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CIFE SURVIVES WITH SECRET SPONSORSHIP

- Chartered Institution for FE boasts of unnamed construction firm investment
- Sir John Hayes MP, former skills minister, on institution's payroll last year

FRASER WHIELDON FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK

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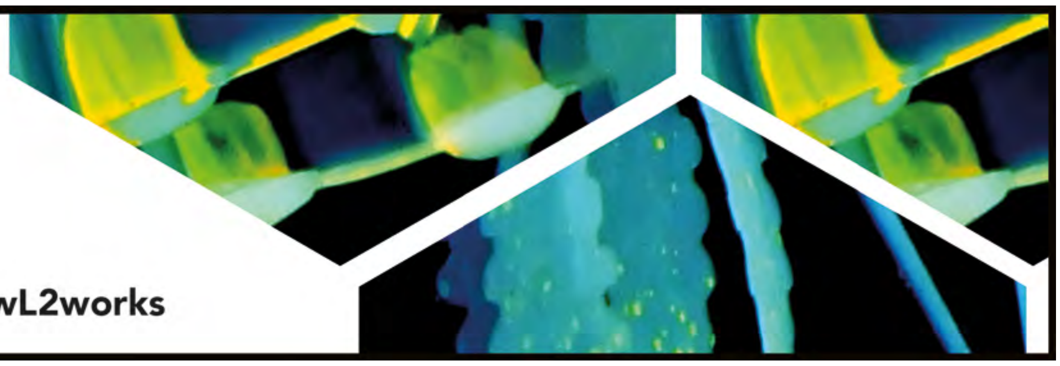

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AELP Autumn Conference 2019

Apprenticeship budget overspend: Small employers to face cap on starts

BILLY CAMDEN
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Small employers are likely to be capped on the number of apprentices they can employ, as part of the government's plan to enable all providers to access funding for non-levy payers from January.

Keith Smith, director of apprenticeships at the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), announced at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers conference this week that small businesses would finally be able to access the apprenticeship service from the new year.

As part of a "managed transition", all main organisations on the register of apprenticeship training providers, not just those with an existing procured non-levy contract, will be allowed to train apprentices with small employers from 1 January.

It will more than double the number of providers with direct access to funding for non-levy payers, including most universities.

Additional funding will be made available for up to 5,000 new starts through the service per month between January and March 2020.

But recognising the strain on the apprenticeship budget, as first reported by *FE Week* last year and followed up by the National Audit Office, there will be restrictions on the number of starts for the employers.

"What we are thinking about is, purely for testing reasons, putting a cap on the number of apprentices per employer," Smith told the conference. "We think that is a sensible way to try and control and test."

He added that the move to the apprenticeship service would provide "certainty" that funding is "going to be there going forward".

"We will introduce something called 'reserve my funding', which will enable an SME with a provider to access and reserve apprenticeship opportunities into the system and bank that investment to know that their reservation is there, although it will only be held for a period of time."

Small employers were meant to move onto the apprenticeship system in April 2019 but the agency delayed this by a year to ensure the roll-out was successful. At this point it extended non-levy contracts for training providers until March 2020.

Smith said providers with current non-levy contracts will have them extended in April, but there is no fixed deadline for when these will end.

"We're going to embark on a dual running system," he told delegates.

"Contracts are currently the primary route for funding small business apprenticeships. Over time we'll be switching to those being the secondary route and the digital system to the primary route and eventually we'll switch off those contracts altogether."

He continued: "If you have a non-levy contract you can continue to train on that contract, but you can also engage new opportunities from the online service. In essence there will be a dual running of the two services.

"We're not going to put a fixed time frame on how long that transition period works, but what we can give you assurance on is those non-levy contracts will continue to operate for as long as we think you'll need them before we fully switch them off."

Through the apprenticeship service, already in use by large, levy-paying businesses, employers can: manage their apprenticeship funding, select a suitable apprenticeship standard and an end-point assessment organisation, as well as advertise an apprenticeship and select a suitable provider to deliver their apprenticeship training.


Keith Smith

Sex discrimination linked to funding rates controversy

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From front

A sector leader has called for an investigation into whether sex discrimination lies behind some of the controversial apprenticeship funding rates.

Mark Dawe, boss of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, told his organisation's autumn conference this week that training firms are dropping the adult care worker standard "left, right and centre" as they "can't afford to run it".

He said it was "ridiculous" that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (ifATE) has declined appeals to increase its funding band, which sits at £3,000, but "you can change a tyre on a big vehicle" on the specialist tyre operative standard and receive £12,000.

Both standards are at level 2, and the funding duration for the tyre operative is just a third longer than for the adult care worker (18 months compared with 12 months).

FE Week analysis shows that of the 10,480 adult care worker starts recorded in the first three quarters of 2018/19, 85 per cent were female.

There weren't enough starts for the tyre operative to compare but the level 2 autocare technician standard, also funded at £12,000, had 270 starts in the same period and 96 per cent were male.

Dawe also pointed out that the powered pedestrian door installer and service engineer standard, which is essentially an "electric door opener", is also given thousands more (£9,000).

"The more I look especially at level 2 and level 3 the funding bands for the different sectors, the more, on average, male-dominated sectors are getting vastly more money compared with the female sectors," Dawe told *FE Week*.

"There is a bit of service sector versus engineering, but actually that is a historic bias and I'm starting to think there is an element of sexual discrimination here."

He added that this was an area where "we ought to start looking and seeing if there is some truth behind it" and called on the IfATE and Department for Education to do their own research as "they have the data".

The IfATE makes the decisions on funding bands for apprenticeship standards before getting sign-off from the education secretary.

A spokesperson for the institute said: "All funding decisions for standards are taken on an individual basis, utilising quotes and costings data from providers delivering to the sector in question and following the same established procedures that balance the need for quality delivery with value for money for taxpayers.

"There is no variation in our approach by standard or sector."

He added: "The institute is wholly supportive of diversity across technical education and promoting equality of opportunity, which we have demonstrated through our continuing gender-neutral language work."

The spokesperson would not say whether the IfATE would launch research into potential sexual bias in apprenticeship funding decisions.

According to IfATE figures, starts on the adult care worker standard have soared from 513 in 2016/17, to 14,744 in 2018/19.

In May, however, a review by the institute kept the funding band for the standard at £3,000, despite calls for it to be doubled.

This caused a significant provider of the two, Professional Training Solutions, to stop recruiting apprentices to the programme, as revealed by *FE Week*.

A follow-up survey by the AELP found more than half of providers who offered the standards were reducing their starts, or pulling the programme altogether.

Many other providers said they were being forced to introduce "cost efficiencies", such as fewer in-person monitoring visits, reducing the number of tutors to learners or charging employers more.

In June, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on social care reported that as many as 500,000 unqualified people could be passing themselves off as trained care workers, putting millions of senior citizens at risk.

"There is a care crisis in this country, we need hundreds of thousands more care workers. We haven't got the training workforce we need and apprenticeships were a key part of that," Dawe told *FE Week*.

"Now we are putting those apprenticeships in a position where they are not viable to deliver, so it is going to get worse rather than better."


Mark Dawe

News

3aaa investigation stutters on as police confirm no contact has been made with top bosses

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Exclusive

The co-founders of a disgraced apprenticeship provider currently under police investigation are yet to be interviewed by officers, more than a year after inquiries began.

In October 2018 the government terminated its multi-million pound skills funding contracts with Aspire Achieve Advance, better known as 3aaa, after allegations of fraud. The case was referred to Derbyshire Constabulary.

The apprenticeship giant subsequently went bust with 4,200 learners and 500 staff on its books.

But a spokesperson for the constabulary has confirmed that no contact has been made with anyone who worked at the defunct firm, including the top bosses.

They could not say what work has been done over the past 12 months, even though in March the constabulary said that a "formal criminal investigation" into 3aaa had started.

The High Court placed 3aaa into compulsory liquidation in late October last year.

Anthony Hannon is the official receiver handling the insolvency, but his investigation into the collapse of 3aaa is also ongoing one year later.

A spokesperson said that the Insolvency Service has three years from the date of the company winding-up order to launch enforcement action "if it was to determine doing so was in the public interest in the light of any investigation findings".

"Enforcement activity is pursued through the courts meaning that applications must be supported by information that meets the evidential standard for those proceedings," they added.

Sanctions imposed by the official receiver, if he or she uncovers unfit director conduct, include director disqualification of between two and 15 years.

A total of 1,242 company directors were banned last year.

3aaa was co-founded by Peter Marples and Di McEvoy-Robinson in 2008, but the pair stepped down in September 2018.

The company was one of the biggest apprenticeship companies in England, holding £16.5 million in ESFA contracts when it went into administration on October 11 that year.

It received more than £31 million in government funding the year before it collapsed and had the largest allocation for non-levy apprenticeships, standing at nearly £22 million.

Evidence from a whistleblower, obtained by *FE Week*, showed how the provider inflated achievement rates by more than 20 percentage points, which contributed to a high Ofsted grade and more public funding.

In addition to data manipulation, 3aaa sales documents showed a potential £700,000 ESFA clawback. It is understood that this related to a range of apprenticeship and traineeship funding overclaims made through individualised learner record

submissions.

