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ON SIX MONTHS
OF CHANGE**

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FEWEEK

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EDITION 249



EMPLOYER FEES TO BE SCRAPPED?

- 10% apprenticeship charge seen as putting off SMEs
- Minister is 'open minded' to co-investment rethink
- AELP hopes for announcement at annual conference

Exclusive

BILLY CAMDEN BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

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Correction

FE Week mistakenly reported in Edition 248 that Sarah Robinson, the chief executive of Alpha Academies Trust, would be overseeing a "much smaller trust" after it announced the closure of two studio schools. She got in touch to point out that despite the two closures, the trust is growing overall because three academies are in the process of joining. We are happy to correct the record.

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Is the government about to scrap apprenticeship fees to woo back employers?

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

The 10-per-cent fee that small businesses must pay when they take on apprentices could be scrapped, according to the AELP.

Its boss Mark Dawe revealed that the skills minister is having "ongoing conversations" about a change in policy regarding the co-investment rule, in an exclusive interview with FE Week ahead of his association's national conference next week.

Anne Milton later confirmed it is an issue



Anne Milton

she is seriously looking at, but wouldn't be drawn on whether there would be any immediate announcement.

"Our big ask is for the minister to make the announcement that the 10-per-cent contribution requirement is to be removed for non-levy-payers or levy-payers who go over their levy if they are delivering level two and three apprenticeships to the under 25s," Mr Dawe said.

"We made a proposition for a transition period to try it out until April. I don't know if the minister will be able to do it this quickly but I know there are ongoing conversations about it.

"If the minister

announced that [at the AELP conference] then she would get a standing ovation and we could probably close the conference."

The apprenticeship levy is paid by employers with an annual payroll of £3 million or more, who can then spend their contributions on apprenticeship training.

Smaller employers can also access the funds generated through the levy, although they must pay 10 per cent towards the cost of the training.

There was no mandatory charge before May last year, simply an assumed contribution for apprentices aged 19 and over.

Since last May, only 16- to 18-year-olds at employers with fewer than 50 staff are fully funded and therefore free to train.



Mark Dawe

The AELP has been heavily campaigning to remove the 10-per-cent rule as it believes it puts SMEs off apprenticeships, and is the reason why starts have fallen so much since the introduction of the levy.

Ms Milton later admitted to FE Week that she is "keeping an open mind" on the policy.

"I am mindful that we need to make the levy work for small businesses, and how much impact that 10-per-cent contribution has. I make no promises but we are monitoring everything.

"I'm working with businesses to find out what particular problems they have and a lot of it is around the understanding of what they can and can't do. That would apply to non-levy-

payers and small businesses.

"I think a lot of them don't realise that we will pay 90 per cent of the training, or maybe 100 per cent in certain circumstances."

Ms Milton added that she is organising a roundtable event with SMEs to "find out exactly what is going on" with their experience of apprenticeships.

The 10-per-cent contribution rule is expected to be a hot topic at the AELP national conference, taking place in west London from June 25 to 26.

FE Week is media partner and will be live tweeting from @feweek throughout, as well as producing a supplement sponsored by NCFE with coverage from the first day.

Ofsted will keep its four-point grading system – for now

BILLY CAMDEN
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Ofsted will stick to its four-tier grading system in its new inspection framework – putting an end to rumours that it would opt for a simpler pass-or-fail system.

Instead, the status quo will remain in its 2019 framework, its chief inspector has told this year's Festival of Education at Wellington College.

Options will be kept "under review" looking further ahead, Amanda Spielman said.

She is working with the Department for Education to "see the removal of the 'outstanding' exemption", which currently allows education providers to go more than a decade without inspection.

Rumours have been flying around in recent months that all four of the grades used by Ofsted – 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate' – might be on borrowed time.

"I know that there are some who would like Ofsted to abandon grades altogether or to move to a pass/fail model," Ms Spielman said.

"For me, that is a decision which must squarely be decided on the basis of whether the current grading system meets our mission of being a force for improvement.



Amanda Spielman

"We will keep this under regular review. But we've concluded, on balance, that it is right to maintain the current grading system in the new framework and that is the basis of the discussion I'm having with ministers now as we engage with them on the new framework as a whole."

She said that recent research suggests the profession "prefers" a four-point system to a pass/fail one, and when it comes to the 'outstanding' grade in particular, a number of education leaders have "persuasively lobbied me, and others, to keep it".

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EDITOR ASKS...

Milton 'the fixer': I just want to make it all work

NICK LINFORD
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It was exactly a year ago that we labelled the new skills minister Anne Milton "the fixer", after she said in her speech to the AELP annual conference that she was motivated "to make it work" rather than introduce "new, bright ideas".

So a year on and just a few days before she delivers her 2018 AELP speech, I am keen to find out what she thinks still needs fixing.

"I still stand by what I said then. I don't really want to change anything, I just want to make it all work," she tells me.

1. The 10-per-cent co-investment

With a stumbling start to the apprenticeship reforms, it seems demand from small employers has taken a dive and needs fixing. Is there any truth to the suggestion that the mandatory fees introduced last May might be reversed? In other words, will she be scrapping the 10-per-cent co-investment, something AELP hopes will be announced at the conference next week?

"Well, we are keeping an open mind on anything around, in the overall of apprenticeships," she is quick to say.

"There's a good body of evidence out there that a contribution from somebody is important, because it requires their buy-in to what they're getting into. Sometimes if you get something for free, on the training side of it you don't have quite such a buy-in. So I make no promises. We're looking at everything."

I agree that a fee contribution is important, but I press again on whether the rumours are true and that it could be scrapped, even temporarily.

"It's not about whether the co-investment is working", she says. "It's about whether that 10 per cent is a barrier. People are sending me some of

their evidence. We're looking at it.

"I think there are bigger issues for smaller businesses. I think sometimes just taking on apprentice in the first place, irrespective of the 10 per cent, feels like quite a big step for business, particularly in quite uncertain times for small business. No discussions with the Treasury looking at it, holding roundtables, doing exactly what I've done with the larger levy-payers. You know, getting them round a table, finding out exactly what's going on."

I'm left with the impression that fixing SME participation is needed, and scrapping the co-investment requirement could well be in the mix, but if any change were imminent, the minister was careful not to give that away.

"I still stand by what I said then. I don't really want to change anything, I just want to make it all work"

2. T-level implementation

The T-level reforms steam ahead to a 2020 roll-out, against the advice of the lead civil servant at the Department for Education. The AoC is confident that colleges are ready for wave one but its chief executive worries about delays from legal challenges during the tenders for awarding organisation licences.

"No, I'm not worried. And I'm not somebody who worries," she is quick to fire back. "If something could go wrong, then my aim is to put in place adequate mitigation to make sure it doesn't go

wrong, and so I don't worry. I think the DfE is doing a lot of work. I know they had some meetings with the awarding organisations and we're listening to them and hearing what will make this work better for them."

And on widespread concerns over the T-level work-placement being mandatory, is there any consideration to avoid young people having a barrier in specific locations where there's no placement?

"No," she insists, firmly. "It is absolutely crucial. The T-level is all about the industry placement as well as the qualification."

3. Adult education budget devolution

I'm keen to find out why the DfE is allowing the mayor of London to top-slice of £3 million to pay for new staff after he was denied an administration budget from the DfE. Surely she should be limiting raids on budgets like this, as it's all being devolved?

"There are a lot of other sides to devolution and I'm actually quite in favour of this being devolved," she says. "It will be for the mayoral authorities to work out how best they spend their funding."

"So if you devolve, you devolve. You need to talk to the Greater London Authority. It's the upside and downside of devolution. But what I think is quite important is that you have somebody accountable for this. You have the mayor's office. If you don't feel that

the GLA or any other of the combined authorities are spending their AEB well or if they're taking too much of it up in admin, then you need to ask them."

