

**ATKINS OPENS UP IN FINAL INTERVIEW**

Pages 7-8



**CAN A CHEMIST FIX CAREERS ADVICE MUDDLE?**

Pages 21-23



**HOW TO SELL MATHS TO LEARNERS**

Page 25

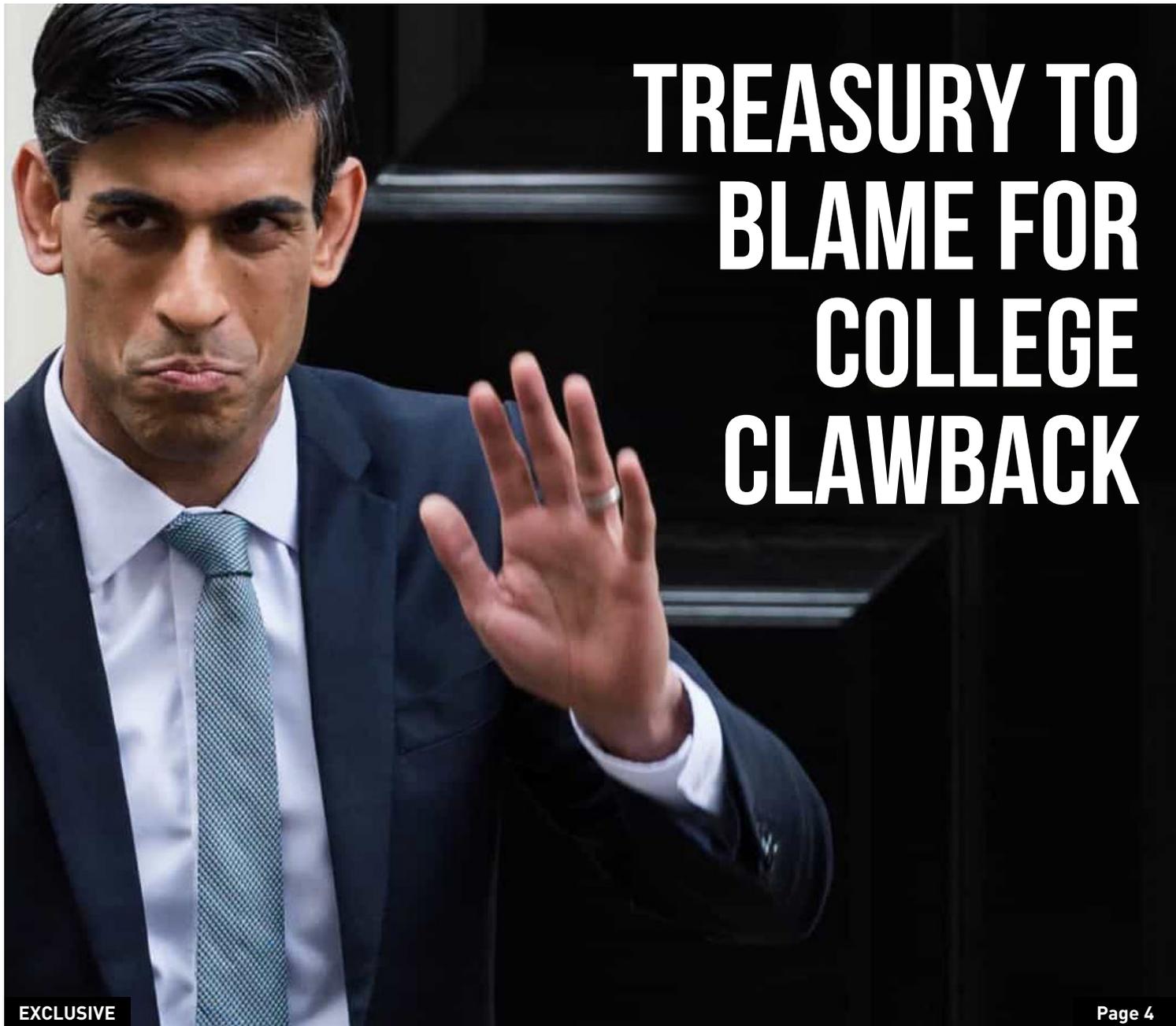


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## TREASURY TO BLAME FOR COLLEGE CLAWBACK

EXCLUSIVE

Page 4



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### Apprenticeship standard achievement rate fails to hit 60%



Page 5



### DfE admits Skills Toolkit completion data may just be starts

Page 15



### For its 'national recruitment campaign' the DfE should look to the armed forces

Page 26



### There is a worrying downward trend in digital qualifications

Page 27

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# Treasury to blame for adult education clawback plans

FRASER WHIELDON  
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From front

Exclusive

The Treasury has demanded that the Department for Education claw back millions in adult education funding from colleges, *FE Week* has learned.

College leaders were riled this week when the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) announced it would apply a 90 per cent tolerance threshold for adult education allocations in 2020/21.

Colleges have told *FE Week* that they now face handing back millions of pounds as they expect to miss that target by some way because of the disruption and lockdowns following Covid-19.

The ESFA claimed this new threshold, much higher than the 68 per cent set for last year, is a "fair representation of grant-funded providers' average delivery" in 2020/21.

But *FE Week* understands it was the Treasury that successfully lobbied for the higher threshold by arguing that colleges have had enough time to reorientate provision and run courses online where needed.

*FE Week* also understands the decision surprised senior ESFA officials. The agency has so far stayed silent on whether colleges will be able to submit business cases if they do not reach the 90 per cent target.

The Treasury declined to comment.

Leicester College, which has been in lockdown with the rest of the city since March, forecasts it will only be able to spend 53 per cent of its allocation this year.

This would mean having to hand back more than £4 million. It will be "unlikely to be able to make up the remaining allocation in the final term of the year," a spokesperson says, as many adult learners are "unwilling" to sign-up until the vaccine programme is completed.



Rishi Sunak

While it is "not clear" what the full implications of this year's clawback would be, it is "clear" there will be consequences for its capital programmes.

Derby College Group has forecast it will only be able to make it to 65 per cent of its £7.1 million allocation – meaning it will be handing back nearly £1.8 million.

"Not only is this announcement later than expected, it is tremendously disappointing," a spokesperson said.

The group believes the clawback could hurt its ESOL and basic skills programmes, but is unable to detail how as *FE Week* went to press.

"We would appeal to DfE to reconsider this position in light of the financial impact this will have on our sector," the spokesperson added.

The Association of Colleges has predicted most of its members will deliver between 75 to 85 per cent of their allocations, which would mean a total clawback of between £22 million and £62 million.

The decision is also troubling councils with AEB allocations, with Leicestershire County Council – which has a £4.1 million allocation – saying the 90 per cent threshold will "certainly

be challenging".

Kent County Council, which has the largest allocation of any council this year with £8.7 million, said it expects to spend the full amount, but it is "difficult to understand why" the threshold has been set at 90 per cent.