The alleged misuse of grants from an apprenticeship incentive scheme in which 3aaa held on to £1.2 million that was supposed to go to employers is also under investigation.

The defunct company's latest accounts show that its directors took out huge directors' loans totalling more than £4 million between them, and that its two owners bought multi-million pound properties at the end of 2015.

Meanwhile, 3aaa spent its public funding on £1.6 million of sports-club sponsorships, an Elton John concert and Tesla supercars, among other luxuries.

Last year was not the first ESFA investigation. In 2016 the auditing firm KPMG was asked to carry out an investigation and found dozens of success rate "overclaims".

It is understood this resulted in 3aaa paying back a substantial six-figure sum.

After launching its second investigation into 3aaa in June 2018, the DfE called in an independent auditor to investigate the ESFA over its contract management of the former apprenticeships giant.

Funding ban for new level 3 and below quals

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The Education and Skills Funding Agency will stop any new qualification at level 3 and below receiving approval for funding from September next year.

Officials at the ESFA issued a "moratorium" notice to awarding organisations this week, which will be in place initially for a period of three years. The move is part of the government's controversial post-16 level 3 and below review of vocational qualifications, which includes applied generals such as BTECs, tech levels and technical certificates.

Officials claim that many of these qualifications are of "poor quality" and their existence leaves young people and employers "confused".

A spokesperson for the Department for Education (DfE) said the moratorium will support this review, and will be enforced "so we are not adding to the already confusing and complicated system of over 12,000 qualifications already available at these levels".

But Graham Hasting-Evans, group managing director at awarding body NOCN, warned of the economic consequences of the decision. "The announcement is not surprising," he said.

"What I hope we will get very soon is a formal report from the Department for Education, not the ESFA, on the outcome of the [level 3 and below] consultation with the opportunity to comment on any firm DfE proposals, arising from the review.

"In that sense I believe that the blanket announcement of a moratorium, even with the exemptions, is not the best way forward for the UK economy as it could prove to be too restrictive."

The moratorium will apply to study programme for 16 to 19-year-olds, advanced learner loans, the adult education budget and the European Social Fund at level 3 and below.

Exemptions include qualifications that are being reformed, those that have been "designed to respond to a particular economic need" and those which have been approved for 2020 to 2021 but need updating.

The operation of the moratorium will be reviewed annually and will also

apply across the Greater London Authority and six mayoral combined authorities, which had their share of the adult education budget devolved to them in August.

James Kewin, deputy chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, called the government's level 3 and below review "important" and "high stakes" as it will determine the future of applied general qualifications.

Reacting to the moratorium, Kewin said: "As our consultation response set out, we believe that the newly-reformed applied general qualifications have a vital role to play in the future qualifications landscape, and should sit alongside T-levels and A levels as the 'qualifications of choice' for 16 to 19-year-olds.

"Applied general qualifications make an enormous contribution to both social mobility and economic growth and we will continue to make the case for this option to be available to students in the future."

The ESFA stated that funding approval will not be removed from qualifications that have funding offers unless "they no longer meet approval principles, reach their operational end date during the period of the moratorium, and are no longer available for students to study" or are a "legacy version of a qualification that has been subject to other reform".

The first part of a two-stage consultation on plans to withdraw funding for qualifications at level 3 and below begun in March and followed the announcement of plans to introduce new "high-quality" T-levels, which will be rolled out from next year.

Then skills minister Anne Milton told *FE Week* the consultation did not represent a manipulation of the market to ensure T-levels are a success and claimed those providing high quality, necessary qualifications with a clear purpose and good progression "should have nothing to fear".

However, Ofqual voiced concerns that there was a risk of a potential barrier to student progress if alternative choices to T-levels and A-levels were "unduly restricted".

In July it was confirmed that more than 160 "duplicate qualifications" at level 3 and below, including 76 BTECs, will have their funding removed from August 2020.

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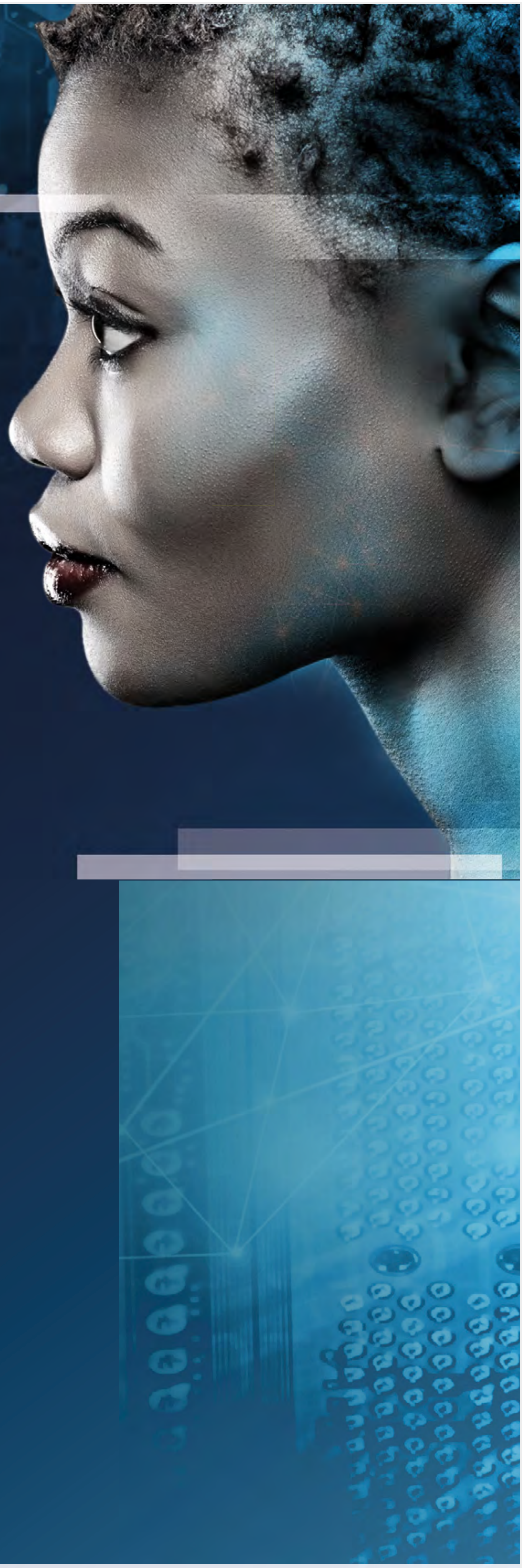

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News

UTC deficits more than double over four years, National Audit Office finds

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Deficits in university technical colleges have more than doubled over four years, reveals a damning National Audit Office report.

The government's audit watchdog found that the total deficits for the embattled 14 to 19 technical providers constituted nearly a tenth of the total for all academy trusts, after rising from £3.5 million in 2014-15 to £7.7 million in 2017-18.

The Department for Education has spent what one union described as an "eye-watering bill for the taxpayer" on the UTC programme between 2010-11, when they were first set up, and 2018-19.

Despite the huge cash injection of £792 million, the scheme has been hit with a catalogue of issues which *FE Week* has exposed over the years and which the NAO's report lists, including unviable student numbers, multiple closures and poor Ofsted results.

Meg Hillier, the chair of the Public Accounts Committee, said the report "provides further evidence as to why the Department for Education is my top department of concern".

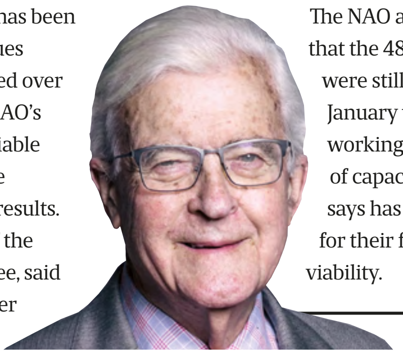
Most of the £792 million was capital grant, but there was also £28 million to improve UTCs' financial positions and £8.8 million to cover their deficits.

The DfE has also spent £4.5 million on helping them to "improve" and £9 million on closing them, which included the costs of writing off debts and staff redundancies.

Jo Grady, the University and College Union general secretary, said too often UTCs have proved to be "expensive failures" that took funds away from FE at a time when it most needed support.

Nansi Ellis, the assistant general secretary of the National Education Union, found it "shocking" that such a "staggering amount of money" had been spent on a "flawed model".

The NAO also found that the 48 UTCs that were still open in January this year were working at 45 per cent of capacity, which it says has implications for their financial viability.



Lord Baker

It reported that the Education and Skills Funding Agency has "significant concerns" about the finances of a quarter of them (13 out of 48).

UTCs have attempted to remedy their recruitment and financial problems by applying to take on pupils from year 7, rather than from the age of 14.

This month it was announced two UTCs have been granted permission to open to 11-year-olds from next September One already has permission and others are expected to follow suit.

The government has also encouraged the colleges to join multi-academy trusts to strengthen their position.

In 2017, the Department for Education embarked on a three-year project to improve UTCs' finances and provision with two main measures of success: for the proportion of UTCs rated as "good" or "outstanding" by Ofsted to be the same as for free schools generally; and for the proportion of UTCs on the ESFA's national concerns list to be the same as for academies generally.

