



# FEWEEK

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Susie Sergison, A Level Fine Art student at Runshaw College, published 'Toxic Oil' as part of SFCA exhibition

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## SLUGGISH START FOR GOVERNMENT'S FREE IT QUAL

- Just 270 people received Essential Digital Skills Qualification certificates by June 2021
- Tens of thousands studying 'legacy' courses that will not be funded from next month
- Colleges shunned EDSQs during pandemic as qual requires more face-to-face contact

EXCLUSIVE

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## FEWEEK

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# Slow start to flagship Essential Digital Skills Qualifications

**BILLY CAMDEN**

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**From front**

**Exclusive**

Take-up of the government's flagship free digital skills qualifications, which will replace all low-level IT courses studied annually by over 100,000 people from next month, flopped in their first year.

Announced five years ago and finally launched last August as a free "entitlement" alongside English and math courses, just 270 people had achieved an Essential Digital Skills Qualification (EDSQ) by June 2021.

The new Ofqual-regulated qualification was developed by consultants on behalf of the government, is available at entry level and level 1 and typically takes a few weeks to complete. Only one awarding body, Gateway Qualifications, has so far issued certificates.

Colleges and training providers that spoke to *FE Week* said EDSQs are best delivered face-to-face, especially for learners who lack very basic digital skills, and blamed Covid restrictions for the slow start.

In many cases they have chosen to continue delivering the IT course that will have funding approval removed from August 1, 2021, with one college saying they are better for remote learning.

But many also complained that most of the EDSQs were not made available at the start of the current academic year, which meant they could not plan them into the curriculum.

Only Gateway Qualifications received sign-off from Ofqual by August 2020 for their EDSQ to be delivered. Seven other awarding bodies have eventually received sign-off but at different points throughout the year. They claim they are seeing some colleges and providers starting to deliver the qualifications this term.

The Department for Education said no targets had been set for the number of people taking the qualifications.

Colleges, providers, awarding bodies and the DfE all expect starts to increase substantially from September.

A spokesperson for Bedford College Group, which historically delivers high numbers of IT courses to adults, said: "We didn't offer EDSQ this year because we felt that ITQs for IT users fitted the needs of our learners better, as it covers more Microsoft Office applications.

"We are planning to offer the

qualifications in the next academic year and are anticipating that over 300 learners will enrol."

Highbury College explained: "The introduction of these qualifications has been hampered by Covid-19 disruption and the fact that most of the EDSQs were not available from the start of the 2020/21 academic year.

"We have plans, subject to the impact of any further disruption, to start delivery this summer."

Another, Brockenhurst College, told *FE Week* it has chosen not to deliver EDSQs so far because it was not prepared to launch a new qualification during a pandemic. The qualifications are, however, on their radar and the college plans to deliver them in 2021/22.

The DfE has pushed to make digital skills as important as English and maths skills, going so far as to enshrine the entitlement to EDSQs in law, with the 2017 Digital Economy Act.

An unweighted base rate of £300 is paid by the department for each of the qualifications, which can be either entry level or level 1, funded from the adult education budget.

Skills that adults learn on the course includes creating and editing documents, how to use emails and video calls, completing online forms and purchasing items, and resolving simple technical issues with software and hardware.

But those providers that have managed to begin delivery have sung the praises of the EDSQs, citing cases of homeless people developing skills for employment, and retirees becoming apt with computers to complete day-to-day activities.

One adult to benefit from the course is Martin Shephard, aged 26. He was until recently homeless, suffered with a drug addiction and poor mental health. He chose to take his EDSQ with J and K Training in Middlesbrough.

"I think I probably value this course more than most. Doors and opportunities have mostly been locked to me, but now I'm able to see that with the right teaching in the right

environment, I can do things – it's been a bit of an eye opener," said Martin.

Sisters Ruth Smith and Catherine Allen, who are both retired and in their 60s, took their EDSQ with Middlesbrough College.

While both were "anxious" about doing the course, Catherine, a retired nurse, explained that because they both now volunteer for a charity they wanted to "grasp the nettle" and upskill.

Ruth added: "This course has been a great experience, I'm definitely less terrified now and I do have more confidence. I've learnt that computers are logical, that I shouldn't overthink things and I'm brave enough to experiment."

Lee Morton, aged 38, also took the course at Middlesbrough College. She said: "My aim was to improve on knowledge that I use in my everyday workplace and learn new skills to help me improve what I do. To be honest, the course proved valuable straight away. It's helping me work more efficiently and it's helping me on my own personal journey."

Delivery hasn't been plain sailing for colleges and providers, however.

Joanne Dye, deputy director of adult, community and ESOL at Leeds City College, said: "It has been challenging this year to deliver EDSQs at volume, due to the Covid pandemic and related lockdowns and restrictions.

"This has affected adult learners in many ways, in particular being able to attend face-to-face support which many of our adult learners prefer, especially those with lower levels of digital skills.

"We have, however, delivered to cohorts remotely, providing support through the loan of digital equipment and the means to get connected to the internet."

When asked about the sluggish switch to EDSQs, a DfE spokesperson said: "Now more than ever, it is vital more adults have the

opportunity to learn and develop the digital skills they need to thrive in everyday life and work.

"That's why we've introduced a new generation of essential digital skills qualifications, and removing approval for funding for existing ICT qualifications, which are based on out-of-date standards that do not reflect the world we live in.

"The pandemic delayed rollout and take-up of EDSQs. We expect take-up to increase in the next academic year."



From left: Middlesbrough College EDSQ learners and sisters Catherine Allen and Ruth Smith

# Delayed AEB tender: 'No one can plan with such timescales'

BILLY CAMDEN

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Training providers were left "seething" this week after the Education and Skills Funding Agency announced yet another delay to the results for its adult education budget (AEB) tender.

"No one can plan with such timescales" was how many independent training provider bosses reacted as news of what appears to be the latest in a string of tender debacles emerged.

Hundreds of providers are particularly nervous as their existing AEB contracts run out in one month's time. The new contracts from this procurement are set to start from August 1.

Results of the £73 million tender were originally supposed to be communicated on June 24 but the ESFA last week announced they would not meet the deadline. Bidders were told the next day that the outcomes would be ready for June 28.

But a further update was issued on Monday to say that award decisions would again not be released.

No reason for the delay has been given and nor has a new estimated deadline.

ESFA chief executive Eileen Milner told her staff just two days after the latest delay that she would soon step down (see page 10). There is no suggestion that she is resigning because of the tender fiasco.

Independent training provider leaders and staff swiftly took to Twitter to express their outrage.

One user, called David Armstrong, said: "It really is dreadful, particularly when you consider that 'preparedness to deliver' is a major part of the procurement exercise. Tough to be prepared at an ever-shortening timescale."

Another, who uses the Twitter name Raging Robin, said: "But students are supposed to access this funding in a few weeks' time and



colleges/training providers don't even know if they have funding, let alone build their programmes.

"Wasn't this supposed to be sorted a year ago? Not even the courtesy of an explanation from the ESFA."

Tony Allen, an ex-deputy director of the then-named Skills Funding Agency, added that the ESFA "demonstrates time and time again their inability to run procurement processes with any degree of professionalism".

The ESFA had originally planned to launch the tender in July 2020 but faced a number of setbacks.

