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**'IT WOULD BE
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FE WEEK

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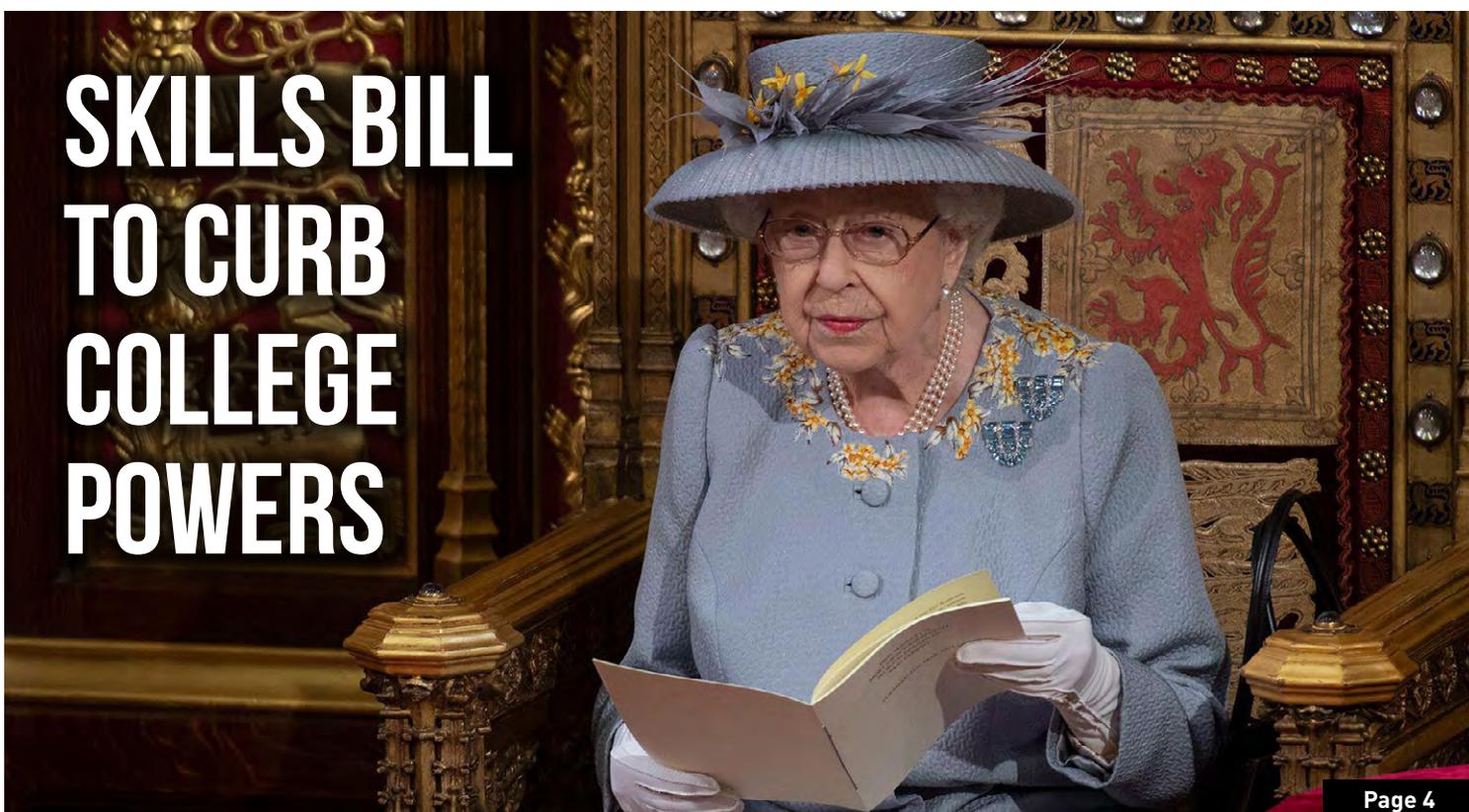
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- Just four college winners among 11 training providers, two universities and an LA
- AoC concerned bidding is 'stretching resource at a very busy time of the year'

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CORRECTION

In an article on the three SEND 'centres for excellence' last week, we reported that the services of an external evaluator, RINA, cost the Education and Training Foundation £160,000. This was an error: the correct figure was £16,000. We are happy to correct this.

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Spielman set for two-year extension as chief inspector



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Queen's speech: Legislation to form new Skills Bill

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From front

Ministers will introduce a new Skills and Post-16 Education Bill next week after the Queen's speech pledged to put the government's lifetime skills guarantee into legislation.

In her address to the state opening of Parliament on Tuesday, the monarch said new laws will "enable flexible access to high-quality education and training throughout people's lives".

Downing Street has since confirmed that a Skills and Post-16 Education Bill will be laid before Parliament on May 18.

It will encompass the legislation promised in the FE white paper, namely a new lifelong loan entitlement, local skills improvement plans and greater powers for the education secretary to intervene in colleges that fail to meet local needs.

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said that while he was "delighted that further education is right at the heart" of the Queen's speech, the plans will "only work if people can afford to live whilst studying through a mixture of loans, grants and welfare support".

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers said it understands that the Bill will also cover "greater protection of learners and apprentices" as well as "approval for technical qualifications and the role of Ofqual and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in regulating".

Prime minister Boris Johnson has said the new laws in the Bill "are the rocket fuel that we need to level up this country and ensure equal opportunities for all".

While the full details of the new legislation will be fleshed out next week, here's a recap of the main elements that have been mooted.

Make new local skills improvement plans legally binding

Central to the government's reforms are the creation of local skills improvement plans, led by employers and in collaboration with colleges and



training providers.

The plans will aim to make colleges align the courses they offer to local employers' needs.

According to the white paper, the government "intends to legislate to put the employer leadership of local skills improvement plans on a statutory footing, strengthening the voice of employers in local skills systems across the country".

Speaking at an *FE Week* webcast in March, the Department for Education's director of post-16 strategy and architect of the white paper, Keith Smith, said putting the employer role on a statutory footing will do two things.

"Firstly, we want employers to know they have a place and purpose in coming together in being able to articulate the shape of how the skills system is put together and how it is prioritised.

"Secondly, we want it to become part of the core purpose in the skills delivery space that actually, whether you're a college or part of the institution delivery, there is a link that you have to pay due regard to those local priorities."

Local skills improvement plans will form part of what the government is now calling a "skills accelerator", which also incorporates Strategic Development Fund pilots announced in the white paper to create greater collaboration among local colleges and providers.

Give government new powers over further education colleges

The white paper said the government would introduce "new powers" that allow the education secretary to intervene "where local providers are consistently unable to deliver the skills priorities for that area".

This will include new legislation to enable the education secretary to intervene where colleges refuse to deliver courses decided through local skills improvement plans.

According to the white paper, the "strengthened" powers will enable the education secretary to "intervene locally to close or set up college corporations, bring about changes to membership or composition of governing bodies or review leadership, or take other actions where there are long-term weaknesses.

"This includes the possibility of intervention within a local area, where there is evidence of issues affecting a limited number of providers. Use of these powers is envisaged only as a last resort, where agreement has not been possible through other means and there are no alternative options for resolution."

Introduce a 'lifelong loan entitlement'

The other part of the government's white paper reforms that involves legislation is the promised lifelong loan entitlement.

Part of the prime minister's lifetime skills guarantee first announced last September, the entitlement will enable people to access four years' worth of student loan funding across further and higher education providers to study modular provision throughout their lifetime.

The idea is to create a system that allows for more part-time studying while people are working.

Contrary to many national newspaper reports, loans for FE students to use at colleges and other learning providers from a student loans company have been available and used by hundreds of thousands of people since 2013.

'Skills taxonomy': new algorithm planned to seek out skills cold spots

BILLY CAMDEN
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A government tender has revealed plans to develop a "skills taxonomy" that could sit at the heart of Department for Education proposals to dictate college courses.

Ministers want a new algorithm developed to map England's skills shortages, with experts predicting it will play a key role in putting local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) together.

Beginning with a £25,000 research review by Frontier Economics, the taxonomy is intended for the education secretary's new Skills and Productivity Board to identify and analyse national skills needs and those that "add the most value" to the economy.

The board, composed of seven labour market and skills economists who have been tasked with influencing policy, has met four times since it was formed in November but minutes of the meetings have so far been kept under wraps by the DfE.

The skills taxonomy tender appears to be the first insight into the board's direction of work.

It states that the board requires a "functional and operational skills 'taxonomy' – to be able to name, define and classify skills (for example, knowledge skills, workplace skills, transferable skills)" as well as a way of linking these skills to occupations and, possibly, qualifications.

The board is then expected to use this taxonomy "to identify areas of significant skills shortage".