However, the NAO has found UTCs struggled to meet both counts: as of August 2019, as a proportion of schools inspected, Ofsted had rated 52 per cent of UTCs as good or outstanding, compared with 84 per cent of free schools.

And as of July 2019, 26 per cent of UTCs were on the ESFA's list, compared with 1 per cent of academy trusts.

Responding to the NAO report, Lord Baker, the founder of UTCs and the chair of the Baker Dearing Trust, said it "records the price of everything and the value of nothing".

"UTCs should be judged by the success of their students becoming apprentices, studying STEM subjects at university and getting a job as a technician or an engineer. For that we have the best destination data of any schools in the country."

The NAO did find that a higher proportion of students from UTCs went into sustained apprenticeships after GCSEs and A-levels or their equivalents, compared with the national average.

He added that the DfE had encouraged the Baker Dearing Trust to make applications for new UTCs and was working with local employers and universities for the next round in November.

A DfE spokesperson said: "As this report recognises, we have taken significant action to support and raise the profile of UTCs to make sure they continue to play a role in our diverse education system and provide the skills that employers need."

New shorter Ofsted reports are 'good' for colleges

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Colleges and independent learning providers are prospering under the new Ofsted inspection framework, with most scoring "good" grades in the initial run of reports.

The first inspection reports conducted under the new framework, which came into effect from 1 September, were released last Friday. A total of 18 have now been published and almost three quarters (71 per cent) have received a grade two, or "good" ranking. Four were classified as grade three, or "requires improvement," and one was rated grade four, or "inadequate".

The reports are structured quite differently from before, with new questions and a different layout, but one of the most drastic changes has been the reduction in word count.

The report for Woodspeen Training in Huddersfield, the first provider to be inspected under the new framework, features 2,004 words, while its previous report from 2017 contained 5,241 words.

This could be due to Ofsted's decision to reduce the number of types of provision it inspected under the new framework to make its reports "more coherent and inclusive".

This meant that, for example, rather than looking at a range of study programmes for those aged 16-19 and those aged 16-24, they would all be grouped under education programmes for young people.

The new framework is intended to focus less on data and more on the quality of education received by learners.

Woodspeen Training, which improved from a grade three to a two, told *FE Week* in September that inspectors were looking at the "three I's": intent, implementation, and impact.

This new model appears to be benefitting general FE colleges: three out of five of their reports from this week returned "good" ratings.

Bedford College was another of the successful providers, with inspectors reporting that more than 10,000 learners enjoy their time and benefit from a "positive and respectful culture".

This is the first inspection since its merger in 2017 with Tresham College, which received a grade four rating in 2016.

Ofsted also graded Tyne Coast College in South Shields as "good" and wrote that the 5,000 learners enjoy the experience and feel valued by staff.

North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College also achieved a grade two for its provision to over 5,000 learners. Inspectors found its senior leaders had developed and successfully implemented a clear strategy, resulting in sustained improvement since the college was formed from a merger of two others in 2016.

The less successful performers were Coventry College and The Sheffield College.

Coventry, which has around 6,000 learners, failed to rise above a grade three after it was found that too few of its learners and apprentices in 2018/19 received clear information about courses, their location and entry criteria.

The Sheffield College, with over 10,000 learners, also received a grade three because too few learners on study programmes and with high needs achieved their qualification.

Two specialist colleges have earned a grade two under the new framework: Lakeside Early Adult Provision on Merseyside, which has ten students and improved on a grade three; and Freeman College in Sheffield, which has 27 students.

Independent providers have also done well since the new inspection framework was introduced – with seven out of nine achieving a grade two in their reports.

Norman Mackie and Associates in Cheshire, like Woodspeen, progressed from a grade three to a grade two this week.

Inspectors reported that its 41 learners "enjoy and participate fully in their learning programmes" and leaders have high expectations for them.

But on the flip side, Mercia Partnership, based in Chorley, Lancashire, is challenging Ofsted after being given the first grade four rating under the new framework.

People Solutions Training, which trades as N-gaged and is based in Bristol, scored a grade three overall but received an "inadequate" for apprenticeships. The provider told *FE Week* that it would not be challenging the grade.

Employer providers are off to a bad start after Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust received a grade three in its first inspection.

Kirklees Council Adult and Community Learning scored a grade two. This was a downgrade from its previous grade one.

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News

Industry placement cold-spots? Exp

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Forty-five colleges and school sixth forms across England will need to find hundreds of 45-day industry placements as part of new "digital" T-levels next year.

But last month Scarborough Sixth Form College pulled out of the programme as the principal did not feel confident in securing enough placements – a move which was applauded by education secretary Gavin Williamson, a former student of the college.

FE Week investigated whether other providers would struggle to find relevant employers in their patch.

Weston College, based in Weston-super-Mare and one of an initial six providers set to deliver the digital T-level in the South West of England, has admitted to concerns over finding sufficient employer partners to deliver industry placements.

"We are confident that we can embrace the delivery of the digital T-level, but recognise that it is a difficult agenda," principal Dr Paul Phillips said.

"We are confident that we can embrace the delivery of the digital T-level"

"We are well on the way to finding our placement providers, but again the time it is taking to fulfil requirements is huge.

"There is, however, a reality here – this is the future and therefore we have to find a way to deliver this successfully and we will."

The "Digital production, design and development" qualification will be one of the first three T-levels to be available at select colleges, schools and other providers across England in September 2020. The two-year course will follow GCSEs, be equivalent to three A-levels and include classroom learning.

A mandatory industry placement of at least 315 hours (approximately 45 days) is arguably the most critical component of the T-level.

A student could be on the programme for the full two years but prevented from passing if the provider cannot find an employer to place students with – something that sector leaders have long expressed concern about, especially for those in rural areas.

To encourage enough providers to sign up to offer the new qualifications, colleges have been given monetary incentives including a hefty £38 million capital funding pot which 13 have benefitted from so far.

"This is the future and we have to find a way to deliver"

But this year the National Foundation for Educational Research released research, based on interviews with half of the first 50 providers to deliver T-levels in 2020, which found providers faced huge challenges in securing work placements, specifically in the digital sector.

This was reportedly "due to the small size of many of these businesses, as well as intellectual property and safeguarding issues".

Recognising this threat, the Department for Education (DfE) announced in May that students would be able to split their industry placements between two employers, in order to enable more choice.

They also stated that digital placements could be undertaken within "common sets of occupational areas" as opposed to those only relevant to students' specific specialism.

FE Week analysis of the latest employment data from the Office for National Statistics attempted to identify the potential cold-spots of digital jobs in England.

It showed the North East had the fewest Information and communication jobs, as of June 2019.

Despite this, Chris Toon, deputy principal at Gateshead College, was optimistic about finding enough work placements.

"North East England has one of the fastest growing digital and tech sectors in the UK," he said.

"It's our continuing role as a college to ensure those businesses that choose to thrive here in the region have access to a talented workforce; people with the skills, experience and ambition who can hit the ground running."

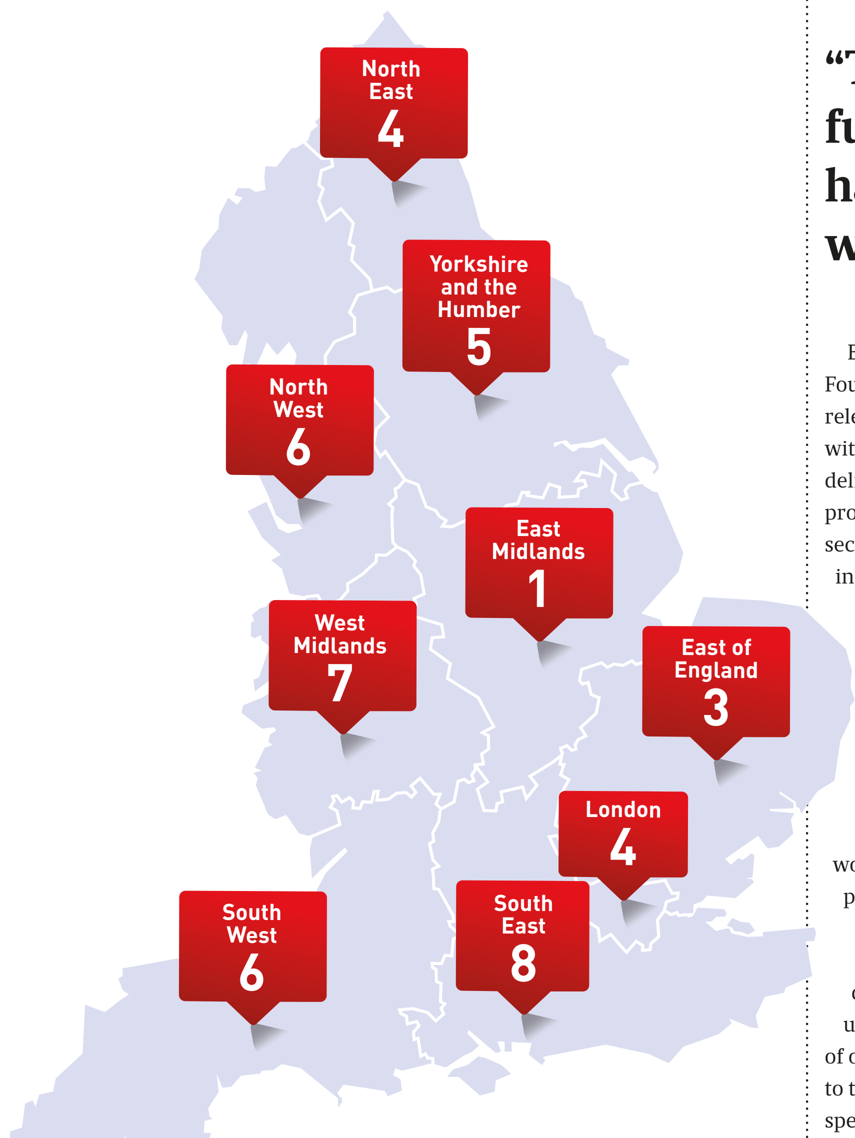
The college "successfully trialled" digital T-levels work placements as part of the DfE pilot last year, according to Toon.

