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FE WEEK

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OFSTED PROCLAIMS UTC 'GUIDING LIGHT'

Artwork by and picture of Jessica Harkins, Year 10 student at Ron Dearing UTC

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COLLEGES IN ADMINISTRATION ENTER SECOND YEAR WITH MORE DELAYS

- Transfer of Hadlow College and West Kent College delayed - again
- ESFA fail to agree hand-over deal terms with North Kent College
- Accountants at BDO costing millions charging up to £320 an hour
- Independent review of DfE financial oversight still kept secret

EXCLUSIVE

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FEWEEK MEET THE TEAM

Nick Linford
EDITOR
@NICKLINFORD
NICK@LSECT.COM

Shane Mann
MANAGING DIRECTOR
@SHANERMANN
SHANE@LSECT.COM

Billy Camden
DEPUTY EDITOR
@BILLYCAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

JL Dutaut
COMMISSIONING EDITOR
@DUTAUT
JL.DUTAUT@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Fraser Whieldon
REPORTER
@FRASERWHIELDON
FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Yasemin Craggs Mersinoglu
REPORTER
@YASEMIN_CM
YASEMIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Simon Kay
DESIGNER
SIMON@FEWEEK.CO.UK

THE TEAM

HEAD DESIGNER	Nicky Phillips
DESIGNER	Simon Kay
SALES MANAGER	Bridget Stockdale
ADMINISTRATION	Frances Ogefere Dell
EA TO MANAGING DIRECTOR AND FINANCIALS	Victoria Boyle

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Learning & Skills Events, Consultancy and Training Ltd

163-165 Greenwich High Road
London SE10 8JA
T: 020 8123 4778
E: news@feweek.co.uk

FE WEEK IS PROUD TO BE A MEMBER OF

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Milton slams lack of 'joined-up thinking' that led to college bailouts

BILLY CAMDEN
JESS STAUFENBERG
NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Exclusive

A former skills minster has described the "nonsense" of her colleagues setting up schools that competed with the struggling colleges she was then forced to bailout.

Anne Milton has revealed the lack of joined-up policy decisions between ministers during her two-year stint in the Department for Education, which she says has "real problems".

In an interview with *FE Week*, she said: "I was two years a minister, and we were able to give out grants and loans to colleges who were struggling financially, often associated with mergers and reconfigurations.

"It was complete nonsense"

"Meanwhile in the schools department, they might have been approving the opening of a sixth form. So there was competition for students. I understand all the good reasons for a competitive environment, but it was a complete nonsense: we were giving cash to colleges while also increasing the number of providers chasing the same kids."

Multi-million-pound college bailouts have been rife across the sector in recent years, including one of more than £50 million that went to Hull College.

Milton puts the situation down to a mix of underfunding over the past ten years for the sector and in a minority of cases, poor leadership.

The situation has got so severe that the DfE has had to introduce a new insolvency regime, which two colleges, Hadlow and West Kent and Ashford, are currently being put through.


Anne Milton

Milton said it made no sense to continue handing out huge bailouts to colleges without joined up thinking with the schools side of the DfE, which caused "very expensive competition".

"I saw that with my own eyes. We were giving with one hand, and making it even more difficult to attract the students with the other."

The former minister made the comments while speaking to *FE Week* about the DfE's plan to bring colleges back under government control – an option that is being explored as part of an upcoming White Paper, as revealed by this newspaper earlier this month (see pages 20 to 22).

She urged caution over the idea, believing it would be a "step too forward", as central government is "clumsy, not agile, and slow to respond".

Milton added that there are "real problems" specifically within the DfE.

"It's not necessarily a good idea, public ownership. It's been ticking around for a long time. It's expensive. The government doesn't always run things very well. If you look at some of the innovation that's gone on very well, a lot of that has not been driven by government.

"I would be very nervous about saying, 'because some colleges have got into trouble, therefore the government should take them back into ownership'."

Milton admitted that other than insolvency, there are "very few tools the government has to interfere, and it does need to be able to step in" but "now is not the time" for them to take back ownership of colleges.

"Government is clumsy, not agile, and slow to respond"

Asked for his view on government ownership of colleges, Robert Halfon, another former skills minister and current chair of the education select committee, said: "My instinct is always for autonomy and I have always believed that small is beautiful.

"However, I would want to hear the views of colleges, the Association of Colleges, lecturers and unions before deciding on the best course of action both during and in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis."

News

Minister rules out delay to framework switch-off after 'careful consideration'

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Gillian Keegan has ruled out an extension to the switch-off date for starts on old-style apprenticeships, known as frameworks, after "comprehensive, careful consideration" of sector-wide concerns.

Conversations between the skills minister and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education about a possible delay had been taking place as the July 31 end-date draws nearer.

Numerous training providers and college leaders have warned they would have to pause recruitment of apprentices in some areas, such as stonemasonry, if there was no extension as there is no new apprenticeship standard that would be ready for delivery in August. Covid-19 has also disrupted the switchover.

Rob Nitsch, the institute's chief operating officer, first revealed the talks were happening during an Association of Colleges webcast last month in which he agreed that extending the date would "make sense".

"With apprenticeship starts on the floor, it's the wrong decision"

But the Education and Skills Funding Agency revealed on Wednesday that they are sticking with the planned cut-off date and all starts must be on standards from August 1.

"We would like to remind providers that all remaining apprenticeship frameworks will be withdrawn to new starts on July 31, 2020," the agency said in its weekly update.

While the IfATE appeared to have a preference for extending at least some frameworks, the decision ultimately lay with Keegan.

A spokesperson for the institute told *FE Week*: "The institute works closely to support and inform the Department for Education. They reached this decision after comprehensive, careful consideration of the associated facts and circumstances.

"The institute has always been convinced of the benefits of standards-based apprenticeships."

The spokesperson refused to comment on whether the institute was advising the minister to extend the deadline.

Mark Dawe, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, said that with apprenticeship starts "on the floor", not extending frameworks is the "wrong decision because it puts even more pressure on employers and providers when we should be maximising the number of opportunities available to young people".

"Sectors such as plumbing will be particularly hit," he added.

Karen Woodward, the ESFA's deputy director for employer relations, defended the decision to stick to the July 31, cut-off date during an *FE Week* webinar on Monday. She claimed that the agency has actively informed employers of the switch-off for the past 18 months, urging them to move quickly with developing any new standards that are needed.

"We have actually been specific in writing directly to employers who are still using frameworks for any of their new recruits to say you need to know that this framework is running out of time and if this is an important occupation to you, and you haven't got standard in place, then you need to act," she said.

Questioned on whether there was a good case to extend the cut-off date due to the current pandemic, especially for frameworks where there is no viable replacement standard in place for August 1, Woodward said this would be "opportunistic".

"The current approach is that we are continuing with the timeline that we have got in place. We have signalled this for a good time. I know we have had Covid, and it hit us at the end of March, but all employers know that in order to have a good standard and funding arrangements in place, and to be ready for delivery, even with the wind behind you, takes a good nine months.

"We knew the timeframe for switching off frameworks was the end of July, so if you were really desperate to make sure you have a good-quality standard in place from August 1, you would have been doing this in September last year. So saying you have just thought of this in March, when Covid has arrived, I think is a heck of an opportunistic approach."

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News

Fresh delay to Hadlow College Group transfer as costs continue to soar

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

From front | Exclusive

The transfer to new ownership for the first colleges to be placed by the government into insolvency has been struck by a second delay as concerns heighten over the spiralling costs.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency has failed to agree a financial deal with North Kent College to take over both Hadlow College and West Kent College.

Administrators were originally due to hand over the keys on March 31, which was then pushed back to May 31 and has now been rescheduled for July 31, *FE Week* can reveal.

Today (May 22) is exactly a year since Hadlow College's insolvency process began, with West Kent and Ashford, part of the original Hadlow Group, officially entering education administration three months later.

David Gleed, a qualified chartered accountant, has been principal at North Kent College for over a decade.