It is a "re-procurement" exercise and follows roughly the same scope as the controversial AEB tender that caused havoc in 2017 – the contracts for which expire on July 31, 2021.

The procurement was plagued with delays and had to be completely redone after the ESFA realised it was botched. And when the final outcomes were released, most providers had their funding slashed – including one case of a 97 per cent cut.

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

Later in 2017 the ESFA had more issues with its tender for non-levy apprenticeship

funding. For example, the agency awarded a contract to a defunct provider while rejecting an 'outstanding' college.

And just last year, the ESFA delayed its European Social Fund tender three times following technical errors as well as claims the agency broke procurement rules, which led to more threats of legal action.

Association of Employment and Learning Providers chief executive Jane Hickie said perhaps this latest debacle will "bang the final nail in the procurement coffin".

"The whole current AEB funding system is a busted flush and the DfE can no longer pretend otherwise."

She added: "For those providers that win contracts, they have only a month to prepare for delivery which will delay some programme roll-outs in areas where the reskilling of adults is an absolute imperative as part of the recovery from the pandemic. The consequences for existing AEB contractors who have missed out on awards in this procurement round are equally serious, especially in terms of staffing."

This tender is just for the national AEB, not for devolved combined authorities, which run their own procurements.



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Advertorial

# PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE – MENTAL FITNESS NEEDS TO BE A PRIORITY

David Gallagher, CEO at NCFE

It's not hard to see the impact of Covid-19 around us all. It has seeped into every facet of life as we knew it and it's only now, with the upheaval lasting considerably longer than we ever thought it would, that we're seeing the data on how it is affecting mental health.

Mental health charity, Mind, has recently released a report on Young People's Mental Health which reveals a strong relationship between mental health and learning. Their findings, along with new research from Unite Students showing a rise in the number of university applicants suffering from eating disorders and other mental health conditions, really showcases the scale of the problem we are dealing with and drives home the importance of doing everything we can as a sector to provide valid solutions to help maintain and improve the mental health of our young people.

Our education system currently suffers from a significant gap in general understanding and teaching of mental education and fitness. We're taught all about physical fitness (and undertake PE classes from a very young age), but there must be more awareness and skills development to enable young people to take responsibility for their state of mental fitness to prevent the documented decline of mental health.

NCFE has recently partnered with FIKA, a mental fitness platform, to tackle these issues head on. We conducted research around mental health which found that 79% of Brits believe that mental education should be taught in a similar way to physical education. It also found that 80% of people believe teaching confidence in

schools and colleges is as important as teaching maths and English.

The results of our research, alongside the worrying statistics uncovered by other organisations, clearly demonstrate the urgent need for preventative action – and this should start in schools and colleges. The public clearly value the importance of teaching confidence and identify that it is as crucial as maths and English in this changing world.

Fika is offering their mental fitness curriculum framework and skills development platform to a large number of further education colleges, thanks to charitable funds from NCFE. This work will help students maintain and develop their mental fitness, as opposed to waiting for reactive support to 'fix it' when problems have already manifested. NCFE has endorsed the Fika curriculum and certificates to help reinforce the important message of valuing the development of mental education and fitness in the seeking of employment.

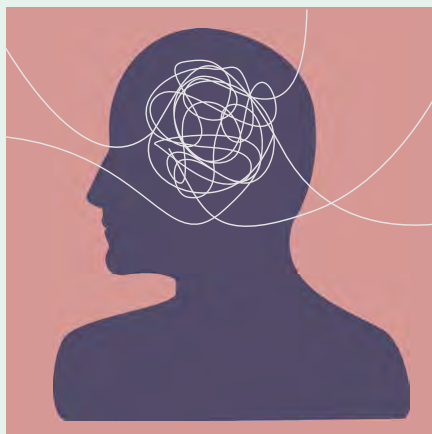
Learners across the UK will access remotely delivered interactive courses in positivity, confidence, connection, focus, motivation, stress management

and meaning via Fika's mental fitness platform – the first of its kind in the UK. These courses, created by expert performance psychologists and evidenced to build mental fitness, will be embedded into the learner experience and curriculum at the colleges involved, and learners will earn CV-enhancing certificates on completion of each of the seven Fika courses.

We are delighted to be funding this important work – at NCFE we are passionate about creating real change for young people, in many areas of their lives. One of the most fundamental things, which we must get right is teaching mental fitness at the crucial stages in education, before learners head into the 'real world'.

At the centre of our work, we are prioritising closing this education gap, to prevent young people from reaching a place of crisis. What we've shown in the past year, as an education sector, in terms of quickly adapting delivery and assessment, changing plans, and working environments, demonstrates that we are capable of reacting to problems and providing real-time solutions faster than we ever thought possible. Why shouldn't we apply that same urgency to the mental health crisis by proactively supporting young people and making a real change to the way we teach, and the way we think? The time is now to make a change to our education system if we're to stand any chance of creating a brighter future for our young people.

For more information on our work with FIKA, please visit our website here: <https://www.ncfe.org.uk/fika>



# Colleges told to prepare for return of on-site Covid testing in September

JAMES CARR

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Schools and colleges have been told to prepare for the return of on-site Covid testing from the start of the autumn term, with test kits and PPE to be sent out.

In a letter sent to education leaders, seen by *FE Week*, schools minister Nick Gibb states the government wants education settings to "be prepared for all scenarios, including testing on return after the summer holidays".

The letter states: "Given the uncertainties around the Covid situation we will face in the autumn, we want to help schools and colleges to be prepared for all scenarios, including testing on return after the summer holidays."

"We will therefore provide all schools and colleges with refreshed guidance, test kits, and PPE so that they can be ready to stand up on-site Asymptomatic Test Sites (ATS) from the start of the autumn term. We expect to be able to confirm the position alongside announcements on Step 4."

Prime minister Boris Johnson has said it is "very likely" people will be able to return to "pretty much life before Covid" on July 19.

Tests will start to be delivered from June 29 and information on the delivery schedule and refreshed guidance is now available for schools on the "document sharing platform".

It comes as cases in schools and colleges rocket. Data from Public Health England published last week shows there were 151 new Covid outbreaks in education settings in the week ending June 20, up from 96 the week before.

A PHE technical briefing on variants of concern released last week also shows that education settings were the "most common settings" for outbreaks of both the alpha and delta variants between April 28 and May 19, but such events became far less common around half-term at the end of May.



The letter confirms regular rapid asymptomatic testing will be paused in schools and colleges over the summer except for those that remain open.

For settings that open as summer schools, NHS Test and Trace will provide support with contact tracing. But testing will still be widely available and kits can either be collected from the local pharmacy or ordered online.

It is understood that at a meeting this week, DfE officials suggested schools may be responsible for contact tracing in the first week of the summer holidays – a situation similar to that over Christmas.

Schools and colleges were previously asked to conduct on-site testing in March when most students returned following the third lockdown.

Secondary school and college students needed to be tested four times in the first fortnight back – with the first three tests conducted on-site and the fourth at home. Testing was voluntary and pupils were allowed to attend lessons as normal following their first negative result.

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said it is "completely unacceptable" for the DfE to "tell schools and colleges without any consultation and in the vaguest terms that they

may have to set up something akin to field hospitals at the start of next term.