As a result, he said it already has commitments from leading tech firms in Gateshead and the wider North East region going forward.

Derby College is the only planned provider of the digital T-level in the East Midlands, a region with the second fewest digital jobs according to the data from the Office for National Statistics.

Kate Martin, vice principal of Derby College Group who is heading the introduction of T-levels at the college, sought to allay apprehension over placement options in the area.

Digital T-level provision across England by region from 2020



Total: 44 providers


Dr Paul Phillips CBE

News

loring the toughest T-level challenge

She said: "Our partnership working with local and regional employers - which has been rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted – gives us a head start on the work experience requirements under the T-level programmes.

"We have a dedicated team whose focus is to provide current students with diverse opportunities with employers, including work experience.

"Partner employers in the first tranche subjects - and many others - are fully on board to work with us to provide students with the work-based elements of the T-levels."

"North East England has one of the fastest growing digital and tech sectors"

Yorkshire and The Humber was the region with the third smallest workforce employed in "digital" jobs.

But a spokesperson for Barnsley College, which is based in the region, said it had "no intention to withdraw" and planning for delivery was "well underway and on track."

Barnsley College is the prime college beneficiary of capital funding for T-levels so far, having received £2.2 million.

David Akeroyd, vice principal of technical and professional education, explained how the provider secures work placements.

"We are working closely with Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council in relation to the town's proposed digital campus, which will open up new opportunities for business start-ups and the relocation of existing digital employers to Barnsley," he said.

"The town also has easy access via public transport to the key cities of Sheffield and Leeds where we have many links with digital employers who are supporting T-level delivery."

Barnsley's digital campus is set to open in September 2020, according to the college and the council.

The principal of Shipley College of Further Education, Nav Chohan, echoed the expectation of meeting the T-level industry requirement in the Yorkshire and the Humber region.

He stated: "Given our positive experience in finding opportunities with employers under the Work Placement Capacity and Delivery Fund, we feel confident that sufficient industry placements can be found."

Leeds-based Notre Dame Catholic Sixth Form College also said it was "confident" that it will deliver a successful T-level digital programme, including sufficient amounts of industry placements.

The highest proportion of digital jobs in England are based in London but there are only four digital T-level providers in the capital and none of the largest London colleges will be offering the new qualification next year.

Part of the reason for this was the stipulation that grade three colleges could not apply to deliver the first wave of T-levels; nor could merged colleges that no longer have an Ofsted grade, such as London South East Colleges.

"Partner employers are fully on board to work with us"

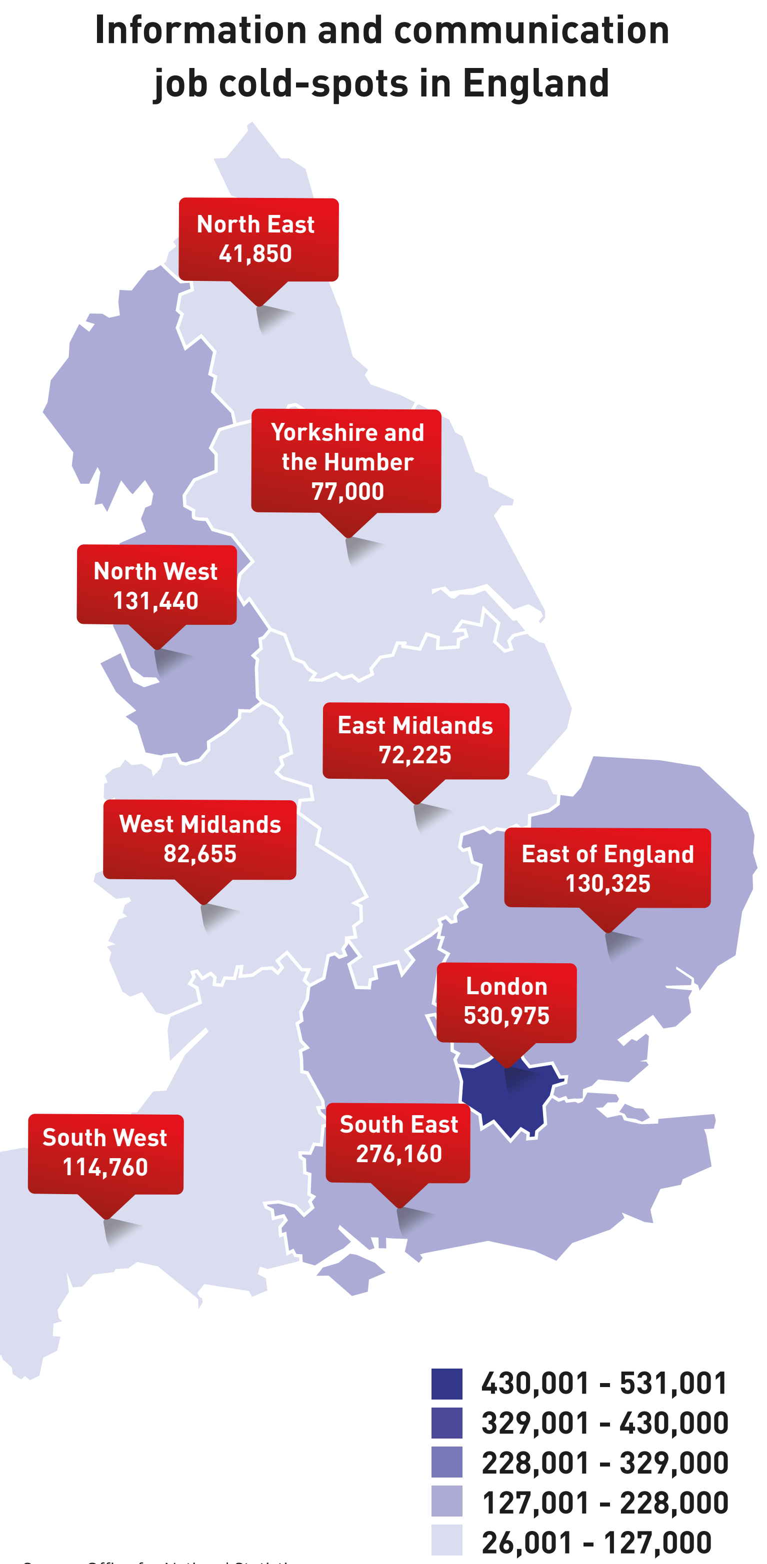
At the start of October, when Scarborough Sixth Form College officially pulled out of delivering the digital pathway, education secretary Gavin Williamson said his former college made the "right decision".

Despite Williamson also pledging to convene employers to "make sure" enough work placement opportunities are available to colleges, his words could be taken by rural colleges as encouragement to bail out now if they also have concerns over work placements.

But Becci Newton, deputy director of public policy research at the Institute for Employment Studies, cautioned against a decision not to attempt delivery of the T-level in locations that are not known as digital hubs and claimed it would be "a hugely limiting decision in terms of young people's future careers".

"Obviously places such as Reading, Brighton and London have high numbers of digital employers, however, it is also the case that all organisations use digital skills in some way, and often these provide a suitable match for FE level digital skills," she added.

Other digital T-level providers



Source: Office for National Statistics

across the South West – the same region where Weston College acknowledged difficulties in preparation – expressed their confidence in the successful delivery of the programme.

Matt Reynolds, a vice principal in teaching, learning and assessment development at Cirencester Sixth Form College, said: "We've had a healthy response from employers of different sizes who are willing to get involved with T-levels.

"The key is in being flexible and understanding to help bring the employers into the programme as a partner, and also in having top quality communication between the college and business."

Bridgwater & Taunton College and Truro and Penwith College both told *FE Week* they were on track to deliver the new digital T-level successfully, but would not comment specifically on whether they will secure a sufficient number of work placements.

A DfE spokesperson said: "We have worked closely with large and small businesses to make sure we get the delivery of T-levels right.

"As we progress towards September 2020, we expect a certain amount of fluctuation among T-level providers and the pathways they offer – but these changes are not anticipated to be a matter of concern."

