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FEWEEK

MEET THE TEAM



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FE WEEK IS PROUD TO BE A MEMBER OF



Brooklands College faces ESFA insolvency threat

BILLY CAMDEN

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From front

Exclusive

A college is being threatened with education administration following a £20 million apprenticeship subcontracting scandal, *FE Week* understands.

Brooklands College has failed to file accounts for the past two years amid an ongoing clawback dispute with the Education and Skills Funding Agency and budgetary pressures.

Andrew Baird, one of the government's paid national leaders of governance, was parachuted in to chair the college in October 2019. He is understood to be clashing with ESFA chief executive Eileen Milner over the timing of any repayment as the college tries to sell off its historic building.

The agency has remained tight-lipped about the situation, but *FE Week* understands the option of insolvency has been put on the table.

The threat of administration is, however, unlikely to be followed through, considering the huge sums the ESFA has forked out to pay for the first college insolvency involving the Hadlow Group, which is predicted to reach £60 million.

Christine Ricketts, who was promoted to principal at Brooklands College in May 2019 to succeed Gail Walker after she resigned, told *FE Week* the accounts are delayed "because of



Brooklands College

the need to resolve an outstanding technical issue" they "hope is nearing resolution".

She added that the college's day-to-day operation "continues as normal" and is unaffected by the "historical issues that are delaying the agreement of the accounts".

Brooklands College was brought under the microscope in late 2018 when an *FE Week* investigation exposed how it subcontracted out almost £20 million to a small private training provider called SCL Security Ltd in just three years.

The ESFA, FE Commissioner and Ofsted then stepped in to investigate, which led to the private provider, headed up by Andrew Merritt, being kicked out of the apprenticeships market.

Among other findings, the agency discovered that apprenticeship funding was being used to pay the wages for the 16-to-18-year-olds, which is strictly against the funding rules.

SCL Security Ltd filed for insolvency in October 2020.

A statement of affairs document published on the Companies House site a month later shows it owes almost £4 million, including £2 million to HMRC. The same document shows that Merritt took a director's loan of over £8 million.

The ESFA demanded Brooklands College

pays up to £20 million back to the government after the scandal came to light.

Despite Baird now chairing the college, and being paid £300 a day for his services, Brooklands has also failed to publish any board minutes since summer 2019.

"The college's day to day operation continues as normal"

Ricketts said the minutes will be made available within four weeks and explained the delay has been "because priority has been given to finalising the accounts".

She added: "The college continues to focus on the student experience and at a college level, as far as learners and employers are concerned, it is 'business as usual'.

"Enrolments are up year-on-year and the college continues to build on its Ofsted 'good' and has plans for further expansion in 2021-22 as it responds to increased demand for its provision."



Christine Ricketts

Ofsted slams GP Strategies for safeguarding errors

BILLY CAMDEN
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From front

One of England's largest training providers has been rapped by Ofsted for serious safeguarding failures in its early years provision.

The watchdog also claims the company, part of a global venture capital firm incorporated in the US, is under investigation by another agency.

Ofsted's announced safeguarding inspection of GP Strategies Training took place in February following concerns raised by whistleblowers. It culminated in a critical report published last week.

Both the government and provider have declined to comment on whether recruitment of apprentices has been suspended as a result of 'insufficient' judgments being scored across the board.

The report said leaders and managers do not know if their apprentices who work with young children have completed Disclosure and Barring Service checks, nor how many places they are employed in.

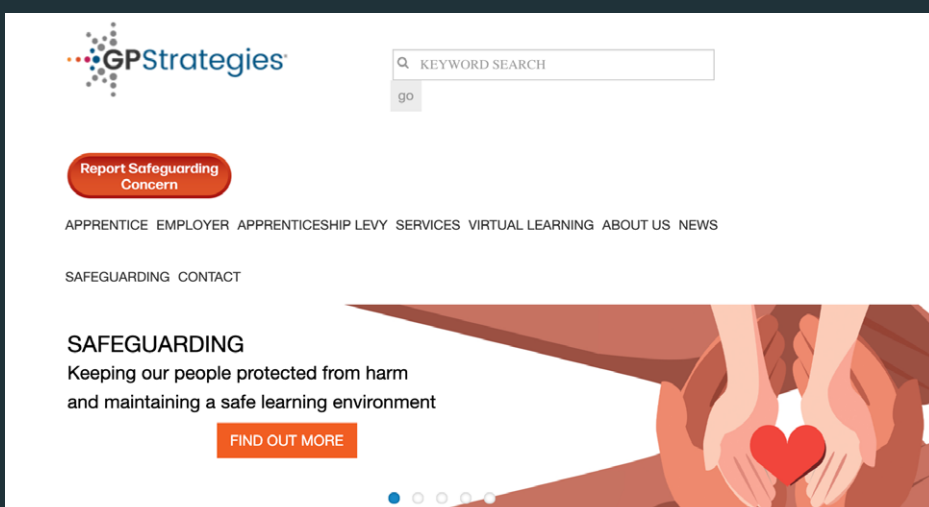
The watchdog labelled apprentices' knowledge of safeguarding requirements as "superficial" and "confused" as training in this area is "too rare".

Inspectors were also concerned that all apprentices follow the same training plan, irrespective of the type of setting they are employed in or the ages of the children they work with.

Additionally, the provider was criticised for poor record keeping and reviews of safeguarding incidents, as well as their process to raise formal concerns, which "lacks clarity".

GP Strategies Training is part of GP Strategies Corporation and began delivering apprenticeships in 1997.

It has since risen to become one of the biggest providers in the country, recording almost



13,000 starts over the past three years in areas such as adult care, childcare and education, and business and management.

The provider also became a named apprenticeship delivery supplier by the Crown Commercial Service to deliver training to the civil service in 2017.

Ofsted's safeguarding visit only focused on GP Strategies' early years apprenticeships. The inspectorate alleged in its report that the concerns first raised with the watchdog "remain under investigation by another agency".