It is unclear why the transfer deal remains unsigned and Gleed has denied that the college board are holding out for better terms, which could include transitional protection, or a more immediate financial reward.

A source close to the transaction suggested one of the many "complexities" relates to the substantial land and many properties owned by the two colleges, including residential accommodation.


David Gleed

Kent-based law firm Thomson Snell & Passmore, where the North Kent College chair of the board Alex Lewsley is a partner, is being paid by the college to undertake due diligence on the deal.

FE Week understands the administrators, BDO, have become frustrated by the lack of progress on the deal between North Kent College and the senior ESFA representative, Matt Atkinson.

At the same time, BDO has come under increasing pressure from the ESFA to keep their costs down as they continue to run the college for far longer than had originally been planned.

The most recent administrator report lodged with Companies House showed that senior BDO staff were charging up to £310 per hour, as agreed with the Department for Education, and the costs to the public purse were already in the millions.

The DfE told *FE Week* the costs of this project are regularly reviewed with consideration of value for money.

A spokesperson added: "We continue to work closely with North Kent College and the Joint Education Administrators for Hadlow College and West Kent and Ashford College towards a planned transaction date of July 31, 2020."

A spokesperson for the administrators said "good progress" has been made with the transaction "but Covid -19 has and will continue to impact on the pace of the work that remains to be done".

"Taking this into consideration, and with the end of the academic year approaching, the completion date has been moved to a target date of July 31. All parties continue to proceed positively towards a successful conclusion," they added.

A spokesperson for North Kent College added that the transaction "continues to proceed positively and is fully expected to reach a successful conclusion in the summer".

A successful conclusion to the administration is not alone in being beset with delays as the DfE continues to hold on to an independent report, led by Dame Mary Ney, into their own oversight of college finances following the Hadlow Group scandal.

The Hadlow Group came under investigation by the government once financial irregularities were uncovered, including submitting partial information to the agency which generated a 'good' financial health rating.

But the FE Commissioner later found that had the ESFA looked at Hadlow's published accounts, they would have rated the college as 'inadequate' and intervention would have taken place far sooner.

Ney was then commissioned to undertake the review in August and her so far unpublished final report has been with the DfE since December.

While North Kent's transfer has been delayed, East Kent Colleges Group did take over Ashford College, which was part of West Kent College and a site in Canterbury at the beginning of April as planned.

The break-up of the Hadlow Group got under way on January 1, 2020, when its Mottingham campus was taken over by Capel Manor.

The three-way split was recommended by FE Commissioner Richard Atkins back in July.

Most of the Hadlow Group's senior leaders and governors resigned once the FE Commissioner stepped in and their role in the demise of the institution remains under active investigation by the insolvency practitioners.

Hadlow went into administration in May with £40 million in debts, and West Kent and Ashford College went into administration in August with debts of over £100 million when capital grants for the construction of K-College are included.

With complexity and costs proving to be far higher than anticipated, the government has not gone down the education administration route with several other colleges that ran out of cash since, choosing instead to provide long-term loans.

News

ESFA reject one-third of all AEB and non-levy supplier relief applications

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Exclusive

A third of training providers that bid for the Education and Skills Funding Agency's apprenticeship and adult education Covid-19 supplier relief scheme were rejected because they struggled to "prove need".

The agency told *FE Week* that of the 165 applicants, 107 (65 per cent) "met the criteria for funding".

All bidders have now been informed of their outcome, the process for which was supposed to be wrapped up by May 12 but had to be delayed after a "very small number" of providers suffered technology issues when attempting to submit applications.

The ESFA said providers that were unsuccessful can appeal the outcome "where they believe that the ESFA has failed to follow its own policy and / or processes, and / or that the ESFA failed to understand or recognise the evidence submitted in the application".

Previous *FE Week* analysis found that only a quarter of eligible providers for the scheme had actually applied.

Karen Woodward, the ESFA's deputy director for employer relations, told an *FE Week* webinar on Monday that many providers struggled to "prove need" for the financial support as a "number of them are not really facing huge cash flow problems at the moment".

"Currently the guidance is only up until the end of June, and many of the providers have got sufficient cashflow, maybe have got reserves, and didn't feel that it would be appropriate for them to apply at this stage under the rules of the Cabinet Office procurement notice," she said.

Woodward described the supplier relief scheme as a "rigorous process" and that some providers did not feel "comfortable" in sharing the financial information that was being requested by the ESFA.

"It was looked at both by the further education directorate and also by the provider market oversight team. It was a deep look at whether people would be prepared to share some open-book work around the monies we were looking at. Some providers didn't feel comfortable about some of that.

"But most of it was a failure to prove need. That there was such a requirement that you need a cash injection over the next few months and that you couldn't actually manage that as an organisation in your own right."

The Cabinet Office's supplier relief policy, which the ESFA's was based on, is currently set to finish at the end of June. *FE Week* asked the Cabinet Office if there were any plans to extend this, but a spokesperson said they have nothing to add to existing guidance.

The ESFA had come in for a lot of criticism over its handling of the relief scheme.

They took more than a month to launch the support after Cabinet Office gave contracting authorities the green light to pay their suppliers in advance of delivery on March 20, and when it was released, it excluded the majority of apprenticeship providers.

All apprenticeships recorded on the government's digital system, mostly with levy-paying employers, were made ineligible as the ESFA believes the contractual relationship is between the employer and the provider, rather than the government.

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers challenged this legally. James Goudie QC, a senior silk at 11KBW, as well as a deputy High Court judge and a master of the bench of the Inner Temple, was instructed by the law firm VWV to help present the case in a letter on behalf of the membership organisation.

The letter was sent at the end of April. The DfE has now responded and the AELP is currently deciding its next steps.

European Social Fund providers finally offered chance of Covid-19 supplier relief

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The government has launched a Covid-19 supplier relief scheme for training providers with European Social Fund (ESF) contracts.

There are 50 eligible providers, according to the Education and Skills Funding Agency, which have one week to bid for the extra financial support as a closing date has been set for May 28.

The ESFA said the scheme will provide payments to ESF contractors in the form of "repayable advances ahead of actual delivery to support the cash flow of providers with a demonstrated financial need".

Decisions on applications are planned to be released by June 4.

According to the ESFA's guidance, providers will only be eligible if they hold an ESF contract with the agency that was procured as a service under the Public Contract Regulations 2015 and commenced on or after April 1, 2019.

Providers must have also delivered under their ESF contract during the "six-month period ending March 31, 2020 and submitted individualised learner record or supplementary data in respect of this delivery".

Another requirement is that they plan to deliver education, training and support under the contract in April, May and June 2020 – which is when the supplier relief is currently scheduled to end.

If an ESF contractor has furloughed staff to deliver the contract, they must unfurlough them to receive the supplier relief to prevent "double funding".

ESF contractors should only apply where they have a "demonstrated need" for advance funding to "maintain capacity within their contract to support learners and/or employers and respond to the economic recovery".

The supplier relief is in line with the Cabinet Office Procurement Policy Note 02/20 (PPN 02/20) and follows a similar ESFA scheme for apprenticeship and adult education budget funding.

Explaining how the supplier relief will be calculated for successful ESF provider applicants, the agency said: "We will calculate a total relief cap for each ESF contract where support is requested from the scheme. Where ESF contractors hold more than one ESF contract, the relief cap will be calculated and applied to each contract supported.

"The relief cap will be determined at contract level based on the lower of the following: your monthly average earnings based on actual earnings data from October 2019 to March 2020, multiplied by three; or the contract level costs ESF contractors submit as part of stage two in the application process. This is known as the total relief cap. The monthly relief cap payment will be the total relief cap divided by three."

The agency added that payments under this scheme cannot total more than 25 per cent of a provider's annualised contract value over the three-month period.

In addition, a cap of 90 per cent of the current total contract value will be applied, "taking account of actual reported delivery on the contract and relief payments being sought".

News

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Ofsted praises 100 per cent positive progression rate at 'outstanding' UTC

YASEMIN CRAGGS MERSINOGLU
YASEMIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

From front

A university technical college in Hull has been dubbed a "guiding light in the education sector" after being rated 'outstanding' in its first ever Ofsted inspection.