Labour market economist and chief executive of the Federation of Awarding Bodies, Tom Bewick, said taxonomies can be useful in terms of "helping to shine a light on trends relating to occupational skills gaps and shortages", but warned they are "hopeless at predicting employer or student demand in a fast-changing economy".

Similarly, Stephen Evans, who heads up the Learning and Work Institute, said a skills taxonomy can help commissioners and providers plan provision, but added there has "been so much work on this already and ultimately a taxonomy is no substitute for increased funding for adult skills".

What is a skills taxonomy?

A skills taxonomy tries to set out what skills



are needed in particular roles. It is essentially a skills map for different jobs and occupations. That then is intended to help skills providers design provision and to help people understand what other jobs their skills might be suitable for.

Globally, work has already taken place on skills taxonomies which have typically linked occupations to skills. The O*NET database in the US is the most famous.

The DfE's tender also points out that innovation agency Nesta and the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence recently undertook an exercise using "web scraping techniques for online vacancy data to produce their own data-driven taxonomy of skills demand in the UK".

Part of Frontier Economics' brief is to bring together the work currently taking place on skills taxonomies in the UK, including techniques such as information from web scraping vacancies and other real-time information.

Labour market analyst firm EMSI does a lot of economic modelling for the FE sector, including scraping job posts to inform colleges what employer demand looks like in their area for them to then translate that back into curriculum planning.

EMSI's managing director, Andy Durman, said this is one piece of the jigsaw that gets beyond the headline figures that government data can show, building a "more specific insight" into which particular skills occupations require.

He warned, however, that web scraping job postings is "not an exact science" and it is "fraught with a lot of danger" as they "crop up in multiple places".

Durman urged the DfE to be "very careful to assume that job postings tell us everything about what's needed".

How could the skills taxonomy be used?

Bewick told FE Week he believes the algorithm will help form the education secretary's evidence base to intervene in geographical areas where "they believe FE providers are not sufficiently shaping course provision to meet the aims of LSIPs".

He said it looks like government wants a new national framework for deciding whether or not local course provision meets real labour market needs, and such a taxonomy "could be what all local areas are mandated to use when putting together LSIPs in future".

LSIPs are central to the DfE's FE white paper reforms. They will be piloted this year, and legislation is being drawn up to put employer leadership of the plans on a statutory footing.

Colleges and training providers must then pay "due regard" to the plans by ensuring their courses align to local employers' needs. Failure to do so will result in intervention from the education secretary.

Bewick warned that if the intention of the DfE's skills taxonomy is to try and predict how many hairdressers or mechanics a local area needs to train, "it will fail".

"Moreover, post pandemic, there will be new jobs and skills created which labour market economists will not be able to anticipate or fully capture in their econometric models. In simple terms, this means that any taxonomy tool will already be out of date before it is even used."

Durman agreed. He said the world moves at pace and things decay. "You can't afford to pay massive panels to keep tweaking it every few months so they tend to be fairly static."

Linking skills shortages to which quals are made available has proved controversial in recent months. The Education and Skills Funding Agency sparked outrage when it excluded major sectors including hospitality, tourism and media from its new level 3 adult offer as they were deemed to be a low priority with low wages.

Evans pointed out that any new skills taxonomy would not be ready until LSIPs are already in play, but they could be used to inform them in future.

Frontier Economics' contract started in April and is due to end in July. The initial findings are expected to form the basis for a larger piece of research in the next financial year.

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Winners of £18m bootcamp tender revealed

FRASER WHIELDON
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From front Exclusive

The providers chosen to deliver the government’s flagship national technical skills bootcamps have been named.

FE Week can reveal 18 organisations, including 11 independent providers – two of which are owned by education giant City & Guilds – two universities, one council and just four colleges, have won funding in the £18 million tender.

Association of Colleges chief executive David Hughes believes the lack of colleges among the bootcamp providers is due to them “being asked to bid for a lot of pots of funding at the moment and this is stretching resources at a very busy time of the year”.

List of tender winners

- Babington
- Chichester College
- City of Liverpool
- Croydon College
- Firebrand Training
- Gen2
- Intertrain
- Isle of Wight College
- Learning Curve Group
- NCH Northeaston
- QA Ltd
- Remit
- School of Code
- Somerset County Council
- System Group
- T3 Training
- Tech Talent
- University of Bath



He said colleges “use other funding pots” to “meet the needs of unemployed adults,” which is what bootcamps are intended for.

Winners (see table for list) were told on Wednesday they had been successful, but they have not yet been told the value of their contracts.

FE Week analysis shows that four of the providers have never been visited by Ofsted, while Intertrain – one of those owned by City & Guilds – has yet to receive a full inspection. Gen2 is the other City & Guilds-owned provider.

Ten of the providers have received a ‘good’ rating from Ofsted, while two are rated ‘outstanding’.

The providers will be delivering 12- to 16-week courses to unemployed and employed adults aged 19 and over in sectors such as digital skills, electrotechnical, nuclear and green energy, at a local or national level.

Although the contracts had been intended to start from the end of March, timed for the roll-out of the National Skills Fund, delays have pushed this to June 4 this year.

The tender is currently in a ten-day “standstill” period, in case any of the unsuccessful applicants to the tender wish to challenge the results.

If no organisation submits a challenge, contracts will be awarded on May 22.

The tender was published in January alongside another lot, also worth £18 million, for digital skills bootcamps in the nine geographical regions of England.

This procurement is still ongoing and the Education and Skills Funding Agency has not disclosed when its results will be shared

or announced.

Both lots will last for one year, with the possibility of a one-year extension.

The Department for Education anticipates that at least 75 per cent of all bootcamp trainees will “move into a new job or role within six months of completing training”.

The bootcamps were announced by prime minister Boris Johnson in a speech at Exeter College last September.

He said the bootcamps were a response to the “huge number” of people who are “going to have to change jobs – to change skills – and at the moment, if you’re over 23, the state provides virtually no free training to help you”.

This year’s Skills for Jobs white paper pledged the government to run bootcamps as “a flexible way to gain high-quality skills that are relevant to employers”.

Before this tender came two waves of pilot bootcamps launched last year with £8 million of funding in areas including Derbyshire-Nottinghamshire, the south west and Leeds.

These were inspired by programmes run in Greater Manchester, and the West Midlands Combined Authority’s ‘Beat the Bot’ scheme.

Hughes said he would like to see the bootcamp model “evaluated as soon as possible because if it is effective, then the approach could become part of the mainstream, funded through the adult education budget”.

Academy trust comes to UTC's rescue

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Another university technical college in financial difficulty is seeking to shelter inside a multi-academy trust after recruiting fewer than half its target number of students.

Bristol and South Gloucestershire UTC, also known as Bristol Technology and Engineering Academy (BTEA) and based in Stoke Gifford, is awaiting sign-off from ministers to join The Olympus Academy Trust this September.

The decision comes after the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) criticised the college for its "weak financial position" and "continued concerns on governance and oversight of financial management by the board" in a financial notice to improve, published last Friday.

The notice followed a warning letter from the ESFA in 2017 and told the college that it must either join a "strong" MAT or expand its board of trustees.

In a letter about its move to Olympus, the UTC says it has paused recruitment from September for "logistical" reasons. Admissions are expected to restart next year.

"BTEA was funded on estimated numbers which didn't materialise"

Dave Baker, the MAT's chief executive, said joining the nine-academy trust would provide "a financially and educationally viable future for the specialist UTC provision and for current students".



Bristol Technology & Engineering Academy

Ministerial sign-off is expected this month. The decision will then need the approval of Olympus' trustees.

Baker further explained that the pause in admissions was due to "leadership turbulence". Several governors and leaders had left the college within the past year, which had made recruitment "challenging".

The UTC opened in September 2013 but has struggled to recruit its anticipated student numbers. Government figures show that, despite a capacity of 440 at its north Bristol base, it currently has just 205 students.

Under-recruitment has led to the ESFA clawing back more than £1 million in funding from the UTC since 2014.

Its 2019-2020 financial statements show that it had accumulated a deficit of £833,391 by August 31, 2020, partly due to having to hand back £108,000 that year.

Previous years' statements show it had to hand back as much as £362,000 in 2015-16.

Baker said the clawback was for "pupils number adjustment - BTEA was funded on estimated numbers which didn't materialise, so the overfunding has to be paid back".

He said that "low student numbers have made it impossible to fund the actual costs

of running the establishment". The college's budgetary situation remains "challenging".

Joining an MAT has become a common option for struggling UTCs in recent years. It is a move favoured by ministers and, despite initially resisting it, the UTC licensing body the Baker Dearing Trust began to encourage the process in 2019 to enable the colleges to survive.

Currently, there are 48 UTCs of which just over half (25) are now run by MATs.