On any devolution of the AEB to other local commissioning areas, the minister makes it clear that there is "no further devolution for the moment. We'll see how this goes. It will be very interesting to see if anything emerges from those combined areas that represents really good practice."

4. College finances and mergers

"A shame," is how the minister describes FE Week's constant references to the £700 million college restructuring fund as bailouts. "It is meant to be money to help colleges merge, get back on their feet."

"It's a very, very rigorous process, in which I'm closely involved actually. The FE colleges are a really important part of our mix and what we need to do, and that budget was not about bailing anybody out. It was about making sure FE colleges are sustainable and will last for the future. They're very important parts of the education mix, so a bailout it is not."

I end by asking about mergers and the growth of mega-colleges. What lessons are being taken from Learndirect and warnings about organisations that become too big to fail?

"Too big to fail is not an invalid point," the minister says. "I'm very mindful of

colleges being too big to fail. I think we need to watch it.

"I have to say the scrutiny and oversight on colleges at the moment is probably more intense than it has ever been, particularly bearing in mind that it is a sector that is actually independent of government. And I'm seeing some really good results emerging, but you are right to highlight the point that when any sort of group, be it independent training providers or FE colleges, gets very big, we need to have more oversight on the possible risks that emerge. There are always opportunities when something is big, because of overhead costs, but we also have to be aware of the risks as well."

And finally, it's one of the best jobs in government

As we wrap up what has been a pretty technical and wide-ranging interview in just 20 minutes, the minister offers me a headline.

"Do you want a headline for your article?" she asks. "It's that I have one of the best jobs in government. I spend my life meeting enthusiastic young and older people, brilliant independent training providers, fantastic colleges. All of the things I deal with are levers of social change, and I see the young people that have benefited from the social change that they can bring about in their own lives. I just needed to say that. I didn't say that when I was at the Department of Health."





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News

First-time principal explains how she's taking Hull College out of intensive care

JUDE BURKE
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Hull College chief executive Michelle Swithenbank probably has the toughest job in FE right now. The former nurse has been charged with taking a college which has received the largest ever government bailout to any FE institution out of intensive care and back on the road to recovery.

It's a task that would challenge the most experienced of college leaders – but Ms Swithenbank is in her first chief executive role, and she's already in the middle of a huge fight with angry unions. How does she plan to turn things around? Jude Burke headed to Hull to find out.

Michelle Swithenbank greets me warmly at reception, asks about my journey and offers me a cup of tea,

which she makes herself.

The venue for our meeting is the college's main campus, at Queen's Gardens in the centre of Hull.

It's a rather grey, dated-looking place, dominated by an eight-storey tower block: a faded grey and blue brutalist monument that has seen better days.

Inside it's little different. Plain white walls and scuffed wooden floors add to the institutional, characterless feel.

But as we walk through the college, Ms Swithenbank tells me of her plans to change all that, to make it more "learner friendly" – more "open, more attractive, more colourful".

The senior leadership team's spacious offices, tucked away on a second floor corridor, will be converted into social areas for the learners, and management will move into the "heart of the college" so they are "more accessible and more visible".

It's all part of her "open, honest,

approachable" style of leadership, which will prioritise "communication and transparency", and through which she aims to drive culture change and reverse the college's fortunes.

She has a difficult job ahead of her, though some would say it's closer to impossible.

The scale of the college's debts is, in the words of Richard Atkins, the FE commissioner, "eye-watering".

It received a massive £54-million payment from the government's restructuring facility – though this has never been confirmed by the college or the government, due to a confidentiality agreement – while its recently published (and long delayed) 2015/16 accounts revealed a £12.8 million deficit.

The 2016/17 accounts are still being audited, and are due out at the end of August.

In order to balance the books, the college says it has to cut the equivalent of 231 full-time staff members, a decision that has caused no end of rancour.

Mr Atkins himself described it as "one of the largest financial – and in human terms, staffing – crises that I've known".

While acknowledging the scale of the task, Ms Swithenbank remains upbeat: "It is a big job. It's a five-year recovery plan. Nobody in this organisation feels that from September everything is going to be wonderful. We're working towards that, but it's all going to take time."

At the heart of this recovery plan is the funding the college has received. As I've been told before, and as Ms Swithenbank reminds me during the interview, "the terms of the grant restrict me from talking about that".

This is frustrating, as without being able to talk about the figures, we're only getting half the picture.

Nonetheless, she professes herself "optimistic for the future", and doesn't hesitate when I ask her if she's confident she'll be able to turn things around.

"Absolutely," she says.

At just 37, this is her first chief executive role, although she has had a

What the FE commissioner said

In an exclusive FE Week interview, Atkins described Hull as "one of the largest financial and, in human terms, staffing crises that I've known".

"The rate at which money poured out, the financial controls and the lack of this carefully costed curriculum plan, and the speed at which income dropped and staff numbers didn't, was eye-watering," he said.

He attributed this to "poor governance and leadership, the lack of a carefully costed curriculum plan, staffing levels that were out of line significantly with income, and a failure to be concentrating on running a college that could remain sustainable".

The terms of the restructuring facility grant to the college remain shrouded in secrecy, as it's subject to a confidentiality agreement.

This means neither the college

nor the government is able to confirm the amount awarded, nor what it's being spent on.

However, according to Mr Atkins, a "significant amount" of the cash has gone to repay emergency financial support given to the college to "keep it going" – without which it would have been "completely insolvent, unsustainable".

FE Week asked the Department for Education how much it had dished out, but it does "not comment on the amount of individual college payments".

Despite the "shocking" numbers involved, Mr Atkins believes the college can get better.

"I do believe that they're doing the things that have to be done," he said. "I want to get right behind the college in September and help with its recruitment and ensure that the college can have a sustainable future."

A timeline of financial troubles:

November 2016 – Richard Atkins is called into the college, following a request for exceptional financial support after its bank withdraws support

January 2017 – His report is published, detailing a cumulative deficit of "around £10 million over the past four years". Michelle Swithenbank is appointed deputy chief executive as part of sweeping changes to the college's leadership

March 2017 – The previous chief executive Gary Warke resigns and Swithenbank is promoted, on an interim basis until June 2017, when she is made permanent

February 2018 – The college receives cash from the government's restructuring facility to fund its five-year recovery plan. This is reported to be worth £54 million.

March 2018 – Proposals to shed over 200 staff are published, provoking anger from staff and unions who call a series of strikes

June 2018 – The college's 2015/16 accounts are finally published, revealing a massive £12.8 million deficit over the year.

Seven days of strikes are called off, after unions and management reach an agreement which means no jobs will be lost through compulsory redundancies

number of leadership positions, most recently as interim vice-principal at Grimsby Institute.

Her appointment was one of a number of changes to the senior leadership team following Mr Atkins' intervention at the college. She was initially recruited as the deputy chief executive in January 2017, at a time when the college was "still unravelling", as she describes it.

Just six weeks later she found herself in charge, following the departure of previous leader Gary Warke – a promotion that appears not to have fazed her.

"I like to see the potential in things," she says. "That's what's exciting for me, the fact that I can come in, with a team, and make things better."

She returns repeatedly to the idea of culture change: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast. If you don't change the culture, it doesn't matter what



"I like to see the things. That's what's exciting for me, the fact I can come in, with a team, and make things better."

strategies and process you've got in place, you've got to have that buy-in from your staff."

Getting that staff buy-in while cutting the workforce by almost 250 can't have been easy.

Hull's staff costs, at around 78 per cent of the college's income, were deemed "unaffordable" by Mr Atkins in his first visit to the college in November 2016, and reducing them to 65 per cent – the sector benchmark – is essential to the college's survival.

The cuts are being made "across the board", rather than in specific areas.

"We've looked at every part of the organisation, the whole organisation has been restructured for it to be able to function sustainably and with stability for the future," she says.