While the DfE has called the 90 per cent a "fair representation" of grant-funded providers' average delivery, other adult education commissioners have moved to comfort providers.

For instance, the Greater London Authority has applied a 10 per cent "London Factor" funding uplift for its AEB providers, affecting the base rate of all AEB-fundable qualifications up to and including level 2. The authority also previously announced it would apply a 90 per cent threshold this year.

But even colleges who expect to hit the threshold have complained it is unfair.

Luminate Education Group, formerly Leeds City College, says it can reach the 90 per cent, but that is dependent on whether it can recruit enough learners in the summer term.

The Yorkshire group's vice-principal for curriculum and adults Ann-Marie Spry says the threshold is "quite a stretch for us and there is no wriggle room".

She believes an 85 per cent threshold would have been "better" as it would encourage innovation while "recognising the mood among the adult population".

College group NCG expects to use in excess of 90 per cent of its allocation, but has also seen "some" reduction in enrolment to new provision.

Chris Payne, its deputy chief executive, says that "given the uncertainty around recruitment at the moment, we would have welcomed a lower target".

The DfE is planning on publishing further details by the end of March.

# Apprenticeship standard achievement rate fails to hit 60%

**BILLY CAMDEN**  
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More than two in five apprentices on standards failed to successfully complete their qualification last year.

National achievement rate tables (NARTs) published on Thursday by the Department for Education revealed that the overall rate for all apprenticeships fell from 64.8 per cent in 2018/19 to 64.2 per cent in 2019/20.

The data shows that apprentices on old-style frameworks, which are being phased out, hit a 67.8 per cent achievement rate, but the new-style standards only achieved 58.7 per cent.

This is, however, an almost 12 percentage point increase on 2018/19 when just 46.9 per cent of apprentices on standards achieved.

The retention rate for standards continues to be low, sitting at 60.2 per cent.

Commentary published by the DfE alongside the statistics claims that a difference in apprenticeship achievement rate between framework and standards is “not, at least initially, an entirely unexpected consequence of our reforms”.

“Whilst some standards do have similar names to frameworks, standards are not designed to be a direct replacement for frameworks and as such, they should not be directly compared,” the document said.

“Department for Education reforms changed what an apprenticeship is: standards are longer, with more training and an independent end-point assessment to test occupational competency at the end. End-point assessment is a new assessment method, making achievements on standards more demanding and this could also impact the qualification achievement rate.”

A DfE spokesperson added: “As more and more apprentices are on the new, more rigorous standards, we are pleased to see that the achievement rate for apprenticeship standards has increased by 11.8 percentage points from 2018/19 to 2019/20.”

Year	All apprenticeships		Frameworks	
	2018/19	2019/20	2018/19	2019/20
Retention rate	65.8%	65.5%	69.7%	69.0%
Pass rate	98.5%	98.0%	98.7%	98.3%
Achievement rate	64.8%	64.2%	68.8%	67.8%
Leavers	295,830	239,680	241,500	145,600

Source: DfE apprenticeship statistics March 2021

Breaking the data down by subject area, it shows that agriculture, horticulture and animal care had the lowest achievement rate, at 50.9 per cent, followed by construction, at 52.3 per cent, and then leisure, travel and tourism, at 55.6 per cent.

The subject with the highest achievement rate was education and training, which hit 80.4 per cent, followed by arts, media and publishing, at 75.4 per cent, and then ICT, at 64 per cent.

While the DfE has released achievement rate data at a national level for 2019/20, they have not published it at individual provider level or by institution type this year due to the pandemic.

The data will also not be used by bodies such as Ofsted, local authorities or devolved authorities or within ESFA, to hold providers to account.

The DfE commentary warns that “care should be taken when comparing outcomes with previous years due to the effects of the pandemic”.

“A number of things will have impacted these data. For example, there was an increase in the number of breaks in learning for those with 2019/20 expected end dates in which we can observe a large number of outcomes being delayed until 2020/21,” it added.

## Standards

Sector Subject Area	2018/19		2019/20	
	Ach Rate	Leavers	Ach Rate	Leavers
Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	46.3%	100	50.9%	800
Arts, Media and Publishing	72.0%	300	75.4%	400
Business, Administration and Law	46.7%	20,300	59.7%	39,100
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	37.8%	700	52.3%	800
Education and Training	-	-	80.4%	500
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	58.4%	2,900	59.3%	5,400
Health, Public Services and Care	47.5%	10,400	56.5%	22,600
Information and Communication Technology	50.3%	5,400	64.0%	7,100
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	48.6%	300	55.6%	600
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	42.7%	14,000	56.6%	16,700
Science and Mathematics	-	-	-	-
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>46.9%</b>	<b>54,300</b>	<b>58.7%</b>	<b>94,100</b>

Source: DfE apprenticeship statistics March 2021

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# Atkins exit interview: ‘Do I think we’ve got most of it right? Yes - I do’

BILLY CAMDEN  
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Exclusive

In his final interview as FE Commissioner, Richard Atkins speaks candidly about his time in office and why he makes “no apology” for his intervention approach.

Atkins spent 21 years as a college principal before taking on the lead intervention role in 2016, during which time his team visited and publicly reported on dozens of colleges in financial peril, with two becoming the first to be taken through the new insolvency regime.

**Q. Your college visits, which have often been swiftly followed by the departure of principals and chairs, have divided the sector’s opinion over your no-nonsense approach. While some have welcomed your intervention, others have been critical of the public focus on leadership failures. How do you respond to that criticism?**

A. It is good preparation being a principal for 21 years because you can’t be universally popular all the time, so I had some general preparation for needing to have a thick skin. I always try and put the interest of learners and employers and their parents at the forefront whenever there is very difficult work to do.

In an ideal world there wouldn’t be a need for an intervention regime but I haven’t heard from anyone in the sector that in the cases we have intervened that those cases didn’t need to happen.

If we hadn’t put in the appropriate support and challenge, what would have happened to those learners in those colleges? In my view, the quality of teaching and learning would have deteriorated and the sustainability of the college would have got worse.

For those communities and those learners, I make no apology for what we have done. I and my team make mistakes, nobody



is infallible, but if you ask me of the 59 intervention assessments, 95 diagnostic assessments and more than 60 mergers during these four years, do I think we’ve got most of it right, most of the time? The answer from my judgment is yes.

At the end of the day, if an institution is failing and the governance and leadership does not have the capacity and capability to ensure its sustainability and improve its quality, then it isn’t fair on the learners that there isn’t intervention.

I believe that where public taxpayer money is spent, there has to be a high level of scrutiny and accountability.

I think our judgment calls are far more often right than wrong. The ones that attract the most interest are the very serious failures of governance and leadership – we haven’t had that very many of those, but where there have been, I have recommended prompt and direct intervention because that is what

employers and parents expect and that is what those are funding the sector expect.