When approached for further comment about this other investigation, GP Strategies claimed it was not involved in any other inquiry but refused to say whether it is challenging the watchdog over this.

A spokesperson for Ofsted told *FE Week* it "wouldn't be appropriate for us to comment on or provide information relating to external investigations".

The Education and Skills Funding Agency said it reserves the right to remove an organisation from the register of apprenticeship training providers and stop all current and future apprenticeship delivery if Ofsted raises concerns about safeguarding and identifies a significant risk to apprentices.

A spokesperson for the agency said they

would not comment on individual cases when asked if the ESFA was conducting its own investigation into GP Strategies or whether it had suspended starts.

GP Strategies was still advertising apprenticeship vacancies at nurseries at the time of going to press.

Ofsted said it takes safeguarding "very seriously" and the outcome of this monitoring visit might give rise to an earlier full inspection or a follow-up visit.

Commenting on the safeguarding failings, a GP Strategies Training representative said: "GP Strategies Training have taken on board the conclusions of the progress monitoring report and take very seriously the concerns expressed by Ofsted.

"They have acted immediately to put relevant measures in place. The safety and security of their learners, partners and staff is their main priority and they are committed to supporting and promoting best practice across the diverse and complex areas in which they operate, and to advocate a strong, accountable culture."

GP Strategies Training has added a safeguarding section to its website since Ofsted's visit, detailing its policy for keeping people safe as well as contact details for reporting concerns.

Digital degree apprenticeship review outcome kicked into long grass

BILLY CAMDEN
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A decision on whether one of England's most popular apprenticeships can keep its degree element has been kicked into the long grass.

The level 6 digital technology solutions professional integrated degree standard is set for change under the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's route review process.

A revised version of the apprenticeship was supposed to be launched last year, but this timeline was scuppered by Covid-19 and its future now hangs on the outcome of a wider degree apprenticeship review.

In a blog published last week, IfATE relationships manager Helen Dalton said the trailblazer "continues to work" on revising the standard's content and its end-point assessment but are "holding off submitting their work to the institute until the outcomes of the degree apprenticeship consultation are known".

The institute first announced it was working on a degree apprenticeships review in January, but a consultation is yet to be launched, despite plans for it to get under way in spring 2021.

Announcing the review in January, IfATE head of route reviews Jill Nicholls said that when degree apprenticeships were introduced in 2015, there was "no requirement on employers to show any labour market requirement in support of a degree and little guidance on what a good degree apprenticeship might look like".

Degree apprenticeships developed prior to the institute's launch in 2017 – like the level 6 digital technology solutions professional – could therefore see the



degree element removed in the future if they do not meet the IfATE's new standards.

New degree apprenticeship policy proposals have been developed by the IfATE and signed off by the minister and will go out for consultation "imminently", a spokesperson said.

FE Week understands the trailblazer group for the digital technology solutions professional standard, which has a £25,000 funding band and is offered by many universities, including Russell Group members, is lobbying to maintain its degree element.

The apprenticeship has become one of the most popular standards, gaining almost 5,000 starts since its launch in 2017.

During that period, QA Limited has been the provider with the most starts on the programme (1,015), more than double the starts of Manchester Metropolitan University, in second place, with 472.

Making up the rest of the top five providers offering the apprenticeship are BPP University, The Open University, and Aston University.

The standard also has 43 organisations, mostly universities, that deliver its end-

point assessment.

There were 12 standards involved in the IfATE's digital route review, which got under way in September 2018.

All of them were developed prior to the institute's launch in April 2017 and the purpose of the review was to ensure their content is of high quality, meeting employer needs and do not overlap with each other.

The outcome of the review, published in May 2019, resulted in six of the standards being "revised", with the remaining six merging content into three new standards.

It was the institute's "expectation" that new apprenticeship standards arising from the review would be approved within 12 months and the old versions withdrawn.

But the quango paused its route review process in early 2020 to focus on the Covid-19 pandemic. They restarted in September.

Dalton's blog provided an update on the other standards involved in the review. All will keep their old funding band values, but their content has been amended slightly.





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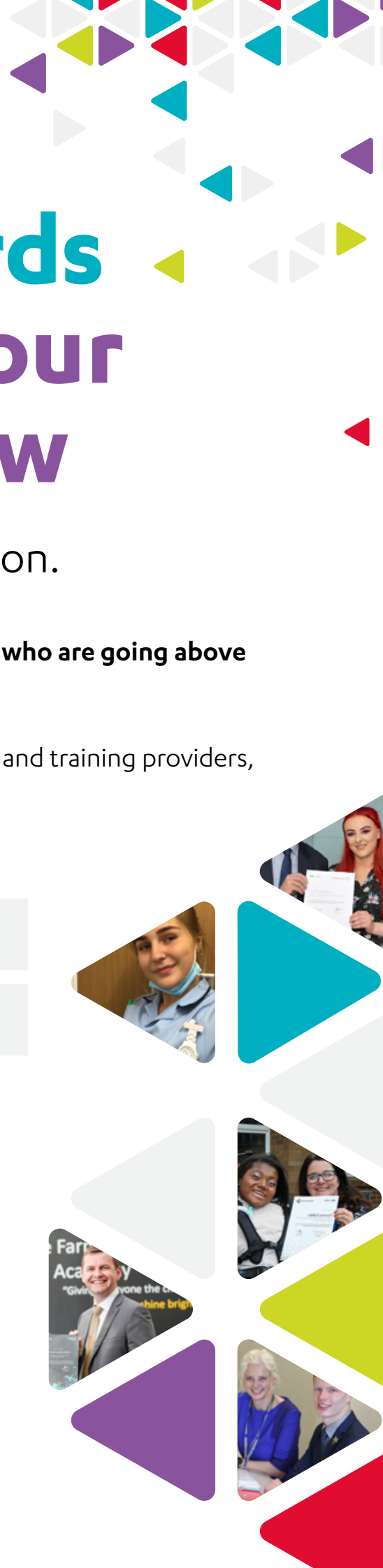
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Tell us why grades will be withheld, say leaders

SAMANTHA BOOTH
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School and college leaders are demanding Ofqual come clean over why students might have grades "withheld" this summer.