"There appears to be no understanding of the scale of the logistical challenge involved in setting up on-site Covid testing and processing hundreds or thousands of pupils," he added.

Barton said ASCL's understanding is that the intention is that schools and colleges would be asked to test every pupil twice in on-site stations.

However, "this is not explained in this week's communication, and neither is the apparent plan to then replace self-isolation of close contacts of positive Covid cases with daily contact testing next term", which was flagged up separately by the new health secretary Sajid Javid on Monday.

Gibb, in his letter, said he "recognises how difficult the past 18 months have been and how hard teachers and staff have worked to keep schools and colleges open."

"This has been an enormously challenging time for everyone and we would like to take the opportunity to thank you for everything you have done, including on testing, to maintain education provision during the pandemic."

# Third of apprentice assessors have never awarded a certificate

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## Exclusive

More than one-third of organisations signed up to deliver apprenticeship assessments are yet to award any certificates, *FE Week* can reveal.

A freedom of information request shows that 125 companies on the Education and Skills Funding Agency's 324-strong end-point assessment organisation (EPAO) register have not recorded any assessments.

Smaller EPAOs which spoke to *FE Week* blamed larger or better-known awarding bodies for squeezing them out, saying it was hard to win assessment contracts without an established track record.

Others blamed the impact of Covid for holding apprentices back from being ready for assessment.

After being shown the data, Federation of Awarding Bodies chief executive Tom Bewick said the apprenticeship assessment market currently presents a "confused picture".

He told *FE Week* this is compounded by the fact starts on standards are way down, meaning "multiple bodies competing in a diminishing pool of EPA opportunities".

He reasoned that "market forces" in a competitive sector "will decide who survives or not" and he is unsurprised providers and employers are putting faith in tried and tested, Ofqual-regulated organisations.

One EPAO which has yet to deliver certificates is defence and homeland security assessor Explosive Learning Solutions (ELS).

The company's head of end-point assessment, Caroline Walton, claimed that employers had asked to use them for apprentice assessment, but that training providers "have refused, saying they already have their preferred EPAO suppliers".

Having only joined the register in March 2020, Walton said there is "certainly is not a fair playing field out there and for a new



EPAOs like ELS. It has been exhausting, frustrating and heartbreaking."

Additionally, as a new EPAO, ELS cannot provide evidence and case studies to win tenders for assessment contracts. "I can see why so many possibly gave up on their EPAO journeys," Walton added.

Steve Chesman from Vitae Services Limited says rail employers who could choose them to assess the rail engineering operative level 2 standard are "difficult to pin down, and they seem to prefer to use the more well-known names".

Essential Learning and Skills' David Matthews said they had been "trying" to increase their offering – they are on the register for the level 3 unified communications technician standard – "but have been unable to do so, due to the larger EPAOs taking on the vast majority of EPAs".

This has meant the organisation is only getting its first assessments later this year.

Other EPAOs said they had not delivered certificates as they were new to the register; that cohorts on the standards they assess had not reached gateway yet; or that Covid had held apprentices back.

*FE Week* has also found a further nine EPAOs have dropped off the register since its launch, with most simply saying it was a business decision.

But one of them, Mighty Oak Training, which was signed up to assess the level 4 revenues and welfare benefits practitioner standard,

said the cost outweighed the work involved for a small business.

The provider was run by sole-trader Julie Maycock. She told *FE Week*: "Mighty Oak Training has chosen to withdraw from the register. It became evident that the amount of work involved outweighed the small amount of assessments we were likely to receive in our specialist field. The process is not helpful to small organisations and it is not cost effective to continue as an EPAO."

Asked if it was concerned at the number of EPAOs that have not carried out any assessments yet, a government spokesperson said: "EPAOs join the register for different standards on a regular basis and therefore some EPAOs will have been offering certain standards for longer than others."

"An EPAO has to complete readiness checks by ESFA and the external quality assurance provider before they can deliver an EPA for a given standard."

"The ESFA monitors the activity of EPAOs and has frequent contact with EPAOs who have not yet delivered assessments in order to understand their readiness status and whether they have EPAs booked."

Bewick said it is "time now to put the Wild West aspects of it behind us and to support a proper mature market where there is real transparency for all concerned".

He called on the ESFA to provide "better information about service and performance levels at the gateway process and beyond".





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# ESFA chief exec to stand down

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## Exclusive

The chief executive of the Education and Skills Funding Agency Eileen Milner is to stand down, FE Week has learned.

The senior civil servant told staff on Wednesday that the “time has come” for her to “go to a new challenge”.

Milner was appointed in 2017 shortly after the organisation formed through the merger of the Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency.

The ESFA is an executive agency of the Department for Education responsible for funding education and skills for children, young people and adults.

It is not yet known where Milner is moving to, but in a letter to staff she said there was an “important role for me to undertake in the area that I call home and that feels important to do, to try and make a contribution, most especially in the context of recovery from the pandemic”.

According to Milner’s LinkedIn profile, she is based in the “greater Cambridge area”.

A DfE spokesperson confirmed Milner was leaving her position and “we want to thank her for her work over the past three-and-a-half years and wish her all the best for the future”.



Eileen Milner

“An interim appointment to the position of chief executive and accounting officer will be made in due course.”

However, the spokesperson would not say exactly when Milner was leaving, nor where she was moving on to.

Milner joined the ESFA from the Care Quality Commission, where she was an executive director. According to her profile on the government’s website, she started her career in local government, specialising in education services, before moving into higher education.

The civil servant told colleagues she had been “both delighted and apprehensive” to join the ESFA in 2017. “Delighted to be able to return to education, but naturally apprehensive about quite what challenges I might face – strangely enough, a pandemic didn’t feature in my list of worries.”

But Milner said she could say with “absolute confidence” that she had “never had a day when I have regretted taking up the role, and frankly, in the toughest of times, the reason for that has been entirely down to all of you”.

She said the “sense of community and family” created by ESFA staff was “truly exceptional and I am so

thankful for it”.

Milner also said the organisation was “blessed in so many ways in terms of our people and in terms of ongoing leadership”, describing the quality of the executive team as “exceptional”.

“They are collectively committed to ensuring that the transition to new leadership happens as smoothly and supportively as possible. I will, of course, be looking to have the opportunity to say farewell properly to you in the coming weeks.

“For now though, we will carry on doing what we always do – being absolutely committed to delivering at a level of excellence and expertise.”

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# Disappointment as human resources T Level development stopped

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## Exclusive

The government's decision to "cease" a T Level in human resources will cut the industry off from a potentially precious entry route, sector leaders have warned.

An update from the Education and Skills Funding Agency last Friday announced the development on the qualification, due to be rolled out in 2023, had paused because no awarding bodies had come forward to develop it.

The British Institute of Recruiters, a professional body for staffing and recruitment, described the news as "disappointing" as they had big hopes it would be a game-changer in the way people in the industry, especially in small employers, are trained.

**"This T Level would have been an excellent route into HR that would have benefitted SMEs"**

A spokesperson said the institute is concerned as the "majority working in HR for small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) have no formal qualification as they never set out to pursue a career in HR.

"This T Level, offering a mix of study and work placement, would have been an excellent route into HR that would have benefitted SMEs.