**Q. Where do you stand on the issue of “naming and shaming” colleges in difficulty? Some in the sector believe your detailed FE Commissioner reports on individual colleges should be kept confidential instead of being placed in the public domain. Do you agree or disagree?**

A. One of the things I introduced when I took on the role was diagnostic assessments. They’re unpublished and private and I think they can be very effective. That is my favoured approach to every intervention.

However, when a college is seriously failing and there has been a serious failure

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

## CONTINUED

in governance and leadership and/or they become financially insolvent, I do believe that the level of accountability should lead to some form of report. Not just to be published for the sake of feeding the media, but they are also a useful learning point.

There are over 100 FE Commissioner reports now on the DfE website and I have numerous chair and governors saying to me they have looked at a few and find them very helpful. A number of the issues colleges need to address are the same issues and therefore they do provide a really helpful resource. Therefore, do I think there should be a "let's keep it all private and push it in a corner" approach? No, I do not. But do I think there should be excessive publication of reports, or any attempt whatsoever to name and shame individual people? I do not.

I find that the colleges most concerned about the issues you raise are the ones that have never had any interaction with the FE Commissioner. I often find the college leaders and governors that have gone through our intervention are complimentary.

I don't produce reports that are salacious or that are meant to entertain.

Ofsted does a great job, and I think it would be extraordinary if we could publish their reports but not FE Commissioner reports – that would be very strange. Why shouldn't the local community be able to see whether the governance and leadership has the necessary capacity and capability to improve when they're having difficulties?"

**Q. What was your lowest point as commissioner?**

A. My lowest moment was at about 10.55am at Hadlow and West Kent and Ashford College on day one when we started to begin to put the jigsaw together that led to their insolvency. That was a very dispiriting moment.

The complex network of governance and leadership arrangements between these two colleges, which were legally independent FE corporations, were incredibly complex and dysfunctional. They had failed to hold any of the right people to account and, as a result, the colleges had failed to keep their eyes close enough to quality across the board, and in particular, had engaged in a range

of initiatives and other developments that were inappropriate and led ultimately to their financial collapse. Buying a mining museum, a long way away, and the transfer of assets between the two colleges, were inappropriate.

I was saddened that insolvency needed to happen, but I was incredibly grateful to the interim board and principal, who strengthened the focus on teaching and learning throughout the process.

**Q. We have reported on numerous colleges selling off campuses to balance the books in recent years, which has often been controversial with the local community and MPs. Many of the sales have been recommended in FE Commissioner reports. From your perspective, why has this become a common theme for colleges?**

A. Being on top of your costs as a college is good practice. It is right and proper that any college knows the costs of running each site and campus and what contribution the site makes to overheads. When a college finds that a particular site is a loss maker and is draining the mothership, then difficult decisions have to be taken.

At the end of the day, are you going to close the small, possibly distant, campus to sustain the large college, or are you going to allow the small one to drain you?

I regret that colleges are faced with that decision, but the reason they are is the core funding will not always enable them to sustain the number of campuses they had two or three years ago.

Good, well-run colleges regularly assess the viability of their sites and all of their provision and take the necessary steps to make sure the college is sustainable and successful for the highest number of learners possible.

We have advised a number of colleges on doing this and each situation is very difficult for the local community and MPs, but I believe they have been well handled by the college in an appropriate way.

The only thing that would make a difference would be a further significant improvement in core funding. It is the contribution level that is key, and to do that you have got to have a good average class size, a good number of learners and apprentices that you can run efficiently. When those are not evident in a site it is

very difficult, and good governing bodies and management teams make sure of this year-on-year.

Clearly they shouldn't make hasty judgments, clearly they should judge these things over a period of years and not rush in and vacate. Sometimes they do have to make very difficult decisions in the face of considerable public noise and upset about what is going on, but I'm not going to sit here and say colleges should keep open unviable sites.

I have not been involved in a case where a college is closing a site in a frivolous or short-sighted way, I have seen it based on real evidence and a real desire to protect the current and future learners as far as possible. I don't underestimate the impact on students and staff. It is a last resort.

**Q. During your time in post FE Week has reported on a number of ESFA investigations into independent training providers (ITPs). Do you wish you could have also intervened in ITPs, which also receive millions of pounds in public funding? Should they be subject to the same scrutiny as colleges?**

A. I think to have a role similar to the FE Commissioner for ITPs might well be a good idea. With my college background, it would have been inappropriate for me to do it. A conversation was had with me four years ago about that, but we do not have the skillset or capacity to do that work.

It is not a decision for me, but if the ESFA deemed it helpful to have a team of ITP experts doing this sort of work, I would understand.

**Q. What are you planning to do next? Full retirement or other work, perhaps still in the FE sector?**

A. Apart from continuing at Exeter University as a board member and being on the government's Higher Education Advisory Group, I'm hoping to watch a bit more sport and take a bit more exercise.

I don't see myself as ever being an interim principal. I was jumping on trains and planes three or four days a week in this role. I don't want to go back to a four- or five-days-a-week job.



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# Mixed response to restated public sector apprenticeship target

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## Exclusive

The government's single-year extension to the public sector apprenticeship target has received mixed reaction from in-scope bodies.

It was announced last Friday that the target of having apprentices make up 2.3 per cent of new public sector employees would be restated from April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022.

Most sectors of the public workforce have struggled to meet the target in its original timeframe, of April 1, 2017 to March 31, 2021, with an overall average of just 1.7 per cent by the end of March 2020.

The police have performed worst so far, with official Department for Education statistics from earlier this year showing England's forces managed just 0.7 per cent.

Schools, which only came in-scope for the target in March 2019, performed second-worst with one per cent.

After facing high financial and time costs recruiting and training apprentice teachers, school leaders have reacted strongly to extending the target, set under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

Sara Ford, deputy director of policy for the Association of School and College Leaders, called it an "unwelcome and unnecessary distraction" when schools are "trying to resume in-school education for all pupils after a year of unprecedented disruption" caused by Covid-19.

She said the bureaucracy behind the target, which applies to schools but not FE colleges, "is enough to make one's head spin".

"Managing the off-the-job training and support elements mean taking on new apprentices is a tricky proposition for many

schools, where time is precious."

Instead of an "unrealistic and complicated" target, she suggested the government "get the nuts and bolts of a properly resourced and funded apprenticeship programme, which works for all schools and colleges, in place".

Existing staff being developed through apprenticeship funding could also be counted towards the target, Ford proposed.

Despite it achieving just 1.5 per cent over the past three years, extending the target has been welcomed by the NHS, according to Laura Roberts, director of skills development and participation for the service's training overseers, Health Education England.

This is because their apprentices "make a huge contribution to the delivery of essential services across the NHS in frontline clinical and non-clinical roles".

