of that in contact time on study programmes. Lecturers are still trying to deliver the same content, but with half the time. Young people are being poorly served by this. More funding is needed, not cost cutting, and true recognition of the role further education colleges have in helping many achieve their potential and go on to HE or into employment.

Ruth Mitchell, website

DfE to move army of cost-cutting advisers into FE



Qualified teachers' hours and contracts are being reduced and academic coaches are replacing them (non-qualified tutors). FE employs many hourly paid staff and just change their contracts with minimal notice. No wonder good, experienced teachers are leaving. Simply not enough funding or respect towards them. Very sad.

Michelle, website



The huge burden of the many pointless administration tasks, on top of the regular very demanding workload, was the reason I left the sector in 2012. If cost cutters could reduce the money spent on employing lecturers to do pointless paperwork and administration accountability exercises, it would be a total win-win, benefitting lecturers and students.

Joan Fitzsimmons, website

Bulletin

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Movers & Shakers

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



Alexandra Miles

Governor,
Selby College

Start date September 2020

Concurrent job

Managing director, West Yorkshire Learning Providers

Interesting fact

She reached the final stage of the England Squad Netball trials under-18 in 1993



Anne-Marie Francis

Vice principal of
quality and curriculum,
Loughborough College

Start date Early 2021

Previous job

Vice principal, Stockport College

Interesting fact

She previously worked as a voice actor, including for a Ford Transit advert



Patricia Denham

Interim vice
principal, Highbury
College Portsmouth

Start date September 2020

Previous job

Specialist FE advisor/consultant, PRD

Interesting fact

She is a former Highbury College student

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