"HR skills are also needed in the voluntary sector, and this T Level would have ticked a lot of boxes."

The Institute for Apprenticeships and



Technical Education, responsible for delivering T Levels, launched a tender for awarding bodies to develop eight T Levels in wave four of the qualifications' rollout – including the one in HR – in November 2020.

Their aim was to award contracts in August 2021.

Announcing that the HR T Level had "ceased" last week, the ESFA said: "We were not able to award the contract for the development of this T Level to an awarding organisation during the recent wave four procurement exercise.

"At this stage, we are unable to commit to a date when work on the HR T Level might resume."

Two of the big awarding organisations who are delivering other T Levels, Pearson and NCFE, remained tight-lipped about their reasons for snubbing the qualification. Both have experience in developing HR qualifications for the further education sector.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which offers qualifications at levels 3, 5 and 7 and end-point assesses human resources and learning and development apprenticeships, said it had not

bid for the T Level because "focus is primarily in post-18 education".

A spokesperson said it "shares the government's disappointment" that it was "not able to award a contract" but explained most of the sector's training is focused on adult education rather than T Levels' 16-to-18 age range.

The HR T Level was delayed from its original start date of 2022 last July, and its removal now means the overall number of T Levels has dropped to 23.

**"At this stage, we are unable to commit to a date when work on the HR T Level might resume"**

The cultural, heritage and visitor attractions T Level was the last to be removed from development, which also happened last July.

A government spokesperson said the cultural T Level had been canned because of "insufficient employer demand" for a new technical qualification in that field.

The government's new flagship qualification, T Levels began rolling out last September, mixing classroom study with an industry placement that lasts at least 315 hours.

Three qualifications rolled out last September in the first wave: digital, construction, and education and childcare.

In September 2021, a further seven will start being taught in classrooms; while an extra six will roll out in 2022.

A further seven qualifications are to be introduced in 2023.

The procurement of awarding organisations for the 2023 wave began in November, with the winners set to be announced over the summer.



# £80m rebuild puts troubled college's merger on hold

FRASER WHIELDON

FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK

A multi-million-pound redevelopment which put a college's finances at "significant risk" has now delayed its much-needed merger.

Richmond-upon-Thames College had been due to merge with HCUC (Harrow College Uxbridge College) on July 30, 2021 but announced on Tuesday this had been called off with no new date in sight.

A spokesperson told *FE Week* the delay had been caused by local authority planning issues regarding two new sports halls, which are part of a two-phase £80 million campus redevelopment.

While the plans for one sports hall are ready to be submitted, the other one has "required some changes and this is causing a delay to the dual submission.

"We are confident that this will be resolved, and we are working with all stakeholders and partners to meet the required planning conditions."

The college has said the challenges "present unresolved financial issues for both HCUC and RuTC". The redevelopment had already plunged Richmond-upon-Thames into supervised status and forced it to drop plans in January 2020 to deliver T Levels.

## "The challenges present unresolved financial issues for both HCUC and RuTC"

The project involves a 100-customer restaurant, 3D prototyping laboratory and STEM Centre.

Skills minister Gillian Keegan wrote to the college's chair in March 2020 to warn that the "increasing financial commitments



Richmond-upon-Thames College

required by the ongoing campus redevelopment project" had made her "greatly concerned this presents significant risks to the college's working capital and its future sustainability".

This was after an FE Commissioner report, published that same month, found budgetary control issues had emerged since May 2019 and there were increasing concerns about the underlying cash position and losses on core college provision.

"Serious shortcomings in financial management and control during 2018/19 have meant that the full extent of financial underperformance is only now being fully identified," the report read.

The college's financial turnover had halved over the past seven years, and although it did not have any commercial loans, there were substantial advance capital grants and receipts from asset sales, which had led to "exceptionally high levels" of restricted cash.

The college generated a £5.1 million deficit in 2019/20, and a £6.2 million deficit in 2018/19.

It had seen the departure of a number of senior leaders in the period immediately

before the FE Commissioner's report, including the principal Robin Ghurbhurun, the vice principal for finance and enterprise, the clerk and deputy principal.

A new chair, head of governance, and two vice chairs were also appointed. The college is currently being run by an interim, Elaine McMahon, who succeeded another temporary leader, former Petroc College boss Diane Dimond, in September.

A structure and prospects appraisal to "identify options for structural change including merger" was ordered after the commissioner's intervention, which led to the announcement last November that RuTC would be joining HCUC.

Despite the hold-up, both colleges have said they remain "committed" to the merger, with Richmond chair Ian Valvona writing in a June update on the college's website: "It is the intention that merger will go ahead with only a relatively brief delay until the issues are resolved."

HCUC's chair Nick Davies said the partnership between the two providers "remains strong," as they believe "we can develop a far stronger educational offer by working together".

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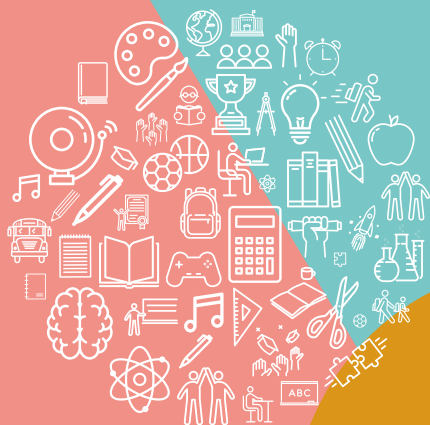
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# Applications go live for Pupil Premium Plus Post-16 pilot scheme

**FRASER WHIELDON**  
**FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

The government is on the hunt for local authorities to take part in a £3 million pilot to extend its "pupil premium plus" scheme into further education.

Applications opened on Thursday for the trial which will see "virtual school heads", tasked with improving outcomes for looked-after children and care leavers, work with colleges and training providers from October.

The Pupil Premium Plus Post-16 Pilot will run until March 2022 and councils have been invited to put in bids which show how they can lift the profile of the young people, improve their attendance and support delivering their education plans.

Children's minister Vicky Ford has praised the "phenomenal job" that has been done by the existing virtual school heads, a mandatory appointment for each local authority to oversee looked-after children's education, attendance, attainment and achievement since the Children and Families Act 2014.

## "The impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated the challenges faced by these young people"

Virtual school heads currently receive pupil premium plus funding of £2,345 per child in care, aged four to 15, to provide individual support in line with their personal



education plan, as well as help for their overall cohort.

Guidance for bidders to the pilot states that this funding ceases when the child reaches the age of 16, but virtual school head duties and the "need for bespoke support continue for as long as the child is in care", which is why the trial is being run.

"The impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated the challenges faced by these young people, who do not currently benefit from the same levers of financial support as the pre-16 cohort," the guidance says.

It adds that the pilot will "enable the DfE to build an evidence base of what works, which will be used to inform any future support for this cohort".

The expression of interest form asks bidding local authorities how many looked-after children they have in post-16 education, how much funding they are requesting and the costings for their delivery, as well as a "clear and realistic" delivery proposal.

There will also be an independent

evaluation of the pilot involving monitoring data and case studies, and in their bids, councils have to provide a plan for collecting information to feed into the evaluation.

Applicants have until July 22 to put in their bid and results will be announced in early September.