The College of Policing, which sets standards for professional development in law enforcement, said it was "very supportive of apprenticeships" and was working on entry routes for new officers to start on the police constable degree apprenticeship.

After local councils achieved just

1.3 per cent towards the target, their representative body the Local Government Association said it "remains committed to supporting councils to provide these opportunities to people in their communities".

They are also "keen" to work with the government on "how more local flexibilities in using the levy could open up even more opportunities".

The best-performing sector – the armed forces – was the only one to meet the 2.3 per cent target, managing 7.9 per cent.

The guidance from the DfE which revealed the target extension also confirmed relevant public bodies would be still expected to publish their progress towards the target to the department.

The bodies will also have to publish their progress publicly, to "enable the government, the public and wider stakeholders to understand each body's headcount and the number of apprentices they employ".

This information must be "easily accessible to the public, for example, on the internal and external facing website of a public sector body in scope," the guidance reads, as previous guidance on the target has said.

*FE Week* uncovered last October how scores of multi-academy trusts, councils and hospital trusts had failed to publicise what percentage of their staff had started an apprenticeship in 2019/20 on their websites by the September deadline.

At the time, the DfE appeared to be letting off mandating bodies to publish their guidance, saying it was simply "good practice" to do so.

Under this new guidance, public bodies have six months after the end of the target period to send their data to the DfE and make it public.



# OFQUAL VTQ CONSULTATION – WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT?



By Stewart Foster, Chief Operating Officer and Responsible Officer at NCFE

## Education firmly in the spotlight

Earlier in the year, Ofqual launched a consultation on alternative arrangements for assessing and awarding vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) which received a staggering number of responses. The volume of interest in the consultation drives home the importance of getting the assessment model right, both for this academic year and for years to come. People are realising the economic and societal impact of the pandemic and the huge part that education will play in building back our economy and closing vital skills gaps.

In anticipating the outcomes of the consultation, we knew how incredibly important it was to ensure that we were ready for whichever scenario unfolded. Having the knowledge of how quickly the sector had to adapt last year gave us insight into how both centres and learners needed to be guided through the process. Centres look to us to provide the support and guidance they need to get through times such as these so being ready to implement the changes to assessment models was incredibly important, and communicating those changes and adaptations as clearly as possible to our customers was and is paramount.

## Embracing change and collaborative working

The changes which have been brought

about by the pandemic have meant that as a sector, we've had to work together more than ever. We've been working with sector bodies, awarding organisations, centres, employers and government to ensure that our offer is aligned and the validity and robustness of assessment is at the forefront of all decision-making. It's been a time of unification and collaboration that we should embrace and continue to nurture.

What we now need to look at is how learners progress through not only this year but also the years to come, having missed out on significant milestones and experiences. There will not only be motivational and engagement barriers to learning, but also significant mental health issues that we cannot afford to overlook. As a sector, and as a society, we need to do all we can to support our young people in emerging from what has been an incredibly unsettling and stressful year for so many.

## Using technology to transform teaching and assessment

One significant leap forward in the sector is the amount we have had to embrace and embed technology as part of teaching and assessment. The flexibility of things like remote invigilation and online learning have revolutionised how we operate and provided a whole new way of working with learners and teachers. This is something that we need to further develop, keeping assessment aligned with technological advancements to create more streamlined and agile processes. More flexibility with assessment also means more

inclusivity, ensuring that learners can undertake their assessments where and when they're ready.

## VTQs are practical for a reason

Assessing VTQs is completely different from assessing traditional academic subjects. In adapting assessment practices, we need to ensure not only that knowledge is assessed, but that capability to undertake the practical skills required for the job/field of work are accurately observed, especially when a learner is preparing for a role where they would handle or be responsible for tasks where safety is at stake. Standards for VTQs are very closely linked to jobs and real-life experience so the assessment also needs to reflect this.

## Final thoughts

I think we need to take a long hard look at how we work to shape the system moving forward; it's clear that we need to appreciate the scale of this and change can't happen overnight but we have proved that we can make huge strides when we work together. It's up to us to keep this momentum going.

Ultimately what we want and need for the future of education is a system built on success and progression, and that is fundamentally what we are trying to achieve.

**For more information on NCFE's response to the alternative arrangements for awarding in 2020-21, please visit our [Covid response hub](#).**

# MPs demand answers from ministers over 'Wild West' grading fears

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Ministers have been warned over a "Wild West" grading system this summer, with MPs demanding concessions to ensure a "level playing field" for students.

The education select committee has warned Gavin Williamson his exams replacement plan risks being "too inconsistent".

Robert Halfon, the committee's chair, said this was down to a lack of standardised assessments and "impartial assessors to provide the checks and balances to guarantee fairness".

The demands are made in an eight-page letter that also requests that the Department for Education sets out any reductions in cash that schools and colleges should expect on their exam fees.

FE Week's sister title *Schools Week* revealed earlier this year that boards had increased entry prices, despite exams not going ahead.

Here is what MPs are demanding:

1. Exam boards should provide a "clear" minimum requirement to schools and colleges relating to the coverage of the syllabus in each subject in order to address lost learning concerns.
2. Officials must explain how it will be possible for leaders to make clear judgments on whether a student has been taught "sufficient content".
3. Ofqual needs to reveal the scale of the sampling it expects exam boards to do during the external quality assurance process.
4. To reconsider publishing external test papers after Easter, which will "devalue their worth" and be a distraction to students.
5. Provide clarity on what past performance data schools and colleges will have to submit to exam boards to verify teacher assessments.
6. DfE should set out what, if any, work it undertook to look at how grades might be moderated at a subject level by sending

"external assessors" in.

7. Ofqual and exam boards should put measures in place to guard against conscious or unconscious bias "creeping into teacher assessments".
8. DfE must "remain ready" to step in with support for private candidates where they have difficulties, if they do not have an "established relationship with an exam centre".
9. There should be "full confirmation" that exam board papers will be offered to students on request, if they wish to do them.
10. DfE should indicate what it thinks would be a "reasonable" reduction in fees charged by exam boards.
11. Plans should be in place in case of a high volume of appeals this year "as parents and pupils seek speculatively to challenge grades".
12. DfE needs to reveal its "route map" back to "normal" grades, with Halfon warning of "ever-increasing grade inflation" that would be "absolutely no benefit or value to anyone".

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# ESFA extends level 2 functional skills flexibility

FRASER WHIELDON  
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A flexibility that suspends the requirement for level 2 apprentices to study towards and sit a level 2 functional skills assessment has been extended again.

In an update published on Wednesday, the Education and Skills Funding Agency announced the funding rule would remain suspended until July 31, 2021.

The agency said this "recognises the continued disruption to the apprenticeship programme due to coronavirus".

Level 2 apprentices will still need a level 1 in functional skills English and maths to complete their apprenticeship, the update added.

The flexibility to the rule that level 2 apprentices must study towards a functional skills assessment in English and maths at that level was originally suspended last April.