Ofqual's chair and chief regulator last week warned results could be withheld should an exam board and school or college not agree on the teacher-assessed grade awarded.

But Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), said the guidance for schools and colleges only contained the "vaguest of the vague" references to results being withheld.

There was "no explanation" of the process. "We have asked these questions, but have not been able to elicit any further information."

He called for Ofqual and the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ) – the board representing exam boards – to have "a clear process in place and an answer about how such a dispute would ultimately be resolved if grades were to be withheld."

"Obviously, everybody hopes that no such impasse will happen, but it is a good idea to



Geoff Barton

have it mapped out at this stage so that it is clear and is not left hanging in the air."

At the third stage of quality assurance this year, exam boards will conduct random and targeted checks on the evidence used to determine teacher-assessed grades.

JCQ guidance published in March said a board would decide whether to accept the grades submitted or undertake further review, which "may lead to the withholding of results".

Ian Bauckham, Ofqual's interim chair, last week said boards "reserve the right to withhold or delay the publication of results if it is not possible to agree an acceptable way forward in such cases".

Ofqual said this week it expected exam boards to resolve concerns through "professional dialogue". Results would only be issued in "withheld cases"

"As in any year where an exam board has remaining concerns about any result, this is an important safeguard to protect the integrity of qualifications."

JCQ said in any exam series there were "isolated circumstances" where a student's grade may not be available on results day.

Where issues were "unresolved", exam boards "reserve the right to temporarily withhold results pending any further investigation required".

Boards could use the no result code – (X) – where a result was not issued because the candidate was not due to receive one. Code X could also be used because of malpractice investigations.

Pending – (Q) – indicates that no result has been issued as the grade was not yet available.

In 2018-19, about 0.3 per cent of GCSE entries (14,094) were "no result" – but it is not broken down by X or Q grades in government data.

Autumn resit plans revealed

SAMANTHA BOOTH
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Exam boards will be required to offer AS-level exams in only five subjects during this year's autumn exam series.

The exams will be open to any student receiving a teacher assessment grade this year, or those who an exam board "reasonably believes would have entered for the exams in summer 2021 had they taken place".

Ofqual will require boards to offer all exams in all GCSE and A-level subjects, but will only have to offer AS exams in biology, chemistry, further maths, maths and physics.

These were the only subjects in which autumn exams were taken by more than 100 students last year. Boards can offer exams in other AS subjects if they wish.

Boards can also offer GCSE English language and maths exams in January 2022 "for students who were eligible to enter the autumn exams in those subjects but did not do so".

The regulator published a consultation response this week that confirmed other proposals set out earlier this year.

Separately, Ofqual also published its decisions on autumn resits for vocational and technical and qualifications.

Awarding organisations that normally provide assessment opportunities between September and January will be required to make those assessments available to learners who were eligible to receive a result through a teacher assessed grade if they wish to improve on it.

Where awarding organisations do not normally provide assessment opportunities

between September and January, Ofqual will require them to provide those opportunities where they "reasonably consider there is sufficient demand and would be manageable to both the awarding organisation and centres".



WorldSkills hosts biggest ever virtual pressure test in run-up to Shanghai 2022

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Exclusive

A UK competitor has come within the top 15 at the largest virtual pressure test ever run by the WorldSkills international movement.

Isaac George, 18, was placed 13th out of 23 competitors at the IT Network Systems Administration Competition, ahead of Team UK being selected for the next in-person WorldSkills competition in Shanghai next year.

He was just one point off winning a Medallion for Excellence, for competitors who have reached the international standard in their skill – all while juggling preparations for the university exams he is sitting this week.

It marks a good result for the UK, after we also scored two medallions at a virtual cooking pressure test late last month.

George, who studied at NESCOL before starting his computer science with information security degree at Royal Holloway, University of London, called it “brilliant” to test his skills against other nations.

Fifteen other nations took part in the tournament, held on April 24-25 and May 1-2, including Japan, Germany and South Korea.

“The competition was tough, but I was really pleased with my performance,” he said. “The whole experience has given me a real boost of confidence but has also confirmed to me where I need to work on my skills with the training



team and my lecturers.”

He said he is “determined” that he has what it takes to be picked for Team UK next year.

His training manager Kevin Large from Remote Training Solutions said he was “very pleased” with the result, after George came second in one of the four modules of the pressure test, despite being the youngest person taking part.

“It definitely showed his potential. It also showed us where his strengths and his weaknesses are, which was one of the big reasons why we wanted to do it the first place.”

The test was split into four modules, with competitors granted three hours for each. They included tasks such as designing disaster recovery procedures for networks and troubleshooting hardware and software issues.

WorldSkills UK is using the virtual pressure tests – including this latest one and one held late last year, in electronics, in which the UK beat China – to prepare for Shanghai next year.

Deputy chief executive of WorldSkills UK Ben Blackledge said seeing where our country stands against other nations, and which areas it is particularly strong and weak in, is “the whole point of doing these pressure tests”.

He highlighted how the UK’s mechatronics team came third at the Europe-wide EuroSkills Budapest event in 2018, because a

“really rough” time at a competition several months earlier gave them the “kick they needed and real insights into what they needed to address”.

This latest pressure test has also informed WorldSkills UK about how other nations are progressing.

Large said not only had it given them “a lot” of information on how other nations compete, but also the infrastructure they worked on during the competition, which helped to show why different nations did well in certain areas.

The test was the largest virtual one which has been run by the international WorldSkills movement. It worked by having all the competitors taking part remotely, but connected over Zoom call and sharing their screen, so they could be monitored.