Aside from encouraging the college to join an MAT, the financial notice also mandates BTEA to "submit all audited financial statements to the ESFA on time and without qualification".

It must also "demonstrate that every possible economy is being made to achieve a balanced budget".

The ESFA's permission is also needed before the UTC takes on costs like the writing off of debts or making special staff severance and compensation payments.

Low student numbers and ensuing financial difficulties have dogged the UTC programme since it was launched in 2010. The brainchild of former education secretary Lord Baker, 11 UTCs have now closed.



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- **Toby Perkins MP**, Shadow Minister for Apprenticeships and Lifelong Learning
- **Peter Mucklow**, Director of Apprenticeships, ESFA
- **Jennifer Coupland**, CEO, IfATE
- **Simon Lebus**, Chief Regulator, Ofqual
- **Oli de Botton**, CEO, The Careers & Enterprise Company

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Spielman set for two-year extension as chief inspector

JAMES CARR
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Amanda Spielman is set to stay on as Ofsted chief inspector for an extra two years, *FE Week's* sister publication *Schools Week* understands.

While the extension to the role is believed to have been agreed by government, it still has to be officially signed off by the Privy Council, the Queen's formal body of advisers.

Should it get approval, Spielman would become the longest serving Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, at seven years – with Sir Chris Woodhead previously leading the watchdog for six years during the 1990s.

The HMCI began her five-year term in January 2017 and was originally due to hang up her hat at the end of this year.

“We expect to confirm next steps in the coming weeks”

But, should she leave at the end of this year, the education inspection framework (EIF), which she introduced and helped mastermind, would only have been in place for less than two terms because of Covid.

Ofsted introduced the EIF in September 2019 but just six months later was forced to suspend all routine inspections when the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in March the following year.

Schools Week understands Spielman is eager to extend her reign in order to ensure the changes she introduced have an opportunity to become fully implemented within the sector.

The new framework saw the inspectorate



Amanda Spielman

place more focus on curriculum and less emphasis on exams results and hard data.

A Department for Education spokesperson said planning for the appointment of Ofsted chief inspector from January 2022 “is ongoing, as the current chief inspector's term concludes at the end of the year”.

“We expect to confirm next steps in the coming weeks,” they added.

How is a HMCI usually appointed?

The HMCI is appointed by the Queen for a term of five years. However, there are a number of steps candidates must complete beforehand.

First they must receive the green light from the education secretary, who will recommend them as the “preferred candidate.”

Agreement is then required from the parliamentary education committee, who will meet with the candidate before deciding

whether to proceed.

Finally, agreement is sought from the Privy Council, the Queen's formal body of advisers. An appointment cannot be confirmed until an order is laid by the Privy Council.

Spielman received a recommendation from former education secretary Nicky Morgan in June 2016, before taking the helm the following January.



Nicky Morgan

New £17m ESF tender set to launch for eight LEPs

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A fresh European Social Fund tender worth £17 million is in the works and is expected to launch next month.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency this week revealed plans for the procurement which would be open to eight local enterprise partnership (LEP) areas that have gaps in provision.

It is, however, subject to funding being secured from the European Social Fund “managing authority” – the European Commission.

The ESFA completed a European Social Funding procurement in January 2019, where a total of £309 million of contracts for use up to July 31, 2021 were won by 49 training providers.

Contracts were then extended to March 2023, supported by additional funding of £137 million.

In its weekly update, the ESFA said this week there are eight LEP areas of the country where learning provision was not extended or existing provision will finish significantly ahead of March 2023.

The new procurement is intended to “ensure that gaps in provision are filled and learners supported”.

Training providers who are successful in the bidding process will “have the opportunity to provide a flexible support and respond to Covid-19 recovery for learners most affected by the pandemic (NEETs, unemployed and low-skilled workers in employment),” the ESFA added.

Officials will be hoping to avoid the



controversy caused by the ESF procurement in 2019.

The ESFA delayed issuing contracts several times, after multiple providers claimed that the government broke tender rules, namely by excluding the “track record” section

when marking bids, while the ESFA has admitted to “errors”, such as naming Serco Regional Services Limited as a winner instead of Serco Limited.

Providers were also aggrieved to find out that Learndirect’s new owner had secured contracts worth more than £20 million, in conjunction with his other company, Dimensions Training Solutions.

Further questions were asked about the tender in March, after *FE Week* discovered an “unprecedented” number of tie-breaks in the procurement.

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

For the new £17 million tender, the agency anticipates that an invitation to tender will be made in mid-June 2021 and the contracts are expected to commence in mid-October this year.

The proposed eight LEP areas include:

- Worcestershire LEP
- York, North Yorkshire & East Riding LEP (More Developed & Transition Areas)
- London LEP – South
- London LEP – North & East
- Stoke-on-Trent & Staffordshire LEP
- South East LEP
- South East Midlands LEP
- North East LEP
- Solent LEP

Banned: 9 firms join the ‘suspended’ list on the apprenticeships register

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Peterborough Skills Limited has become the latest apprenticeship provider to be banned from taking on new starts after being reprimanded by Ofsted.

FE Week analysis shows the east of England-based firm is one of nine providers to have been slapped with suspensions on the register of apprenticeship training providers (RoATP) in the past 12 months, after they were found making ‘insufficient progress’ in a new provider monitoring visit.

Education and Skills Funding Agency rules mean any provider which receives at least one such rating from an early monitoring visit will be banned from taking on new apprentices until their rating improves, unless there is an “exceptional extenuating circumstance”.

Peterborough Skills Limited made ‘insufficient progress’ for its safeguarding arrangements, with inspectors finding staff did not have “sufficient knowledge” to deal with disclosures or see them through to a “reasonable resolution”.

Leaders and the provider’s board, the report read, have “insufficient oversight” of safeguarding and have not established “a culture of safeguarding apprentices”.

A spokesperson for Peterborough Skills Limited said it “respects the decision” of Ofsted and through the “support of an independent safeguarding consultant we have addressed all the findings and significantly improved our processes”.

“We would like to express that there has been no negative impact to the well-being of our apprentices on record,” they added.

Other providers that have been added to the suspended list were found to be making ‘insufficient progress’ because they are “not ambitious enough” for apprentices.



Failure to take into account prior learning is another common theme that trips up new apprenticeship providers who find themselves on the banned list, as is poor English and maths and off-the-job training.

Many are also criticised for slow progress, with one provider being caught out for having apprentices on programme for 12 months who only submitted one piece of written work.

FE Week analysis of the RoATP reveals a total of 21 providers are currently suspended (see full list below). Nine have been added to the list over the past 12 months, while the remaining 12 were on there prior to the first lockdown.

That is a decrease from the 46 providers banned at the time of this publication’s last stocktake in April 2020, at the very start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since then, 25 of the 46 providers have been removed from RoATP altogether.

Ofsted paused its inspection activity at the outbreak of coronavirus in March 2020 and only resumed new provider monitoring visits in March 2021, which may have impacted the pace of suspensions over the course of this year.

RoATP has been closed to new applicants since April 2020, but will open on Monday for its second refresh in two years.

The 21 providers suspended from taking on new apprentices (with the 9 new additions in bold)

AGILITY PEOPLE SERVICES LIMITED

ALDRIDGE EDUCATION

ASHORNE HILL MANAGEMENT COLLEGE

BRITISH AIRWAYS PLC

CATALYST LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT LIMITED

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Loans provider slammed for accepting 'identical' learner work

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A new FE loans provider where tutors accept suspected copy-and-paste assignments from learners has been slammed by Ofsted.

Inspectors warned that a significant amount of written work submitted by different students at London Cactus Limited is "identical".

Tutors "accept the work at face value, without verifying that learners have completed the work themselves".

Ofsted also said managers recruit too many learners on to programmes who do not have the necessary level of English to "maximise their chances of succeeding on the programme".

London Cactus Limited has been delivering FE loans provision since 2017, receiving almost £1 million in Education and Skills Funding Agency allocations to date.

It has also recently started to deliver health and social care apprenticeships, the provision of which was also in scope for Ofsted's visit. But the provider only has 12 apprentices on

its books, with its main provision being adult FE loans to a current cohort of 72 learners on business and care courses.

The watchdog's new provider monitoring visit shows three out of four 'insufficient progress' judgments. The provider now faces a suspension on apprenticeship starts, but ESFA policy mandates it can continue recruiting adult learners despite the poor judgments.

Inspectors found that the loans learners only attend the course for between three and four hours each week for a total of six months, which is "substantially lower than the recommended total course hours stipulated by the awarding body".

Tutors were criticised for not identifying how the programme might fit with learners' longer-term career or personal goals. And in lessons, a high proportion of learners "struggle to grasp more complex concepts and do not demonstrate spoken or written responses at the appropriate level" as they do not hold the required level of English for the course.