At that time, it was relaxed for end-point assessments until July 31, 2020.

However, it was later extended to the end of March 2021.

This is one of a range of flexibilities the government has brought in for apprentice assessments in response to the pandemic.

Last month, the Department for Education rolled out an allowance for apprentices to take their end-point assessment before their English and maths functional skills test.

It was also confirmed in February that teacher-assessed grades can be used for

functional skills learners, but only if they are unable to take their assessment in person or remotely.

This is after the skills sector warned that thousands of apprentices were "stuck in limbo" while awarding bodies struggled to figure out how to adapt functional skills assessments for Covid-19.



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# DfE admits Skills Toolkit completion data may just be starts

**BILLY CAMDEN**

**BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

The Department for Education has admitted that a "completion" of a course on its Skills Toolkit may simply represent that a user has accessed learning materials.

Officials have also publicly confessed for the first time that they have no idea whether users of the free online content, which has cost almost £1 million to put on a new platform, live in the UK.

The admissions follow multiple investigations by *FE Week* which revealed how the flimsy data was being celebrated by ministers without a high level of transparency.

It also comes shortly after a public telling off by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR), which wrote to the DfE's chief statistician earlier this month to raise issues with the figures.

A series of extra caveats have been added to the DfE's publication of the Skills Toolkit "experimental" data in its monthly apprenticeship statistics release for the first time on Thursday.

As previously revealed by *FE Week*, course "registration" data has already been overcounted by the DfE and has led to revised estimates as they can simply include web hits.

The DfE now explains in their data release that course providers outline their method of reporting to the department "after being given a clear mandate to ensure that they are accurate to the best of their knowledge and understanding and are asked to report a change in their methods of reporting or any errors/issues they encounter as quickly as possible".

Provider reports are then "checked for unusual patterns".



This publication also revealed in January that the course registrations could be coming from anywhere in the world as many of the providers do not filter users by geographical location.

The DfE's data now includes a line which states: "DfE do not receive data from course providers on the country the learner accessed the course from, but we expect this to be the UK in most cases."

Additionally, *FE Week* reported earlier this month on how course "completions" were being counted when users spent three minutes looking at one of the online resources.

The DfE's publication of the data now states: "How providers record completions and define what a completion is can vary, and again depending upon the course format (for e.g., interactive videos, modules etc), the completion stage could be different for various course types and a 'completion' may simply represent that a user has accessed learning material."

In the OSR's letter, deputy director for regulation Mary Gregory raised concern that the Skills Toolkit data was published under

the "additional analysis section" of the publication which "may not be clear to users looking for these data in the release".

The DfE has now included commentary at the top of the publication to flag where users can find the relevant data.

The course content on the Skills Toolkit has not been developed by the government, but more than £1 million has been spent to develop and promote its "platform". The platform launched in April 2020 and consists of a web page on the National Careers Service with short course descriptions and links to the external websites.

The government says the free educational content being promoted aims to help people who are out of work to boost their digital and numeracy skills during the pandemic.

Education secretary Gavin Williamson described the free online courses as having a "transformational impact on so many people taking furlough" during a speech in October.

# GCHQ warns of steep rise in ransomware attacks on ed sector

**JAMES CARR**

**NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

Schools and colleges have lost financial records, students' coursework and Covid-19 testing data during a recent "spike" in cyber attacks targeting the education sector.

The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), part of GCHQ, this week published an alert warning colleges and other education settings to take further precautions to protect themselves against ransomware following "an increased number" of attacks since late February.

It comes a week after South and City College Birmingham, which teaches 13,000 students, was forced to shut its eight campuses following a "major" ransomware attack that disabled its core IT systems.

Paul Chichester, director of operations at NCSC, said the targeting of the education sector by cyber criminals is "completely unacceptable" but is a "growing threat".

Ransomware is a type of malware that prevents you from accessing your systems or the data held on them, the NCSC explains.

The data is usually encrypted and may be deleted or stolen. Following the initial attack those responsible will "usually send a ransom note demanding payment to recover the data". Payment is usually requested in the form of crypto currency.

The criminals also threaten to release sensitive data stolen during the attack if the ransom is not paid.

The NCSC added: "In recent incidents affecting the education sector, ransomware has led to the loss of student coursework, school financial records, as well as data relating to Covid-19 testing."

The cyber security experts said the attacks can have a "devastating impact on organisations" and may require a significant amount of recovery time to reinstate critical

services.

*FE Week* has previously reported on a range of cyber attacks affecting colleges, which have included doctored emails from principals and hoax terror attacks.

## "Led to the loss of student coursework, school financial records, as well as data relating to Covid-19 testing"

Eighty per cent of further/higher education institutions identified a cyber security breach or attack in the 12 months prior to the end of 2019, according to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Cyber Security Breaches Survey 2020.

There has been a rise in attacks since late

February 2021 "when establishments were preparing to welcome students back to the classroom", the NCSC said.

The security centre added it could not release exact figures for the number of attacks conducted due to operational reasons.

However, it stated the attacks have caused varying levels of disruption and "there is no reason to suspect the same criminal actor has been behind each attack".

The NCSC recommends education providers to not encourage, endorse or condone the payment of ransom demands.

It warned the "payment of ransoms has no guarantee of restoring access or services and will likely result in repeat incidents to educational settings".

The NCSC recommends a 'defence in depth' strategy in order to defend against malware and ransomware attacks.

The advice includes effective vulnerability management, installing antivirus software and implementing mechanisms to prevent phishing attacks.



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# Wanted: a landscape architect for the careers service



JESS STAUFENBERG  
@STAUFENBERGJ

**The skills white paper sets the lofty ambition of a “clear, all-age careers system”. Will a former academic be the man to deliver it? Jess Staufenberg reports**

In 2013 Michael Gove had something of an outburst in an education select committee hearing. He’d just axed Connexions, the national careers advice service for young people aged 13 to 19, and retorted in the face of criticism there was “a lot of garbage talked about careers”.

Poor career opportunities for students, the then education secretary thundered, “comes

down to our failure to ensure that they are literate, numerate and confident in subjects like science – not that we have had an insufficient number of well-paid careers advisers.”

Wind forward to 2021 and it would be tempting to say the government is now eating those words. In the recent Skills for Jobs white paper, the Department for Education admits “there is no single place you can go to get government-backed, comprehensive careers information”, adding the careers landscape can be “confusing, fragmented and unclear”.

It would seem to suggest the National Careers Service, set up by Gove the year he axed Connexions, might not be working as a single source of support as intended,

and that perhaps the DFE’s careers strategy, published after much delay in 2017 as an “ambitious plan”, is struggling too.

It’s all something of a vindication for Robert Halfon, the education select committee chair, who has claimed “careers support is still far too fragmented” with a “confused mish-mash of offerings” and “wasteful spending and duplication” of services.