So why did it have to be done so quickly? Her answer is honest and direct: to avoid going bust. With the imminent introduction of the FE



the potential in what's exciting that I can team, and better"

insolvency regime, "we had to become a solvent college by the end of this academic year".

She understands the reaction from University and College Union members, who went on strike over the cuts and even returned a vote of no confidence in her leadership.

"They were risking losing their jobs at the time. Anyone is going to do as much as they can to stop the process and save their job," she says.

Thanks to "productive" negotiations with the UCU and other staff, the cuts will now all be made through redeployment, voluntary redundancy or resignation.

She insists staff morale has improved. "They've gone through a very difficult time, but they really want to see this organisation be fabulous again, and for a leader that's fantastic as I've got what I need to work with," she says.

Apart from the wholesale

restructuring of the organisation, her focus so far has been on getting a handle on the college's finances, developing the recovery plan and reforming systems and processes.

She uses the learner journey to illustrate her approach.

After getting "every team that's involved in that journey" to map out the existing processes – of which, it transpired, there were many – they were asked to design how they wanted those processes to be.

"That was done with the staff directly involved in those processes, because there's no point in a senior team going 'this is what we're going to do, because it's not them running it,'" she says.

As a result of these exercises, "we'll have a new structure, new systems, new processes that will be able to deliver the service we need to be able to deliver".

The college's road to recovery is about more than just leadership – it's

also about governance, and "having the right balance of both, and making sure those are working well".

The governing board now meets each month, rather than quarterly, a move she says has been a "real turning-point for us".

The board "all collectively take responsibility for the recovery of the college", and are "aware very early on and can help intervene, support and challenge".

They will also soon have access to live data, via a dashboard on the college's new systems.

"You can't get more transparent and open than that," she says.

Ms Swithenbank shrewdly describes the journey she's been on over the past year as "character building".

She's committed to ensuring everyone with a stake in the college's recovery – the Education and Skills Funding Agency, the FE commissioner,

the local enterprise partnerships, the local authorities, the MPs, the unions, the learners, the staff – are kept abreast of where things are.

Applications for September from 16- to 18-year-olds are slightly up on last year – an achievement given everything the college has been through. Ms Swithenbank says this is a "reflection of the staff's dedication, all the professionalism they've shown throughout all of this".

At the end of the five-year recovery period, she has an ambitious vision for a "buoyant and vibrant" college, "where learners and students are loving coming to, where staff feel they can really do their job effectively and well – the flagship in the sector, all being well".

It's a long way from here to there, and she admits there will be some "bumpy roads" along the way. Only time will tell if they will all make it through in one piece.

DfE: Financial warnings at colleges will treble to 100

BILLY CAMDEN

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The estimated number of colleges with financial warnings will nearly triple to 100 over the next decade.

The Association of Colleges has however rejected the government's dire warnings as "misleading".

The Department for Education revealed the prediction in its response to its insolvency regime consultation, in which it urges all colleges with financial troubles to "fully familiarise themselves with the [new] insolvency procedures".

There are currently 37 colleges with a published notice to improve for financial health.

The DfE estimates that using "today's assumptions", over the first 10 years of the insolvency regime an additional 63 colleges "could meet the current triggers for a notice".

"In the subsequent six years an additional 51 colleges may become in scope for intervention (using inadequate as a proxy as per current modelling assumptions)," it said.

"An additional 12 colleges may become in scope of a notice over the following three years (estimated based on current assumptions). Therefore a total of 100 colleges is estimated to be the 'most likely' central scenario."

These colleges would need to "ensure they were familiar with the insolvency regime procedures", specifically they would need to know the "details of the regulations".

David Hughes, the AoC's chief executive, pointed out that the DfE's figure may be "misleading and is certainly not intended to imply that 100 colleges are at risk of insolvency".

He said the regime being introduced in itself is "not a bad thing", but the "problem is that it is likely to come into effect at an historic low point in college funding".

"The children's commissioner pointed out that 16-to-18 funding in 2019-20 will be at the same level in real terms as 30 years ago," he added.

"That lack of funding has made running a college harder than ever, just at a time when colleges want to provide a full and rich curriculum and support for young people and adults."

Scenarios requiring insolvency arrangements are expected to be "rare", the DfE said, and will only apply where colleges are in "severe financial difficulties and there is no alternative viable solution for managing the college out of that situation".

News

IfA apprentices panel hasn't met for 10 months

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Exclusive

The Institute for Apprenticeships has been told to "get its act together" after it emerged that its panel of apprentices has gone nearly 10 months without actually convening.

The panel is made up of current or recent apprentices who are supposed to discuss issues from the learner's perspective and raise them with the main IfA board.

But a Freedom of Information request has revealed that the panel has only held four meetings since its launch last March, with the most recent being on October 12.

This is being viewed as a snub both by the chair of the parliamentary education select committee and the leadership at the National Union of Students, which has led calls for greater learner influence over the IfA.

The next meeting is not scheduled until July 4 – which will mean there's been a gap of nearly 40 weeks between meetings.

During this time, the IfA has launched its "faster and better" promise to speed up its processes and policies, while many issues from the apprenticeship reforms have emerged.

"It beggars belief that during this crucial time for boosting apprenticeships, the IfA panel could be so conspicuously abdicating its responsibility to hear the voices of apprentices," said the chair of the education committee Robert Halfon, who set up the panel during his time as skills minister.

"The IfA need to get its act together and make far greater effort."

The NUS' vice president for FE, Emily Chapman, described the gap as "deeply worrying".

"At a time when they should be listening to the needs of apprentices more than ever this is simply not good enough," she continued.

A spokesperson for the IfA did not manage to explain why it has taken so long for the apprentice panel to meet since its last meeting.

"The institute's apprentice panel is peer-led and the members can set the frequency of the meetings," she said.

It was revealed last month that the skills minister, Anne Milton, had still not met the panel more than 12 months after it was established.

Ms Chapman said the IfA and the minister must be "clear about how they'll make sure the board will take the views of the panel seriously".

The IfA has recently appointed a host of new members to the panel, but their identities have not yet been released.

NHS apprenticeships fall by more than a third

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

The number of people starting an apprenticeship with the NHS has fallen by more than third over the last two years, FE Week can reveal.

Expanding the amount of NHS apprentices has been a top priority for the health secretary Jeremy Hunt, since he pledged in 2016 to create a further 100,000 starts in the sector by 2020.

The NHS is also subject to a public-sector target, and needs to ensure at least 2.3 per cent of its workforce starts an apprenticeship every year.

It had to achieve 27,500 starts in 2017/18 alone to meet this target.

But things have not gone to plan, with just 12,611 apprenticeship starts last year – 36 per cent down on the 19,820 in 2015/16.

The new figure equates to just one per cent of the NHS' 1,205,814 workforce – meaning it fell way short the government's public-sector target.

Robert Halfon, the chair of the Commons education committee, which held a recent hearing on the topic, said the government "urgently needs to do more to boost the number of healthcare apprentices at all levels if we are to

Year as of April 1	NHS starts	Decrease on previous year		Decrease on 15/16	
2015/16	19,820	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2016/17	15,532	-4,288	-22%	-4,288	-22%
2017/18	12,611	-2,921	-19%	-7,209	-36%

tackle the skills shortage in the NHS".

"I've spoken in Parliament of the need to expand the number of nursing apprenticeships and the education committee will examine this issue with the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)," he added.

NHS apprenticeship starts have been in steep decline over the past three years.

The 19,820 achieved in 2015/16 fell by more than a fifth to 15,532 in 2016/17. Its 2017/18 figure of 12,611 represents a 19-per-cent fall on the previous year.

A spokesperson for Health Education England (HEE) said the drop is "as a result of NHS organisations taking the time to implement and adapt to the new apprenticeship reforms and systems introduced in May 2017".

The DHSC said it is working directly with employers to make sure the NHS is in the best position to meet the public-sector target, but did not acknowledge Mr Hunt's 100,000 starts pledge.