Ron Dearing UTC, which opened in September 2017, received grade ones across the board in a report published on Thursday that did not include one line of criticism.

Inspectors said learners received an "exceptional" quality of education and heaped praise on their 100 per cent positive progression that has come about as a result of the college's "considerable" links to industry.

According to the UTC's 2018-19 accounts, of their 117 year 11 students in that year, 94 progressed on to its sixth form, 14 on to an FE college, eight on to an apprenticeship and one on to employment.

And of the 86 year 13 learners on roll last year, 28 started university, 22 went into employment with one of the UTC's partners, 29 into an apprenticeship and seven into other employment.

Ron Dearing, which had 506 students at the time of the inspection in March against a capacity for 600, is the first UTC to be given a grade one under Ofsted's new inspection framework, which was rolled out in September 2019.

Jessica Harkins

Principal of the 14-to-19 technical college, Sarah Pashley, said: "Ofsted raised the bar when it introduced its new Education Inspection Framework, which made it even more difficult to achieve an 'outstanding' rating. This makes the achievement even sweeter."

Ofsted's report said Ron Dearing UTC has the "hallmarks of a school that could be viewed as a guiding light in the educational sector".

Inspectors reported that the curriculum is "superbly" designed, with teachers demonstrating passion for their subjects and ensuring they know the strengths and weaknesses of every pupil.

Students' A-level results in 2019 placed the UTC in the top one per cent of schools nationally.

In addition, rates of attendance were found to be "much" higher than the national average, while there have been no students permanently excluded from the college since it opened almost three years ago.

Ryah Russell and Natalie Bamforth

The principal, vice principals and other senior and curriculum leaders were praised as being "astute, enthusiastic and entirely committed" to the school, staff and pupils. Governance was also called "outstanding".

Pashley said the provider had been supported by the University of Hull and employers in the region, who were involved in developing a "highly ambitious vision" for the college.

"We're also acutely aware that our students and their parents and carers put their faith in us by moving to a brand new school which hadn't been tried and tested," she continued.

The UTC's patron, former education secretary Alan Johnson, said: "There was never any doubt in my mind that Ron Dearing UTC would be a success. The business community in Hull were totally supportive, as was Hull City Council chief executive Matt Jukes and his colleagues.

"However, even I didn't contemplate success of this magnitude so quickly. Hull now has one of the best schools – and the best UTC – in the country, and these results are a magnificent tribute to Sarah Pashley and her team."

The only two other UTCs currently rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted are Reading and Energy Coast.

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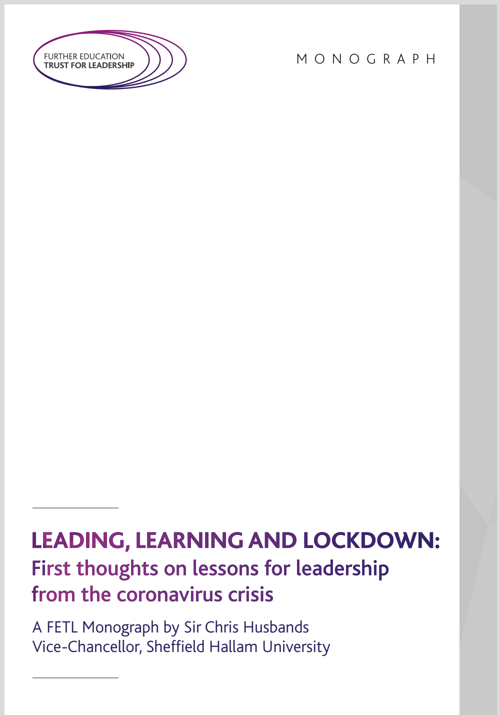
Leading, learning and lockdown: first thoughts on lessons for leadership from the coronavirus crisis

A FETL Monograph by Sir Chris Husbands Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University


FURTHER EDUCATION TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

MONOGRAPH

LEADING, LEARNING AND LOCKDOWN:
First thoughts on lessons for leadership from the coronavirus crisis

A FETL Monograph by Sir Chris Husbands
Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University

This is a hugely welcome contribution that reflects on the challenges the COVID-19 crisis has posed for learning and its leaders, and asks what it can tell us about leadership and the future of education. The almost overnight transition from face-to-face teaching to online and distance learning placed significant and unprecedented demands on leaders, their institutions and staff. The response in further education, and in the education system more generally, has been remarkable, but there are also important lessons to be learned from all of this, and this FETL monograph begins the process.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

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News

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Take the 'opportunity' to reopen from June, says skills minister

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Exclusive

Colleges that refuse to begin face-to-face teaching with students before the next academic year will "lose an opportunity to start a journey that we need to go through" to recover from Covid-19, Gillian Keegan has warned.

The apprenticeships and skills minister believes the safety issues currently presented by the pandemic will still be there beyond September, and this week urged college bosses to "show leadership" by taking these "painful steps" sooner rather than later.

> "These are painful steps, the sooner you take the first one, the easier it is take the second one"

Gillian Keegan

She was addressing an *FE Week* webcast following guidance published last week by the Department for Education which said colleges and training providers could start their wider reopening from June 1.

It came on the day that a survey by this newspaper found a huge 94 per cent (32 out of 35) of college leaders said the DfE should leave it to them to decide who should come in for face-to-face contact when they reopen, and 71 per cent believe a significant number of students will refuse to attend next month.

Unions representing tens of thousands of college staff have also set out five "tests" they believe should be met before students return, and are advising them to continue working and studying from home if they can.

Asked during this week's webcast what she would say to a college principal who decides that all provision will be online-only until the 2020-21 academic year, the minister said: "I think they'd be losing an opportunity to start a journey that we need to go through.

"They need to do risk assessments, they need to look at the provision, the mix of cohort, the facilities, their buildings – all of those questions do not go away in September, so start now.

"Unless you start to assess the risks, you can't come up with a plan to mitigate them. These are painful steps, the sooner you take the first one, the easier it is take the second one. We are having to show leadership and that is what is required in these cases.

"Leadership, by the way, that many others have done already. Think of our health service, think of our transport workers, the people who keep the lights on, the people who keep keeping us fed. They have all done this already. What we're saying is, could we have some of the education sector join them as well in trying to get back to a new normal."

Keegan added: "There is a counterfactual for everything and the counterfactual here is we stay at home. How long are we going to stay at home because all of those challenges will be there in July, they'll be there in September and will probably be there a while after that."

She described the reopening guidance from the DfE as "baby steps" and reiterated that the department is giving the sector's "brilliant" college leaders "flexibility" to decide exactly what face-to-face contact they supplement with online learning from June.

The minister pressed that "we have to start this journey" and cannot wait until the country has other safety measures, such as a coronavirus vaccine, antibody test, or a track-and-trace system.

Keegan concluded that the FE sector has "exceeded expectations so far" in response to Covid-19 and the "fantastic" online delivery "will probably change aspects of how we deliver FE going forward".

News

Colleges will need to create student 'bubbles' to reduce Covid risk

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The Association of Colleges has warned that reducing interaction and mixing in colleges is "going to be a real challenge" should they choose to begin their wider reopening from June, following a government scientific briefing.

Colleges have been advised to form "small consistent grouping, or 'bubbles'" – a task that the AoC admits will prove "very difficult".

Eddie Playfair, the association's senior policy manager, blogged about the issues this week after he attended a government scientific briefing last Friday. It was held to address concerns about the government's aim to have young people start returning to face-to-face education from June 1.

The AoC, along with other education unions, heard from Chris Whitty, the government's chief medical officer, Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, and Russell Viner, the president of the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health.

Playfair said they explained that in the UK, the number of new Covid-19 cases, hospital admissions and deaths are all on a "downward trajectory" and while there is currently a 0.27 per cent prevalence of the disease in the population, there should be "half as many cases" in two weeks' time.

Children and young people are the "least clinically affected" but it is not fully understood how infectious they can be.