News

'Secret' construction firm keeping Chartered Institution for FE afloat

FRASER WHIELDON
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From front

An unidentified construction firm is propping up the troubled Chartered Institution for Further Education (CIFE), as it pivots from being a membership body to conducting research for the sector.

The revelation came in a blog published this week on the institution's website, which also disclosed for the first time that it had paid its advocate, former skills minister Sir John Hayes, in an advisory capacity. He has told *FE Week* that this was worth £5,000 for five months' work in late 2018.

The institution, which is very much the minister's brainchild, received around £1.5 million in subsidies from the Department for Education (DfE), before public money was cut off this year.

The blog reads: "We have gained sponsorship from industry, from a major construction company, who like many employers recognises and understands the value of gaining chartered status."

The institution, which grants chartered status to FE providers, claimed this funding means it is now free-standing and sustainable for the long term. It is, however, yet to file its accounts for 2017/18.

The institution did not respond to *FE Week*'s request to reveal the identity of this mysterious benefactor; nor did it reply to a request to put a figure on the sponsorship.

While it was being funded by the government, the CIFE had been focusing on attracting members – its chief executive Dan Wright said that it needed 80 to be self-sustaining.

But the blog post said the last 12 months had shown "this isn't what the CIFE is or should be about," so the number of members is no longer its "major priority" – instead it is shifting to being more about "quality than quantity".

The CIFE says it is now a "truly independent voice for our sector", and can provide "critical challenge and support to key sector stakeholders" and fight for the needs of its members.

Additionally, the blog post shows that the CIFE is trying to recreate itself as a research body for the FE sector: "We have a renewed focus and have partnered with industry to undertake research for the benefit of the FE sector."

Its construction industry sponsorship means the CIFE will be conducting research into the skills needs and gaps of the future construction sector workforce, which it predicts will be launched at the House of Lords early next year.

But the CIFE says it will remain accountable to its 16 members, who pay an annual subscription fee of £5,000; but for interested parties there is also a £3,000 non-refundable fee to have an application reviewed in the first place.

Hayes, the MP for South Holland and The Deepings, declined to say whether his advice was funded by membership fees, but told *FE Week* it was not unusual for an organisation to seek advice and guidance on what it was doing and what it could be doing.

Because of a potential conflict of interest, the former skills minister had to have the financial arrangement cleared by the


Chartered Institution for FE members at their inaugural admissions ceremony in the House of Lords in 2016 (John Hayes pictured front row third from right)

watchdog for former ministers' new jobs, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments.

He had estimated that he would gain £15,000 a year for between 100 and 120 hours' work with the institution, which would include attending council meetings and advising on future strategy, according to the parliamentary analysis service TheyWorkForYou.

The work took place on a pro-rata basis between July and November last year.

Although the institution was set up by then-skills minister Matt Hancock, the plans for it were drawn up by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills while Hayes was skills minister.

He said his appointment "went through all the independent scrutiny and vetting process and was approved and registered in the proper way at time".

FE Week has been reporting on the troubles with the institution since it was founded in 2012.

It did not answer whether this new sponsorship meant it would begin taking on employees again. It had to get rid of them all when its subsidies were cut off.

It has so far failed to publish its 2017/18 accounts, saying that a technical error had held this up, even though not publishing accounts is a breach of the institution's own bye-laws.

Limb tops list for LGBT+ public sector workers

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A former college principal has topped a list of the most influential lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender role models working in the public sector.

Ann Limb, who is now chair of The Scout Association, was ranked first in the OUTstanding list of 30 LGBT+ public sector executives for 2019.

WorldSkills UK chief executive Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann OBE was another FE sector leader to be recognised in the awards, which have been running since 2013.

Limb said she hoped that her achievement "can help raise the profile of LGBT+ people and issues across the FE sector".

At OUTstanding's awards ceremony on Wednesday, Limb said that as an "almost 67, post-menopausal, gay dwarf, you really never expect to be a role model for anybody. The fact that I seemingly am a role model is joyous and a blessing."

In front of the awards ceremony's audience of 170 million people worldwide, Limb said she was "overwhelmed to find myself in this company".

Afterwards she said: "That is where FE and LGBT+ should be – on the global stage and mainstream."

Although she has been with her partner Maggie for 33 years, Limb only began to speak openly about being gay in February, after being invited to a parliamentary event during LGBT+ History month.

She is also vice chair of City & Guilds and has previously served as principal of Milton Keynes College and chief executive of the former training giant Learndirect.

She wrote in March: "During a 25-year, successful career in FE, I did nothing overtly in the arena of LGBT+


Ann Limb


Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann

activities." But she now hopes that she can "take some actions to raise the profile of LGBT+ in the sector".

Bentley-Gockmann, who came 15th on the list, said it was a "real honour to be recognised in this way for the work we are doing at WorldSkills UK".

He said that with the organisation's partners in education and industry "we are working hard to boost the profile of LGBT inclusion alongside ensuring more young people, regardless of social background, ethnicity, gender or disability have the opportunity to succeed through our work".

This includes the first WorldSkills UK Diversity and Inclusion Awards taking place at WorldSkills UK LIVE towards the end of this month. They are intended to celebrate individuals and organisations championing inclusivity in the FE sector and going above and beyond to support young people from a range of backgrounds.

Bentley-Gockmann said: "Now is the time for more leaders in the skills sector to step up to champion diversity, as role models and allies, so more young people from all walks of life are inspired to take up technical careers and apprenticeships."

In addition to his work with WorldSkills UK, Bentley-Gockmann has led a roundtable discussion in the House of Commons with education partners to discuss the importance of LGBT+ leadership and role models in colleges; and he has chaired a one-day annual conference on LGBT+ inclusion at work.

His OBE, awarded in the 2019 New Year Honours, was for services to LGBT+ inclusion. He is a former deputy chair of Stonewall, the LGBT + charity.

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News

‘Unfair’ funding rule costs colleges £1.5m

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Exclusive

Colleges have hit back at the “unfair” English and maths condition of funding rule after *FE Week* found more than one in 10 had funding recouped for failing to meet its requirements.

This newspaper’s analysis of the latest allocation data for 16 to 19 providers, released last week, revealed that 23 of the 171 (13 per cent) colleges in England have been stripped of £1,468,934 this year.

Four of them had more than £100,000 each withdrawn due to the controversial rule.

A spokesperson for London South East Colleges, which had £142,880 taken away, said the rule was “wrong and unfairly penalises colleges which take on high numbers of learners who arrive without good grades”.

“We carefully operate within the funding rules, and use a variety of methods to encourage English and maths participation,” they added. “Only when these are exhausted, and there is no evidence of participation, are any learners removed from GCSE programmes.

“When this happens we support the learners to continue in vocational programmes which enable their progression into work or an apprenticeship.”

The Capital City College Group lost £212,386, the second highest amount out of all colleges.

A spokesperson told *FE Week* that GCSEs were “not appropriate for all young learners, which can be very challenging”.

The college acknowledged that it had “much work to do in this area” but said: “We absolutely stand firm that all of our learners are carefully assessed and placed onto what we believe are appropriate levels and programmes that best suit their individual needs.”

The spokesperson added: “We have recently developed a new maths and English strategy, which is already being implemented and monitored robustly.”

Actual Condition of Funding reduction in 2019/20 (£) (after mitigation)

Provider type	Total providers	Providers with CoF reduction	% providers with CoF reduction	Reduction	% of total reduction
Academies	1,479	139	9%	£1,672,735	29%
GFE Colleges	171	23	13%	£1,468,934	26%
School 6th forms	400	42	11%	£766,266	13%
Private providers	120	46	38%	£495,133	9%
UTC/Studio schools	75	24	32%	£411,777	7%
Sixth form college	52	0	0%	£0	0%
Other	539	60	11%	£897,247	16%
Total	**2,836**	**334**	**12%**	**£5,712,092**	

Provider type	Total students	Total students %	Students failing CoF	CoF Students %	Students failing CoF %
Academies	350,289	31%	3,827	15%	1.1%
GFE Colleges	492,176	44%	16,146	65%	3.3%
School 6th forms	79,867	7%	1,268	5%	1.6%
Private providers	36,358	3%	1,195	5%	3.3%
UTC/Studio schools	8,274	1%	395	2%	4.8%
Sixth form college	106,407	9%	722	3%	0.7%
Other	58,032	5%	1,390	6%	2.4%
Total	**1,131,403**	**100%**	**24,943**		**2.2**

Source: ESFA 16 to 19 allocation data: 2019 to 2020 academic year. Analysis by *FE Week*


Capital City College Group - Westminster Kingsway College campus

Under original Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) rules, any student aged 16 to 18 who does not have at least a C (now 4) in their English and maths GCSEs, and who fails to enrol in the subjects, will be removed in full from funding allocations for the next-but-one academic year.

But the condition was relaxed from 2016/17, with the penalty halved, and only applied to providers at which more than five per cent of students did not meet the standard.

So only those providers with more than 5 per cent of students failing to enrol on eligible English and math qualifications saw their funding “adjusted” in the 2019/20 allocation.