HEE is "leading the development" of a number of new health-related

apprenticeship standards. As of May, 21 new standards are ready for delivery and a further 29 are in development.

One example of an NHS apprenticeship is the associate ambulance practitioner standard, which involves "responding to 999 and urgent calls, and providing emergency care for people as part of an ambulance crew".

The government hopes degree apprenticeships will help nursing shortages across the country. It wants more trainees to enter the profession, as they receive wages while they train rather than having to pay towards the traditional degree route.

FE Week reported earlier this year that the majority of NHS trusts in England plan to spend their apprenticeship levy cash within the allotted timeframe – even though most have been frustrated by the policy's "inflexibility".

But NHS leaders have since warned its starts target will be missed without urgent reform.

"Without the flexibility in the levy, to

be blunt, we are not going to get there," Danny Mortimer, the chief executive of NHS Employers, told the Commons education committee.

He said the NHS needs longer than the standard two years to use up the £200 million apprenticeship levy payments it is shelling out annually.

Apprenticeships are a "very expensive way of training a nurse" and current Department for Education policy does not "accept the difference between a nursing degree apprenticeship and other degree apprenticeships".

Nursing degree apprenticeships cost an additional £35,000 or £40,000 per student every year over their four-year duration.

The government's 2.3-per-cent apprenticeships target applies public bodies with 250 or more employees and covers the period April 1 to March 31 each year.

It's an average target across the years 2017/18 to 2020/21 to "give flexibility to organisations to manage peaks and troughs in recruitment".

Federation of Awarding Bodies calls in the lawyers over T-levels

JUDE BURKE
JUDE@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Exclusive

The Federation of Awarding Bodies is gearing up for possible legal action over T-levels following the start of a controversial tender process, FE Week can reveal.

The government launched its hunt for awarding organisations to deliver the new qualifications with two "market engagement" events earlier this month.

But AOs have been left fuming over the commercial terms to which they will have to agree.

They believe, among other things, that their ownership of the content they will have developed will be limited.

Tom Bewick, FAB's chief executive, said the terms as they stand are "flawed" and suggested a "wholesale

nationalisation of the technical qualifications industry in this country".

Federation lawyers are currently checking the terms, Mr Bewick said, and they are considering launching legal action to try to get them changed. He has also requested an urgent meeting with Institute for Apprenticeships' boss Sir Gerry Berragan to discuss the concerns.

"If the government is procuring the expertise of the awarding and assessment sector then it needs to recognise the integrity of the business models, the brand and in some cases the heritage of these organisations," he said.

Association of Colleges' boss David Hughes is worried that any legal challenge to the T-level procurement process could cause unwanted delay to rolling out the new qualifications.

But skills minister Anne Milton isn't troubled.

"If something could go wrong, then my aim is to put in place adequate mitigation

to make sure it doesn't go wrong, and so I don't worry," she told FE Week.

The battleground for awarding bodies concerns just five paragraphs in the draft key commercial principles for T-levels.

These state that the IfA will own the intellectual property in any materials, which will be licenced back to the AO for the duration of their contract.

They also ban AOs from reusing any of the content without "prior written approval" and from using any of their own branding.

The FAB insists these rules set "disproportionate limits" on the intellectual property and ownership of content, and "completely undermine the integrity" of AOs' business models "in terms of the investment and innovation associated with developing qualifications".

Its lawyers are reviewing whether the terms comply with public-sector procurement regulations, and if state aid

rules apply.

They will also consider taking out an injunction to halt the procurement process if the FAB feels the government isn't sufficiently engaging on the terms.

Any final decision on legal action would be taken after two roundtable events with awarding bodies early next month, Mr Bewick said.

This is not the first bone of contention to arise during the procurement process.

The government is sticking with its plan to have just one awarding body per T-level, as recommended in the Sainsbury review of post-16 skills, despite concerns being raised across the sector.

Research conducted by Frontier Economics on behalf of the DfE and published last July concluded that limiting access to a single AO may create a "risk of system failure" in both the short- and long-term.

It warned that if a single AO fails, it may be that no alternative can step in.

Then in February, Ofqual, the body that regulates qualifications in England, said it had "advised on the risks related to the single-provider model".

Ms Milton told FE Week that sticking to a single AO is the "right way to introduce T-levels. I think it's simple, straightforward, and clear".

Atkins reflects on six months of major changes

JUDE BURKE

JUDE@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Six months ago the FE commissioner embarked on a series of new initiatives designed to support colleges before they get into too much difficulty.

Using diagnostic assessments and peer-to-peer support, Richard Atkins aims to avoid a repeat of the high-profile college failures of recent months.

These new measures are all the more important, given the impending insolvency regime, which will allow colleges to go bust for the first time.

At the same time, both the restructuring facility, which provides cash for colleges to implement major changes, and exceptional financial support will be withdrawn.

In an exclusive interview with FE Week, Mr Atkins discusses what he and his expanded team of deputies and advisers have been doing to ensure that colleges are ready for the coming changes.

Interventions are down – but diagnostic assessments are up

The backbone of the FE commissioner's work has always been interventions with failing colleges: those with an 'inadequate' rating either from Ofsted or for financial health.

Mr Atkins has begun formal involvement with just nine institutions in 2017/18, down from 18 the previous year.

At the same time, the team has also carried out 29 diagnostic assessments at colleges in difficulty but not yet failing, "which is more than I thought we'd do".

These assessments are designed to sniff out areas for improvement before a college falls too far into difficulties.

"I think we're having some success in getting to places a bit earlier, trying to provide advice, help and support to avoid a college slipping too far, too fast," he says.

Of those colleges that have fallen into scope of intervention, "financial difficulty this year has been more frequently a cause than quality".

And, while the restructuring facility has "helped resolve the longstanding

difficult cases" in the sector, it is likely that colleges will "occasionally get into difficulty" in the future and funding is still needed to "oil the wheels in these situations".

Mergers, mergers, mergers

The surge in mergers is showing no signs of slowing down.

Last year there were 15, and "I would expect to see a similar number" this year.

These partnerships are "beyond area review", and many have been brokered through an FE commissioner-led structure and prospects appraisal.

This process, which he has previously likened to "going to an introduction agency and having a courtship", allows a college to thoroughly weigh up its options.

All of the 19 SPAs that he and his 15-strong team have led have ended with a proposal to merge.

"I think we're having some success in getting to places a bit earlier, trying to avoid a college slipping too far, too fast"

It's not just for failing colleges, either.

New guidance on the process, published last week by the Department for Education, "emphasises the point" that a SPA is "not only for colleges in intervention" but also for those who "come to us voluntarily" to consider their "strategic options".

Principals' reference group

Mr Atkins' crack team of principals is already starting to have an impact at the DfE.



The team, which is designed to act as a sound board for Mr Atkins and to help shape policy, has met three times so far since it was formed in January.

They've been involved in consultations on T-levels, high needs and workforce development, and are set to get stuck into the internal review announced by Anne Milton earlier this year, looking at FE funding and resilience.

"I would say that most of the policy teams here in the department now see them as one of the key groups that they consult with," he says.

Peer-to-peer support

The national leaders of FE programme, first announced last November, is one

of the means by which Mr Atkins aims to encourage a culture of colleges supporting each other.

The names of the seven leaders were announced in January, and they're all now working with at least one college.

They are "really critical to helping" at a college in difficulty, following an intervention or diagnostic assessment by his team.

Alongside this support for college leaders, a similar programme for governors is in the process of being set up, with the call for applications launched last week.

"I think it's a really useful way for a chair, a board member or a member of a senior team to have a reference point," he explains.

Strategic college improvement fund

Fourteen colleges received money from the pilot round of the strategic college improvement fund, which offers a tailored package of support.

These colleges are implementing a range of initiatives, including "developing better costed curriculum plans to quality improvement implementation practices, such as teaching observations".