As well as accepting identical work, tutors do

not make learners aware of the potential for them to achieve above a pass grade, inspectors said.

"Most tutors' feedback does not guide learners to improve their work and achieve higher marks. Learners are unable to explain how the feedback they receive from tutors helps them improve their work and develop further. All learners so far have only achieved pass grades."

The provider did however score 'reasonable progress' for its safeguarding arrangements.

Ofsted said: "Apprentices and adult learners feel safe in learning and when working. They know whom to contact if they have any safeguarding concerns. Care apprentices are knowledgeable about safeguarding policies they need to adhere to, for example when lone working."

And while most of its apprenticeship provision was criticised, leaders were praised for recruiting "skilled apprenticeship tutors who are knowledgeable and well qualified".

London Cactus Limited did not respond to requests for comment.

School catering firm furloughs tutors despite going on apprentice hiring spree

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A major school catering supplier has been slated by Ofsted for hiring apprentices during the pandemic only to place their tutors on furlough.

Inspectors found that, as a result, almost all apprentices at Aspens Services Limited in Worcester are asked to complete assessments before any learning takes place.

Some apprentices had to wait for four months before receiving contact from a tutor. Inspectors also warned there are no plans in place for how apprentices will be supported to catch up.

The judgment came after a new provider monitoring visit in March. The report was published this week.

Two of the three themes that were judged returned 'insufficient progress' scores. As a result, the provider faces a suspension on starts

until a follow-up Ofsted visit returns improved judgments, in line with government policy.

Aspens Services Limited provides catering services in 700 schools across the country and began delivering its apprenticeships in early 2020, just before Covid-19 hit.

Fifty-two apprentices were hired last year and began standards-based apprenticeships such as chef, team leader and customer service.

Ofsted praised senior leaders for having a "clear rationale" for the apprenticeships they deliver. They have "designed the programme of apprenticeships to 'upskill' their workforce with these skills as the focus".

But leaders have not ensured that there is a clear delivery plan and resources in place to support apprentices, inspectors found.

The report said: "Almost all of the current apprentices on programme have been recruited during the pandemic. However, many of those

responsible for teaching apprentices have been furloughed.

"There is no clear plan in place for how apprentices are taught, assessed and supported to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need. As a result, apprentices are making slow progress.

"There are no plans in place for how apprentices will be supported to catch up."

Ofsted also pulled the provider up for a lack of "focus" on English and maths, as well as there being "no clear plan for how on- and off-the-job training link together".

In addition, the watchdog reported that the line managers of apprentices are not clear on what apprentices are moving on to next, which has led to almost all apprentices making slow progress.

During their visit, inspectors found that almost all apprentices have "been set assessment tasks to show what they have learned from the course before any teaching has taken place".

Tutors' reviews with apprentices "lack focus" and "do not set clear targets for what apprentices need to do next".

Aspens Services Limited did not respond to requests for comment.

Welsh online-only apprenticeship training provider censured

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A Wales-based provider that trains apprentices in England exclusively online has been rapped by Ofsted.

Cognitia Consulting, headquartered in south Wales, scored two 'insufficient progress' ratings in a new provider monitoring visit report published on Monday.

Since 2018, the independent provider has delivered the safety, health and environmental technician apprenticeship and is one of the "few providers in the country" to offer the level 3 standard.

Inspectors criticised the lack of communication between Cognitia, its 26 apprentices and employers which its website boasts have included Virgin Media, logistics company Menzies Aviation and local councils.

"With very few exceptions," the report reads, "employers are not closely involved in managers' planning and teaching of the apprenticeship. This hinders apprentices' progress."

"One employer commented that he had had no contact with Cognitia staff since the apprentice started."

Apprentices in their second year on programme have to contact their trainer once they need training, rather than receiving scheduled tuition. These learners were also not set targets or deadlines for completing their portfolio evidence, so "most are behind in submitting work and do not know when their end-point assessment will take place".

Although Cognitia's training has been done entirely online since before Covid-19, apprentices could not access online resources for two and a half months recently as the provider was switching online resource systems.

Training was further disrupted when a member of teaching staff was furloughed.

The provider is also currently without a functional skills training partner which has slowed apprentices' progress, with half of the learners needing the assessment and qualifications in English, maths or IT to complete their apprenticeships.

Ofsted has in the past expressed scepticism about online or remote apprenticeship provision, with chief inspector Amanda Spielman telling *FE Week's* Annual Apprenticeship Conference last month they are the "second-best option" to face-to-face training.

Even before the pandemic, the watchdog raised concerns about certain providers' "weak" remote provision, with others facing criticism for "slow" implementation of quality assurance arrangements to improve the standard of their online training.

Cognitia's Ofsted report also criticises the low quality of the provider's training, to which its leaders admitted, telling inspectors: "The initial cohorts of apprentices experienced enrolment practices and training that did not meet the apprentices' or employers' needs and, as a consequence, a high proportion withdrew from their qualification."

Despite fewer learners leaving later cohorts, the watchdog decided it "it is too early to tell if such a reduction is sustainable".

Its curriculum was also "not being implemented logically or in ways that take full account of apprentices' prior skills, knowledge

and experience".

Cognitia did make 'reasonable progress' in terms of its safeguarding arrangements, with Ofsted finding apprentices feel safe and staff are clear about how to report issues to the designated safeguarding lead.

But under Education and Skills Funding Agency rules, an 'insufficient progress' rating usually means a provider will be suspended from taking on new apprenticeship starts.

Cognitia's apprenticeship programme manager Tom Edwards said that following some internal changes, "we were already working to strengthen our offering prior to this visit."

"However, we accept the findings of the report and acknowledge that whilst we have made great strides as a learning provider, we still needed to improve some elements of our scheme delivery."

He raised how it had been a "turbulent year for both trainers and training providers alike", and that they have "learned much from working with Ofsted and from reflecting on our own internal operations".

Cognitia now has new training staff and processes in place, Edwards said, and the inspectorate "has recognised we are already making improvements, providing improved support for apprentices learning."

"We appreciate the findings of Ofsted's monitoring report and are working closely with them to ensure we meet and surpass these standards in our full inspection later this year."

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Ofqual issues post-qualification admissions reform warning

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Ofqual has warned exam results could be delayed and students miss out on places if the government relies on slashing marking time to deliver a radical overhaul of university admissions.

The regulator said post-qualification admissions (PQA) reforms would rely on results for level 3 courses, including AS and A-levels, being released up to three weeks sooner than usual.

Education secretary Gavin Williamson has said the PQA model would see universities base offers on actual results, ending the reliance on predicted grades which is “letting down” bright disadvantaged students.

Research from UCL’s Institute of Education showed almost a quarter of high-ability applicants from lower-income households had their results under-predicted between 2013 and 2015.

But Ofqual has now warned that cutting marking time alone to deliver the reforms would “introduce delivery risks that are simply too great and would be unacceptable”.

It says current marking quality cannot be “compromised” by the reduced time for



both individual examiners and exam boards carrying out quality assurance.

A shorter marking window will also require more examiners, but Ofqual says it “could not be certain that there would be sufficient examiner capacity”. Recruitment is already sometimes “challenging” in some subjects.

This could see some results delivered late, “disadvantaging those whose results are delayed” in their bid to secure places.

The reforms could also erode the current “contingency time”, which factors in risks such as particular subject marking being slower than expected, or technology outages.

Ofqual accepts a “limited reduction in marking time could be explored”, but says it “cannot bear all the weight” and changes must come across the system.

It proposes bringing exam start dates forward by a week, starting AS and A-level exams earlier relative to qualifications like GCSEs, and scrapping the one-week gap between issuing results to UCAS and to students.

Introducing a fixed results date could also help, according to the regulator.

Overall, Ofqual argues in its response to the DfE’s consultation that “a combination” of such adjustments would be needed to deliver PQA successfully.

It also proposes a pilot of any changes is undertaken first, to boost confidence and “identify unforeseen and unintended consequences”.

“Disadvantaging those whose results are delayed”

The DfE has said its preferred route is “to compress the exam timetable, the marking period and the requirement for UCAS to receive results data well in advance of results day”.

Two models have been proposed, with one delaying only offers until after results and a second delaying both applications and offers.

The consultation on reforms began in January and ended on Thursday (May 13).



Gavin Williamson

Local outbreaks and variants may see reintroduction of face masks

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Colleges and training providers in areas facing “localised outbreaks” of Covid may be asked to reintroduce masks for students, the Department for Education has said.

The government announced earlier this week that the recommendation that masks be worn in classrooms and by learners in corridors will be lifted from Monday (May 17), in line with step three of the roadmap out of lockdown.