To ensure a good connection for competitors, the online tasks were funnelled through Microsoft data centres in America, the Asia-Pacific region and Europe.

Blackledge said there is “definitely” a demand among competing nations for more virtual pressure tests, even after the pandemic passes, owing to the sustainability concerns of jetting competitors around the world to take part in in-person tournaments, as well as financial considerations.

“We think this is a really valuable platform,” he said.



Isaac George

Students and tutors recognised in this year's WEA achievement awards

FRASER WHIELDON
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Exclusive

A teacher from Turkey who had to study her way back into an education career, and a Zoom champion are among the winners of this year's WEA awards.

The six student and three tutor award winners, as well as two WEA fellowship recipients, were named at a virtual ceremony on Thursday, May 6.

"Our awards are a fantastic opportunity to celebrate our students' achievements and the quality of teaching and support our tutors provide," the WEA said.

Here are all the winners.

STUDENT – CAREER SUCCESS: JOANNE SCOTT



After the WEA helped her to "come out of her shell", Joanne has now founded her own charity, Everyday Enable, and is working with a number of other similar organisations.

Before starting classes, Scott said she "would have loved lockdown. I'd have hidden myself away and enjoyed not speaking to anyone. The WEA helped turn that around," by making her realise that "other people faced the same – I wasn't alone in this."

"To know that I have helped others come through the situation I faced is absolutely incredible... I sometimes feel like Dorothy skipping along the Yellow Brick Road – a completely different person."

STUDENT – ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: SELMA CAKMAK

Selma previously



worked as a maths teacher in Turkey before she and her family "suddenly" moved to the UK. "I entered a world I knew only through movies. I'm a talkative person and I could speak to nobody. It was like being a baby again," she said.

She enrolled with the WEA and after passing several ESOL Level 1 courses, she was accepted as a volunteer classroom support assistant at a local school.

Selma said she was "determined" to work in mainstream education or set up her own tuition centre, as: "The satisfaction of watching young students progress makes the pain of relocation fade away."

The award "gives me amazing encouragement and motivation to follow my dreams."

STUDENT – ENHANCED DIGITAL SKILLS: KENNY RAE



A self-proclaimed "gaming geek", Kenny has developed new digital skills to inspire and engage others, the WEA said.

During lockdown, he started a gaming thread on a WEA Facebook page, discussing everything from old games to next-generation games.

He was introduced to WEA's Reach Out scheme ten years ago and "enjoyed it from the very first day".

One of the things the thread involved was a live demonstration of Assassin's Creed: "Folk watched me playing the game and I told them about the real-life history in London, where it's based." The audience "loved it," Kenny said.

STUDENT – COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION: MARGARET KIRK

Margaret joined the WEA ten years ago after retiring



and ended up as her local branch's treasurer. She "loved" the WEA's arts courses but really came into her element when the pandemic hit.

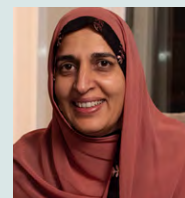
"One of the members could read emails on her tablet, but nothing more. She was on her own and determined to stay connected," and so Margaret coached her through Zoom. Margaret calls the software "a lifeline, especially for people who live by themselves".

When her branch started having Zoom coffee mornings, Margaret was asked to go through helpful Zoom tips.

"We've got a number of people who come from very successful careers, so they're not used to feeling stupid. But that's how technology can make you feel."

The WEA has said "everyone" needs "Zoom champion" Margaret on their calls.

STUDENT – ENHANCED ENGLISH: REHANA KOSAR



Rehana has gone from being unable to catch a bus due to her lack of English, to travelling alone to Pakistan. She came to the UK 25 years ago with "no English at all". But within a couple of years of joining the WEA, Rehana had used her new-found language skills to get a job as a cleaner and a dinner supervisor at a school, the headteacher of which says she is doing "fantastically well".

Her father recently fell ill in Pakistan, and she travelled there by herself, filling in leave of absence forms and understanding in-flight announcements. She even carried on with her Zoom classes while she was in Pakistan.

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News

CONTINUED

STUDENT GROUP:
TEACHING
ASSISTANT GROUP,
NORTH EAST
TEACHING GROUP

This award has been dedicated to Christina Wilkinson, Emma Wilcom-Duke, Sarah Lowery, Sarah Stoker and Tanja Gordon, whose teaching assistant course moved online when the pandemic struck.

The WEA said while it would have been "easy for them to walk away, they supported each other".

They had been on a course the WEA was running with a children's centre in South Tyneside. The five also set up WhatsApp and Zoom groups to "support anyone who was struggling, with study or emotional problems".

The WEA said "not only have they learned new skills on the course, as well as making confident Zoom presentations, they have also shown themselves to be very creative at teaching their children at home under pressure".

"I think they'll make great teaching assistants," their tutor wrote.

TUTOR —
STUDENT
SUPPORT:
SALLY TURNER-
CLARKE

Sally, who teaches life skills and crafts to students with learning difficulties and disabilities, won the award after she "immediately volunteered" to pilot a return to in-person teaching last autumn.

"Lockdown has caused a lot of anxiety and loss of confidence," she said, as many of her learners cannot use technology and live independently, so they "never saw anyone else from one day to the next".

"For me, it's personal. They were my mum's group originally and I've taken over now she has retired. We fought hard to get them back face-to-face, as soon as we possibly could. We had all our PPE ready, with all our policies and

procedures up to date."

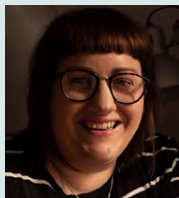
Of her groups, Sally says: "You see their confidence growing in front of you."

TUTOR —
INSPIRATIONAL
TEACHING:
AZRA RASOOL

Azra worked as a teacher for 25 years at a local college before joining the WEA, where she was assigned to teach ESOL to women, such as mums from a local primary school. Many had either recently arrived from Pakistan, or had been here many years but never taken part in society.