The main phase of the fund is expected to open for application very soon.

His overall aim with the fund and his other initiatives is to "try to avoid the catastrophe we're seeing at the moment at one or two colleges" by supporting them at an earlier stage.

News



Skills minister: IfA better but it's still not fast enough

PAUL OFFORD
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Exclusive

The number of approved apprenticeship standards has exceeded those awaiting sign-off for the first time, but the skills minister still wants to see things done 'faster and better'.

In fact, a tough-talking Anne Milton told FE Week that she has pursued the Institute for Apprenticeships over the need to pick up the pace with "a big stick".

At the time of going to press there were 265 standards listed on the IfA's website as awaiting approval, and 279 cleared for use. That tips the proportion approved up to 51 per cent. "We are pleased that the positive impact of our faster and better

initiative is being demonstrated through the increased pace at which standards are getting through the standards development process," said an IfA spokesperson.

The institute's chief executive Sir Gerry Berragan launched his "faster and better" campaign last December to "streamline the approvals process", after employers and providers complained that the process was too slow and bureaucratic.

The pace of approval has been mixed since then. Nine went through in January, 21 in February, 10 in March, and four in April. The IfA appeared to pick up the pace last month by approving 19, but it has fallen back to three so far this month.

Ms Milton said the IfA had "definitely got faster and better, but are they faster enough and better enough?" "Probably not yet," was her verdict.

"I have been in there with a big stick. I went to the launch of their faster better thing. And I meet Gerry Berragan and their chair Antony Jenkins on a regular basis, and with Gerry Berragan on an extraordinarily

"I always have a big stick in my hand when I meet the IfA"

frequent basis. I always have a big stick in my hand when I meet the IfA.

"If it's more standards, then push on the IfA but also push on employers, because at the end of the day they

need to get together to design the standards."

Apprenticeship standards, which are developed by groups of employers, are gradually replacing the old frameworks.

Each contains a list of the skills, knowledge and behaviours an apprentice will need to have learned by the end of their apprenticeship.

Approval delays have been blamed for the slowdown in apprenticeship starts, which were down 52 per cent for March compared with the same period in 2017, and the apparent lack of success of the apprenticeship levy in boosting employer investment.

This follows complaints from companies that they have been unable to find suitable approved standards to meet their training needs.

Since January, the average number of monthly approvals for standards has been 12.

There are currently 265 standards in development – so at that rate it would take nearly two years to clear them all.

Association of Employment and Learning Providers' boss Mark Dawe does not believe this rate is good enough.

"I would say the IfA's definition of 'faster' needs to be 0 to 60mph in six seconds rather than 60," he said.

Teresa Frith, the Association of Colleges' senior skills policy manager, added: "The IfA is right to make the approval process quicker and slicker, and we can see the progress they are making on that.

"What we also want to see is more openness and transparency in the process. There could be much more shared knowledge as to the nature of hold-ups, which will help employers navigate through to approval – for example around the allocated funding band."



Vice Principal Innovation and Growth

Salary circa £70k



From our heartlands in the Sheffield City Region and the East Midlands, RNN Group includes three colleges of career-focused further and higher education and five training organisations.

We are now seeking a new Vice Principal to drive our innovation and growth agenda to ensure we continue to meet the needs of employers, learners, apprentices and partners. In this role you will make a major contribution to the strategic leadership of the Group whilst leading the innovation and renewal of our curriculum and overseeing our significant apprenticeship provision. This role requires you to be a key ambassador for the Group and use your skills to work with, and influence, a range of stakeholders.

We have retained FE Associates to support us in this crucial appointment.

A candidate pack can be obtained from: www.fea.co.uk/jobs

Closing date: **Wednesday 4th July 2018 at noon**

First interview to be held **Tuesday 10th July**.

Second interview to be held **w/c 16th July**.



Head of Schools Exams

Salary: Senior Leadership Band

Flexible location

The British Council is looking for an experienced Head of School Exams to join the English & Exams Strategic Business Unit (SBU).

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with - changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

The Head of School Exams will develop a school exams strategy in line with the global exams strategy to ensure we are positioned for significant growth with our key clients (Cambridge International, Pearson and OxfordAQA).

Reporting to the Head of Client Services you will lead on the development of the schools exams business to maximize our share of the international school exams market and ensure that we are operating to high standards efficiently. In addition to the above you will drive new business development opportunities across all our school exam clients and deliver income and surplus growth in line with ambitious global targets- by maximizing value from existing accounts including winning new business.

For full details please refer to the role profile on our website.

If you feel that you are suitable and would like to be considered for this role, please apply before 23:59 UK time on the 3rd July 2018 using the following link;

<https://bit.ly/2loiE5X>



Managing Director (Training)

£70,000 pro rata (Full Time or 4 days considered)

BPIF have engaged Solvendis to support them in the recruitment of a knowledgeable and passionate leader with a detailed understanding of apprenticeships.

As the trade association and primary training provider for the UK printing industry, BPIF deliver around 500 apprenticeships each year and also offer an extensive programme of short courses. With premises in London, Brighthouse and headquarters in Meriden near Coventry, the appointee will be home based but with a need for regular travel.

As Managing Director (Training) you will take responsibility for delivering a quality and cost effective offer and for ensuring that we reach and maintain the highest of standards in all that we do. The successful applicant will have a solid understanding of apprenticeships, first class communication skills and the passion to lead and inspire a team of dedicated staff. Reporting directly to the Board, the Head of Training will play an integral part in formulating and realising the vision and objectives of the organisation.

If you're interested in knowing more about this exciting opportunity or wish to request a recruitment pack please contact **Neil Hulme** on **07702 555800** or email neil@solvendis.co.uk.

Closing Date for Applications 9 July (12.00 noon)



Client Engagement Consultant

National role working remotely

£40 - £45k OTE £60,000
Plus attractive benefits package

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We're looking to further expand our Client Engagement team to achieve our next phase of growth and are looking for a passionate and experienced Apprenticeship expert who can successfully identify and win new client opportunities with large businesses in our core market sectors.

Our Client Engagement Consultant will be responsible for identifying new opportunities/leads with large organisations who will benefit from the high quality Apprenticeship solutions Paragon Skills offer. Building market intelligence, a sound knowledge of our target clients, you'll nurture excellent relationships with prospective client contacts, positioning Paragon Skills as their partner of choice.

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www.paragonskills.co.uk or call **01202 646521**.

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DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND PERFORMANCE

boston:college

Salary: £50,000- £54,067 p.a

Boston College is a highly successful college that requires a Director with a keen eye for detail and understanding of funding and performance, to join the Executive Team. The financial health of the College is outstanding with over 8,500 enrolments. The recent Ofsted inspection confirmed that we are "good" and our journey to outstanding is well on the way. This role is critical in providing leadership to the key business functions of Registry, MIS, Partnerships and External Funding.

As Director for Planning and Performance you will be responsible for ensuring that funding streams are maximised through the modelling and forecasting of funding and overseeing Partnerships to maintain high quality performance. You will be responsible for supporting with the development and implementation of the College's IT strategy, managing all aspects associated with IT services. With the ability to effectively manage complex information systems and be able to apply business planning skills, this role will advise on the strategic, operational planning and performance factors to the Executive Team.

For an informal discussion please contact **Jo Maher**, Principal and Chief Executive **(01205) 365701** extension **3300**.

Closing date: Monday 25th June 2018 by 12 noon.

Interview date: Tuesday 3rd July 2018.

For more information and to apply online please visit www.boston.ac.uk.

Boston College is committed to providing a safe and secure environment for all learners. All posts are subject to enhanced Disclosure & Barring Service checks.

Boston College is committed to promoting Equality and Diversity

Senior Education and Skills Competition Manager

Salary: £46,500 **Location:** London



A fantastic opportunity has arisen for an experienced highly motivated, competent and solutions driven senior manager to make a significant contribution to the work of WorldSkills UK. The role will provide leadership and management of projects; developing new initiatives and partnerships that further our work and the UK's performance in international competitions.