“Any educational drawbacks should be balanced with the benefits of managing transmission”

Staff have been advised to continue to wear face coverings in communal areas where social distancing is not possible.

However, guidance for parents published on Wednesday states that the reintroduction of face coverings for students or staff “may be advised for a temporary period in response to particular localised outbreaks, including variants of concern”.

Runshaw College in Lancashire was forced to close this week after large numbers of staff and pupils tested positive, including for the new so-called Indian variant. There have also been reports of outbreaks in schools in Merseyside and Warwickshire.

Any decisions to reintroduce masks will be managed on a “case-by-case basis”, the DfE said.

Decisions affecting a small number of providers will be made by local directors of



public health, while ministers will decide whether to reimpose the masks rule “where there is a widespread local issue”.

“In all cases, any educational drawbacks should be balanced with the benefits of managing transmission,” DfE guidance states.

A DfE spokesperson said: “Removing face coverings will improve interaction between teachers and students and ensure the clearest possible communication to support learning.

“In a small number of cases, such as if there were to be a highly localised outbreak, schools and colleges may be advised to reintroduce face coverings in certain areas for a temporary period.”

Masks have been recommended in classrooms since schools and colleges reopened more widely on March 8. The government initially said it would review the rule in the Easter holidays, but opted to continue to make the recommendation until May 17 at the earliest.

Earlier this month, unions and scientists called for the recommendation to be extended to June 21 at the earliest. They warned that not doing so would have “consequences” for the health of young people and parents.

“If there were to be a highly localised outbreak, schools and colleges may be advised to reintroduce face coverings”

But the DfE said last week that it planned to remove the rule “as infection rates continue to decline and our vaccination programme rolls out successfully”.

Second wave of IoTs sees 13 bids longlisted

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The proposals in the running for the second wave of the government's flagship Institutes of Technology have been revealed.

There are 13 bids going into the final stage for the £120 million of funding announced by education secretary Gavin Williamson at the Conservative Party conference two years ago. They will be whittled down to eight winners later this year.

The first wave of 12 institutes were given the go-ahead in 2019.

This second wave, which opened for applications last October, is intended to help the network of institutes "achieve nationwide coverage across all regions".

This pledge was later confirmed in the

Skills for Jobs white paper, which promised to "expand our flagship Institutes of Technology programme to every part of the country by the end of this parliament".

Institutes of technology are collaborations between colleges and universities, intended to deliver higher technical training in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects.

In April 2019, the Department for Education announced it was looking into tendering for more institutes than the initial 12 after *FE Week* found there were none in the north-west and the east of England.

Bids in this second wave include proposals for IoTs led by the north-west-based Blackpool and The Fylde College, and by the University of Suffolk in the east.

The £120 million up for grabs will fund capital projects to create the institutes.

A total of 15 bids were received in stage 1 of the process. Of those, 13 applicants have been invited to progress to stage 2 which will "test the viability, feasibility and deliverability of proposals in more detail".

Here is a list of the lead sponsors in the 13 bids:

- Blackpool and The Fylde College
- Cheshire College South and West
- Chichester College Group
- DN Colleges Group
- Furness College
- Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group
- Solent University
- South Essex College
- University of Derby
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Leicester
- University of Salford
- University of Suffolk



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WorldSkills centres expand to ITPs

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A new teacher development programme run by WorldSkills UK is being expanded to independent and employer providers.

From Monday until June 4, the organisation – which puts up teams of skilled young people against other nations at international ‘Skills Olympics’ events – will be accepting applications for the second wave of its Centre of Excellence programme.

Ten spots will be available for the continuous professional development arm of the programme, where high-performance coaches, who also train the UK’s competitors for international competitions, work to train up teaching staff in international best practices.

Successful applicants will start on the programme from September. The centre’s second element, a series of digital masterclasses and learning resources, will open for applications for 40 places later this year.

The professional development “is designed to equip educators in technical and vocational education and training with insights from global skills systems,” says WorldSkills UK’s head of skills development and international competitions Parisa Shirazi.

Twenty colleges won spots in the first wave last year and have gone on to develop pressure testing and skills competitions for their students.

As in-person skills competitions have been delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, WorldSkills UK has championed the use of international pressure tests, where nations test their skills against each other in isolated, single-



WorldSkills UK high performance coach Frazer Minskip working with educators

discipline competitions.

The tests have now been adopted on a smaller scale by one of the colleges from the first wave of the Centre of Excellence: RNN Group, based in the Midlands and Yorkshire.

Assistant principal for apprenticeships, high-level skills and innovation Rebecca Blackburn told *FE Week* five of RNN’s educators had been working with performance coach Frazer Minskip.

The five had reported being “upskilled in their teaching and learning”, particularly around pressure testing, which “they specifically learned through WorldSkills UK”.

While RNN had already been running competitions against Grimsby Institute, their work with the Centre of Excellence had led them to introduce tournaments between its three campuses: in Rotherham, north Nottinghamshire, and Dearne Valley near Doncaster.

“The learners really benefit from those competitions,” Blackburn said. “But what we’ve learned is, how are we better preparing them for those competitions? We weren’t, because it was a one-off thing in the middle of the year. So the inter-campus competitions are a great way to start off the environment of pressure learning.”

Minskip says implementing competitions into the curriculum is part, but not all, of the programme.

“We’re here to share the raft of experience and skills that we have with FE sectors around the globe, to explain what works for us and how it could work for you.”

Since launching last year with £1.5 million from awarding body NCFE, the Centre of Excellence programme has been lauded in the government’s Skills for Jobs white paper.

It uses the centre as an example of how the government pledges to “encourage more organisations with relevant expertise to provide high-quality and evidence-based training and development for teaching staff in the sector”.

WorldSkills UK is bringing in independent and employer providers now, Shirazi says, as they had picked up on their interest.

And because “one of the benefits of this programme is looking at how we can mainstream excellence through that provision of global skill systems and world-class practices across the whole of the sector.

“And not exclusively to colleges, because we know that as a sector, we all have a role to play.”

She says the existing team of eight performance coaches will work with the providers joining from September, while continuing to work with the colleges which joined last year.

WorldSkills UK is hoping to build its network of independent and employer providers in the third wave of the Centre of Excellence programme, which will open for applications around this time next year.

Applications will open for this year through www.worldskillsuk.org at noon on Monday, May 17.



Rebecca Blackburn

Ofsted to review framework's impact on staff wellbeing

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Ofsted will review the impact its inspection framework has on staff wellbeing, and the government has promised not to publish guidance outside of working hours as part of a new charter unveiled this week.

The Department for Education and Ofsted have made 12 commitments as part of the new education staff wellbeing charter.

“Wider communications strategy on recruitment and retention”

From the autumn, schools and colleges will also be able to sign up to a voluntary charter of 11 pledges, aimed at showing



a commitment to “protect, promote and enhance” staff wellbeing.

One of Ofsted’s three commitments is to “review whether the framework is having inadvertent impacts on staff wellbeing (for example, creating unnecessary workload) and take steps to alleviate any issues”.

They will also ensure inspectors take staff wellbeing into account in coming to their judgments and monitor it through quality assurance and evaluation.

One of the DfE’s nine pledges is to publish gov.uk updates aimed at education professionals “only during working hours”. However, exceptions include if there is a “significant user need” in publishing the information, or a legislative requirement.

The DfE also wants to break down stigma around mental health by building it into its “wider communications strategy on recruitment and retention, linking to existing campaigns that aim to tackle mental health stigma in our society”.

Schools and colleges who sign the charter commit to “placing wellbeing and mental health at the heart of our decision making.

“We will support staff to make positive

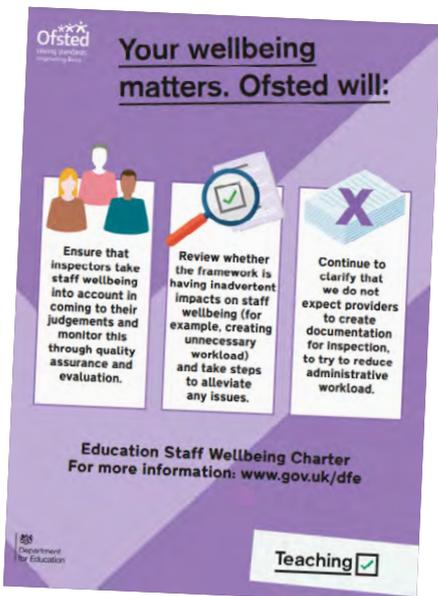
choices for their own wellbeing and encourage a collegiate culture across and between all roles in the school or college,” it reads.

Pledges include having a “sub-strategy” for protecting school and college leader wellbeing and mental health, as well as “hold[ing] ourselves accountable” by “measuring staff wellbeing” and monitoring “trends over time”.