He said more interaction and mixing between people "clearly increases the risk of transmission" and "reducing interaction and mixing in college settings is going to be a real challenge and the creation of small consistent grouping or 'bubbles' is very difficult".

"In colleges, students generally need to move between different groupings and spaces. They also exercise more discretion in their use of time outside timetabled sessions, with significant use of social and independent learning spaces. Colleges also often include adult students as well as young people."

Eddie Playfair

Playfair said colleges will need to understand the "various levels" of risk of different settings and activities before reopening their campuses to more students.

"Even with adequate social distancing, are there issues associated with large numbers of people sharing spaces such as canteens, libraries, learning centres, gyms, changing rooms, circulation and social spaces, entrances, buses and bus stops? Are there issues associated with spending extended periods of time with the same people in one classroom or exam room, and how do these compare to moving between spaces shared with different combinations of people?"

He concluded: "Given the incremental way our understanding grows, there is unlikely to be a single breakthrough moment when everything becomes clear. So, it's important to have a continuing dialogue on these key questions with the experts and with students and staff, as this will help to inform college decisions over the next weeks and months."

Unions warn college leaders over Covid-19 'legal liability'

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Exclusive

Unions have fired off a Covid-19 "liability" warning shot to school and college leaders – quoting the health and safety laws "you are exposing yourself to by following the current deeply flawed guidance".

A joint letter, seen by *FE Week*, from the National Education Union, Unite, Unison and GMB was sent on Wednesday to headteachers and principals of college groups with schools to make clear that the Department for Education has placed the wider reopening from June "on the shoulder of the employer and on you".

It reminds them that the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, as well as four other pieces of legislation, "places a duty on employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare" of their staff and students. It goes on to state that the unions will be advising members of their "legal rights, should any member contract Covid-19 upon returning to school".

"We believe it is important you fully understand the potential liability you are exposing yourself to by following the current deeply flawed guidance," the letter added.

Multiple education unions have warned against the government's plans for schools and colleges to start their wider reopening from June 1, citing safety as their biggest concern.

The joint letter claims that the scientific evidence is "yet to be released that establishes that the measures contained within the DfE guidance are capable of ensuring the risk to pupils, staff and the wider community is reduced to an acceptable level".

Andrew Banks, a partner and health and safety expert at law firm Stone King, told *FE Week* that it is "difficult to see" how prosecution would follow in the event of someone associated with the school or college contracting coronavirus if they "ensure that their [health and safety] guidance is followed and their risk assessments are suitable and sufficient".

But if a school or college has not followed the guidance, or if there are "other shortcomings", it is more likely that the Health and Safety Executive would "engage to ensure they tighten their processes, rather than move straight towards an investigation with a view to prosecution," he said.

"It is important to emphasise that the priority and primary purpose in all of this is the safety of all children and staff."

Banks added: "In spite of the recent rider added to the government guidance, on balance our view remains that by following the guidance they will have undertaken all that is reasonably practicable and, in legal terms, covered themselves in terms of their liability."

Education unions' resistance to the current plan for the wider reopening of schools and colleges has been questioned. Speaking in parliament last week, Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, accused them of "scaremongering".

The unions used their joint letter so say that they "trust" schools and colleges will "understand that we are not acting without good reason, but from the position that we all share responsibility for ensuring there is no second spike of Covid-19 in the UK".

News

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Second college merger postponed due to Covid-19

YASEMIN CRAGGS MERSINOGLU
YASEMIN@FEWEEK.CO.UK

A merger involving a college that previously warned it was dependent upon the move for survival has been delayed by a year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Southampton City College is now set to join Itchen Sixth Form College in August 2021, having scheduled the move for this summer.

It is the second college merger to be delayed because of Covid-19 this month.

As previously reported by *FE Week*, Southampton City is currently keeping afloat on government bailouts. It received around £2.5 million in emergency funding last year and the college's 2018-19 accounts warned that cash would run out by October.

It also stated that if a merger attempt failed, then the college would "require additional financial assistance" to stay open.

Sarah Stannard, principal at Southampton City College, claimed the college's financial position this academic year is now "secure" and said the Department for Education is providing financial support.

However, she refused to say whether the DfE has stumped up any new bailout funding this year to keep the college running as a standalone until next summer.

Stannard would only say that the college is reassured by the department making it "very clear that colleges are essential community institutions" when looking ahead to 2020-21.

She added: "Covid-19 has had a small negative impact on our income but we can manage this."

A Department for Education spokesperson would also not say whether it has given the college any new emergency funding but said: "We continue to work closely with City College Southampton and other key stakeholders to achieve a sustainable solution for further education in the city."

The college's 2018-19 accounts were signed off on a "non-going concern" basis and stated the "current intention and most likely outcome" would be for a merger on August

Southampton City College

1, 2020, whereupon the college would "dissolve after the transfer of trade, assets and liabilities at carrying value to another FE organisation".

Stannard said that Southampton City and Itchen College are committed to merging but have had to prioritise responding to the outbreak and are likely to have to organise continued changes to the teaching and training of students and apprentices this autumn.

"Both colleges believe it's appropriate that they focus on delivering the best student experience possible at this difficult time and give themselves time to prepare an effective and high-quality merger in the summer of 2021," she added.

The move would affect more than 6,000 students and a consultation is due to start at least four months before the merger.

Alex Scott, principal at Itchen College, told *FE Week*: "Itchen College continues to work with City College in preparing a merger proposal, although the current pandemic has understandably had an impact on timescales as we have switched to supporting our learners remotely.

"We are working towards a provisional date of August 2021, but will move more quickly should the proposal be agreed and circumstances allow."

Stannard added Richard Taunton Sixth Form, another college in Southampton, could also join the merger at a later date.

The FE Commissioner has been assisting with the merger after conducting a local provision area review last summer.

Southampton City College was re-issued with a financial health notice to improve by the ESFA in February, which it first received in 2016, while its financial health was rated as 'inadequate'.

The college generated an income of £13 million and a deficit of £1.65 million in 2018-19 – a significant increase from £585,000 in the previous financial year and £257,000 the year before that.

In addition, it lost an agreed £500,000 overdraft after Santander withdrew the facility in August 2019 when loan covenants were breached.

Southampton City College has had two other merger attempts with different partners fail.

The first proposal, with Southampton Solent University, fell through in 2018, while a plan to join Eastleigh College collapsed at the 11th hour in March 2019 after an application for emergency funding was rejected by the ESFA.

The other college merger to be delayed this month because of coronavirus involved Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College and Trafford College Group. They had planned to join up by August but have now pushed this date back to October 31.

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Young disadvantaged ‘losing out’ on degree apprenticeships

BILLY CAMDEN
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Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are “losing out” on degree level apprenticeships as they soar in popularity without “fair access”, new research has found.

Analysis published this week by the Sutton Trust, an education charity, found that young apprentices from deprived areas have been “crowded out” since the introduction of the levy. They made up six per cent of degree level apprentices in 2018-19, a fall from nine per cent in 2016-17.

At the same time the number of older apprentices from “well-off” areas starting these courses has more than doubled – from 5 per cent to 11 per cent – leading to a “growing access” gap for those under 25.

More than half of degree apprenticeships have been taken up by people over 30, with just 20 per cent aged 20 or under.

The findings, which concern the likes of education select committee chair Robert Halfon, come two years on from then skills minister Anne Milton admitting that fear of a “middle-class grab” on apprenticeships was “valid”.

Speaking to *FE Week* about the Sutton Trust’s research, Milton said the results were “hardly surprising” as employers wanting to use their levy funds were “always going to take the easier options, which is upskilling existing employees”.

However, she added that upskilling anybody is a “positive thing” and not “bad”, except if it is “to the exclusion of young people from more deprived communities, who are quite capable of doing a degree apprenticeship”.

Halfon, a champion of degree apprenticeships and a former skills minister himself, said it is “deeply worrying” that despite the growth in degree apprenticeships, “too many people from disadvantaged backgrounds are still being locked out of one of the best routes to a prosperous future”.