The move comes as the number of looked-after children aged 16 and over has increased by ten per cent from 17,280 in 2018 to 19,030 in 2020.

The DfE's 2019 children in need review reported the "strong advocacy ability" of virtual heads provides opportunities to "raise visibility and understanding" of youngsters who have needed a social worker.

The government said when the report was published in June 2019 they would look at whether there's a case for "extending and adapting" the virtual school head role.

Pupil premium plus funding is used for children in care, whereas the pupil premium is used to increase the attainment of disadvantaged children.

# Virtual Natspec games prove a hit

**FRASER WHIELDON**  
**FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

Students enjoyed some of their "best experiences" at the first fully virtual Natspec Games last week.

Organisers are even looking at using a mix of virtual and in-person events for future games, which are run by the specialist providers' organisation Natspec, with help from AoC Sport.

Over 40 specialist colleges took part in the games, which are held annually and involve sporting events and exercise sessions based on disciplines such as yoga, ball sports, movement and music.

One of sessions was led by Ava McAuley, 24, from St John's School and College in Sussex, and incorporated singing, body percussion and learning the sign language Makaton.

The session started off with a 'hello' song, she told *FE Week*, to make sure people with restricted mobility, such as those in wheelchairs, could be included.

This was followed up by a body percussion exercise – where participants generate sounds through actions like stomping, patting, clapping hands and snapping fingers – to perform a song called "I Like the Flowers".

During the session, she also gave a lesson on the Makaton sign language, which involves the person speaking the words as well as signing them.

She called it "definitely one of my best experiences", and reception from colleges has been rapturous. "I got feedback saying that people liked my grounding in meditation, people enjoyed the sing-song, and I taught

quite a few people Makaton signs that they are now going to go and show other people."

Bridge College in Manchester is even trying to get her to go on Good Morning Britain with them, which Ava is looking forward to, as "I get to be famous".

Ava has been studying peer mentoring and will be moving on to a level 3 course in supporting teaching and learning next academic year.

Her tutor Steve Elston said it was "really amazing" to see her deliver the session, and was particularly impressed by how she routinely asked if people were OK and gave encouragement to participants, saying: "Oh I can see this college smiling and joining in".

In addition to sessions like Ava's, the games featured a number of challenges. For instance, one challenge run with Boccia England tasked participants with knocking over as many skittles in five throws of a ball as they could, which was won by National Star College.

Another challenge was to design a mascot for the games – which was won by Jess Lowe from Sense College in Loughborough and Olly the Owl.

The 3-Step Challenge run with the FA tasked students with moving around a square with a football as many times as possible in one minute. This was won jointly by CSC Doncaster and Bridge College.

The Aurora Group's Foxes Academy won England Netball's challenge to throw and catch a ball as many times as possible in one minute.

And David Lewis Centre won the task set by Harlequins Rugby Foundation to move to a 'try' line and



Students from CSC Doncaster doing one of the prerecorded workout sessions

back with a ball as many times as possible in one minute.

Each of the winners received a £50 sports equipment voucher.

The event also included a question-and-answer session with blind England footballer Azeem Amir and deaf England Rugby Sevens and Sale Sharks Women's player Jodie Ounsley.

AoC Sport's disability development officer Shannon Howarth said the event, which ran from Monday 21 to Friday 25 June, with funding from Sport England, had been "brilliant", with a "real mix" of sessions.

She said that organisers had not had time last year to put together a virtual event after having to cancel the in-person competition; but this year's – the fifth Natspec Games – used a mix of live and pre-recorded sessions.

The virtual sessions were designed so they can be delivered in the classroom, as "some colleges don't necessarily have the big sports halls or sports facilities".

So, from now on, she thinks, "Colleges will be more confident to be able to deliver within the classroom."

She says the switchover to virtual will "definitely" have a lasting change on the games, and organisers are looking at a "hybrid" model of in-person as well as virtual delivery in the future.



Shannon Howarth



Ava McAuley

# SFCA showcases student work on theme of Fake News

FRASER WHIELDON  
FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK

## From front

More than 250 students from 58 colleges have had their work on the theme of "Fake News" exhibited in a Sixth Form Colleges Association exhibition.

Thursday saw the launch of this year's SFCA virtual showcase of photos and artwork by students, with the exhibition running from July 1 to 22.

Association chief executive Bill Watkin called it a "celebration of the arts and a recognition of the excellence in sixth-form colleges."

"But it also highlights how young people feel about having to navigate the vast amount of news and information that is available in the modern world, and at the same time, to discern what is the truth."

"Art has always played an important role in social and political commentary, and the students featured in Fake News have shown they have the talent to communicate their feelings about this important subject in a powerful and effective way."

A number of pictures in the exhibition focus on misinformation around



Pieces from the SFCA student exhibition

Covid-19, but also address themes such as body image and newspaper coverage, and include images of British prime minister Boris Johnson, former US president Donald Trump, and Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg.

This year's participants included Coulsdon Sixth Form College A-level photography students Maia Francis, Casey White and Phoebe Newman.

Maia's piece, Covid Deniers, features a photo of her face split into two halves. One half is photographed in black and white while she is wearing a mask plastered with public safety messages from the Covid-19 crisis. The other half is in colour, with no mask, just the words " 'covid 19 isn't real' covid denier" [sic].

Francis said she was trying to highlight "the difference in what people have been saying during Covid. "So, you have the people who are abiding by all the guidelines, and then you have the people who say that it's not real."

White is featured in the exhibit with his piece, Covid-19 fake news, a grainy, black-and-white photo of him looking out of a bus window on to a collage of newspaper clippings on the pandemic. This includes headlines saying: "This is the year we will defeat Covid" and "Death is all around us... so follow the rules".

White wanted the piece to reflect how coverage of wearing masks and sanitising regularly "affects people's health".

Newman was inspired by the photographic collage-maker Pablo Thécua for her piece, Gender Issues, which features one picture of a man seemingly crying with the words 'toxic masculinity' hanging overhead.

To his left is a picture of a woman, her head split into three different faces above her shoulders, with a message warning against sexual insults all around her.

"I was trying to get across the way the media portrays masculinity, can sometimes have an effect on young boys and how they feel about themselves and the expectations of what they should be," Newman said.

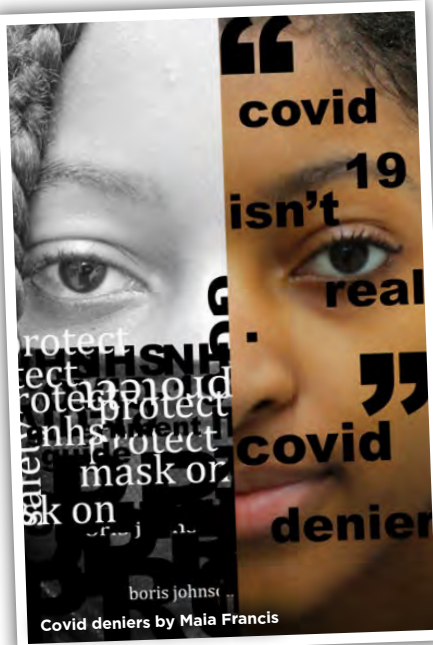
With the female piece, she wanted to speak out about how the phrase "men will be men" can excuse aggressive behaviour.