New College in Swindon topped the list of general FE colleges with the highest withdrawal in 2019/20 – £213,481 – after exceeding the 5 per cent threshold with 281 eligible students not enrolled in the subjects. The college declined to comment on the figures.

West Herts College, which merged with Barnfield College in February 2019 and lost £93,664 in the 2019/20 adjustment, was the fifth-hardest hit by the condition of funding rule.

A spokesperson said the figures reflected the amalgamation of pre-merger performance data from both institutions: 193 students at Barnfield College and 141 learners at West Herts College did not meet the condition of funding.

“Since the merger, actions to improve the organisation and delivery of English and maths have been fully implemented,” they said. “This academic year, students enrolled on the subjects are engaging with their learning and attending lessons in line with condition of funding requirements.”

The latest figures for colleges show an increase from last year when 13 were deducted £1,137,091 to 23 colleges and £1,468,934 of funding withdrawn this year.

Elsewhere, 15 university technical colleges (UTCs) lost £180,966 under the rule and 46 independent learning providers had £495,133 deducted.

However, two UTCs that spoke to *FE Week* claimed that the figures used to calculate their adjustment level were wrong.

Silverstone UTC’s allocation data stated that 18 students did not meet the condition of funding threshold, which resulted in a deduction of £10,406 in this year’s adjustment.

But the principal Neil Patterson said there was an error in the management information system of the UTC which led to those students being incorrectly identified as not meeting the condition of funding.

“All 18 students did in fact meet the condition of funding, so we submitted a business case to the ESFA to seek to recover the amount,” he said.

“However, as the amount is smaller than the ‘5 per cent of revenue’ threshold that the ESFA apply. our business case was, unfairly in our view, rejected by the ESFA.

“We have since introduced a third-stage check on this to make sure it doesn’t happen again, but feel that with post-16 funding being fairly complex, the threshold rule is an unfair barrier to receiving full funding.”

Another UTC also blamed initial inaccurate internal data and is attempting to restore the funding level. The Leigh UTC lost £19,300 after 12 students were registered on the system as not being enrolled in GCSE English and maths.

Principal Steve Leahey told *FE Week*: “We believe the information used to calculate the condition of funding adjustment was incorrect and we are in the process of discussing a correction with the ESFA.”

The ESFA said it is aware of the business case and will assess it once it’s been submitted.

In total, 24,943 students (2.2 per cent compared to total allocated) were not enrolled on eligible qualifications to meet the condition of funding rule.

But the biggest losers from the total £5.7 million reduction were academies, where 139 out of 1,479 (9 per cent) lost £1,672,735 from their 2019/20 allocation.

A Department for Education spokesperson said: “The government knows that students who leave school with a good grasp of English and maths increase their chances of securing a job or going on to further education. This is why students who do not achieve a standard GCSE pass at age 16 are given the opportunity to obtain it post-16.

“However, we recognise that for some students with a grade 2 or below, a Functional Skills Level 2 qualification may be more appropriate. These students can decide with their provider which qualification is best for them.”

News

Highbury College principal to retire next summer

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A principal at the centre of an expenses scandal has announced her retirement after 18 years at the helm. Stella Mbubaegbu will leave her position at Highbury College next summer.

This follows accusations of the lavish spending of college funds. *FE Week* revealed in September how she had spent £150,000 in four years on expenses, including first and business-class flights, luxury hotels, designer headphones and a meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant.

In a statement released on Highbury College's website Mbubaegbu said: "In the summer of 2019, I informed my board of governors of my intention to retire from my post in a year's time (end of July 2020).

"I deeply care about and am extremely proud of Highbury College. It has been an immense joy and privilege to serve the college, its diverse communities and the wider FE sector over the past two decades.

"I am proud of my contributions to Highbury, steering the College through the turbulent times that FE has seen over the past eight years with funding cuts and policy changes, positioning Highbury on the global education map, the transformation of the college estate, the uncompromising approach to educational and social inclusion and our Ofsted outstanding for seven years.

"The board will be initiating the search for my successor in the coming weeks, with my full support, and I will focus on continuing to lead this amazing college and its amazing staff and students with passion and commitment."

She was awarded a CBE in the 2008 New Year honours list for services to further education.

Ministers ordered the FE commissioner to investigate the Portsmouth-based principal's "deeply concerning" corporate credit card use two months ago following revelations about her expenses, obtained by this newspaper after a year-long freedom of information battle.

More than 500 receipts analysed by *FE Week* showed that college funds were spent on first-class flights, five-star hotels, travel in luxury cars and a £350 bill – including a £45 lobster and nearly £100 on cocktails – at a Michelin-starred restaurant.

At the time Lord Agnew, the Department for Education minister who oversees the FE Commissioner, said he and education secretary Gavin Williamson were "deeply concerned by these revelations".

"School and college leaders must treat taxpayers' money with the utmost care and in a way that benefits their students," he added. "Where this does not happen we take the strongest possible action."

Mbubaegbu's spending took place during a period of redundancies at the college, which axed its sixth form two months ago, amid deteriorating finances. Staff last got a pay rise in January 2013.

The college's Ofsted grade has also dropped from "outstanding" to "requires improvement".

Minutes published from a board meeting in May show that international and first-class travel have been restricted and claims for lunch and alcoholic drinks have been banned. A £2,000 limit has been placed on the principal's corporate card, although the college would not say whether this was a monthly or annual amount.

FE Week has also revealed that cladding at the college's halls of


Stella Mbubaegbu

residence for students under the age of 18, the type used on the Grenfell Tower, failed a safety test several months ago (see story above).

The college has also called in lawyers to recover a long-running £1.4 million debt held up in Nigeria, following a technical education project in the country.

Highbury's halls of residence claim questioned by both Ofsted and DfE

BILLY CAMDEN
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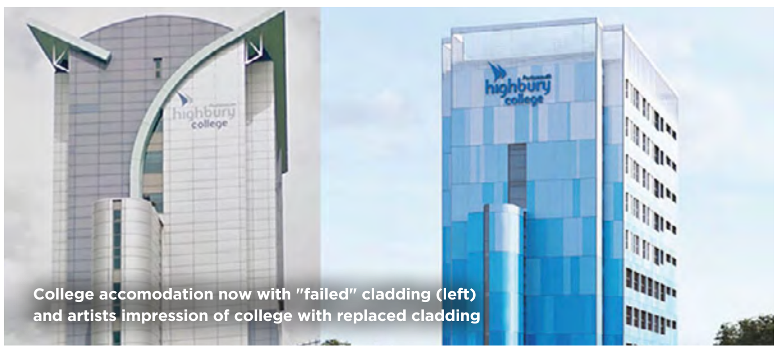
Exclusive

A college's halls of residence for students under the age of 18 that failed safety tests for having Grenfell Tower-style cladding has gone 18 years without an Ofsted inspection, *FE Week* can reveal.

Despite Highbury College advertising to parents that the residence was subject to oversight by the inspectorate, the Department for Education (DfE) has told this newspaper that it was unaware of the provision.

As a result, the education watchdog has not regulated the halls since they were constructed in the 1970s and re-clad in 2001.

The issue came to light after *FE Week* asked Ofsted if it had previously found any issues with the residence, for which the college has requested up to £5 million in government funding to replace "non-compliant" panelling which, according to the architects, has unsafe cladding.


College accomodation now with "failed" cladding (left) and artists impression of college with replaced cladding

A DfE spokesperson said all colleges with residential provision are "required to inform the department about students in residential accommodation" and have a "responsibility to self-record this information on Get Information About Schools".

The spokesperson added that Highbury has not declared this provision so far, and officials have asked the college to rectify this so that Ofsted can go in and inspect it.

Ofsted said it was awaiting the outcome of discussions between the college and DfE before arranging to inspect it.

The college did not comment at the time of going to press on why it has not declared the residential provision to the DfE.

The top five floors of Highbury's 10-storey tower contain 75 bedrooms and "students aged under 18 years of age are accommodated within the on-site Tower Hall of Residence" at a cost of £120 per week.

The college declined to comment on how many students currently occupy the 75 bedrooms, but confidential board minutes seen by *FE Week* suggest a significant decline in international students this year.

The group finance director told the college board of governors in March 2019 that income had dipped because fewer international students were coming to the college after the Home Office suspended their tier 4 sponsor licence when the college was awarded an Ofsted inspection grade three in June 2018.

It is understood that as many as 40 international students had been studying A-levels and the loss of the Home Office licence was attributed in a large part to the cutting of all A-level provision this year. A tier 4 licence allows education institutions to sponsor international students to study in the UK.

The minutes also make it clear that the group finance director told the board he was confident the multi-million-pound re-cladding project would be "100 per cent funded by the ESFA".

ECD Architects, employed by the college to develop the project, said: "The tower was constructed in the early 1970s and was re-clad in 2001 by another architecture practice, but recently underwent the BRE cladding screening test and failed."

"The existing ACM rainscreen cladding is being removed and will be replaced with a new cladding system."

ACM, or aluminium composite material, is the same cladding material at the heart of the ongoing investigation into the cause of the rapid spread of fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017.