Robert Halfon

He added that “now more than ever” the government and higher education providers “must do everything possible to tear down the barriers to degree apprenticeships, sweep away the cobwebs of bureaucracy and to move both quickly and decisively to support our more disadvantaged learners”.

A spokesperson for the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education admitted they “would like to see more younger people from disadvantaged backgrounds taking degree apprenticeships and will be working with the government on this”.

Degree apprenticeships were first introduced in 2015. The number has grown rapidly since then, from 756 to 13,587 in 2018-19, according to the Sutton Trust’s report.

Last year, just over 2,000 apprentices starting one of the courses at an English university was 20 years old or younger, which is about one-fifth of all such apprentices.

The analysis shows 12 per cent of those aged 19 to 24 on degree apprenticeships at universities are from the most deprived areas, and seven per cent of those under 19.

Among under-19s, degree apprentices are more than five times more likely to come from the most advantaged neighbourhoods.

The Sutton Trust said Russell Group universities “in particular” are “highly selective” after finding the average young degree apprentice there has achieved A-level grades AAB, which is “effectively the same as those doing other undergraduate courses”.

Since the levy’s launch, there has also been an explosive rise in other degree-level apprenticeships, from just 19 four years ago, to 8,892 last year.

At the same time, senior leadership courses – equivalent to an MBA – have expanded significantly, growing six-fold from 552 to 3,410 in 2018-19.

The controversial level 7 senior leader standard, which currently has an MBA attached to it but which is set for the chop later this year, has grown by 517 per cent since the levy was introduced, with 99 per cent of apprentices over 25.

Business management apprenticeships such as this are the “biggest growers”, but have the lowest proportions of young apprentices and from disadvantaged areas, the Sutton Trust found.

Senior leadership and chartered management courses alone now make up almost half (46 per cent) of the entire degree apprentice cohort as employers “look to put their senior staff through these courses rather than train younger, less affluent employees”, the report said.

It added that while these skills are “clearly in need”, such a “skew is unlikely to reflect the overall balance of skills gaps in the economy and will do little to benefit younger people looking for new opportunities”.

Sir Peter Lampl, the founder and chair of The Sutton Trust, said: “The popularity of degree apprenticeships is impressive, but it has come with problems for fair access. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are losing out on these opportunities.”

News

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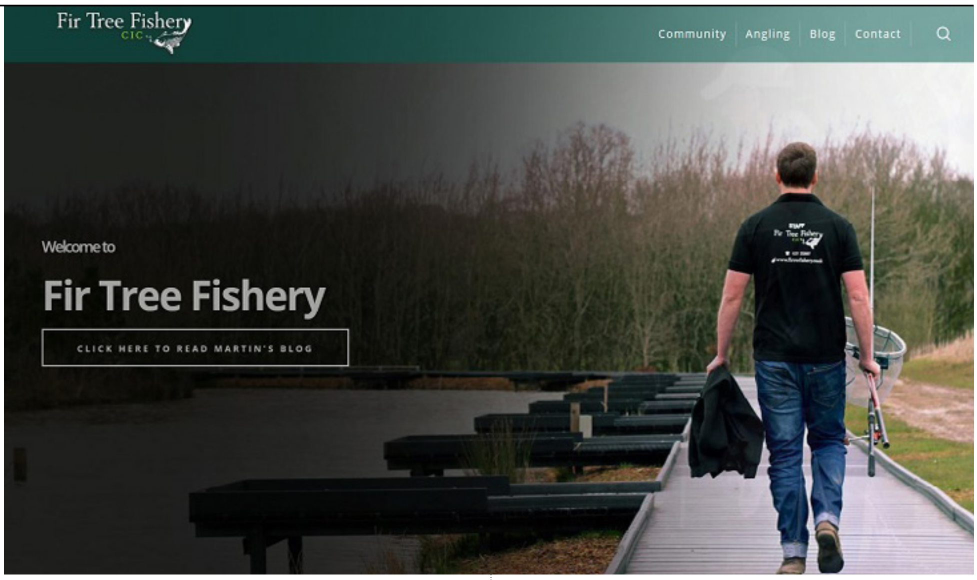
Ofsted triggers government intervention at specialist college

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK



A new college for students with special educational needs and disabilities has been suspended from recruiting learners after receiving stinging criticism from Ofsted.

Fir Tree Fishery, an independent specialist college (ISC) in Wigan, received a visit from the watchdog in February which found 'insufficient' delivery across the board, including safeguarding.

Inspectors said learning focuses "too much on random activities" that fit around what students want to do and "not what will benefit them and help them to succeed", while tutors' feedback was "overly positive".

Some learners had also been placed on "unachievable" qualifications which negatively impacts their self-esteem.

Ofsted began carrying out monitoring visits to ISCs that are newly Education and Skills Funding Agency-funded from December 2019.

Just as is the case with early monitoring reports of new apprenticeship providers, if ISCs are found to be making 'insufficient progress' in one category, they receive a temporary ban on starting students, in line with ESFA rules.

Fir Tree Fishery CIC was the fifth early monitoring visit of a newly ESFA-funded ISC, but the first to result in an 'insufficient progress' judgment.

"We are desperate for a follow-up visit to demonstrate what we have done to improve"

The college provides young people aged 16 to 25 who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities with a "unique environment to learn", including its own accessible angling lake, polytunnel and allotment area, according to Ofsted's report published on Tuesday.

It has 27 learners, seven of which have moderate learning disabilities while the remainder required support for social, emotional and/or mental health needs.

A spokesperson for the college confirmed to *FE Week* they have been barred by the ESFA from recruiting new learners until they have a follow-up monitoring visit that results in a better judgment.

They said Ofsted's visit was "not the most negative experience ever because it helped us highlight where we were not working as well as we thought" and the college is now "desperate for a follow-up visit that allows us to demonstrate what we have done to improve so we can get that recruitment restriction lifted".

Staff at Fir Tree Fishery were praised by the watchdog for their "effective and supportive" relationship with the college's "respectful and communicative" students who develop "effective personal and social skills".

However, leaders and managers were criticised for lacking a "coherent, well-designed curriculum that meets the needs and interests of learners".

"For example, for one pathway, the first week related to building a shed, the next was around radicalisation and the following week about food hygiene," the inspection report said.

It found that managers did not know which learners have achieved their English and math qualifications and they did not focus "sufficiently" on quality improvement.

Ofsted also found that leaders did not target the funding that they receive for high-needs learners "specifically enough" to support the individual learners for whom it was intended.

The work in learners' files was of a "poor quality" and there was "no logical correlation between previous qualifications and the level of qualifications that the provider has recommended".

Ofsted gave the example that a few learners were placed on an entry level 3 English qualification and a level 1 mathematics qualification when they cannot read or write.

And although the Fir Tree Fishery was praised for making learners feel "safe, and [they] know what to do if they have any concerns", inspectors failed the college on safeguarding as their risk assessments were "not sufficiently rigorous to demonstrate that learners are always safe around hazards on and off the site".

The college's spokesperson said the report has given them "direction and clarity that has enabled us to put new good practice and systems in place".

While Ofsted has suspended inspections and publishing reports during the coronavirus outbreak, it does release those where permission is given by the provider.

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Feature

Incorporation: The end of an experiment or the end of a myth?

JESS STAUFENBERG
NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Ministers are considering taking colleges back into government control, as revealed last week in these pages. But, Jess Staufenberg asks, was incorporation ever what it was cracked up to be?

There is a rising anxiety in the heart of government about the lack of intervention powers when colleges are failing. That's what *FE Week* reported, in an explosive story, this month. Perhaps ministers are muttering because, as the devastation of coronavirus comes swiftly on the heels of funding cuts, they've finally decided they can't bear to watch any more colleges hit the financial buffers. Anyway, they're looking to bring colleges under increased control, we heard.

More government involvement would mean further education colleges, which are officially categorised as in the "private" sector because of their borrowing and spending freedoms, could be re-classified as in the "public sector", like schools are. The body responsible for this decision is the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which has criteria for whether an institution belongs in the public or private sector, and includes them in the national balance sheet accordingly. The ONS has announced no plans to re-assess the status of colleges – yet.