“We will support staff to make positive choices for their own wellbeing”

The government will review the progress it makes on the commitments in 2023. Schools and colleges will also be surveyed to gauge how much impact the charter has had.

The charter was drawn up by a group comprising teaching unions, several schools and colleges and the mental health charity MIND.



Ofsted's mental health charter pledges

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Editorial



Apprenticeship levy funding: the truth is out there

A major problem for apprenticeship levy watchers and commentators is that the government not only refuses to share spending data – it is failing to properly explain how the policy works.

As a result, this week a national newspaper was persuaded by an organisation with vested interests to report that the policy was “wasteful”, claiming billions were going unspent.

This concern is not new, nor a result of the pandemic stifling apprenticeship starts. Ever since the levy was introduced in 2017 there have been regular press releases from large employers calling on the government to find alternative uses for unspent levy funding.

Yet in March 2019, nearly two years after the levy was introduced, the National Audit Office found the new style apprenticeship standards were costing “around double what was expected” and reported a potential “overspend in future”.

In the same month, the then permanent secretary of the Department for Education, Jonathan Slater, agreed. He told the education select committee the levy budget “could be significantly overspent if we carried on, on the basis of current trends”.

And in January 2020, the incoming chief executive at the Institute for Apprenticeship and Technical Education, Jennifer Coupland, said there was “not sufficient money available for these small and medium-sized businesses” and called for government to find a further £750 million.

Underspending, or on course to overspend? It is clear that some underspending claims are wildly inflated and misrepresent the policy.

The apprenticeships minister, Gillian Keegan, replied in answer to a parliamentary question this week, that £1 billion “had expired between May 2020 to February 2021”. But when a levy-paying employer loses access to the funding after 24 months, this does not mean there has been any budget underspend, nor that the levy policy has failed.

Without expired funds there would be no money to pay for the apprentices at 98 per cent of employers, those that do not pay the levy.

Without expired funds there would be no money to pay for the employer and provider cash incentives.

Without expired funds there would be no money to pay for the ten per cent levy account top-up.

Without expired funds there would be no money to pay for apprentices’ English and math qualifications.

Without expired funds there would be no money to pay for the apprentices still on a pre-levy programme.

Without expired funds there would be no money to pay for apprentices at employers that exhausted their levy pot.

And these are far from minor extra costs. For example, the NAO report revealed that in 2017/18, funding from levy accounts only amounted to £191 million. But when including all the extras, in total more than £1.5bn had been spent on apprenticeships.

Keegan did go on to say in her answer: “We do not anticipate that all employers who pay the levy will need or want to use all the funds available to them, but they are able to do so if they wish. Funds raised by the levy are used to support the whole apprenticeship system. Employers’ unused funds are available to support apprenticeships in smaller employers who do not pay the levy and to cover the ongoing costs of apprentices who began training prior to the introduction of the levy.”

But the government has completely failed to explain this complex feature of the policy – so expired funds are, incorrectly, reported as “wasteful” and unused.

And, if we are being honest, vested interests are exploiting the confusion. Just this week the Times reported: “Ten vice chancellors have written to Rishi Sunak asking for changes to the ‘inflexible’ apprenticeship programme they say is wasting billions of pounds.”

So the government needs to explain better and defend its policy, but it also needs to come clean on the actual spending figures.

The apprenticeship levy spend suffers from a unique lack transparency, which is also hampering informed debate.

All other sources of FE funding, including apprenticeships before the levy, include regularly published provider allocation spreadsheets as well as final funding values. And a simple Freedom of Information request to the DfE would solicit spreadsheets listing the names of employers alongside the funding values paid to the relevant provider.

No such data is available for the apprenticeship levy, with the government hiding behind the fact that it is a tax.

Keegan’s answer this week to an MP asking simple questions was: “Due to taxpayer confidentiality, we are unable to publish the amount that individual employers have contributed through the apprenticeship levy or the amount of funds that have been spent or have expired.”

And yet the government now publishes more data about apprenticeship starts than ever before. The DfE’s quarterly “underlying data” spreadsheet published on gov.uk has hundreds of thousands of rows and tells me, for example, that in the month of January 2020 Staffordshire University started one 19-to-24-year-old apprentice on the level 6 police constable standard, that they live in Birmingham, Erdington, they had already been in the job for seven to 12 months and the delivery is taking place in Birmingham, Ladywood.

An incredibly rich source of data about the provider and apprentice – but nothing about the public money earned so far, nor future monthly payments committed to for the duration of this apprenticeship.

And at a national level – although the DfE has been forced to reveal some funding that has been returned to the Treasury in past years – very little is shared willingly.

So returning to the question: underspending, or on course to overspend?

The answer is, it remains top secret.

So genuinely informed policy debate needs two things:

1. Putting a stop to the myth that expired funds are wasteful or the same as unspent funds.
2. Access to funding data which, to date, the DfE has classed as a tax and refused to share.

FE Week will be working hard over the coming months to encourage the government to start sharing levy funding data.

Once made public, a genuinely informed debate may finally take place about how it is best spent.

The truth is out there – so stay tuned!

Nick Linford, Editor
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Focus: Adult residential education



The slow death of high-quality adult residential education?

JESS STAUFENBERG
@STAUFENBERGJ

As Northern College fights for survival, Jess Staufenberg asks – is the government overlooking a big opportunity to ‘level up’?

Lee Hughes was 29 years old when he signed up to Northern College, one of just a few adult residential providers in the country, hidden away in expansive grounds in Barnsley. “It’s a bit of a story,” he begins. “It were quite rough at my school and I thought, if I just play the fool, I’ll get by, which I did. But I left school with no qualifications whatsoever.”

Aged 16, Hughes was living alone. “I got a job in a warehouse, and that was it, I was just drifting. I got into drugs. One of my hang-ups was that I’d not tried my best – that I’d let an opportunity slip through my fingers.” He’d

done electrical engineering for a year at the nearby general further education institution, Barnsley College, but left. “I was just doing it because everyone else was.” He then got a job in a call centre. “I kept getting disciplinaries for reading books, history books. I was on my final warning at work, and my manager said, ‘You’re wasted in this work. Go and do something with yourself.’ It was a really key moment in my life.”

Hughes turned up at Barnsley College once again. “But as soon as I walked in the door, it was just kids. Some of them weren’t much older than my son.” He’d also been recently made homeless and so the receptionist, hearing his circumstances, told him about Northern College. Like 95 per cent of learners there, Hughes qualified for a means-tested free place. The college offers two- or three-day short courses, an adult educator training route, maths and English GCSEs, functional

and digital skills courses, and two main access routes into higher education: a humanities and social sciences route, and a computing route. A criminal investigations route, leading into police work, is launching this year and a healthcare access route is in development. Hughes took the humanities route.

“I did well, really, really well, I were absolutely flying.” Hughes became the student union president at the college, got a distinction in his course, and was accepted on to a history BA at Sheffield Hallam University. He went on to a research masters, and is now applying to PhD positions, aged 36. “If I hadn’t had the opportunity to move into Northern College, I wouldn’t be having this conversation with you right now.”

Adult education is already under huge

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Feature

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Focus: Adult residential education

CONTINUED

pressure due to government cuts. Funding has nearly halved since 2009 and adult education participation rates have fallen by 49 per cent since 2004. An estimated £1.3 billion will be needed to reverse the cuts of the past decade.

“The failure to distinguish the needs of these institutions has crippled them”

Hidden within this straining sector is adult education residential provision, which has relatively tiny numbers compared to higher education residential provision. Northern College has about 4,000 enrolments each year, of which about 70 learners are on access to HE routes, and 35 of those are on residential placements. Meanwhile, about 80 per cent of learners on short courses are residential. There are 75 bedrooms on site.

There used to be more such provision, explains Alan Tuckett, who formerly led the National Institute of

Adult Continuing Education and is now emeritus professor of education at Wolverhampton University. After the Second World War, residential education was encouraged and both long- and short-term-stay colleges sprang up. By the 1960s the long-term adult education residential providers included Fircroft College in Birmingham, Ruskin College in Oxford and Hillcroft College in London. In 1973, a government inquiry into adult education recommended “the establishment of one further college in the northern half of England”, and Northern College opened in 1978. All four were intended for vulnerable and working-class adults and have historically close links to community groups and trade unions.

Together, the four are known as the residential Institutes of Adult Learning. When incorporation arrived in 1992, they were registered as “specialist designated institutions”, because they differed from other FE colleges in being independent charities, regulated by their own trust deeds, while publicly funded. All four institutions retain that category on government websites. But experts warn only two truly remain in their original form.