The successful candidate will have significant experience as a senior manager, alongside extensive applied specialist knowledge of vocational and technical education underpinned by exceptional project and relationship management skills and have a strong ability to drive projects forward, working well with a large and complex network of stakeholders. The successful candidate will also have a commitment for developing programmes for young people to accelerate their personal and professional development.

Closing Date: 25th June 2018

It is intended that interviews will be held in London, short-listed candidates will be advised of the process.

WorldSkills UK is committed to making appointments on merit by fair and open processes, taking account of equality and diversity.

How to apply

Applications should be submitted no later than Monday 25th June and should include:

- A curriculum vitae detailing your full career history; and
- A supporting statement with evidence of your suitability for the role, taking into account the points listed in the role description and person specification (throughout the recruitment process we will be looking for examples and evidence of your experience, knowledge and skills).

Applications should be submitted by email or post (marked 'Private and Confidential') to:
Meryem Ozbiloglu, Senior HR Manager
jobs@worldskillsuk.org

For an informal conversation about the role please contact **Parisa Shirazi**, Head of Education and Skills Competitions by email at pshirazi@worldskillsuk.org

Vice Principal- Quality, Curriculum & Standards



Job type - Full-time, permanent

Hours - 35 per week (+5 hours paid lunch)

Salary - £63,155

Location - Head Office Southwark (Some flexibility on location)

Do you want to make a difference to young people's and adults lives, inspiring them to achieve and realise their true potential? If so, then join Nacro, a registered charity and training provider, who educate, nurture and transform lives.

Who we are looking for?

We are seeking a senior quality and curriculum professional that has the passion, pride and skills to help us on our journey of transformation at Nacro Education. You will be on top of new policy developments, skilled and experienced in what you do, and able to bring about rapid improvements through working with others. You will be looking for your next challenge to make a significant difference to our learners and committed staff team.

It is an exciting time for Nacro and its education delivery, as it grows and develops. This is an ideal opportunity for a teaching and learning professional who is exceptional and resilient, and who wishes to move to a senior post and to quickly progress through the range of opportunity and exposure Nacro can offer.

Duties and responsibilities include but are not limited to:

- Working closely with our Principal, Senior managers Faculty Managers and Teachers to raise aspiration and opportunity across the Nacro Education community

- Leading the quality improvement and assurance across Nacro's Education and Skills provision to ensure that we consistently deliver excellent results
- To drive the development and delivery of curriculum ensuring that it is innovative and inclusive and responsive to Nacro's ethos
- Proactive relationship building and horizon scanning will also be of key importance, to enable the successful growth and diversification of our services.

The successful candidate will be able to demonstrate senior level leadership skills and have significant experience of leading Teaching, Learning and Assessment within an FE setting and a complex environment.

If you are motivated by contributing to a culture of continuous improvement, and keen to work in diverse settings, then we would like to hear from you.

Please note: An enhanced DBS check & regular travel to Nacro Education sites throughout England, will be required for this role.

Closing Date: Midnight July 1st 2018

Interview Date: July 10th 2018

Please apply online at <https://bit.ly/2MI9cwr>



The College of
Animal Welfare

AAT Lecturer - Huntingdon

Salary £20,000 - £30,000 depending on skills and experience

We currently have a vacancy at our Huntingdon centre for an enthusiastic and committed individual to lecture and assess within our Business School.

The position will involve delivering AAT courses across a range of programmes, supporting learners in all aspects of their learning and achievement, as well as the opportunity to participate in student recruitment, careers events and employer liaison.

The successful candidate will hold a Level 4 qualification or relevant experience to demonstrate knowledge to Level 4 in accounts. A qualification relevant to teaching adults would be advantageous and professional registration must be up to date.

Closing date: 3rd July 2018

For further information or to request an application pack, please contact **Jackie Sumpter**, Human Resources Administrator, on **01480 422060 / jobs@caw.ac.uk** or download an application form from the College's website (www.caw.ac.uk).

The College of Animal Welfare is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young people. All successful applicants will undertake a Disclosure DBS Check.

The College undertakes not to discriminate unlawfully either directly or indirectly against a job applicant or one of its own employees. The College is committed to equal opportunities: appointments are open to members of the community on an equal basis.

Subject Leader Counselling Skills

Trittiford Learning Centre, Billesley, Birmingham

£26,470 - £33,136

Permanent. 1 x 36.5 hours per week or
2 x 18.25 hours per week

Ref: BCC000334

Subject Leaders at Birmingham Adult Education Service are good or outstanding teachers of adults and lead on quality assurance in a particular subject area.

We have 10 Learning Centres in Birmingham and the successful applicant will be based at our Trittiford Learning Centre in Billesley.

The role is for a teacher with remission for internal quality assurance and good practice sharing. Travel between Centres is required and travelling expenses can be claimed according to BCC approved mileage scheme. Excellent interpersonal and organisational skills are required together with a commitment to driving up quality and evidence of flexibility, as occasional evening and Saturday work is required. Close team work with the Health and Social Care curriculum team will be critical.

The successful applicant will hold a level 5 teaching qualification, A subject qualification in Counselling at least at level 4, an Internal quality assurance qualification, maths and English at least at level 2 and be currently active in a Counselling Practice.

Considerable experience of teaching adults in Counselling or a related subject.

Closing date: Monday 2 July 2018.

To view Job Description & Person Specification and to apply, please visit: www.wmjjobs.co.uk and search reference number: BCC000334.

Right to work in the UK documentation will be fully checked for all applicants. All non UK and non EU applicants are required to apply for a Certificate of Sponsorship from Birmingham City Council and must be approved by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) before any employment offer can be confirmed.





Quality & Curriculum Coordinator (Adult Education & Training)

Salary: £27,000- £32,000 per annum (dependant on experience)

Closing date: 5.00pm on Wednesday 27th June

High Trees Community Development Trust is a community anchor charity based in Tulse Hill in Lambeth. We deliver a range of services focussed in 3 key areas - Employment, Education and Training and Children, Community Engagement and Development and Young People and Family Services. All our work is focused on improving the social and economic welfare of the local community and supporting inclusiveness.

Our Curriculum & Quality Coordinator sits at the heart of our biggest team, Education and Training, and is responsible for all teaching, learning and assessment by overseeing the effective design, coordination and implementation of all courses as well as driving quality improvement across the organisation for a range of accredited and non-accredited courses aimed at the local community and other organisations.

The successful applicant will have solid experience in the Adult Education sector, whether in a community setting or an adult education provider, specifically of quality improvement and assurance.

For more information about the role and how to apply, please visit www.high-trees.org

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EDITORIAL



Scrapping employer fees would be a mistake

We reveal this week that the government is considering a U-turn on apprenticeship employer fees.

Since May last year, and for the first time in the history of apprenticeships, providers could only access government funding for small, non-levy paying firms after they received a 10-per-cent payment from the employer.

This employer charge is central to the apprenticeship reforms, forcing employers that do not pay the levy or had exhausted their levy credit to put their hands in their pocket and invest.

The Skills Minister, Anne Milton, rightly acknowledges the benefit of requiring employers to pay, saying "a contribution from somebody is important, because it requires their buy-in to what they're getting into".

Yet in my wide-ranging

interview the minister also confirmed that a rethink on employer fees is in the mix.

Scrapping employer fees would be popular with many providers, particularly those working with SMEs, so it is no surprise that the AELP has been pushing for it for some time.

But a volte-face on employer fees, even a temporary one for a low-level apprentices, would be a detrimental and unnecessary knee-jerk reaction to a temporary decline in starts.

Pitching "free" may well stimulate additional demand in the short term, but only from those employers unwilling buy a product with a 90-per-cent subsidy.