The college's visual arts course leader Neal Vaughan said taking part of the show, as they have for three years, is part of the learners' experience: "We like to move learning outside of the classroom, to have industry links and employability."

"So this really does give them a sense of what it's like in the real world, applying and going through the selection process for exhibitions."

His students "really responded" to the fake news theme, he added.

Last year's SFCA exhibit featured pieces by more than 140 students on the topic of "life stuck at home in lockdown".







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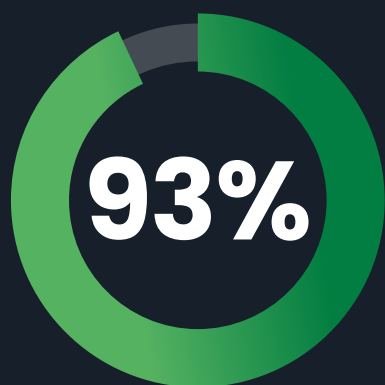
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Introducing

# JO GRADY

General secretary,  
University and  
College Union (UCU)



## ‘What would Dolly Parton do? I ask’

**JESS STAUFENBERG**  
**@STAUFENBERGJ**

**Jo Grady, general secretary of the UCU, swept to the leadership at a young age pledging to improve wages in FE. Here she explains why members shouldn't wait for others to make it happen**

"What would Dolly Parton do, essentially? That's what I ask." The blonde country singer does not at first seem the most obvious role model for Jo Grady, general secretary of the University and

College Union, formerly a lecturer in employment relations at Sheffield and Leicester universities. Grady is astoundingly young for a trade union leader, having won the leadership at just 36 years old, and, like her heroine, is blonde and grins widely. But it's taking action that won Parton to Grady's heart.

"I know it's going to sound like an absurd thing to say, but Dolly Parton didn't just sit around saying, 'Isn't it awful children can't read?' She set up the Imagination Library," says Grady, referring to the singer's huge literacy initiative.

Rolling your sleeves up and getting stuck in was the platform on which Grady won the leadership in 2019, securing 64 per cent of the vote (almost double the runner-up's) on a turnout of 20 per cent. It was a platform of fighting talk, sweeping in after her predecessor, also a woman, had spent 12 years at the helm. Despite never having run an organisation before, Grady entered confidently and in particular said it was FE where the union had "made the least progress in protecting or improving our members' wages" and that it should spend more of its "fighting fund" to support

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striking workers.

In the past two years, Grady appears to have put her money where her mouth is. Right now, UCU members across 11 colleges are casting ballots on whether to go on strike over pay (the pay gap with schoolteachers currently stands at £9,000) and redundancy plans. The ballots close in mid-July and strikes would take place in the autumn. Meanwhile, 600 prison staff across almost 50 prisons and young offender institutes have walked out four times since May, with two strikes just last month. The union leader has also been found on picket lines everywhere from Nottingham College to Islington College. As at January, the union had about 38,000 FE members.

But her drive for action doesn't mean Grady sees herself as a charismatic trade union-Dolly Parton type, leading the charge for a fairer 9 to 5. When she arrived, she says, many members had forgotten it was they – not the UCU leadership – who should be taking action.

"I get really annoyed when people say, 'Someone should do x' or 'The union should do y'. And I say, 'Why don't you do it, you're in the union? Stop using third-party language. Find other people, find your community.'"

A more passive attitude towards union membership arose during the New Labour years, says Grady, and was the subject of her PhD at Lancaster University (she got masters funding and then stayed on). "It was on the extent to which trade unions had collaborated with a neoliberal agenda, with New Labour," she explains.



Grady taking up her role as general secretary

"I think there was an internalisation following the 1980s, with the huge attacks on the trade union movement, that winning was difficult. I think there had been a loss of courage." As a result, trade unions moved to a "service model", rather than a collective action model, she says. "It was an assumption that people were joining not because they were committed to progressive politics and social justice, but they just wanted stuff. They wanted representing, almost like an insurance card."

At the same time, she says, unions had begun to accept a watered-down vision for members. She joined UCU aged 25 as a lecturer, and by age 35 had been left unimpressed. "It seemed

to be about just managing the decline of terms and conditions," she frowns. "It doesn't mean they weren't fighting, but there was a sense of just defending what we'd got or making the decline palatable."

"What that does," she continues, "is create quite a passive membership, that fosters a sense of dependency that someone else should be doing things for them. For me, it should be the opposite. That is not the union I want. It's changing to be more member-led." It's a heady mix of collective action via personal responsibility.

Grady credits her Catholic grandfather with encouraging her towards university, and, once there, regularly checking when she'd be a professor. But her meteoric career was not expected by her family: "It was seen as a bit of an unusual thing, but it was also like, 'Oh, that's Joanne,'"

she laughs.

I comment she's a self-made woman, but am carefully corrected. "I don't really like that idea of a self-made person, someone who's escaped their working-class roots," says Grady lightly, and you can see the teacher coming through. "It completely erases the communities that working-class people are brought up in. The success for me is fundamentally embedded in the community I came out of." She laughs again. "I genuinely credit a lot of my skillset to working in a pub."

**"I get really annoyed when people say, 'Someone should do x'"**

Her father was a miner in west Yorkshire earning a good wage, and Grady was brought up in Wakefield on a council estate she remembers as a "triumph of social housing – beautiful, with wide roads, trees, terraces, everyone had a garden". But pit closures meant the household, with three children under four, went without a salary for a whole year. Afterwards, her parents opened a pub and some of Grady's earliest memories are heading through the pub tap room to the flat



Grady with a campaign banner in Wales



# Profile

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upstairs.

Grady doesn't attempt to ham up a childhood of hardship, as politicians occasionally will. "We could afford books, and when I wanted to go to university, we had money to help me go. I sailed through with a lot of material comforts, but for the gift of birth, it could have been different."

## "I genuinely credit a lot of my skillset to working in a pub"

Grady recalls those differences. On non-uniform day, some children couldn't afford the pound for charity. One particular incident stands out. "There was a girl who I think was one of seven, the rest were boys. The household got nits and they all had their heads shaved, including the girl. I remember as a child being horrified that things that didn't cost a lot of money, like shampoo, were being denied to people."

The environment fostered a strong sense of unfairness, and also grounded Grady. "You'd meet such an array of people in the pub," she recalls, chuckling about a millionaire regular. "It was the social living-room of the community. It's a really grounding experience – that no one is better than you, but you're not better than anyone else."

Steeped in community, Grady has been intent on building community among UCU members.

Last year the union set up a "strike school", she says, which 800 members have been through already. It's a deliberate inversion of the service model Grady sees as so disabling. "It's about, if you want to win, campaign, ballot, these are the things you need to do." The first school was in September last year, with two classes a week over six weeks, and the second school finished this week.

It's also a pushback against the Trade Union Act 2016. Fiercely opposed by unions, it requires industrial ballots to attract a 50 per cent turnout in order for any vote to be legally valid. But the real catch, says Grady, is that ballots cannot be electronic.

"The struggle is the paper ballot. You have to let people know it's coming, post it to them, they have to post it back," she says. "I would argue the government did it to make it as difficult as possible to take part in action."