"Getting them into class in the first place was the hardest challenge," she recalled, saying she had to win the trust of their husbands.

Azra says she started her classes with breathing exercises to relieve their stress. Many students had lacked simple skills, such as booking an appointment. But now they organise coffee mornings, fundraisers, join gyms and enjoy shopping trips.

TUTOR —
DIGITALLY
INNOVATIVE
TEACHING: LUCY
HEWES

Having invested in new technologies since Covid forced her sewing and textile courses in Scunthorpe online, Lucy has attracted new students from all across the country.

She found the first online sessions "frustrating," as she struggled to show people what she was doing. Pre-recording sessions did not help.

Her breakthrough was a visualiser: "It's like a webcam that angles over a certain area, such as my hands or the sewing machine." The "final piece of the jigsaw" was a digital switcher, "which meant I could jump from, say, the pattern instructions to the visualiser with a click of the mouse."

She loves teaching people from across the country, as "somebody in the south will sew in a zip totally differently to somebody in the north!".

WEA FELLOWSHIP
— SIR MALCOLM
GRANT

Malcolm has been made a fellow "having formed strong bonds" with the WEA, after what the organisation has called a "long and important role in public life".

This has included roles as chair of NHS England, chair of the Russell Group of universities, provost of University College London and pro-vice chancellor of the University of Cambridge. He was made a CBE in 2003 and knighted by the Queen in 2013.

WEA called him a "firm believer in the power and importance of adult education, not least having seen his mother thrive through her learning with the WEA."

"We are delighted that he has agreed to form an even tighter bond with us."

WEA
FELLOWSHIP
— RUTH
SPELLMAN

The chief executive of the WEA from 2012 to 2019 has been made a fellow. She kept the organisation's finances strong "despite reduced public funding [and] times of austerity".

Her successor, Simon Parkinson, called it "a challenging time, but her determination and drive inspired the organisation to adapt and succeed".

Spellman has also taken up roles with The Open University, The Education and Training Foundation and the Learning and Work Institute.

"Today, this fellowship recognises both the WEA's continued appreciation of Ruth's impact on the organisation and her continued passion about us," Parkinson said.

"Ruth's commitment to lifelong learning throughout her career has caught the eye of many, not least those in the highest seats of power," after she received an OBE in 2007 for services to workplace learning.

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Focus: SEND Centres for Excellence



SEND centres for excellence model to expand with six new providers

JESS STAUFENBERG
@STAUFENBERGJ

Two years on, the sector's 'centres for excellence' in SEND will be joined by mini-hubs. Jess Staufenberg looks at how the model is working so far

Almost two years ago, the government announced that three "Centres for Excellence" in special educational needs and disabilities would be spreading best practice and expertise around the further education sector.

This week, the three colleges representing each centre officially start their third year. So what have they achieved so far? *FE Week* can reveal what they've been up to, with what resources – and how a drop in funding has come at the same time as a planned expansion of the model.

In June 2019, Derby College in the East Midlands, Weston College in the south-west and City College Norwich in the east of England won contracts to become the centres for excellence. They were to get a slice of £1.2 million every year via the Education and Training Foundation, as part of the ETF's wider "SEND workforce development" programme.

The need for sharing expertise was real then and continues to be now. There are 200,000 students in general FE colleges with a learning difficulty or disability, or about one in five students. Of those, only around 65,000 have Education, Health and Care Plans. This means that mainstream colleges don't get extra funding for most students, and finding that support from somewhere else is crucial.

"We noticed we couldn't always get leaders to engage with SEND provision because they had so many other pressing priorities," says

Teresa Carroll, head of inclusion at the ETF. "So we really wanted to address that with the centres. The majority of learners also haven't got plans, so it was about using that resource really well."

City College Norwich got the focus of "community", which largely means engaging employers. Derby College got "curriculum", with a focus on inclusive learning pathways, and Weston College got "people", with a focus on staff development.

Each centre has a "strategic leadership" focus on supporting CEOs and senior leaders, as well as a "community of practice" focus on webinars, resources and support for practitioners. In the first year, the centres were supposed to reach 45 leaders and 360 practitioners, but the ETF says an additional

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Focus: SEND Centres for Excellence

CONTINUED

400 people were reached. In the second year, the centres were asked to reach 90 leaders and 360 practitioners, and this time an additional 2,500 people were engaged with, says the ETF. The targets are even higher for 2021-22.

In its first year, Weston College worked with 30 leaders on putting SEND at the heart of college strategy through one-to-one conversations with their own CEO. "I will sit down with the leader, and ask what's on your shopping list? Then we will jigsaw together what's needed," says chief executive Paul Phillips. In 2013, his college was recognised for its 'outstanding' SEND provision by Ofsted, and in particular for the "independent, enriched" lives his learners led as a result of the college's approach. Phillips has also visited 19 prisons in the past two years to help with SEND provision.

Meanwhile, 1,000 participants joined the college's "community of practice" conferences in the first year, focused on staff development. Participants are also invited to a "day in



Corienne Peasgood



the life of Weston College" to look at its autism residential training facility and sensory base. "People want to see it in practice," explains Phillips. Sam Mayhew, head of inclusion at the college, says: "You're giving both practical and operational ways for practitioners to work, and then supporting leaders about the strategic direction too."

Meanwhile at Derby College, director of inclusion Sarah Le-Good and her principal, Mandie Stravino, have booked in senior leaders from other colleges for weekly sessions. Follow-up sessions with Le-Good are then offered half-termly or monthly. For six colleges in need of significantly more support, the team has run "full two-day reviews" to help identify issues and a comprehensive strategy forward. Overall, 60 leaders have been supported. Training has also been offered in topics such as "compassionate agitation", which Le-Good describes as learning how to "ask compassionate, difficult questions" around the SEND provision on offer in a college.