Are these freeloaders really going to invest in genuine job creation, mentoring and releasing employees for off-the-job training?

Such a move is also unnecessary, as other factors are more likely hampering employer demand and supply, including: willingness to release the employee for off-the-job training, limits on subcontracting, waiting for standards to become approved for delivery, and a botched attempt by the ESFA at limited non-levy allocations.

Free damages the value of the product, a product that providers should not be so quick to give away.

So the government should certainly fully fund 16- to 18-year-olds again, but for adults, especially those already in work, employers must have financial skin in the game.

Nick Linford, Editor
news@feweek.co.uk

Who's up & who's down

**Eileen Milner**

The Education and Skills Funding Agency was given the Department for Education's "vote of confidence" this week to run apprenticeships and T-levels from September

**Michelle Swithenbank**

The leader of Hull College is turning its fortunes in the right direction, according to the FE commissioner

**Mark Dawe**

Ahead of next week's Association of Employment and Learning Providers conference, its boss' efforts to get apprenticeship fees scrapped for small businesses could finally bear fruit

**Jeremy Hunt**

Bad news for the health secretary as the NHS misses its apprenticeships target for 2017/18, with starts down on the previous year

**Joe Docherty**

Confirmation of falling standards at the country's largest college group, with grade three Ofsted reports for both NCG and InTraining published this week.

**Sir Gerry Barragan**

The Institute for Apprenticeships is still not fast enough, according to Anne Milton - who told FE Week she always has a "big stick in my hand" when she meets its boss

Readers' reply



EMAIL



TWITTER



FACEBOOK



WEBSITE

Digital and science engineering UTC to open in Doncaster in 2020

Brilliant news. Just because one does the same thing time and time again with exactly the same outcome does not mean that one's insane. This has "shambles" written all over it.

I.Ron Pyrite

Well if it's not opening until 2020 plenty of time left to cancel it!

RogerM

A pause for reflection on the programme and its many difficulties would have been wise.

@OldDitch

NHS starts fall despite apprenticeships push

Yet another nail in the coffin for this very important sector that only values a social care apprenticeship at £3,000 but

considers other standards more important, for example customer service, which pays far more!

Mary Holmes

The London skills strategy is a devolution game-changer

Excellent from @suepemberholex on the mayor's skills strategy - positive but also warning against past mistakes, and promoting trusted providers.

@tomschuller48

Let's not be so quick to plan a raid on the levy pot

Certainly won't be the first mistake made with apprenticeships by this government.

@marches_skills

Broadly agree with this - but what we need is a strategy that has longer term vision of how apprenticeship

programme needs to evolve. Then underspend can be used in a planned way - that will help build confidence & offer stability

@AoCDavidH

How we assign apprenticeship funding bands

So will the @IFAtched put pressure on the EPA centres to drive down cost when the bandings are slashed to help providers financially? Doubt it.

@LisaMaple5

DfE estimates colleges with financial warnings will nearly triple to 100

To put it in perspective, that is HALF of colleges - a national disgrace caused exclusively by Tories and Lib Dems.

@properjob57

REPLY OF THE WEEK

AELP leaps to defence of level two apprenticeships

If schools did a better job of educating young people who are 16 and under, we would not need to have any level two apprentices. As it is, we can't do without them. How can we allow almost half of our young people to leave school without a level two equivalent qualification? Why should taxpayers have to educate these students again? No wonder British productivity is so poor. We must reform secondary and possibly primary education so that more young people at age 16 are better able to enter the world of work and add value to society.

Albert Wright

Experts

NEIL BATES

Former principal, Prospects College of Advanced Technology



The FE commissioner is wrong: We should keep PROCAT open

The first college incorporated in years has been told to merge to survive. This is the wrong decision, according to its erstwhile principal Neil Bates

The government continues with its much-needed reforms of technical education and skills at pace. In recent weeks, we have had the announcement of the 16 successful stage one bidders for the £140 million Institutes of Technology and the 52 T-level early adopters, a list which includes a surprisingly large number of schools, sixth forms and faith schools alongside further education colleges. The reforms are driving meaningful structural changes to the educational landscape.

The government wants a world-class education and skills system, but the evidence suggests that transforming technical education is going to be a long slog, not least because our regulatory and compliance system promotes sameness and suffocates innovation.

The recent difficulties at Prospects

College of Advanced Technology (PROCAT), which I led for 30 years until I retired in 2017, are a prime example of how hard it is to change the system.

“PROCAT is a victim of the very change it sought to promote”

Born out of the 1964 Industrial Training Act, the original college was one of 150 group training associations owned and run by employers. Sadly, today only around 30 GTAs survive as independent institutions. In 2014, in a landmark development, PROCAT incorporated and became the first new FE college in England since the 1992 Act. That tells you something about the

rigidity of our skills system.

PROCAT was established as a new model within the sector. A college of advanced technology specialising in STEM subjects, it was governed in partnership with employers, equipped with the latest technology including digital technology, simulators and robots, and had three times more apprentices than full time students and a strong commercial income.

There to meet the local, regional and national needs of key sectors such as advanced manufacturing, defence, aviation and rail, the college helped shape the template for the new Institutes of Technology.

When I retired last year, PROCAT was the largest rail engineering apprenticeship provider in the UK. It had over 1,000 apprentices, the majority aged 16 to 19 and studying at level three or higher. We had managed to transform the curriculum from mainly level one and two provision, to having three quarters of provision at levels

three to six, including new degree apprenticeships.

Hundreds of young people started their careers on higher-level STEM apprenticeships at global companies such as Atkins, Thales and Honeywell. Anyone visiting the college could not help but be impressed by the environment, which replicated a modern workplace.

The fact that the FE commissioner has concluded that the college is too small to survive independently, and so is now being driven into merger with South Essex College of Further and Higher Education, illustrates all too clearly the fault lines which remain in our skills system. It also has serious implications for the new institutes of technology, whose mission and specification are remarkably like PROCAT's.

In many respects, PROCAT is a victim of the very change it sought to promote. The imposition of a badly thought-out levy on large employers has hugely disrupted apprenticeship recruitment.

Pressure to move to new apprenticeship frameworks by slashing funding for the old standards has created change overload on an already stretched workforce. Raising the bar on entry to level three (A-level equivalent) study programmes exposed the reality in schools that they are largely ignoring the Baker Clause, a legal entitlement.

On top of this external turbulence is the almost impossible task of recruiting and properly remunerating expert technical teachers in what the FE commissioner calls “a vibrant south-east employment market” and you have the perfect storm.

If the technical education reforms are going to be a success, we need many more colleges like PROCAT – not fewer. There is no reason why a specialist college with a turnover of circa £10 million cannot survive and thrive.

What is needed is policy stability, modest amounts of capital investment to keep pace with changes to technology and sufficient funding to allow for this.

STEPHEN HOWLETT

Chair, London South East Colleges



It's time to let FE providers award their own degrees

Only nine colleges currently have the power to award degrees. Stephen Howlett believes this needs to be the change for the good of the learners

Rarely does a week pass without a story appearing in the media about the skills crisis facing industry in the UK.

A recent report from the Lords' economic affairs committee highlighted the fact that we have “too many biology and history graduates” and not enough people with “technician-level STEM skills”.

I completely agree that we need more focus on skills in our education system – but I'm an advocate of higher education and don't believe the two are mutually exclusive. It's encouraging, for example, to see more and more companies are recognising the value of degree apprenticeships.

The skills crisis won't be solved by encouraging young people to scrap their university plans. Higher-level skills and learning are crucial to a successful economy, and indeed to social mobility.

So rather than discouraging young people from university and degrees, we need to focus on making sure our higher education provision is accessible, relevant and meets the needs of businesses. There is no doubt that FE colleges offering HE provision are in the very best position to do this.