Another key barrier to creating effective pressure is the lack of coverage of FE in mainstream media. Grady thinks the prison strikes – held over Covid concerns for staff, as well as the "barbaric" lack of education resources for prisoners, she says – were well covered "because they get what prisons are,

even though they're part of FE". But there was a "silent avalanche" of Covid in colleges that failed to get proper attention.

"I don't know why the media is intent on erasing FE from copy. I've been constantly pointing out colleges must be treated differently to schools. They are adult spaces, there's a huge range of people – stop talking about them like they're for children."

Grady says she is currently saying teaching should remain online for the first term back in September. I ask why UCU has argued for remote teaching when schoolteachers were giving face-to-face lessons.

"The argument for schools was more about the mental wellbeing and educational development of children, and the fact parents would have to stay at home," she replies. "The complexities and concerns were not transferrable to the HE and FE sector." Given the mental health crisis engulfing FE and university students, it seems odd to assume these issues are not massive for these students too. Many college staff I speak to say their students can't take any more time online.

But Grady is fighting for her members – or rather, helping them fight for themselves. She says she ran as general secretary in large part because as a lecturer she was burning out, and was either going to "change the sector or walk away". And she's not finished yet.

"There would be nothing stopping me running again if I felt the job wasn't done, and there would be nothing stopping me going back to teaching. Time will tell."

As Dolly says, she's holding out for When Life is Good Again.



Grady on the picket line at Nottingham College



Grady with Jeremy Corbyn outside Islington College

## DAVID GALLAGHER

Chief executive,  
NCFE

## Talking about a 'middle-class' grab on apprenticeships could send the wrong message

**The claim suggests a scarcity of apprenticeships and that only working-class people should do them, writes David Gallagher**

Gillian Keegan, apprenticeship and skills minister, recently highlighted her concerns about a middle-class "grab" on apprenticeships. She outlined government fears about degree apprenticeships growing in popularity and said that "people who would have gone to university anyway... [will] squeeze out people like me, sat in a comprehensive school at 16, with nowhere to go".

Ms Keegan is absolutely right to want to ensure that degree apprenticeships do not become exclusively for the middle classes. Degree apprenticeships are a great chance to bridge the gap between education and employment, and it's pivotal that they are used to open doors for those with fewer opportunities. That's 'levelling up' in action.

However, the language that is currently being used has the potential to send the wrong message. In fact, conversations that pitch learners from differing backgrounds against one another in a bidding war for places are divisive and counterproductive.

By suggesting that apprenticeships and other vocational routes risk being 'grabbed' by the middle classes, there is an implicit judgment that vocational qualifications are



usually only the reserve of the working classes. It makes it sound like they are a fall-back option for those who can't access university.

Through this narrative, university continues to be badged as the ultimate benchmark of success. Learners continue to be marginalised and boxed in by where they have come from, and vocational education routes continue to be stigmatised.

We've already seen the reverse take place in higher education, which has always been framed as an aspirational, middle-class pursuit straight out of the New Labour playbook.

To date, there has been a failure to tackle this issue in universities, and we need to ensure that vocational education doesn't fall prey to similar problems.

As apprenticeships and vocational/technical qualifications are climbing the political agenda, now is the time to positively shape public perception of vocational education. Learning has the potential to be the 'great leveller', creating a fairer and more

inclusive society through the power of education.

So there needs to be a cultural change and increased capacity on all routes in high demand, so it doesn't result in anyone losing out. Learners from every walk of life need to feel that opportunities are opening up to them, not being closed off, and the focus should be on expanding availability to those from all backgrounds.

### "Conversations about a bidding war for places are divisive"

For this to happen, there needs to be a two-pronged approach. Most importantly, capacity needs to be increased where demand is growing so that everyone can pursue their preferred routes – "grabbing" suggests sparsity, which is counteracted by greater supply.

If a broad range of people are recognising the excellent opportunity presented by degree apprenticeships then that's fantastic; we just need to make sure the sector is ready to meet that demand so no one misses out.

Secondly, work has to be done to dismantle stereotypes around various education routes and who should be accessing them. Central to that strategy is placing equal value on all education routes, so that learners are equipped with the knowledge and the agency to make empowering choices about their futures.

Ultimately, we need to get to a point where learners choose their next steps in education based on their passions, skills and personal ambitions, as opposed to the expectations set by those around them and by society more widely. Learners should no longer feel hemmed in by where they come from, or what their parents do for a living.

The focus needs to be on what suits them best. Without this holistic approach, a commitment to lifelong learning cannot be put into action in any tangible sense.

I fully appreciate that a meaningful cultural change in our perception of FE and vocational education will take time. But we stand on the verge of a real step change here and we all need to do all we can to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment across all educational routes.

PROFESSOR  
DAVID  
PHOENIX

Vice chancellor,  
London South Bank  
University, chief  
executive, LSBU Group



## UTCs could survive by extending year groups beyond age 18

**Many struggling UTCs are lowering their age of entry, but they could have more impact by going the other way, writes David Phoenix**

Technical education is critical for filling the UK's huge skills shortages, raising productivity and giving students opportunities to learn and build successful careers.

But holes in our education system are restricting students from studying higher technical education.

The creation of UTCs in 2010 was aimed at tackling some of those challenges by offering school pupils a four-year technical education.

Unfortunately, starting at 14 years old created recruitment challenges, which some UTCs have addressed by "extending down" to 11 or 13 years old.

Just recently in *FE Week* we heard that more UTCs are extending their age range to help stay afloat. However, I believe only "extending down" present risks as well as benefits.

At South Bank UTC, we took a different path by "extending up", rather than down, into year 14 – an extra year of learning, from 18 years old.

That's possible through the UTCs' membership of the LSBU Group, a partnership between London South Bank University, South Bank Colleges (including Lambeth College) and Southbank Academies Trust, which has South



Bank UTC.

Most pupils at 18 years old go on to university or to work. Few go on to study standalone technical qualifications at level 4, which are the equivalent of the first year of a degree.

**"For UTCs it would offer a unique point of difference to other providers"**

Moreover, this year, some of our UTC students were unable to take their planned path when employers withdrew pre-arranged engineering apprenticeship places due to the impact of Covid-19.

Faced with this challenge, the UTC collaborated with other members of LSBU Group to find a solution and quickly spotted areas of overlap across the two institutions.

The BTEC engineering programme covered much of the content in the higher national certificate mechanical engineering course at university.

Working together, South Bank UTC and LSBU created a new year 14 to enable UTC pupils to stay on for an extra fifth year.

So we are enabling pupils to gain a level 4 higher national qualification and to go directly into the second year of higher education (level 5) at university if they so wish.

South Bank UTC pupils have the option to stay on for an extra year to study for a BTEC extended diploma in engineering.

By working with the university on curriculum content and enrichment activities, that additional year gives students the opportunity to enhance their level 3 BTEC study to meet the HNC requirement at level 4.

Students have the option to take the exam with the fees covered by scholarships from LSBU.

Second-year entry to LSBU is possible because we identified BTEC modules that matched the university's first-year requirements.

So we equipped pupils who achieve a merit in the requisite elements of the HNC to transfer

directly into the second year of our mechanical engineering degree.

"Extending up" to year 14 creates a distinctive five-year programme much closer to the German model, enabling pupils to enter the workplace with a level 4 qualification or to complete a degree in two years.