City College Norwich has similarly engaged with leaders through one-to-one sessions with principal Corienne Peasgood. They have been particularly interested in the college's employability focus, she says. Paula Ottaway heads up the college's MINT Centre, which "is like an employment agency, where each young person is allocated a job coach. They've built up relationships



The MINT Centre at City College Norwich

with hundreds of employers over the years." The results speak for themselves: during lockdown, the college managed to get 40 young people with SEND into employment. Nationally, only six per cent people with a learning disability are in work.

It is this employability focus that the DfE now wants replicated, *FE Week* can reveal.

As the pandemic has laid waste to job opportunities for young people – particularly those with SEND – the ETF is tendering for six new providers to come on board, as mini-hubs for best practice around engaging with employers. The ETF are calling these providers "spokes" to the three centres.

"We want those spokes in the regions where the centres aren't," says Carroll. The smaller amount of cash reflects the narrower focus: "This is a very particular piece of work around engaging employers."

The invitation to tender goes out on May 21 and there will be £30,000 up for grabs to each provider, who will need to be Ofsted grade 2 or above and working in the north-west, north-east, Yorkshire and the Humber, West Midlands, London or the south-east. Each will need a strong track record of securing employment for SEND learners and, alongside an employer, must deliver at least three joint activities to 150 participants. They will also be expected to run face-to-face activities in the region, online activities

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Focus: SEND Centres for Excellence

CONTINUED

nationally, and hit all targets by March next year.

But even as it expands the model and raises targets, the DfE is not providing more money to the ETF for 2021-22. Instead the money has dropped, *FE Week* can reveal.

Whereas £1.2 million was provided in 2019-20 and 2020-21, this financial year the funding is about £1.18 million, says Carroll.

And that money does not all go to the centres: “over 80 per cent” goes directly to the three colleges each year, with the rest going on the ETF’s SEND workforce development, says Carroll. *FE Week* has roughly calculated that, if split evenly, this should amount to £320,000 per centre per year.

The ETF says this is a “reasonable calculation”, but refused to say exactly how much each centre receives yearly. The amounts will have “slightly differed between the centres, depending on their programmes of work”, they add.

The remainder of the cash goes to the ETF’s other SEND workforce activities, such as delivering courses and developing new resources, and also on an external evaluator of the programme, RINA, whose services cost around £16,000.

The centres for excellence have noticed the funding drop. Phillips says the funding is “not so good this year” and the college has done “a lot of supplementing” from its other funding pots. Peasgood says the funding “went up a bit, then down a bit” while Le-Good says, “The targets are higher this year, and we are having to do it with significantly less income”. Phillips adds that “the funding isn’t proportional to the targets”.

Targets have risen steeply: for this coming year, 200 senior leaders and 3,000



practitioners must be reached. Le-Good explains that last year her target was to engage with 150 practitioners, but her college engaged 1,000, so that is this year’s target. In a way it shows colleges are already managing some of the higher targets. But on less money it’s a tougher ask. It means that Derby College, for instance, will no longer be able to offer its two-day full review.

The other question is, are these the right targets? The number of staff engaged surely isn’t the end goal: why not better learner outcomes, or at least better Ofsted comments? “We don’t really want to have hard targets, but we do want to see changes,” says Carroll. “We want to see more and more providers being recognised for their inclusive practice.”

Yet the centres are clear the real challenge lies in knitting-up all services – not just theirs. “It’s about transition in and transition out,” says Peasgood. “How does this link to schools, and then adult services and employment? You can improve the middle bit, but if the transition isn’t improved, then we’re a bit of an island.”

It’s a valid comment. All

three colleges sit in local authorities that have been blasted under “local area SEND inspections” by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. Phrases like “no coordinated response”, “long waiting times for diagnosis”, “poor access to services” and “lack of confidence among parents” make the reports for North Somerset Council, Derby City Council and Norfolk County Council damning reading. All eyes are on the government’s long-delayed SEND review, expected in June. Huge system issues with SEND provision clearly continue to rage on, largely unresolved.

If the government wants a system-led solution, Clare Howard, chief executive at Natspec, has a suggestion. Her organisation, which represents the 115 specialist FE providers, would like to set up centres for excellence out of its membership network too. “We want to run an equivalent to these centres for more complex needs, to provide the kind of training that is not happening locally. Mainstream colleges, schools and other providers are lacking this kind of expert support”.

The SEND centres have done much to support and upskill leaders and lecturers. Better funding, more expert partners, and a less embattled wider context would now allow them to really fly.



Sam Mayhew



Paul Phillips

TIF
WARDSafeguarding
coordinator, East
Coast CollegeOpen conversations
about sexual harassment
can tackle victim blaming

Taking a restorative approach so learners can say what they really think is a powerful starting point, writes Tif Ward

For many staff in FE, there will have been a sense of familiarity in the claims of sexual harassment made on the Everyone's Invited website, after the murder of Sarah Everard.

Some people on the website said they have felt unheard when they've made disclosures, because of the reactions of others. We know that young people sometimes report that their peers say that inappropriate behaviour is "banter" or just a laugh.

Young people can often feel as though they themselves have to be apologetic about what has happened, even if they were the ones who were uncomfortable. They don't always know how to name what has happened to them in clear language, perhaps out of politeness or not wanting to be too challenging.

That's why we've focused on open, clear conversations at our college. It's important to normalise talking about healthy sexual relationships. We want to encourage students to use the right language – not "he forced me to have sex", but "rape", for instance. And we want to have restorative conversations, so everyone, not only females, can be involved.

This is particularly important because some families in further



education can often blame the victim or minimise experiences. Parents might say, "Well, what do they expect if they get drunk?" or "I told them not to go out and hang with those friends, they're bad for them", and so on.

So we need individual conversations on a case-by-case basis about language, including the language they're using and what that means.