Now the skills paper sets the lofty ambition of a “clear, all-age careers system”. A sentence outlines the main strategy towards this: “We will improve both local and national alignment between The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) and the National Careers

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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## CONTINUED

Service (NCS)".

Set up by Nicky Morgan in 2014, and with a new chief executive Oli de Botton at the helm since October, the CEC deploys volunteer "enterprise coordinators" (often local employers) and helps "careers hubs" of schools and colleges support each other. On the other hand, the National Careers Service (NCS) works through subcontractors, who target specific cohorts of adults that worry the government – such as the long-term unemployed – while providing only phone and web services to those aged 13 to 19. Matching the two up sounds a daunting task.

## “They’re trying to line up two things that are completely separate”

The man appointed to crack it is Professor Sir John Holman, a chemist at the



Jan Ellis

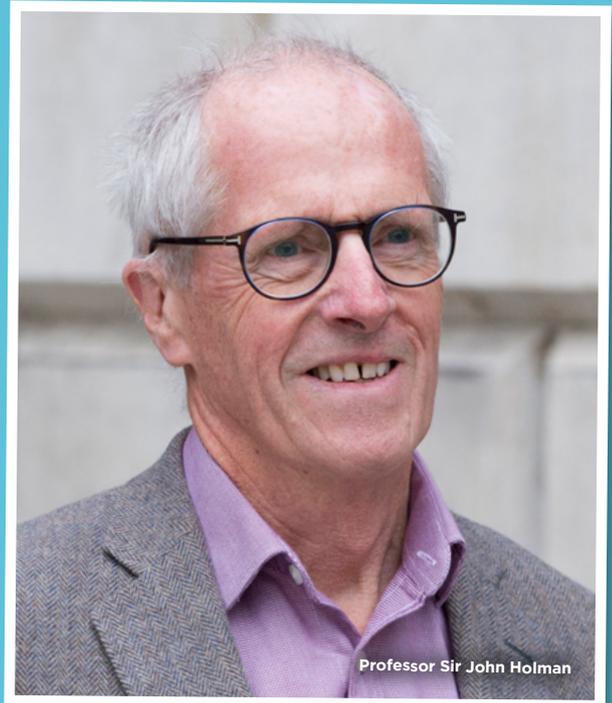
University of York and now an "independent strategic adviser on careers guidance" to Gavin Williamson. Holman himself came up with the eight Gatsby benchmarks for good careers guidance that the Careers & Enterprise Company encourages schools and colleges to meet. But can he do it?

"They're trying to line up two things that are completely separate and different," says Jan Ellis, the chief executive of the Career Development Institute, a professional body for careers educators. "The Careers & Enterprise Company is an arms-length company of the government, there to help manage careers guidance. The National Careers Service is completely different, it's a contracted-out organisation. Managing contractors is expensive, so it's really difficult to say how you would join these up."

Her words are echoed by Janet Colledge, a careers education consultant on the Quality in Careers Standards Board. "It's going to be interesting to see how Holman sees the CEC and NCS working together,

because until now the NCS has basically been trying to get people into jobs. It has a very limited remit with young people".

Holman does give some hints as to what might be in store, expanding on the white paper's mysterious claim that the DfE has developed "four principles for increasing alignment". *FE Week* can reveal these are completing the national rollout of the careers infrastructure; developing an enhanced national careers service website; better collaboration at an area level; and complementary personal guidance for young people.



Professor Sir John Holman

His first hint relates to the almost 50 career hubs in the country, which are meant to share best practice and develop local careers strategy. About half of FE colleges (155) and 45 per cent of secondary schools (2,090) are in a careers hub, according to the CEC. "The NCS has area contractors, and the CEC has a growing network of careers hubs, and I'm quite sure we can look at how we can get collaboration happening systematically between those two," Holman says. It's not absolutely clear what this means, but it looks like career hub leads in schools and colleges might play a part in linking up with the National Careers Service.

Data should also be shared, he says. "Labour market information, which is all those statistics about different jobs, vacancy rates, opportunities – if we could use that consistently across the two organisations, that would be a big win." It sounds sensible, but can the DfE easily gather that data from its NCS subcontractors? When *FE Week* asked the DfE for the numbers of young people who use the NCS each year, it responded that such information was

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## CONTINUED

not published and was not something the department could easily access or provide. More worryingly, the same response was given when asked how much funding the NCS has had since it was formed. Aligning data across both bodies sounds an easier task than finding it in the first place.

Holman would also like a “single source of government-assured information used consistently across schools and colleges [...] so schools, colleges and the NCS are all speaking the same language”. If the NCS website proves highly inspiring to students, that sounds sensible too. Given there’s no available data on whether young people find it useful or not, it might be a good idea to get feedback on its design first. A schools expert has previously called the site “as dull as dishwater”. It has to be said, the civil service-format homepage isn’t exactly engaging.

But as Halfon says, it’s a start. “This is a step forward and it’s a pretty big nod.” Yet he adds that “we need to radically reform careers advice”. He’s with the experts on that.

Olly Newton, the executive director at the education research charity the

Edge Foundation, similarly welcomes the “alignment”, but is clear the current ambition is too limited. “My worry about the connection between the services is making sure it focuses enough on face-to-face guidance. Lots of evidence suggests that telephones, the internet and self-help are OK for adults changing jobs. But if you’re starting off or thinking about a future career, you really need that one-to-one support”.

## “If you’re starting off, you really need that one-to-one support”

Here we arrive back at Gove’s original distaste for careers advisers. Deirdre Hughes, a careers policy adviser, points out that although Gatsby benchmark 8 says schools and colleges must make sure every student has “guidance interviews with a qualified careers adviser”, they have to buy this in themselves as qualified careers professionals have not been funded for schools since 2012.

One helpful alignment would be for the NCS to offer its qualified advisers to students via schools and colleges, she says. At present “the model is to expect teachers to do more”.

It all puts the DfE under pressure to deliver. Worrying statistics are lining up: this week a survey of 10,000 primary school pupils by Education and Employers, a UK-based charity that “connects volunteers from the world of work with schools”, found the career aspirations of seven year-



Clare Marchant

olds were “relatively unchanged” by age 18. UCAS has similarly found that 20 per cent of students said they couldn’t take the course that interested them because they didn’t have the relevant A-levels.

Clare Marchant, the chief executive at UCAS, says “the more we can do, earlier on, the better”, including year 6. Yet primary schools, and special needs schools and colleges, are not mentioned in the white paper.

All the while, select committees will keep their eagle eyes on the funding spent on the current model: £29 million for CEC last year, up from £19 million the year before (despite Morgan pledging it would be self-funding long term) and undisclosed sums on the NCS. It’s less than the £230 million spent on Connexions, Hughes says, but it’s creeping up – while funded, professional careers advisers in schools and colleges remain nowhere in sight.