Following the Grenfell tragedy and loss of 72 lives, the ministry of housing communities and local government (MHCLG) began a programme of fire safety testing samples of panels at the BRE laboratory facilities in Watford.

FE Week asked the college and the DfE, as well as the MHCLG and BRE laboratory, but was unable to ascertain when the testing on the Highbury College cladding took place.

When pressed, the college declined to comment specifically on whether or when the board of governors or student residents had been told about the failed safety test or why the group finance director was so sure the ESFA would pay all the costs.

However, a Highbury College spokesperson did say: "The safety and wellbeing of our students and staff is of upmost importance and we continue to fully engage with the government-wide work, including all relevant agencies, to ensure all of our buildings are safe including the ongoing project to replace the cladding.

"The project has recently received full planning permission and an appointment of a contractor is expected in December with a start on site soon after. The works are expected to take 12 months."

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We are holding an Open Recruitment Evening on Thursday 28th November 2019 from 5:00pm until 8:00pm at Hammersmith & Fulham College, where we will showcase our range of courses and welcome industry experienced talent for a range of job opportunities.

Registration and Application deadline: 27th November 2019

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If you wish to be considered but are unable to attend the event please send your CV to: **HRresourcing@wlc.ac.uk**.

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The above vacancy closes at midday on 13 November 2019
Interviews/tests will be held: 21 November 2019

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Employment type: Full Time
Contract type: Fixed Term until 31 March 2022

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This role will be required to provide effective management and leadership of the whole Skills and Apprenticeship Hub, including contractual relationships. You will have experience of managing large scale funding programmes, ideally with ESF, and ensuring delivery of contractual outputs. The ability to balance oversight of detail with effective strategic relationship building and stakeholder management will be critical.

Team members should be self-starting, collaborative and ambitious, offer fresh ideas, and who demonstrate a commitment to evidence-based policymaking and investment, and a determination to deliver for the people of the Liverpool City Region.

Closing Date for Applications: 12 November 2019 @ 4pm

For further details and to apply please visit https://www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/governance/vacancies/

Bishop Auckland College

Vice Principal - Curriculum and Quality

Bishop Auckland College is a great place to study and work and we are proud of our distinctive internal culture. Our staff work together as a tight-knit team, totally dedicated to our students, the College and the communities we serve.

As an outward-facing organisation we recognise the critical importance of collaboration in order to lead change and influence local agendas. Through our many partnerships with employers and other stakeholders, the College has established its place at the heart of the community and as a key partner in the regeneration of Bishop Auckland and South Durham.

We have worked hard to simultaneously manage costs and develop strategic opportunities, and our financial health is good.

Recent developments include our partnership with the specialist engineering and manufacturing centre, South West Durham Training, and the launch of our first full degree level programme, in partnership with the Open University. We also recently introduced alternative provision for 14-16 year olds who are not thriving in mainstream education.

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Interviews: Up to two days
28 and 29 November 2019

Reference: RS19/20/VP01

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News

Pre-election rules delay Ofsted's annual report

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
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Ofsted will delay publication of its annual report as it seeks to avoid making any statements that relate to its own performance.

Civil servants and public bodies cannot publish anything that could be considered political in the period before an election, known as purdah.

But the watchdog is particularly hamstrung this year as Labour, the Lib Dems and Greens have all committed to abolishing it.

It's highly likely that Ofsted's annual report – normally released in December – will be published after the election. It reveals how the watchdog has performed over the year.

The key information for FE will, as ever, be last year's performance in inspection reports by provider types.

FE Week did its own analysis last month ahead of the annual report and found a record high proportion of colleges are now rated 'good' or 'outstanding' (78 per cent).

It is the highest proportion since comparable records began in 2015 and brings colleges within just three percentage points of the FE and skills sector average of 81 per cent.

There are currently no general FE colleges with Ofsted's lowest grade of 'inadequate,' matching the 0 per cent score of grade four ratings last year.

Education secretary Gavin Williamson said he was "very pleased to see that the standards of our colleges are continuing to rise" after being shown FE Week's analysis.

Aside from its annual report, Ofsted also won't be able to publish any commentary or research reports.

However, it anticipates its standard FE and skills inspection reports will not be affected.

The Department for Education will not be able to publish consultation responses and other expected policy decisions will also be delayed until after the election.

It is also unlikely that they'll be able to release FE Commissioner intervention reports.

Purdah will start next week.

EDITORIAL

Colleges may need to ignore DfE bribes to avoid unethical T-level enrolments

Colleges selected for T-level delivery from September 2020 have been showered with financial incentives – some might even call them Department for Education bribes.

Hundreds of thousands of pounds for equipment, development, piloting, marketing and even a promise they can keep 100 per cent of the course income as long as they recruit at least 60 per cent of the planned students.

But, as our investigation shows this week, the biggest challenge for these 'lucky' few is likely to come in 2021, the second year of their courses, when students need to complete a 45 day mandatory T-level industry placement.

Scarborough Sixth Form College recently realised that there simply weren't enough local employers in the digital sector and rightly walked away from that T-level pathway.

And the reaction they received from the new education secretary for making this tough decision, was praise.

But how many other colleges outside London or near digital employer hubs have been so honest in the face of this likely insurmountable challenge?

The former skills minister, Anne Milton, suggested to the education and skills committee in July 2018 that parents might want to "leave it a year" and see how successful T-levels prove.

Waiting might be impractical if your child is 15 years-old and finishing their GCSEs this year.

Rather than wait, savvy parents should demand (before enrolment) that colleges reveal which employer they have lined up for the industry placement.

And savvy college bosses shouldn't recruit any young people without a commitment from the employer.

The DfE incentives for the 2020 providers must not be allowed to create conditions for unethical recruitment.

The sort of recruitment where learners are unable to finish their T-level because the closest available industry placement is 100 miles away.

Nick Linford, Editor
news@feweek.co.uk

Readers' reply

EMAIL TWITTER FACEBOOK WEBSITE

Profile: Charlotte Bosworth

She is one of the loveliest people in FE, privileged to have her on the FAB board and know her as a friend

Paul Eeles

Don't blame providers for the levy's unintended consequences

Thought that the late set-up of EPAs might get a mention? Heard tales of providers with learners at gateway who couldn't get level 3 team leader EPA for love nor money over the summer (thus making the learners 19/20 completers).

Steve Hewitt

Providers risk handing back £38m in next 20 years if they quit T-levels

1. A year or so back not everyone expected T-levels to run for 20 years. Progress

2. It's increasingly accepted that only a minority will get to study them. Less progress

Two-speed FE?

Bill Esmond

Given current GCSE achievement at 16 and current HE participation on courses requiring A-levels, it's unlikely T-level participation would exceed 25 per cent of the cohort. Therefore, incumbent on DfE to ensure there's capital funding covering non-T-level students in colleges.

Julian Gravatt

Indeed. We've gone from Sainsbury's "up to 250,000 17-year-olds requiring work placements" (ie most FE L3 students) to a quarter. As with apprenticeships, the danger is top-level provision being strengthened at the expense of the rest.

Bill Esmond

Apprenticeship budget overspend: small employers to face cap on starts

This is very bad news for supply chains critical to success of aerospace, social care and healthcare, and many other sectors - also for AELP members and small businesses.

Government and ESFA have been consistently behind the curve on this - a shambles.

Gordon Marsden MP

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Apprenticeship budget overspend: small employers to face cap on starts

As a provider waiting for the new online system for non-levy apprenticeship funding access, it cannot come soon enough. The absolute farcical tendering processes over the last three years have been poorly managed at great cost to ITPs, with many suffering financial strain having to gain subcontracts with companies who have, in essence, taken your eyes out with high management fees for little return.

Please ESFA see the light and put an end to this system asap. Let providers have fair access to funding in the new year as promised in this article. Then all the funding can support learners and high-quality training can resume without the top slicing. Please make my Christmas!!!

Gail Dalton-Ayres

Experts

SHARON BLYFIELD

Head of apprenticeships and early career, Coca-Cola European Partners

Levy payers are finding their voice - and must be heard

The apprenticeship levy has driven new behaviours and rapid improvement among apprenticeship employment providers, writes Sharon Blyfield, but policy makers must heed their feedback to sustain the charge

The apprenticeship levy is not going away and, if used well, it should be a positive enabler to continuous development of all multi-generational organisations. However, some key areas need addressing to improve the experience and engagement of the levy payers and employers on whom the system depends.

It is a point I made at this week's Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) autumn conference, where I provided a levy payer's insight into the policy's pros and cons. As employers, we welcome the fact that we have a stronger voice and have become an integral part of the apprenticeship conversation, helping to shape thinking and direction of government. However uncomfortable, it is important that voice is heard.

Since the introduction of the levy in April 2017, apprenticeships have been firmly on the map for many levy-paying organisations. Nowhere is this more evident than at Coca-Cola European Partners, where we have seen a significant increase in the number of apprentices.

The levy provided an opportune moment to bolster our existing initiatives, elevating our early careers agenda. In particular, we took the opportunity to focus on the pathways into our organisation for young people, ensuring that our award-winning apprenticeship programme attracts as diverse a pool of talent as possible.