In a recent session on consent at our college, some male students were very challenging in their behaviours and attitudes. They were condoning a victim-blaming approach. We ran a restorative approach where we asked the other students how that language made them feel. It was done in an expert way, and several of the males in that group realised, and fell away from the main leader. He was then picked up by safeguarding, to try to understand why he held that view.

It's hugely important we give learners the chance to be really

open about what they truly think. A restorative approach is a starting point for resolving that. These conversations often result in a peak in disclosures in college, from female students but from all students, too. The conversations trigger something, and now is their chance to get help.

"Some families in further education often minimise experiences"

Colleges can do further things to normalise conversations about healthy relationships. Staff need to be visible and available in communal areas to observe groups, to spot issues with power dynamics.

Increasing student voice is really important, such as taking learners to forums with the police, the constabulary and the

crime commissioner, and to the governing board, too. This means change is escalated to the most senior levels.

We must include all students. We must emphasise the importance of having male friends if you're a girl, for example, and vice versa. We need to acknowledge that toxic masculinity affects both boys and girls, and boys can also be victims of sexual harassment.

We also need to build awareness around some vulnerable young people with special educational needs and disabilities as they explore their sexuality, and how they can stay safe. Sometimes other students don't know how to respond if they are approached romantically by more vulnerable learners, so it's about supporting them too.

Ahead of festivals, it can be a good idea to hold conversations on how to stay safe in these environments.

Meanwhile, adult learners on campus can be brought in to share their experiences.

Colleges are in a unique position because they interact with so many different sections of society – they engage with learners, employers, families, business groups and so on.

We have to be mindful that these open, restorative conversations can't just be for tutorial time. They need to be undertaken across the whole board, with everyone.

DAMIAN
HINDS

Chair of the APPG for
T Levels and former
education secretary



T Levels: raising awareness in parliament will be vital to their success

A deeper understanding of T Levels by MPs will be crucial, writes Damian Hinds

Giving young people the best opportunities to set themselves on a path to quality is more important now than ever. For that, skilled employment is essential.

T Levels are a once-in-a-generation opportunity for our technical education and training. They will be key to putting the technical and academic paths on an even footing and equipping young people with the skills they will need for their future careers.

Parliamentarians have a role to play in supporting the rollout, which is why a new All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for T Levels was established last week.

It brings together members of both the Commons and the Lords with a particular interest in technical education. It is a group with a depth of insight and experience, and from across the political spectrum.

We are fortunate to have as sponsors engineering company AECOM, the Education and Training Foundation and the Gatsby Foundation, with different and important perspectives on the subject.

At our first open meeting, it was great to welcome both the education secretary and the skills minister to speak and take questions. I was really pleased that such a wide variety of both colleges and businesses were able to attend.

Raising awareness of T Levels will be vital to success, and that includes making sure there is a deep understanding of T Levels in parliament, alongside awareness among businesses and families, stakeholders and the wider public.

MPs play a particularly relevant role, through their links to the colleges, schools and training providers and businesses in their constituencies.

“MPs play a particularly relevant role through their links to colleges, schools, training providers and businesses”

With any new programme there are always public policy questions. In the case of T Levels these include the social mobility opportunity, ensuring diversity, careers advice and the link with onward destinations; and there is particular interest in how to

optimise industry placements.

We want to make sure that the voices of young people, industry and the education sector are heard as the rollout of T Levels progresses.

A challenging and wide-ranging qualification, T Levels will appeal to a whole variety of students. The courses involve English, maths and digital skills, alongside broad core content for the principal discipline studied, and they allow for some more occupationally specialised content too.

The total time for a T Level is expected to be around 1,800 hours over the two years – a significant increase on most current tech-ed courses.

At the heart of the T Level is ‘on-the-job’ experience in a substantial industry placement of at least 315 hours (that’s about 45 days). This is the chance for a student both to build their technical knowledge and skills, and to develop those workplace skills on which firms place such a premium.

It is this element – the placement – that has most often

caught the eye both of young people and their potential future employers. One of the key success factors is going to be about sufficiency of quality placements, across the different subjects and across the country.

Big, collective commitment is needed from firms, especially with current pressures. But it is also a great opportunity for business to invest in and develop our nation’s talent pipeline.

It is essential that the qualification meets the needs of businesses. So employers have been involved in T Level design from the start, putting together course content and setting the parameters of assessment.

Launching a new qualification against the backdrop of a pandemic is clearly challenging and keeping up momentum will be even more important. I know the first providers offering T Levels have been putting a lot of thought, and effort, into the roll-out.

Key to supporting the efforts of providers and businesses is getting the T Levels message to the people who are often the most influential careers advisers in a young person’s life: parents.

This is a formative time for T Levels as the subject range extends and more providers come on board.

Most importantly, it is the time when more and more young people will be looking to the T Level as the ‘Next Level’ qualification that can get their career off to a strong start.



JANE
HICKIE

Chief executive,
Association of
Employment and
Learning Providers



Use Ofsted and ESFA to slow provider growth if things are going wrong

Restrict the funding new providers can initially access and use recognised milestones to help prevent failure, writes Jane Hickie

The Skills for Jobs white paper was a good opportunity to run a stock-take on where we are in terms of protecting apprentices and other learners in the FE system when things go wrong.

It is important to recognise that this is a two-way street in the sense that government and providers have an equal responsibility to ensure that a committed learner should be able to complete their course or programme without significant disruption.

When I first joined AELP five years ago, I sat in meetings with officials when AELP member providers were proposing improvements to how provider failures should be handled.

It must be said that there was a feeling on our side that subsequent improvements could have been introduced faster; but some have taken place, particularly since the ESFA appointed a director to lead on provider market oversight.

The pandemic has acted as a stress test for the sustainability of the provider supply base and while some providers have had to make staff redundant and use furlough, it is perhaps surprising that the number of actual provider casualties has been so low when programme starts have crashed.

At the same time, there have been examples of administrators being called in where questions

have been raised over how fast a provider has grown in a government-funded system.