Any UTC could provide a year 14, but major challenges are there for those without a strong university partnership, including funding, teaching capacity and course restrictions.

That's how our partnership enables us to go the extra mile and offer students new learning choices.

The benefits of "extending up to year 14" are huge. For pupils, it provides free access to a higher technical qualification without moving their institution or home and an accessible route to level 4 without committing to a full degree programme.

For UTCs it offers a unique point of difference to other providers by enabling them to provide an easier transition from school into higher level technical education.

And South Bank UTC's recruitment is strong this year, with 149 enrolled pupils in year 12.

Finally, for the government, this model helps fill gaps in the UK education system that contribute hugely to skills shortages.

Let's recognise the importance of specialist institutions and start extending up – not just down.



## PAUL JOYCE

Deputy director,  
further education  
and skills, Ofsted



## The need to put young people with SEND at the heart of recovery couldn't be clearer

**The FE sector has worked really hard to support learners with additional needs, but Covid has been so damaging, writes Paul Joyce**

Recently we reported on some of the challenges that children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities have faced during the pandemic. Our findings are based on a series of joint visits to local areas, carried out with the Care Quality Commission (CQC). They highlight just how damaging Covid-19 has been for young people with SEND, including those aged 16 to 25.

All children and young people have lost out on so much during the pandemic, and young people with SEND in further education are no exception. But it's clear that the sector has gone above and beyond, despite great adversity, to help young people learn and to keep them safe.

Most independent specialist colleges and general FE colleges stayed open during the three lockdowns for very vulnerable young people and key worker children. Staff worked tirelessly to provide a service, although this tended to focus more on young people's health and wellbeing than their education.

While many young people with SEND returned to their colleges in the autumn, it wasn't possible for all – especially in smaller providers. Although some learners returned briefly to college in the autumn

term, they stopped again when the government's guidance on shielding was updated.

Learners who couldn't attend in person received remote education. Many young people coped well, but others struggled – some finding it hard to use the technology and to engage with their teachers through a screen.

We know many providers worked really hard to get paper-based and practical resources, such as cooking ingredients, to learners, delivering them by hand to their homes. We even heard of providers taking food parcels to young people's families who were in crisis.

Some young people with SEND had moved to a different further education provider in September 2020, but still weren't attending in person because of health or other concerns.

Some who returned in person hadn't made new friends, having missed out on the usual transition activities – although many providers went out of their way to help learners settle in, managing transition 1:1 out of hours, so learners could familiarise

themselves with the setting.

Young people told us that the pandemic had been an incredibly lonely time. Not only were they missing out on seeing friends at college, many were also shielding for health reasons. Some had only left the house a few times since the start of the first national lockdown, and even then, this was only for medical appointments.

**“Young people told us that the pandemic had been an incredibly lonely time”**

While some young people could chat with friends online, this wasn't possible for others, who have difficulties communicating in this way. Many providers recognised this, and found new ways of keeping young people in touch with their friends.

All young people missed out on academic learning and had exams and work experience cancelled. For young people with SEND, the

pandemic also affected access to specialist therapies and support.

Some were able to carry on with these at home – providers used videos to help young people continue with physiotherapy, and work online with their speech and language therapists.

But in some cases, we heard that young people's mobility and communication skills have deteriorated. Many young people have missed out on the vital preparation and training they need to progress to the next stages of education or work, and some said they were anxious about their futures, particularly their employment prospects.

Many providers have extended young people's learning programmes to provide them with opportunities to develop the skills that they need, particularly for independent living.

It's clear that across the FE sector, providers have worked incredibly hard to help young people learn and to keep them safe over the past 16 months – and at times this has been an uphill struggle.

As we emerge from the pandemic, the need to put young people with SEND at the heart of recovery plans couldn't be clearer.

In the coming months, we'll be working closely with the CQC on new area SEND inspections.

The new approach will help bring improvement in the way education, health and care services work together to get the best possible outcomes for young people with SEND.





## READER'S REPLY

### Sector leaders warn of 'barmy' delays to 16-18 traineeship expansion

The issue with 19-24 traineeships is that the Jobcentre Plus is focused on Kickstart, which is the main priority for this group as it takes them off the unemployment figures which they have targets to hit – that's direct from a high-up JCP source. Traineeships in some JCP areas are not even looked at as an entry route to employment, so are not referred to programmes.

DW, website

### Proposed new IfATE powers 'strike the right balance' with Ofqual, says Williamson

But what about the added cost of this new bureaucracy to government and the sector?

Paul Eeles, Twitter

Problem is Williamson has not said why it is appropriate for the same public body to offer its own technical quals (e.g. T Levels) and regulate everyone else's technical quals at the same time. It's called a conflict of interest.

Tom Bewick, Twitter

### Profile: Roger Taylor

But the raw teacher-assessed grades are still on the system, as calculated by individual teachers, before they were fiddled with by SLTs, fudged and constrained and submitted as centre-assessed grades. It should be an easy fix to undo

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## REPLY OF THE WEEK

### Confusion and heavy lobbying forces Ofsted to 'clarify' Baker clause approach

This is still not specific enough. We are an ITP with a "super school" nearby. They get around the Baker clause by inviting us in to host a table over lunch hours. We have found this to be a complete waste of time, 14-16-year-old learners do not want to give up their lunchtimes, regardless of information available. They cannot understand why they cannot be given this information during their lesson time.

Gaynor, website

the moderations. Schools have admitted grades were not as assessed by teachers. In many cases, they have admitted grades were moderated to fit historic grade patterns.

Suzanne Cairns Edgson, Twitter

### DfE considering 'accelerated inspections' to help Ofsted tackle Covid backlog

I think a formal process to request an Ofsted inspection would rebalance those impacted by a previous poor rating, and encourage leaders to back their judgments of improvement.

Graham Howe, Twitter

### £73m adult education budget tender outcomes delayed

Did anyone really think the results were coming out [on June 24]? ESFA never issues results on time.

Tony Allen, Twitter

## Bulletin

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### Candace Miller

Non-executive  
director, Federation  
of Awarding Bodies

**Start date** May 2021

**Concurrent job**

Managing director, SFJ Awards and  
executive director, Skills for Health, Skills  
for Justice and People 1st International

**Interesting fact**

She enjoys walking her dogs in the local  
woods and gardening, both at home and  
at her allotment.

## Movers & Shakers

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



### Paolo Fresia

Vice chair, UfiVoc  
Tech Trust

**Start date** June 2021

**Concurrent job**

Investment director, 100% Network

**Interesting fact**

His passions include classic boats sailing  
and the alternative medicine Ayurveda.



### Sarah McGrath

Principal,  
Carlisle College

**Start date** May 2021

**Previous job**

Assistant principal for quality and  
curriculum, Carlisle College

**Interesting fact**

She is very keen on crafts – in particular  
dress-making and textiles – and makes  
a lot of her own clothes and soft  
furnishings.



### Andy Green

Chief executive,  
Chichester College  
Group (CCG)

**Start date** October 2022

**Previous job**

Interim chief executive, Greater Brighton  
Metropolitan College

**Interesting fact**

He led Chichester College students to  
perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Festivals  
for the last three festivals, including driving  
the van with set and costumes all the way  
from Chichester to Edinburgh.

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## FEWEEK