So in what way might the government "take

Dame Ruth Silver, president of the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL)

...TH LONDON PRESS, ...

COLLEGE GLEE AT INDEPENDENCE

INDEPENDENCE was not all plain sailing for a college which hit cash flow problems as soon as it broke free from local education authority.

Lewisham College in Lewisham Way separated from Lewisham Council last week to manage its own affairs and be funded by the Government through the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC).

The college immediately hit cash problems as its LEA funding ceased last Thursday and its new FEFC money is not due until today.

But the FEFC bailed the col-... with an emergency ...

● Lewisham College principal Ruth Silver.

face us with new challenges. We will have our own accountants, ...

mation of three major ... faculties — business, ...

X-rays alert

OCTORS have been dered to cut down on e number of X-rays ey give patients to stop necessary exposure to diation.

The Royal College of diologists has made the ll after an 'extensive conltation' with the South st Thames Regional alth Authority.

Experts fear doctors are sting money and placing tients, health at risk by lering too many X-rays.

The RCR has now drawn a series of guidelines ctors are to follow before lering an X-ray examinan.

... clinical

NEWS EXTRA

Marathon travel

GENERAL: London Underground is laying on extra staff on Sunday April 18, to help cope with the expected flood of spectators following the course of the London Marathon.

LU is expecting thousands of people to be 'station hopping' to sites where they can see the runners arrive — particularly to stations at Surrey Quays and Rotherhithe.

Bail granted

SOUTH LAMBETH: A man charged with being drunk and disorderly and assaulting two police constables in the execution of their duty was granted bail at Camberwell Magistrates' Court on Saturday after agreeing to report thrice weekly at Kennington police station.

William James (30), of Albert Square, South Lambeth, is alleged to have assaulted the officers earlier that morning at Atwater Close, Brixton..

James also faced a further charge of being drunk and disorderly at Tulse Hill two months earlier, on February 6.

He will next appear in court on April 16.

ownership of colleges", as *FE Week* reported? We spoke to three colleges leaders who remember the last time "ownership" was a clearly definable state: pre-1992, when colleges, their budgets, recruitment, courses and capital projects were all controlled by the local authority. As of 1 April 1993, all further education and sixth form colleges – but not adult education service institutions – were incorporated, or removed from local authority control. Could the current government go the whole hog and return to that era? If so, what was it like and what could we learn from it? Ministers considering any changes would do well to listen closely.

"You often didn't find out what your budget was going to be until halfway through the year," sighs Adrian Perry, faintly amused, down the phone. Now a consultant, in 1988 he was principal of Shirecliffe College in Sheffield and from 1992 of Lambeth College in London. "I'm all in favour of local democracy, but my criticism was they would tell you how to do things – what grade staff should be on and who to appoint and so on. It should have been the other way around. They should have told us what was needed and we would work out how to deliver it." Moving past strike action was tricky for college principals because the town hall was often in support.

Adrian Perry, consultant and former Lambeth College principal

> **"The idea was to have a fierce incentive for growth while driving down costs"**

"The trade unions were very close to the local authorities. I had five strikes in one year."

There were about 390 colleges back then, many led by men unimpressed with their lack of choice over which courses they could run, according to Dame Ruth Silver, now president of the Further Education Trust for Leadership. She was a clinical psychologist working for the civil service between 1982 and 1988, who joined Newham College as vice principal in 1986. "That's when I discovered, for the first time, people talking about getting the hell out of local authorities. I was taken aback by the hurry to get out."

As a Scot, Silver was a believer in municipality

Feature

and local democratic accountability – unlike many principals whom she attended meetings with. "They were vile complaining sessions in some cases. The complaint on the whole was about not being allowed to run the courses they wanted. The local authority wanted the colleges to do unemployment courses, for example. But lots of the college leaders didn't want to do that – they wanted to be the old-fashioned technical colleges and have apprentices, who were better behaved. They had lots of difficult young people and they didn't have the staff to deal with them."

Yet Silver admits some shady political decisions were made in town halls. In 1991, the year before incorporation, she moved to Lewisham College. "I remember the college had a leaking roof and the money went to the borough, who didn't spend it on the roof. Instead they transferred it to Millwall Football Club! That happened a lot, political projects came first or schools came first." College leaders were "curtailed" by two main factors, explains Silver: elected politicians' links to the trade unions, and that "school was compulsory and so elected officials paid more attention to schools because that's where the votes were".

But there was a serious upside to having a layer of government work closely with colleges – coherence of offer. Before moving to Newham, Silver had worked at Southwark College under the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), which was cross-borough and less tied to particular town halls. This broader, regional level of government allowed for a post-16 sector whose institutions worked together, rather than in competition.

"There is a lie that FE has had all the freedoms. I think freedom is a myth"

"ILEA was planned strategically. It was a lovely model, every borough had a college and people could go to any college in London. If you wanted to do art, you could go to the art college, or fashion there was the fashion college. ILEA would give you travel tickets to get to any college." The scramble to compete for other institutions' students was not nearly as pronounced, and learners were supported to access a wide range of institutions.

Then a series of changes happened in quick succession. Margaret Thatcher's government passed the Education Reform Act in 1988, ushering in "local management" of colleges and schools whereby local authorities were required to delegate certain decisions, such as staffing, to education leaders. Soon after polytechnic colleges demanded the same independent, incorporated status as universities which John Major, who had taken over a year earlier, awarded them in 1991. "The polytechnics disturbed the nest," says Silver. "When college principals saw polytechnics had become universities and gained independence, lots of them wanted that too." It was something of a false analogy, explains Perry. "The polytechnics were national institutions, but colleges were local institutions, and that sometimes got forgotten. One of the drawbacks of incorporation was the withering of local collaboration."

But the move brought a different kind of coherence: the creation of a national sector where spending rates in colleges began to vary less wildly between localities. "Before incorporation, nationally there were enormous differences in the unit cost of efficiency," continues Perry. "Some colleges cost almost twice as much per student as others. Incorporation brought a 'levelling' in spending. Convergence, it was called. The idea was to have a fierce incentive for growth while driving down costs. It also created a national sector: we were in the same circulars, in the same league tables, for the first time."

The first of April 1993, when colleges became 'non-profit institutions serving households' (NPISH) belonging to the private sector, wasn't exactly "VE Day", laughs Perry, but there was considerable support among college leaders. "It was quite something, the increased autonomy – commissioning building work was a very heady freedom." He remembers attending a reception with Major who asked them, 'isn't it great to be free?' Yet soon reality began to bite. "Not long after we got a circular telling us how to behave. It was that Thatcherite thing: all God's children have targets."

Silver is more disparaging of the "freedom" she regards as mis-sold to the sector. "There is a lie in society that FE has had all the freedoms. We were still part of the public pension purse. We couldn't run a surplus or borrow without government agreement. I once heard someone say, 'we have as much freedom as a Marks and Spencer provider' – every product has to cost the same and look the same. I think freedom is a myth."

"It wasn't as wonderful as was always made out," concedes Perry. "But efficiency and flexibility improved very sharply. The substantial increase


Sue Pember, policy director at HOLEX, the professional body for adult education

in management autonomy was on the whole a good thing – it meant identifying problems, like why one course had lost half its students while another one had kept them all." The new regime also came with a range of new actors to enforce it. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which would go through various iterations before becoming today's ESFA, dished out funding and also launched a new inspectorate for further education, unlike the generalist HMI inspectors. Making the same body responsible for funding and inspection sounds pretty dodgy, but having a dedicated inspectorate was a no-brainer. "This was a very purposeful inspectorate who could actually say what was good practice in construction!" says Perry. "Undoubtedly it had a sharp sting, but it was worth doing and people did prepare anxiously." Completion rates of courses began to climb.