Remember that in the case of apprenticeships, we are talking about an employer demand-led system. So when the ESFA first raised in 2018 the possibility of placing a cap on a provider's ability to grow, AELP expressed concern that this might interfere with the direct customer relationship between levy-paying employers and providers.

Now that all employers are on the digital apprenticeship service, denying choice over their external provider and imposing growth caps on good providers would be even more questionable – although we understand the government's concerns about providers being "too big to fail".

It is far preferable that Ofsted inspections and ESFA audits act as potential breaks on growth if things are going wrong.

Following the ESFA proposals in 2018, we recommended restricting the amount of funding new

providers could initially access, and using recognised milestones. These could include successful Ofsted monitoring visits, full Ofsted inspections and the ESFA's provider financial assurance visits, to allow access to greater amounts until they become established.

AELP now believes in the light of the white paper that we should be adopting a "before, during and after" approach to provider monitoring and intervention. The "before" part is centred on a provider's application to the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers.

"We should be adopting a 'before, during and after' approach to provider monitoring"

The fact that we are on a second RoATP refresh in two years demonstrates that this aspect of the regulatory regime has not

worked well, with many providers – even after the first refresh – not evidencing any delivery.

This time the government really must get it right. The Skills Bill in the Queen's Speech may also address the question of individuals being "fit and proper" to run all provider types in the sector.

The "during" part necessitates a shifting of the dial and a far more proactive approach to prevention and support, rather than reactive intervention. Last year the ESFA set up a large provider oversight unit, covering the 30 largest ITPs. This was a welcome move away from a one-sized approach to provider and risk management.

Alongside this, the focus should be particularly on Ofsted, including outstanding new provider monitoring visits in the short term to ensure all providers have had some level of quality oversight.

Then, in the unfortunate event of a provider failure or market exit, we need a more effective process to protect learners – the "after" part. That requires more transparency from the ESFA on the actions it takes.

We also need to return to those discussions of five years ago on how the support of the providers who take on the affected learners is properly and fairly recognised.

Tightening up the approach towards these three aspects of oversight will greatly reduce the temptation to become too preoccupied with how much a provider is growing in order to meet employer demand.





READER'S REPLY

Revealed: thousands of level 5 management apprentices dropped out last year



And why can't Ofsted come out categorically and say the reforms have resulted in better quality? It's time for more candour from those at the top of our apprenticeship system.

Tom Bewick, Twitter



A very common reason for dropout in management apprenticeships has been the use of salespeople who misrepresent how easy it will be to take the apprenticeship to people in the workplace who want a qualification in order to get on. Often those "sold" the idea have poor English writing skills and are told that it does not matter. The "right burns on the right seats" is the most crucial starting point to get right. This also applies to the use of adult loans for a number of longer-term qualifications to people who simply do not have the time. If Ofsted really wants to do some real good in helping to improve learning and skills, a comprehensive survey on initial advice and guidance, including sector best practice, would be a great place to start.

Phil Hatton, website



Anybody delivering these types of apprenticeships will tell you the most common two issues are:

1. Including English and maths qualification requirements in these higher-level standards.
2. Awarding industry-recognised qualifications that the employer/learner wants before EPA process commences. Functional skill requirements were taken out of the previous higher-level frameworks for a reason. Remind yourselves why that was!

Restructure EPA so that qualifications are not awarded until EPA is completed.

Neil Crawford, website

Minister orders investigation into 'astonishing' apprenticeship drop-out rate



Why would a gas apprentice want to go through an EPA when to get to that point they have to get through gateway? To do that, they have to have completed a qualification to become registered with Gas Safe, at that point already qualified to work on gas, so why do an EPA? Ill-thought-out standards and process again. Don't get me started on the need for English or maths functional

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?

CONTACT US NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Focus: Do employers set the bar too high for entry criteria to apprenticeships?



I teach on level 3 (and above) engineering apprenticeships. All have both practical and academic content. It is unfortunately the case that there are some learners who are brilliant with the practical elements but struggle with the academic content and the, oft repeated, mantra that everyone who achieves a level 2 can progress, and achieve, a level 3 is not the case with the current structures.

If we truly want to improve the poor success rates we may need to decouple the academic qualification from the practical. Major employers will not accept this, as they have the option to select only the most able learners, but many smaller organisations are looking for practical, employable skills, not future design engineers.

The other option is that academic standards continue to be eroded in order to meet the "no learner can fail" philosophy in education and training.

Paul Timmins, website

skills to pass an apprenticeship. No wonder drop-out is high.

PW, website



Let's not undermine a much-needed and loved institution. If Northern College were a person, it would be a national treasure... National treasures should be treated with respect and valued!

Paul Eeles, Twitter



Adult providers should be treated as 'The Adult Providers'. Having worked in both, many FE colleges can never spend their AEB and put it out to tender. We have loads of FREE online adult courses just to spend the AEB. Whereas local authorities and adult providers never have enough.

Liza Jo-Gee, Twitter

London UTC in danger of closure just three years after opening



How appropriate that the latest UTC to fail is one named after a Tory politician. In a crowded field, is Baker's vanity project a candidate for biggest education policy failure of recent years? A scandalous waste of money, not to mention the anxiety and disruption to children's education occasioned by the closures.

'Dave Spart', website

Movers & Shakers

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



Jayne Davis

Principal, Bath College

Start date September 2021

Previous role

Deputy principal, Bath College

Interesting fact

She has been stung by a scorpion and used to teach piano.



Andy Salmon

Chair, Bath College

Start date April 2021

Concurrent role

Pro vice chancellor for external relations, Bath Spa University

Interesting fact

His interests include modern poetry and walking coastal footpaths.



David Francis

Assistant principal for student transition and support services, Barking and Dagenham College

Start date April 2021

Previous job

Training, education and management consultant

Interesting fact

He lives in Cornwall and "regularly" falls off a surfboard.

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

FEWEEK

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