In a last sentence, the skills white paper almost seems to guess a more wholesale approach might be needed. The “alignment” will take place over the next 18 months, it says - “as we work towards a longer-term review of the delivery system”. Will that “insufficient number of well-paid careers advisers” come to matter after all?



Deirdre Hughes



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# DIPA GANGULI

Principal, Sutton College



## Despite interventions and investment, why are adult numeracy skills still so low?

**Despite interventions and investment, maths 'phobia' continues to hold learners back, writes Dipa Ganguli**

Are you a parent, or do you know any, who dreads having to help with maths homework? In a restaurant, do you hate having to calculate the tip on a bill? Does understanding your mortgage interest payments seem like an insurmountable task?

If so, you are definitely not alone.

A few years ago while teaching percentages in my level 2 functional skills maths class, a learner simply got up and left the class. Naturally concerned, I followed and found her crying outside.

The learner told me that she worked at a travel agency. Her tears were tears of joy as she realised that, for the first time, she would be able to calculate her commission because she now understood percentages.

At level 2, which requires the application of two or more steps involving calculation, learners would be expected, for example, to work out "25 minus 2 x 32 or write 3/5 as a decimal".

You think most adults would be able to answer such questions.

However, here in the UK in 2021 government statistics suggest that 17 million adults – 49 per cent of the working-age population of England – have the numeracy level that we expect of primary school children.



Maths is part of everyday life. Yet the idea that you are either innately good or bad at maths persists in western countries. Indeed, it seems to be socially acceptable to be bad at maths. We do not hear adults bragging about being someone who can't spell or read well, but we do hear people happily assert that maths is "not my thing".

In response to Lord Moser's 1999 review into adult basic education, New Labour launched the Skills for Life strategy in 2001 with stretching targets. It was reasonably successful, with more than 14 million adults supported over a ten-year period to improve their skills. The Skills for Life strategy and subsequent interventions were seeking to address the issue of low-skilled adults.

Now, the question is why are we not seeing an increase in UK numeracy levels, despite so much intervention and focus? What lessons can we learn from our experiences to ensure outcomes for future generations are more

positive?

Perhaps an improvement in the numeracy skills of adults can only be brought about if we firstly work to change people's attitude towards mathematics. We could explore their feelings towards the subject, identifying their phobias and developing strategies to overcome those barriers.

### "How maths is 'sold' to learners is paramount"

If we can create a learning-oriented environment – where individual improvements, not grades, become the benchmark of success – instead of the performance-oriented environment we currently have, then maybe we will start to see maths-associated anxiety levels fall. In turn, skill levels could rise.

People's introduction to maths and how it is "sold" to them is

paramount. In an important study, researchers found that when mothers told their daughters they were not good at maths in school, their daughter's achievement declined almost immediately.

There is a notion that parents' perception of their role in relation to their child's schooling is influenced by their own experiences of schooling. It is this cycle that needs to be broken.

The diverse nature of primary school teaching also needs to be addressed. It is not uncommon to hear primary teachers admit (off the record) to not liking maths or not putting it in their top three subjects, even though they spend a good portion of their working lives teaching it. Perhaps there is scope for greater involvement of maths specialists.

We should also think about the role of family learning in supporting intergenerational maths education out of school. This could improve students' understanding of how maths can be used in everyday situations, to improve attitudes and develop appreciation of the value and relevance of maths in a variety of contexts.

This in turn will create a generation who will be confident in the use of numbers.

We in FE need to foster positive attitudes towards life-long maths learning, promoting socio-economic resilience and challenging educational disadvantage.

## CAMPBELL CHRISTIE

Retired  
commodore  
and former  
college principal



## For its 'national recruitment campaign' the DfE should look to the armed forces

**Many service leavers have the skills needed to rise through the ranks in FE, writes Campbell Christie**

When reading through the FE white paper I was particularly struck by the announcement of a "national recruitment campaign" to attract high-calibre teaching staff to the sector.

The paper pledges to "work with the sector to ensure that providers can recruit, retain and develop the teaching staff they need" underpinned by new investment in 2021-22 that will reportedly take spending on the FE workforce to over £65 million.

As part of that, the DfE intends to "launch a national recruitment campaign to communicate the opportunities in further education teaching", including targeting "high-potential graduates and experienced industry experts".

Innovative, well-funded, national campaigns do work – I know this from my own experiences during 2001-03 when I was running the Royal Navy's recruitment field force.

This team of over 400 sailors and Royal Marines worked out of armed forces careers offices spread right across the United Kingdom. I witnessed their success in getting about 5,500 new recruits for the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines every year.

And perhaps we can all recall the impact of national safety campaigns such as Don't Drink and Drive's "Think!" campaign.

This national campaigning was 92 per cent effective in changing societal attitude, according to the Department of Transport.

**"We know that FE principals find it increasingly difficult to get STEM teachers"**

But society is more of a "supertanker" than a "fast speedboat". Tiller corrections to change impressions of FE may take some time.

However, that mustn't put us off. As society's impressions change, we should see a concomitant rise in esteem for FE. And the sooner parents and carers feel more confident when advising their children about non-academic qualifications, the better.

So, what's not to like? I'm sure that the planned national recruitment campaign will assist in raising esteem for FE across wider society.

But we know that FE principals

want the best teachers they can recruit and find it increasingly difficult to get STEM teachers, especially those whose skills are in great industry demand, such as construction.

I think service leavers from the armed forces can help.

There are more than 15,000 service leavers every year and many have the technical skills that principals want.

They will have benefitted from career transition advice and support (which the Ministry of Defence terms "resettlement"), including CV writing, interview skills and how to research and apply for jobs.

Service leavers make great "dual professionals" and are supported as such from the start of the initial teacher education programmes that are available to them. In many cases, they also come with excellent leadership and management skills.

Consequently, when they find work as a college lecturer, I have seen them often promoted quickly.

Like any profession, the services have their own jargon. When I joined FE as a principal in 2011,

"SFA" to me had previously meant "Special Forces Association" (or perhaps "Scottish Football Association").

But service leavers soon adapt and find the welcoming camaraderie and team spirit of their new college departments resonant with their old service life.

The Education and Training Foundation, in conjunction with the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, launched the Further Forces Programme in 2017 and, although the recruitment phase has now ended, there are still service leavers on programme who will be available for employment. Future service leavers may be interested in other ETF technical teacher recruitment programmes, such as Taking Teaching Further.

So, I sincerely hope the national recruitment campaign will encompass armed forces service leavers.

Close liaison between the Department for Education and the MoD, and also between the agency appointed to deliver the national recruitment campaign and the Career Transition Partnership (who help to deliver resettlement on behalf of the MoD) would seem to be a sensible first step towards this.

Equally, principals may choose to liaise directly with the CTP to advertise their vacancies (at no cost) and might consider offering "taster days" for service leavers.