But incorporation took many scalps, and the scars of repeated industrial action from frustrated, underpaid lecturers from that time arguably run deep in the sector to this day. Susan Pember, now policy director at HOLEX, a professional body for adult education, joined Enfield council in 1986 and was responsible for administering four colleges before becoming principal at Canterbury college as incorporation arrived. "It was exciting, really exciting. I loved running the college independently – I would have hated having shackles." But, as a former local authority official with budgeting and HR experience, Pember was in a "unique position" to take on the vast role of college principal, now labelled "chief executive". "For many principals who'd had people in the local authority doing all the finance, it was a huge shock. There was a big turnover of principals in the first five years, because the job was much bigger than they thought. We also had to make a lot of redundancies." She adds that during the period

Feature

1992 to 1998, the sector became "incredibly bureaucratic, some of it self-generated by principals who were very nervous and brought in lots of rules". Teaching staff, as is often the case with change, bore the brunt.

Both Pember and Silver made the most of incorporation by appointing experienced people into HR and finance roles so they could get on with supporting lecturers and learners, and also maintaining local authority links rather than putting them out in the cold. For instance, Pember appointed the chief executive of Canterbury city council to her governing body. But in the national picture many lecturers were unhappy. The new Colleges Employers Forum had appointed controversial chief executive Roger Ward, a man who had already taken on the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education over the polytechnic sector, a move which showed it would be taking a hard line with the unions. In 1994 alone, 100 colleges went on strike over new contracts and the abandonment of the 'silver book' for pay and conditions. Financial crises hit numerous colleges: in 1995, 1,500 full-time and 8,000 part-time posts were lost, and in 1996, 3,500 full-time posts were lost. "Dash for cash" scandals hit throughout the 90s and by 1999, 20,000 full-time lecturers had been lost since incorporation. In their place, flexible contracts and efficiency drives had created a "gig economy", says Perry, with "days on and off, rather than the old steady promotion up to a good salary".

Debts were also piling up as colleges grappled with their new freedoms. From 1997, generous funding under Labour made this less of a problem. But co-funding rules for borrowing in that period made later budget cuts more devastating, explains Pember. "Before incorporation a college couldn't borrow. Afterwards it was part of the criteria, and once Labour came in it was a co-funding model. For every pound you got in funding for capital, you had to borrow a pound, using your reserves or going to a bank. So if you were doing a £20 million project, you had to find £10 million yourself. That's when debt really began to build up. As soon as austerity measures came in, you've got this huge debt and no means of paying it off." The latest figures from the Association of Colleges put collective college debt in 2016-17 at £1.25 billion. If colleges are brought into the public sector, it will be a lot to add to the government's books. The bill from coronavirus is going to be so high that ministers perhaps care less than they used to.

Around the same time, more colleges moved away from local links, according to Pember. "About 10 years after incorporation, colleges stopped thinking local and started thinking regional or national. Many of them didn't feel they needed any form of local accountability. The mantra gradually became that colleges are business, not community services." The ambiguous status was reflected at departmental level, where no one seemed quite certain how to categorise colleges. In 2007, they were in the Department for Innovation, University and Skills and by 2011 they were in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Yet despite being parked here, in 2010 the ONS reviewed the status of colleges and decided that the government actually had enough control to re-classify them as in public sector. No sooner had that happened than the coalition government moved colleges into the Department for Education and passed the 2011 Education Act which removed the need for colleges to seek government consent before borrowing and limiting intervention powers. The question persisted: who owned colleges? The ONS promptly moved colleges back into the private sector, but the answer still wasn't quite clear.

"I think colleges will fail ONS private sector classification"

Indeed, the years that followed the 2011 Act read like a timeline of attempts to claw back an element of control. The FE commissioner role arrived in 2013 to lead commissioner intervention where crises were already happening and also steer area reviews in a stalwart attempt to prevent them. The commissioner's latest annual report shows 13 colleges were in intervention last year, higher than the year before. "Administered college status" was introduced that meant "colleges will lose freedoms and flexibilities while they are turned around". In 2017, the number of colleges running out of cash prompted the Technical and Further Education Act, which extended commercial solvency laws to colleges and allowed the education secretary to appoint a special administrator to take over an insolvent college. Freedom was clearly a conditional scenario.

Yet, the fascinating fact is none of the three leaders *FE Week* spoke to would gladly give control back to local authorities. "They cannot go back to how it was," says Silver. "Pre-1992 doesn't fit a modern world. There was a great deal to be critical about under local authorities – political wheeling and dealing." What has been lost, however, is proper local and regional collaboration. "The great thing back then was you sat around political tables as a sibling. That doesn't happen any more – organisations won't go to the wall for each other." She suggests a collaborative "21st century version that's designed regionally". The others come up with astonishingly similar solutions. "My line would be some sort of regional education service for planning across an area," says Perry. Pember says a layer of local government needs to be regularly holding colleges to account for their area. "My view of the future is to cover the rest of the country with the equivalent of Mayoral Combined Authorities, so there is regional accountability to the mayor. It would be to bring in a much stronger scrutiny side. There should be an elected member who is asking that question: 'what are you doing for this area?'"

The suggestions sound much like the ILEA structure Silver remembers as having been effective almost 30 years ago. They want an extension of regional government checks and balances, but not of central or local government control – and certainly not full ownership.

In a way, ownership of the sector has been so slippery to define since 1993 that it's difficult to say what conditions must be met to say the government does or does not own it. The return of local authority control for spending and recruitment would certainly suffice, but that seems highly unlikely, particularly not under a Conservative government and when the sector's leaders were largely opposed to that set-up when it was in place. Yet, as Pember points out, the government has been increasing its powers over the sector in the last few years to the extent that she thinks ONS re-classification is inevitable. "They've ratcheted it up to the point where I think that colleges will fail ONS private sector classification", she tells me.

The other possibility, of course, is that successive governments have always kept and extended enough powers over colleges that the "dream" of 1992 was never fully realised, and now it's just a case of admitting publicly the government actually owns colleges. The charade of independence is more of a headache than it's worth.

Either way, the tussle for ownership of FE continues. But a solution, taking inspiration from the regional pre-1992 structures, might be out there.

Opinion

DAVID MARSH

Chief executive, Babington

In a time of uncertainty, here are some predictions for the sector

The skills system has done an amazing job during the corona crisis and will be critical as the UK economy tries to get back on its feet, says David Marsh

Most people will be pretty clear – the biggest challenge has been uncertainty. Everything has changed so much in the past two months that many would struggle to remember everything that we have been through. Government has moved quickly, but it has still led to much uncertainty and confusion for employers, learners and providers. This has made dealing with the situation difficult – not knowing whether employers would place learners on breaks, whether learners could learn on furlough, eligibility for financial support from government, and so on.

How have we reacted?

Our vision at Babington is developing better futures. We have really focused on that vision and the opportunity we saw to make a difference. We knew that the first thing was for us to ensure we remained stable and viable for the future – as otherwise we weren't going to be able to develop anyone's future! We have had an absolute focus on three things during this really difficult time.

Firstly, staff: we have been open and transparent. We have discussed the challenges and the solutions with the whole business wherever possible and talked about how we are all in it and will get through it together. We have been as visible as we can be and if anything, have got even closer to the business. We started holding daily "Coffee and Chat" sessions with the business to update them on what we know. In these times the main question people want answered is "Is my job safe?", and we have done everything we can to reassure. Our aim was to treat everyone as fairly as possible.

Secondly, learners: we have worked hard to keep them informed and communicated with. We believed the best thing was to keep them on programme, motivated and supported and in the main we have been able to do this. Our teams have been able to support learners through much of this difficult time and give support with the many challenges they face, including mental health. We have quickly increased the amount of virtual training that we deliver and this has been received incredibly positively.

> "The key things we will keep doing are communicating and being agile"

Thirdly, customers: our diversity in sectors and programmes has really allowed us to be flexible and react to market needs and requirements. We have seen some sectors and programmes more significantly affected than others. Particularly hard hit has been our new-entrant programmes where we saw a reduction of nearly 80 per cent, but there are other areas and sectors that have actually delivered more learners than ever before.

What are employers saying?