With strong employer links and a focus on work placements, colleges tend to offer a more practical approach to learning – while equipping their students with the specific higher-level knowledge associated with a degree. There are often more flexible study options on offer at colleges, with part-time and fast-track degrees available, making HE learning more accessible to many more.

And it is for this reason that I believe more “HE-within-FE” providers should be striving to earn degree-awarding powers. Most colleges depend on their relationships with local universities to administer and award the actual degrees. Apart from not being particularly cost effective, this set-up can

fail to recognise and celebrate the high quality of HE provision at the college itself.

“It opens up many more progression opportunities for young people”

Being able to award degrees undoubtedly validates the quality of an organisation's HE provision. From quality assurance to raising the college's profile, it's an important reputational marker.

A student who has studied the majority of their degree at a college, but who graduates at a nearby university, might lose their relationship with the college. They will identify as a graduate from their university as opposed to the very institution that has worked with them for three or more years.

The needs of employers must not be forgotten either. Devolution will change

the way educators respond to skills needs in a particular region – there will no longer be a one-size-fits-all solution.

Educators need flexibility. With its own degree-awarding powers, an FE college will be able to adjust, amend and create new courses to meet the requirements of local and national businesses. When relying on a partner university, such validation can be time-consuming with the need to meet two sets of objectives.

Of course, excellent partnerships with other educational institutions will remain vitally important. I myself witness first-hand the very many benefits that come from good working relationships between schools, colleges and universities. It opens up many

more progression opportunities for young people, fitting with individual requirements and aspirations. This should and would not need to change if a college were permitted to award its own degrees.

Currently just nine colleges in the country have degree-awarding powers – seven at foundation level and only two with full-taught degree status. This doesn't reflect or recognise the high quality of HE provision that is offered at so many others, which are making higher-level learning so much more accessible to local communities.

Education is key to social mobility, and FE colleges are on the forefront. The outstanding job they are doing to support this (in what is a pretty hostile environment) should be recognised and celebrated.

Gaining these awarding powers is not easy and takes years. However, I have no doubt that by doing this, FE colleges would be able to strengthen and expand successful HE provision.

NEIL CARBERRY

Outgoing managing director, the CBI



Here's how English skills policy needs to change

The CBI believes the government is on the wrong track with its current skills system. Neil Carberry sets out the ways in which he would change things

People are fond of maligning English skills policy, but there is no truth in the idea that it is lacking. It can't be – a new one arrives every two years without fail. It is in the delivery of a skills system where we stumble, as each new approach takes us back to the beginning.

We can all understand the political attraction of creating new courses and counting new students as success. But a successful national system needs to be sustainable and flexible enough to meet the needs of different learners and local economies over time.

As I leave the CBI, it remains my hope that the current reforms – the levy, new standards, T-levels and the national retraining scheme – can break this cycle, but something must change. Month-on-month falls in apprentice

starts are bad news, but it would be worse if we had to begin again.

The answer is a different approach from the government, an acknowledgement that we are dealing with a skills market in which people have choices – and need help to make good ones.

“A reformed levy will only work with a new culture of skills investment”

In a global economy, learners and companies have a great deal of choice as the skills market is growing all the time, yet policies are too often designed

without an understanding of these options and their likely outcomes.

It is no accident that, over the past year, every design failure in the levy that had been pointed out before it went live has come to pass. It gives business leaders no joy to say: “I told you so.”

Instead of a top-down system, the government must be more a regulator more than a deliverer, with the industrial strategy as a blueprint. Businesses and providers can then take the lead on delivery. At the moment, this isn't happening.

So what does good look like?

First, the government should reach out further and encourage more firms to take an active role in skills provision. We need many more companies to step up.

Second, the DfE and its agencies should focus on economic and consumer regulation, not state-provided public services. This would focus on regulating markets and

consumer protection in what gets delivered – not specifying provision.

The good news is that we have already seen flashes of this. The apprenticeship reform programme and the creation of the Institute for Apprenticeships could be revolutionary: when employers are given choice to buy quality, they do.

There is much still to tackle. We all need to recognise that businesses and learners, rather than the government, are now the customers. Too little time is spent thinking about what drives consumers and providers – and not enough about effective delivery. There is a lot more for the IfA to do.

One example is price-setting. Provision that costs £1,300 outside an apprenticeship should not cost £9,000 inside it. Pace of delivery and quality control are not yet strong enough. And we still lack a provider strategy that will help the supply side support the good and rigorously challenge the bad.

Businesses need to step up. The

levy is poorly designed, but it is too easily written off as a government tax grab. If firms believe that skills and apprenticeships matter – as almost every CBI member does – then the government should take a more strategic approach, empowering employers and providers, to create new space for firms to innovate in their provision.

A reformed levy will only work if there is a new culture of skills investment in England. I remain convinced that we are not far from a system that could stick around for many years, but making it happen will require firms to step up and providers to change.

And it will be driven on the ground rather than Whitehall. That's why the CBI is so focused on supporting collaborative work as we make the levy more flexible. If the government wants to see real change, that's what it needs to enable: work with us in business to get these latest reforms right.

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Bulletin

**Mandeep Gill****Principal, Newham Sixth-Form College****Start date** August 2018**Previous job**

Vice-principal, Suffolk New College

Interesting fact

Mandeep has been in love for a lifetime: he met his wife when he was just five years old.

**Dawn Whitmore****Principal, Brooksby Melton College****Start date** May 2018**Previous job**

Principal, New College Nottingham

Interesting fact

Dawn's leadership approach ensures that the learner experience is always at the heart of decision-making.

**Ashley Barnes****Deputy CEO, Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT)****Start date** May 2018**Previous job**

Chief academic officer, VTCT

Interesting fact

Ashley is also a chartered and state registered physiotherapist.

**Eddie Playfair****Senior policy manager, the Association of Colleges****Start date** September 2018**Previous job**

Principal, Newham Sixth-Form College

Interesting fact

Eddie is an avid music lover, and plays the clarinet and piano.

Movers & Shakers

...

Your weekly guide to who's
new and who's leaving**Carina Fagan****Chief academic officer, Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT)****Start date** May 2018**Previous job**

Executive director of awarding, VTCT

Interesting fact

Colin Farrell was Carina's line dancing teacher in school.

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

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FE Week Sudoku challenge

How to play: Fill in all blank squares making sure that each row, column and 3 by 3 box contains the numbers 1 to 9

8					3			
	4	2	8	9	3			
	7		1	5				
2	1			4				3
	3		5			4		
6			2			7	9	
			3	9	1			
			6	1	2	7	8	
		7						6

Difficulty:
Easy

	9		8	6	5	2		
		5		1	2		6	8
							4	
				8		5	6	
		8			4			
4	5		9					
	8							
2	4		1	7		5		
		7	2	8	3		9	

Difficulty:
Medium

Solutions: See right

Spot the difference To WIN an FE Week mug



Spot five differences. **First correct entry wins an FE Week mug.**

Email your name and picture of your completed spot the difference to: news@feweek.co.uk.



Last Edition's winner: Julie Coverley

Solutions

Turn the paper around to check if your answers match- but no cheating!

Difficulty: Easy

1	2	7	5	4	8	9	3	6
3	9	5	6	1	2	7	8	4
4	8	6	3	7	9	5	1	2
6	5	4	2	3	1	8	7	9
7	3	8	9	5	6	2	4	1
2	1	9	7	8	4	6	5	3
9	7	3	1	6	5	4	2	8
5	4	2	8	9	3	1	6	7
8	6	1	4	2	7	3	9	5

Difficulty: Medium

5	1	7	2	8	3	6	9	4
2	4	6	1	7	9	5	8	3
3	8	9	6	5	4	7	1	2
4	5	3	9	2	6	8	7	1
6	7	8	5	3	1	4	2	9
9	2	1	7	4	8	3	5	6
8	6	2	3	9	7	1	4	5
7	3	5	4	1	2	9	6	8
1	9	4	8	6	5	2	3	7