The idea of a national recruitment campaign is to be applauded. We now need to pull together to help it become a reality.



# EMMA ROBERTS

Head of research,  
WorldSkills UK



## There is a worrying downward trend in digital qualifications

**Our latest report reinforces findings that the digital skills gap is gendered and has regional biases, writes Emma Roberts**

Essential, and in demand. This is the stark message from employers about the absolute necessity of high-quality digital skills. Yet a worrying trend is emerging. While employer demand for digital skills is set to continue to grow, participation in digital skills training has declined.

The number of young people taking IT subjects at GCSE has fallen by 40 per cent since 2015, with the number taking A-levels, further education courses and apprenticeships all declining.

We partnered with the Learning and Work Institute and engineering sector support body Egnuity to better understand the supply and demand issues around the digital skills gap, from the point of view of young people and employers.

Our research report, *Disconnected: Exploring the Digital Skills Gap*, shows three key findings.

Firstly, there is a mismatch between supply and demand, with 60 per cent of employers interviewed stating that digital skills will become even more important to their business in the next five years.

However, analysis shows that the number of students training in digital skills is on a downward trend and only 18 per cent are very confident that they have the advanced digital skills that

employers are looking for.

Secondly, the digital skills gap has a strong regional bias, with career opportunities overly concentrated in London. Yet analysis of our training programmes shows there are hotspots of digital skills being developed in South Wales, Glasgow, Manchester and many other places across the UK.

Thirdly, and even more worryingly, there is a significant gender gap, with young women reporting they are both less confident and less interested in digital careers compared to young men.

The findings are even more important when you look at how the UK compares to other countries.

We know from research from consultancy firm EY that when international investors are looking at where to invest, skills are one of the most important factors they consider.

Our international benchmarking also shows that we have some work to do. At the last three international WorldSkills events, the UK ranked ninth across the digital

competitions out of 38 countries, with Singapore, China and Russia all ahead of us.

This shows that we need to go further to ensure more young women and men are motivated to take up digital careers and that they can access world-class training.

### “We will aim for a top five place in the global finals of the digital skills competitions”

Now we want to act on the outcomes of this research, and are committed to three key actions.

Our careers advocacy programmes will engage 50,000 young people from all backgrounds, over the next 12 months.

We will also introduce peer role models who use digital skills in their careers, ensuring at least half are female, in our social media campaigns.

Additionally, through a strategic review of our national competitions

programme, we will identify how digital skills should be developed ahead of the 2022 competitions cycle.

Calling for digital skills to be embedded in the next global review of WorldSkills standards will help ensure that they are expected alongside exceptional technical and mindset skills.

Lastly, we will continue showcasing the most in-demand digital skills within our competition portfolio, nationally and internationally.

By striving to achieve ever-higher standards in areas such as cyber security, building information modelling and 3D game art, we will aim for a top five place in the global finals of the digital skills competitions in WorldSkills Lyon in 2024.

We also expect significant progress to be made towards that target at WorldSkills Shanghai in 2022.

We want to reverse the downward trend in digital education and training, by working with our partners to show that digital careers are for everyone and driving up standards in digital training.

We want to inspire more young people to take up digital skills courses at college and digital apprenticeships as routes to real success in work and life. This can help young women and men prosper and ensure employers access the high-quality employees they need.



DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK



# READER'S REPLY

### More licences to practise would show England "values" skills

**f** Early years level 3 has a license to practice which is very rigorous and constantly updated yet often dismissed by other sectors. One principal once called it the nappy course... FE needs to put its own house in order.

Tracie Fryer Kanssen, Facebook

### "All hell was breaking loose": How hackers forced a mega college to close

**...** If it can happen at this well-run and resourced college it can happen anywhere. Great to see BMet helping out and hope that the students don't suffer too much disruption to their studies. All colleges need to run simulations of what they would do if this were to happen and governors need to ask how well-protected their colleges are, especially with multi-sites. Hope that this is a one-off and not the start of anything more co-ordinated. And thanks *FE Week* for the ten pointer tips.

Phil Hatton, website

**...** Mmmm – So they went round to turn off all the computers on site to prevent them being infected. Then are checking the "tens of thousands of machines" they have, which will take until April. That's great, presumably that also includes all the devices connecting to the servers from offsite, both college-owned devices and the personal devices that staff use to work through Covid restrictions.

Anon, website

### All college leaders required to attend annual MOT meeting

**...** Seems entirely sensible to me and fully endorse this. Proactive and forward-thinking meetings to ensure good solutions for students is helpful.

Luke Rake, Twitter

## REPLY OF THE WEEK

### More licences to practise would show England "values" skills

**...** As chief economist of the Learning and Work Institute, I support the suggestion that the UK needs to place a higher value on skills, as Lorna Unwin suggests. Improved skills are key for raising productivity levels, economic growth, wage levels and living standards. Licences to practise are vital in a limited number of areas such as doctors and gas safety engineers where they reduce the possibility of serious harm, but expanding their coverage is not the way to go. Licences to practise are most prevalent in the US where about a quarter of workers require a licence to do their jobs. The evidence from there is pretty clear and not positive. Licensing restricts employment opportunities by imposing additional requirements on those wishing to enter licensed occupations. It raises the prices to consumers and businesses of licensed services, but without any improvement in the quality of those services. The benefits of licensing accrue to those in licensed occupations. The restrictions on entry allow practitioners to charge higher prices and receive higher wages, so these gains to the licensed come at the expense of the wider society and economy. The UK needs to retain the benefits of there being "very, very, very" few licenses to practice, not expand their coverage.

Duncan Melville, email

### Minister accused of misrepresenting new level 3 adult offer

**...** More top work from *FE Week* on the Lifetime Skills Guarantee that isn't up to quite as much as we'd hoped. NB: DfE ministers also considering minimum entry requirement for HE entry/loans - I wonder if "part of a full level 3" would make the cut?

Andy Westwood, Twitter

**...** Another great piece of investigative journalism! And another PR stunt gone wrong over at the Department for Education.

Tom Bewick, Twitter

# Movers & Shakers

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



## Judy Ling Wong

Chair, Green Apprenticeships Advisory Panel, Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education

**Start date** March 2021

**Concurrent job**

Honorary president, Black Environment Network

**Interesting fact**

Vanity Fair recently gave her a 'Challenger' award as part of International Women's Day for her work campaigning for multicultural participation in the climate debate.



## Carole Carson

Executive chair, SCL Education Group

**Start date** March 2021

**Previous job**

Chair, Innovative Alliance

**Interesting fact**

She once took part in hosting TV's Comic Relief.



## Simon Crick

Vice principal for finance and resources, Coventry College

**Start date** February 2021

**Previous job**

Chief financial officer, University of Warwick Medical School

**Interesting fact**

He has been a volunteer community football club coach and treasurer for 14 years.

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

FEWEEK

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