A bedroom at Northern College

college group after being hit with a financial notice to improve in 2014 and again in 2020, and some of its residential provision has been scaled back. Meanwhile, Hillcroft College has merged with Richmond Adult and Community College. Neither college responded to requests for interview.

“Now there’s really only two left, Northern College and Fircroft College, that still have their own distinct centres,” says Tuckett. “The failure to distinguish the needs of these institutions has crippled them. The argument is, they’d be better off amalgamated with a general FE college. No – we will lose what is special about their offer.”

Now the two providers are locked into a legal battle with the Department for Education. Last year the DfE told the four “specialist designated institutions” it was carrying out a review of their residential funding. Since then, Northern College has been told it made “errors” worth £1.2 million over the past two years by applying an agreed uplift for residential funding to each course rather than to each learner. Like other adult education providers, Northern College is also facing a clawback on the adult education budget after under-recruiting because of the pandemic.

But changes to the uplift is the more serious worry. Worth 4.7 times the base funding rate, the uplift was set in the late 1990s by

they were registered as “specialist designated institutions”, because they differed from other FE colleges in being independent charities, regulated by their own trust deeds, while publicly funded. All four institutions retain that category on government websites. But experts warn only two truly remain in their original form.

In June, Ruskin College will join Activate Learning



Lee Hughes



Bryn Middleton and Abe Crabb on site at Northern College

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Focus: Adult residential education

CONTINUED

education secretary David Blunkett, says Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive at the Association of Colleges. It does not apply outside of the four specialist designated institutions, such as for adult residencies in land-based or high-needs specialist colleges, which are funded according to different calculations.

The latest accounts for Fircroft College show a similar story. They reveal the ESFA is seeking between £300,000-£350,000 back from the uplift funding, but “no evidence has been provided that the ESFA’s position is legally valid”, say the accounts. Fircroft College, like Northern College, has engaged lawyers.

The situation is a “triple whammy”, says Sue Pember, chief executive of adult education membership body HOLEX. “Nobody has properly understood the learner operating model for these institutions and how to fund them. They are really adult institutions, and they should have been considered alongside higher education, with the residential element treated in the same way,” she says.

The 4.7 uplift is “not as much as it sounds”, since it “recognises the cost of upkeep of an old building and the wraparound support these learners need, like childcare and extra tuition for English and maths”.



Natalie Gorton

“Key to what we do is the residential work, for those adults who haven’t got homes, or have really chaotic home lives,” says Yultan Mellor, chief executive at Northern College. “We can take them out of that life. We call it an immersive learning experience.” The college is open 48 weeks of the year, 24 hours a day, with the library open until 10pm, and counselling and pastoral services on site. “If the uplift disappeared, we couldn’t offer the residential provision. What I keep trying to explain to funders is many of our learners would be publicly funded by the state in other ways. Actually, this is such a positive way to help them.”

The children’s centre at the college has already had to close this year. Natalie Gorton, a former student now on a PhD at Huddersfield University, says she “could never have re-educated myself without that children’s centre”. She adds: “There’s so many mums in Barnsley who would never be able to do it otherwise. It’s like a family in there. If they remove the residential bit, I would find that incredibly upsetting. It would be devastating for Barnsley.”

Bryn Middleton, aged 19, and Abraham Crabb, aged 21, are equally emphatic. Both are on the computing access course, and have places at Aberdeen University and Manchester University. “If I was at home, I wouldn’t have a study space,” says Crabb. “When



Yultan Mellor, chief executive, Northern College

you’re making a big change in life, you need your environment to change with you.” Middleton adds: “I’d be quite upset if the residential part goes. If I didn’t have this option, I’d still be working in a café. I’d never had my independence before, never looked after myself, so I was worried about going to university. This way I’ve prepared myself.”

There is clearly a case for a wide-ranging, constructive review with open consultation on residential adult education, say Gravatt, Tuckett and Pember. The different rates for residential placements in different kinds of colleges could be considered and fitted into an ambitious future plan knitting together bootcamps, Institutes of Technology and the level 3 skills drive.

“If I was at home, I wouldn’t have a study space”

“It is reasonable and sensible for DfE to periodically review all parts of FE funding [...] but I’m not sure these have been clearly set out,” warns Gravatt.

Gorton puts it more bluntly. “You know when Boris talks about levelling up? This is how to do it.” Spoken from the heart of its new “red wall” region, the government may wish to think again – and ponder an adult education residential provider for every region.



Students relaxing at Northern College

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AVEEK BHATTACHARYA

Chief economist,
Social Market
Foundation



The Queen’s Speech is welcome – but passing legislation is the first step

There are a number of issues to keep an eye on when the draft Skills Bill arrives, writes Aavek Bhattacharya

In one sense, not much has changed in terms of government FE and adult education policy as a result of the Queen’s speech.

Last July, in a speech to the Social Market Foundation, education secretary Gavin Williamson promised a “comprehensive plan to change the fundamentals of England’s further education landscape”.

Then in September, the prime minister announced a lifelong loan entitlement, offering every student four years’ financial support on equivalent terms to the university student loan system, by 2025.

And in January, the government published its Skills for Jobs white paper, which set out a raft of proposals. These included reforms to higher technical education to encourage greater provision and take-up of level 4 and 5 courses, and Local Skills Improvement Plans to be drawn up by employers, FE colleges and other providers and local stakeholders.

This week’s announcement of a new Skills and Post-16 Education Bill to be introduced in this parliament doesn’t tell us any more about those measures.

But it is significant – and welcome – nonetheless because it tells us that education and skills will be a legislative priority for the coming year.

For all the government’s fine ambitions on lifelong learning and vocational education, it wasn’t a given that it would make it on to this year’s parliamentary to-do list. And it is no small thing that the government chose to focus on the Skills Bill in its briefings prior to the Queen’s Speech.

“About £1.3 billion is needed to reverse funding cuts since 2009”

If you have any doubts, just ask the people still waiting for a plan for adult social care.

Adult and further education’s moment in the political spotlight is long overdue. Previous SMF research has shown that funding for adult education (excluding apprenticeships) has nearly halved since 2009-10 whilst participation rates have suffered, falling by 49 per cent since 2004.

It is estimated that £1.3 billion is

required to reverse funding cuts since 2009-10.

The devil, as ever, will be in the details. January’s white paper is full of laudable ambitions: ending disparities between HE and FE, simplifying funding and making it more stable and predictable, creating more modular and flexible courses.

However, we are yet to see the specifics of how these are to be achieved. For those, we must wait a few more days until the draft bill is published.

There are a number of issues to keep an eye on when we do know more.

First, what provisions is the government making for learners in the intervening four years until the lifelong loan entitlement is fully up and running? Structural change takes time, but as we attempt to rebuild economically from the pandemic, expanding opportunities for retraining can hardly wait for the Whitehall machine to spark into life.

Second, how effective are the

measures in combining flexibility for learners and stability for providers?

Will all students and courses be able to benefit from modular, evening or home learning, or will some be prioritised?

We need to know whether the government can offer more financial security and reduce complexity in a way that allows and encourages institutions to invest in new types of courses.

Third, will the government produce collaboration or conflict between universities and colleges?

Our interviews with sector leaders highlighted a brewing “turf war” between the two over who should deliver the new higher technical qualifications that the government wants to see provided.

Given the interest learners have in a system with strong connections between universities and colleges that permits easy movement and sharing of knowledge and resources between the two, stoking tensions could have terrible consequences.

Passing legislation is only the first part of fulfilling the government’s ambitions on FE and adult education. Equally – and perhaps more – important is providing the necessary resources to return to or even exceed previous funding levels.

On that front, we will have to wait a few more months until the spending review to get a full sense of the government’s intentions. But for now, it is a very promising start.



STEPHANIE THOMSON

Lecturer in education,
University of Aberdeen

LORNA UNWIN

Professor emerita in
vocational education,
UCL Institute of
Education



It's true – certain entry requirements are shutting out potential apprentices

Some learners barred from apprenticeships are ending up on college courses for three years, write Stephanie Thomson and Lorna Unwin

As another academic year draws to a close, families, teachers and careers advisers will rally round to help 16-year-olds find a place for September.

But while guarantees and entitlements are popular hurrah words for policymakers, the reality on the ground shows an uneven playing field when it comes to post-16 options.

A big issue, as *FE Week* recently reported, is that entry requirements for some apprenticeships at level 2 are surprisingly high. Some employers demand GCSE grades equal to or beyond those necessary for A-level or level 3 vocational courses.

We found similar evidence in our research for the Nuffield Foundation published in February. We looked at the 40 per cent of young people who annually miss the benchmark grades in maths and/or English.

Across our case study areas in Greater Manchester and North Tyne, we identified great variation in entry requirements for similar types of apprenticeship and requirements that did not always coincide with the level of the apprenticeship.