Many employers state that they will significantly reduce their new recruits but still want to utilise their apprenticeship levy and hence are looking at the opportunity to develop current employees – especially if they furloughed. Productivity and new skills will become even more important in the near future and employers will be looking for new and different skills to meet the challenges they face. We are looking to focus on these areas and also to look at how we can support the sectors that will likely sustain and grow.

There will also be a lot of people who are unfortunately left unemployed and they will need support and reskilling to get back on the employment ladder, so we have maintained our employability team and infrastructure even though we have seen very little activity.

What is the outlook for training providers?

It is difficult to predict exactly how things will work out, how the economy will recover and what the outlook for different sectors will be. The key things that we will keep doing are to communicate and be agile.

There are two main challenges coming down the road that will potentially affect the quality, brand and capacity of the apprenticeship

system and impact learners. These are both around the effect of the current crisis on the stability of providers in the medium term.

- The reduction in the number of new apprenticeship starts from employers will impact for the next two years when those learners would be on programme.
- The increased amount of time and support that learners will need to achieve their programmes will lead to a very large number going out of funding, meaning providers will not have funding coming in and hence will struggle to keep supporting these learners.

The skills system will be critical to the future of the UK economy – getting people reskilled and driving productivity. It has done an amazing job during this crisis to support learners both academically and pastorally – this shouldn't be ignored. Officials will need our support and ideas to create solutions to continue to make the system sustainable and fit for purpose for the future.

Opinion

JOHN HYDE

Executive chairman, HIT Training

Providers are taking the blame for a broken apprenticeships system

The government's numbers on apprenticeships don't add up. Worse still, they lead to blaming the wrong people and make necessary reforms less likely, writes John Hyde

For all the finger-pointing at apprenticeship providers about the substantial drop in the ESFA's Apprenticeship Achievement Rate (AAR), the truth is that it neither gives a true picture of the quality of provision, nor an accurate reflection of apprentices' achievements.

Some 87 per cent of those who complete their apprenticeships remain in employment with the same employer, over 40 per cent gain promotion, and one-third progress to a higher apprenticeship. If employers were not satisfied with apprentices' training they wouldn't continue to employ them, let alone increase their pay. In fact, the ESFA's own annual survey shows most providers score in the high eighties and nineties for both learner and employer satisfaction. And since the introduction of apprenticeship standards there has no outcry about culinary apprentices poisoning their customers, or construction apprentices causing buildings to collapse.

Over 90 per cent of apprentices who reach gateway succeed in their end-point assessments (EPAs). At HIT Training, it is 97 per cent. If there is a problem then, the reasonable conclusion is that it must lie with the apprentice journey and the data the ESFA collects along that journey to

produce AAR.

When Matt Hancock introduced apprenticeship standards and EPA, and when Nick Bowles implemented them, they promised there would be initial pilots and evaluations. These never took place, and many apprentices started towards the new standards without knowing how they would be assessed, or who by. Such major changes to curriculum, assessment and funding – implemented without trials, modelling or pilots – were destined to cause difficulties.

> "The statistics can't possibly offer a true picture"

Worse still, government has always funded FE staff development and training, especially to implement new policies and curriculum, since the 1994 introduction of modern apprenticeships. Yet when it came to these most fundamental changes, the DfE discontinued that funding without consultation or explanation, leaving providers to retrain their staff without support, guidance or financial assistance.

The rationale for introducing employer-led standards and EPA was to improve the quality of apprenticeships. Raising the bar, by default, meant achievement rates would drop, and this doesn't appear to have even factored in considerations of acceptable minimum completion rates. Reform was always going to take time to embed, and without pilots or guidance, it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that early-adopting providers and "guinea-pig" apprentices have been disadvantaged. With some adopting the new standards while others remain with frameworks, and some using both, the statistics can't possibly offer a true picture.

The major problem appears to be that over one-third of apprentices are failing to attain the EPA Gateway, but historically around 20 per cent have consistently left during their minimum one-year journey, for a variety of reasons. The question should be why this has doubled since the introduction of the levy.

Current skills minister Gillian Keegan was right when she noted recently that achievement rates decreased when the levy was introduced, but it's probably not for the reasons she thought. Prior to these changes, enduring government policy was that "the funding follows the learner". Now, it follows the employer. A subtle change, but it has had many unintended consequences and a host of these are employers' responsibility. They can't be blamed on the provider, yet it is the provider that the system penalises. Employers recruit and place employees on apprenticeships. They select, brief and oversee providers. They provide workplace mentors and on-site skills training. And at any time, it is they who can change provider or remove apprentices.

The ESFA's statistical data should take into account the reasons apprentices are taken off their programmes and recognise that this is a combination of commercial factors driven by employers (largely evidenced by the proportion of apprentices reaching EPA) and the quality of providers' delivery (largely evidenced by the proportion of learners reaching EPA who complete successfully).

Providers should be judged on the elements that they alone can influence. That would give government confidence in the quality of provision, and allow the ESFA to better understand the actions of employers and amend their policies accordingly. For the training provider to carry responsibility for the entire success rate with so much outside their control is simply unsustainable.

READER'S REPLY

Take the 'opportunity' to reopen from June, says skills minister

Oliver, website:

"Yet another government minister with some very ignorant comments. Keegan compares FE to the healthcare and transport sectors and says that the education sector could join them in keeping the country running, suggesting that FE colleges are not 'doing their bit'. As an adult FE student going to university next September, I can see how hard college lecturers are trying to provide the best online learning resources they can, and I am very grateful for it."

Anon, website:

"Will the minister send her kids back to college or school? Lead by example..."

Rachel Deblaisy, Facebook:

"And will she be in a classroom come June? Or will she be working from home?"

Louise Bruzon, Twitter:

"If I can do it with five-year-olds, anyone can!"

Apprentices ALSO expected to receive face-to-face training from June

Jess Short, Facebook:

"That's great for knowledge delivery, but I still can't gain access to their workplace to carry out observations, so the situation hasn't changed at all. I very much doubt most organisations are considering how to plan for the safety of external visitors at this point, when their focus is bringing their workers in safely."

Ria Steventon, Facebook:

"Why on earth would you put both tutors and learners at risk like this?"

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Opening from June: College leaders given flexibilities

"The government must allow college and ITP leaders to assess their own preparations and target key learners who need to return to learning, based on individual needs and according to their own situations. As an ITP we do not have extensive space within our training academy so will need to prioritise which learners have been affected most, with the ones who are just awaiting EPA or coming to the end of their course but now need a focus on practical skills development to complete as the priority. Otherwise, they are the ones at risk of not turning up for EPA as it's been too long from when they finished the coursework to then prepare for and eventually sit EPA. On the other end of the scale, school leavers will benefit from engagement asap to prevent NEETS, and what is astonishingly lacking in the new traineeship 'flexibilities' is the same requirement to start work experience within four weeks of their start date!"

Gail Dalton-Ayres, website

Ofsted raps first school over Baker Clause

Charly Fox, Facebook:

"About time!"

Tim Edwards, Twitter:

"Don't want to comment on the specific case, but my experience is access to independent IAG and providers in schools is still variable."

ESFA reveals new further education director

Tony Allen, Twitter:

"Good appointment. Congratulations, Kirsty."

Bulletin

Movers & Shakers

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

Sally Gibbs

Group Director of Strategy and Growth, Seetec Group

Start date May 2020

Previous job
Head of Business Development, Shaw Trust

Interesting fact
Outside of work you're most likely to find Sally in a dance studio, she attends several classes a week

Elaine McMahon

Interim Principal, Richmond upon Thames College

Start date September 2020

Previous job
Interim Chief Executive, Cornwall College Group

Interesting fact
Her first career choice was to work in the theatre. Some of the most memorable plays she has seen have been produced and acted by students in FE colleges

Deborah Bhebhe

Head of Apprenticeships, Mercuri International (UK) Ltd

Start date April 2020

Previous job
Apprenticeships lead, Birmingham Metropolitan College

Interesting fact
When she was a teenager Deborah wanted to learn another language, so she learnt British sign language

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