The vast majority of those we come into contact with through our workshops and at career shows have very little understanding of the types of roles available at a drinks manufacturer. Our outreach programme has seen us engage with more colleges and young adults to raise awareness of the variety of positions within the business via our interactive careers map.

We are always looking to innovate and evolve our programmes, which is why we expanded apprenticeship pathways from level 2 to 7, widening the variety of disciplines available for apprentices and creating a more level playing field for those who are not academically minded, or lack the resources to move into higher education.

> "It is inflexibility that restricts the take-up of the levy"

I am passionate about degree apprenticeships and the opportunities these give to people from all backgrounds. It is wonderful to see this work come to fruition, and the apprenticeship levy has certainly galvanised our efforts.

However, the apprenticeship levy comes with many restrictions which can be frustrating for organisations that want to leverage the opportunities it should provide. As repeatedly discussed with members of the National Skills Academy's Employer Services Network, one of the biggest issues is the blanket approach that has been taken for all employers with the requirement that 20 per cent of apprenticeship time is spent "off-the-job".

We understand the need to regulate and to ensure that apprentices are given time away from their role to fulfil learning requirements, but if the Education and Skills Funding Agency is working with large, medium and small employers who have demonstrated an excellent track record of supporting their apprentices, why can't the off-the-job element have greater flexibility? It is precisely this inflexibility that restricts the take-up of the levy.

I also raised the point that there is inconsistency in the quality of training providers. It is difficult to understand why some providers have registered to deliver programmes when they do not have the capability or standards in place to do what is required.

Having worked with providers who are excellent in their collaboration and understanding of the needs of business, it can be frustrating that there are others who have fantastic marketing and provide great promises, but fail to deliver. They give the sector a poor image to business and, more importantly, to the apprentices they are supposed to be developing.

Any changes that increase flexibility and drive consistency will improve the levy experience. Having found our voice, it is important that levy payers' concerns are heard to make the policy a true success.

JOE DROMEY

Deputy director of research, Learning and Work Institute

The government must prevent any rationing of apprenticeship funding

The government looks likely to miss its apprenticeships target while running out of the money it set aside to meet it. Action is needed now, says Joe Dromey, because bigger problems are lurking

Two years ago the government introduced the apprenticeship levy in an effort to boost employer investment in skills and deliver their target of 3 million apprenticeships by 2020. Yet, as new Learning and Work Institute research shows, we are at risk of missing their target and blowing the budget.

The number of apprenticeship starts fell sharply following the levy's introduction. There has been a recovery, but starts remain a fifth lower than pre-levy levels. At the same time – as was first revealed by *FE Week* – the levy is set to be over-spent next year by £1 billion.

At first glance, this is paradoxical, but two factors help to explain these apparently contradictory trends.

First, apprenticeship standards – which were introduced at the same time as the levy with the aim of ensuring high-quality training – are more costly than anticipated.

Second, there has been a rapid growth in higher and degree apprenticeships, which tend to be more expensive. Over the past two years, while total apprenticeship numbers fell, starts at levels four and five doubled, and degree apprenticeships (levels six and seven) increased by a factor of 12.

This exponential increase in demand has been driven by large employers seeking to get the most out of the levy, with most going to existing workers and those aged over 25, rather than young people starting their careers.

The levy was designed on the assumption that unspent funds would be used to fund apprenticeships at SMEs. Our research shows that levy-paying employers are using about 80 per cent of the funding – higher than the 60 to 70 per cent the government had anticipated. That isn't a bad thing in itself, but less money left by levy-payers means less funding for SMEs.

We're already seeing the impact of the funding squeeze. An AELP survey showed many providers were having to reduce or cease recruitment for SMEs. Our analysis suggests this could lead to 75,000 fewer apprenticeships at small firms, precisely those most likely to offer apprenticeships to young workers.

> "Less money left by levy-payers means less funding for SMEs"

There is a strong case for government to act to prevent a creeping rationing of apprenticeship funding at SMEs.

We set out a balanced proposal to bridge the gap. We call for apprenticeships for 16- to 18-year-olds to be funded out of the DfE budget – requiring an additional £400 million – and for a £150 million top-up for the SME budget.

We also call for measures to dampen the growth in higher and degree apprenticeships for older workers. Requiring employers to pay some of the costs of apprenticeships at level 4 and above for workers aged 25 and over from outside their levy funds would save more than £300 million. This is not to say there is no value in this training, but we would not want to see young people and SMEs lose out due to funding being sucked up by higher-level apprenticeships for older workers.

There are other potential solutions. The gap could be covered solely through additional funding, although with many areas crying out for investment after a decade of austerity, this is unlikely to happen. We could prevent employers from using levy funds altogether on apprenticeships above a certain level or on apprentices above a certain age. Or we could introduce a pre-apprenticeship salary cap as the former skills minister suggested.

However it is done, it is clear that there must be a decision. Ignoring it will not make it go away.

Because beyond this immediate challenge, the longer-term future of funding for training still needs consideration. Most have accepted the strong case for the levy, but there is less of a case for limiting this to apprenticeships. A future system could, for example, involve a more flexible skills levy which allows employers to invest in other forms of high-quality training, in return for larger contributions.

Given employers are more likely to invest in training higher skilled workers, government should also consider wider measures to ensure training is more evenly distributed, so that young workers and those with lower levels of qualifications will not lose out, and the system will focus both on boosting productivity and on delivering social justice.

Experts

JOHN GRAY

Director of further education, Emsi

Colleges won't see the wood for the trees without big data

With Ofsted focusing on curriculum intent, implementation and impact, colleges must be able to show they are truly responsive to local needs, says John Gray

Ofsted's education inspection framework sets out three basic criteria by which a college's curriculum will be assessed: intent, implementation and impact. Of these, intent is critical because it determines everything else. Get it wrong and everything else will be too.

Thankfully, the sector doesn't need to guess at where its focus should be. Ofsted's documentation is explicit that a "coherently planned and sequenced" curriculum should have as its intent "the needs of learners, employers, and the local, regional and national economy, as necessary."

What Ofsted is looking for is nothing less than a vocational and technical sector producing curricula that give learners the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life, and which are highly responsive to the needs of employers at a local level.

> "To find out local skills needs would be a Sisyphean task"

It might be an obvious point, but it is not possible to achieve this without first getting a really good understanding of local employers' needs. Nor is this something that can be done by relying on employer engagement. There are simply too many businesses in a college's region; to find out their skills needs would be a Sisyphean task. Not that employer engagement is redundant, of course, but the most effective way to identify local skills needs to feed into curriculum planning is by combining it with detailed Labour Market Insight (LMI).

LMI use in colleges is sporadic. For some colleges it is a tick-box exercise to placate Ofsted. While others clearly see the huge potential it gives them, very often, even those use it predominantly to look for the big, profitable emerging opportunities. Looking at the forest is good, but might there be opportunities to use the data to look a bit more closely at the trees as well?

The answer is yes, and a good example of this is around the expansion of digital skills. Over the past year, there have been about 280,000 job postings for programming and software development professionals in Britain. Using LMI, we can go deeper to identify the top skills employers want in these roles. In fact, 65,000 required C Sharp programming skills, while 43,000 asked for Amazon Web Services knowledge.

Generic planning for an IT curriculum leaves students' future progress to pot luck, but we can zoom in further still. When we look at the more local level data, we find that the situation turns out to be more nuanced.

Comparing four regions' job postings over the past 12 months, big differences emerge. For example, of nearly 3,000 unique job postings in Outer London-South, Agile Software Development featured 737 times. It didn't feature at all In Coventry, Derby or Sheffield. Server management skills were among the top four required skills in Coventry and Outer London-South, but didn't feature in Derby or Sheffield.

> "LMI is a tick-box excercise in some colleges to placate Ofsted"

This shows the importance of not just looking at the forest (more digital skills needed), nor even getting a little closer to look at the trees (hard skills demand across the nation). Rather, it illustrates the need to look much closer still, at the granular detail of the wood, to see which digital skills are in demand in each region. This is where the information that will inform effective curriculum planning and course design is to be found, with the potential to positively impact college performance and the post-qualification destinations of learners.

Of course there are limitations to what the data can tell us, and it certainly isn't the definitive answer to Ofsted's curriculum intent question. Yet, neither can "doing it for Ofsted" be the entire purpose. If the sector is to rise to the challenge of giving learners the skills local employers need, LMI is a crucial element.

Movers & Shakers

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

Becky Francis

Chief executive, Education Endowment Foundation

Start date January 2020

Previous job
Director, UCL Institute of Education

Interesting fact
She attended Bath Technical College and returned to give an alumni speech at a recent degree ceremony

John Cope

Deputy director for education, Public First

Start date January 2020

Previous job
Head of education and skills, CBI

Interesting fact
He spent several years working as a dog groomer

Lauren Tiltman

Public affairs manager, Association of Colleges

Start date October 2019

Previous job
Scrutiny manager, The London Assembly

Interesting fact
She studied social work and nursing at university, but found her passion for promoting FE after studying business studies and seeing the benefits in a part-time administrative role

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

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

Difficulty: Easy

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

Difficulty: Medium

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

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.**

Solutions

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

Difficulty: Easy

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

Difficulty: Medium

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