For example, 33 per cent of apprenticeships at level 2 specified English and maths GCSE at grade 4 or above as the only condition



of entry. Yet the corresponding apprenticeship standard usually stated an apprentice would be expected to work towards these GCSE grades or functional skills during their training.

Like *FE Week*, we also found that apprenticeship adverts often use vague terminology stating that particular grades “would be an advantage” or were “desirable”, or that a “good standard” or “reasonable level” of English and maths was required.

Given the acute shortage of apprenticeships for young people, using maths and English GCSEs as the main sorting device risks closing down opportunities for many who are keen to show their potential through work-based learning.

In addition, adverts for apprenticeships are not always clear whether achievements in other GCSE subjects, vocational qualifications, work experience and volunteering will be considered.

Course entry requirements are more likely to do this, but there is considerable local variation even for courses at the same level.

Across England, we found that around 25 per cent of young people without English and/or maths GCSE at grade 4 had started their post-16 phase at level 1 or below, including learners with substantial level 2 achievements.

Starting levels can affect progress and outcomes. For example, of the learners who started at level 1, 53 per cent had achieved at least level 2 by age 18. Yet this figure rose to 85 per cent for those who started at level 2.

“We identified great variation in entry requirements for similar types of apprenticeship”

Understanding more about why some learners with similar GCSE attainment are starting on different levels is important because this could be creating inequities.

It could also help explain why some young people are spending

three years in the post-16 phase when they don't necessarily need to. This is an aspect of the system that needs to be better understood and more widely acknowledged.

Some of the young people we spoke to were frustrated by starting on a lower-level course. But it is easy to see why colleges and training providers do this.

Reasons include funding constraints, inadequate information about a learner's pre-16 achievements, timetable pressures due to maths and English upgrading, and a perceived need to start some vocational courses at a basic level.

But is there room to be less risk averse? Could colleges pool experiences and examine data on prior attainment and achievements in different subjects to see if starting levels need adjusting?

Could IfATE fund some sector-based pilot initiatives so employers and providers could work together to overcome prohibitive apprenticeship entry requirements?

Our research and *FE Week's* findings disrupt the notion that, just armed with the “right” information, young people can progress smoothly into post-16 pathways.

This summer's Covid-affected GCSE results will create headlines about grade inflation and teacher-led assessment.

Whatever the results, how can we ensure entry to post-16 provision focuses on young people's potential – rather than their “failure” in certain subjects?

CHARLOTTE BONNER

National head of education for sustainable development, Education and Training Foundation



Let's embed education for sustainable development (ESD) in teaching and training

To have a hope of meeting the government's green goals, ESD needs to be embedded in apprenticeships and staff development, writes Charlotte Bonner

Last week saw the publication of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE)'s sustainability framework. This document helps employer trailblazer groups, who are responsible for developing apprenticeship standards, identify how different occupations can achieve sustainability goals and particularly net-zero carbon.

To meet the UK's ambitious decarbonisation plans, we'll need specialist expertise: in renewable energy systems and batteries, sustainable agriculture and food system, circular economy principles, zero-carbon construction and so on.

As well as these specialist occupations, we must remember that all jobs can and should be green jobs. We need people across all industries to be knowledgeable and ready to make sustainability the norm – from healthcare to project management to marketing to catering.

With this in mind, if we're going to fully equip our learners for their future jobs and careers, all learners can and should be green learners.

IfATE's sustainability framework recognises this. It uses a "shades of green" spectrum to identify that all apprenticeships are affected by the sustainability agenda but in different ways.

The framework also supports trailblazer groups to build

appropriate sustainability outcomes into the apprenticeship development and revisions process.

In addition to the framework, IfATE has established a green apprenticeship advisory panel.

This panel will help ensure the portfolio of occupational standards reflects the roles needed to achieve sustainability goals.

This approach is a signal of how the further education and training sector is moving towards greater uptake of education for sustainable development (ESD). It is particularly welcome as it could be the key that unlocks one of the biggest barriers FE educators face in bringing more ESD to their work.

The ETF will soon publish research with responses from nearly 850 members of the FE workforce. Our research will show that a lack of relevant content in the curriculum and occupational standards is the greatest factor preventing them from including sustainability issues in their teaching and work.

IfATE's framework use is currently advisory rather than obligatory. If embraced by trailblazer groups, it could ensure

new and future curricula used by apprenticeship providers will enable the inclusion of sustainability issues. As such, educators and other sector professionals should no longer face this barrier.

Meanwhile, new curricula need to be accompanied by investment in educators so they have the competency, capacity and confidence to embed education for sustainable development across the apprentice's learning experience.

That's why at the ETF, as the expert body for professional development and standards in FE, we're working with other sector bodies to develop our ESD strategy.

"Our research will show a lack of relevant curriculum content is a big factor"

We want to design, develop and deliver continuous professional development for staff in different roles from across the sector to support ESD uptake.

We're introducing ESD modules into our existing portfolio of professional development – from our governance and leadership programmes to our practitioner research programmes.

We're developing new specialist ESD CPD, including an online course, curriculum mapping tools and resources for practitioners from different subject specialisms.

Those in our membership body, the Society for Education and Training, can access an on-demand webinar, which I ran with teaching methods expert Geoff Petty on effective teaching practice for ESD.

Education is an enabler. It can be a lever to help achieve sustainability goals. Apprentices need to be developing relevant knowledge, skills, values and agency as core competencies so they can create positive change in their lives and their work whether they go on to be sustainability specialists or not.

There's growing recognition of this and a groundswell of interest from practitioners and providers across the country. To support these practitioners and providers, and achieve FE's full ESD potential, sector bodies will need to embed ESD in their work too.

The FE sector has a vital role to play in combating climate change and achieving sustainability and social justice both nationally and globally.

Initiatives such as IfATE's show that central leadership can incentivise and enable uptake of education for sustainable development, by supporting those involved. Hopefully, others will follow.



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READER'S REPLY

Ofsted slams safeguarding failings at apprenticeship giant

Once again we have apprentices suffering. This piecemeal approach to providing apprenticeships has to be addressed.

UNISON Further Ed, Twitter

Revealed: SEND centres for excellence model to expand, with six new providers

Good quotes towards the end of this article from Natspec CEO Clare Howard about the need for SEND centres of excellence that can support people with more complex needs.

Rohan Slaughter, Twitter

Students and tutors recognised in WEA achievement awards 2021

Such wonderful stories, congratulations to all the winners, runners-up and nominees.

WEA Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, Twitter

ESFA boss threatens to put scandal-hit college into administration

No accounts, too busy to post minutes. What does this look like to those outside the FE world? How will FE be viewed by critics when a college keeps the public in the dark? Whatever rights of ESFA case, this response does FE no good. This is public money.

Stefan Drew, Twitter

Why do colleges get treated differently from independent training providers? An ITP would be shut down by now. Level playing fields are needed. If they are corrupt, shut them down – don't leave it two years plus to try and let them off.

Louis, website

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Revealed: SEND centres for excellence model to expand, with six new providers



The low employment rate for those with special educational needs and disabilities continues to be a national disgrace. I have both managed and inspected in the area and although colleges have largely moved their learners from huts at the back of colleges into the mainstream, encouraging the achievement of qualifications, the lack of apprenticeship places continues to need addressing. It was why many of us campaigned to keep high needs as a separate judgment when Ofsted tried to remove it during the EIF consultation.

We need someone who both understands SEND and apprenticeships to look closely at any providers and colleges who are doing things that others are not in engaging employers to have a more representative workforce. From my own experience in getting SEND learners to use an Apple Mac in my office at lunchtimes and to successfully take food hygiene qualifications in the 1990s, I know that setting high expectations is half the battle.

Hopefully, some other principals reading this article identify their colleges to take the baton from the three colleges who have been doing their bit.

Phil Hatton, website

Perhaps we can have a more measured view of the importance and value of ITPs in the sector mix.

Alistair Heron, Twitter

Quite right. This is public money.

Iain Mackinnon, Twitter

Movers & Shakers

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



Esther Chesterman

Chief executive,
National
Extension College

Start date April 2021

Previous job

General manager, NCC Education Ltd

Interesting fact

During March, she and her daughter walked 500 miles to support Global Girl Project, a charity she is trustee of.



Dr Jenifer Moody

Non-executive
director, Energy
and Utility Skills

Start date May 2021

Concurrent job

Qualifications and assessment consultant

Interesting fact

She is one of the original trustees of the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors, where she is currently a fellow.



Daniel Stanbra

Director of
adult education
and contracts,
RNN Group

Start date May 2021

Previous job

Director of operations, The Source Skills Academy

Interesting fact

He enjoys "unsuccessfully" maintaining classic cars, most of which have invariably broken down in a variety of European countries.

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