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MASS TESTING 'GAME CHANGER'



- Army help test all staff and students at college campus as part of citywide pilot
- Hancock applauds collaboration between colleges, council and NHS Test and Trace
- FE leaders hopeful rapid Covid testing rollout will boost both confidence and onsite participation

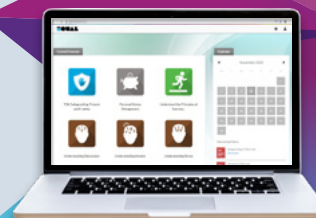
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the **skills** network

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THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Online learning to support your delivery



EQUAL

FEWEEK

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FE WEEK IS PROUD TO BE A MEMBER OF



The show must go on: online resources to support delivery during lockdown 2.0



By Mark Dawe,
Chief Executive
The Skills Network

With Boris Johnson announcing a second national lockdown on Saturday, we continue to face much uncertainty and disruption to our delivery of education and it is hard to imagine there will be much change this academic year – a reality Michael Gove reflected over the weekend.

Although schools, colleges, providers, and universities will remain open, everyone will be facing significant ongoing challenges

There will likely be limited face-to-face contact times and reduced class sizes, as fears grow over outbreaks and spread of infection.

For those offering remote learning to students at home, the focus will be how to keep them engaged, and questions over just how effectively you can teach them new content and provide a semblance of a routine in education and training for these students.

But the show must go on and we must continue to adapt to the changing circumstances.

Most of us are looking for online and blended alternatives to help deliver key areas of our curriculum and are considering how to best transition from classroom-based delivery to online learning.

Whilst we continue to strive for quality delivery and maintain momentum, it is crucial that we consider what good online and blended learning looks like as we shift to digital learning.

It is crucial that we don't employ the same 'knee-jerk' reaction this time round.

The lessons learnt?

When the first lockdown was imposed in March, hundreds of colleges and training providers had to quickly find alternative ways to deliver classroom experiences online.

Everyone agrees we will move into a world of "new normal" and education online will not just be a short-term reaction to the pandemic, but as a long-term solution and real opportunity.

Online learning should be a classroom not a library. Relying on Zoom and YouTube, and creating a dump of existing PDFs and PowerPoints, isn't the best way to engage and inspire learners. We can't just replicate face to face on a computer and a "lift and shift" approach (as I am sure we have all realised over the last 6 months). It just doesn't work.

Nor will these methods prove successful in delivering the rigour expected by Ofsted to effectively progress learners through to their final qualifications.

- A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found head teachers believe a third of pupils were not engaged with set work during the first lockdown

- A survey by the National Union of Students found over a quarter of students (27%) struggled to engage with the online learning provided during the first lockdown with many finding online teaching 'boring' and the course content being 'mediocre'

While many learners thrive learning online, for others it is a real challenge, and it requires a range of new resources and tools to keep them engaged and support their progression.

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DfE to move army of cost-cutting advisers into FE

BILLY CAMDEN

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Ministers are drawing up plans to extend a controversial cost-cutting advice scheme for schools into the FE sector.

According to a job advert posted last month, the Department for Education is recruiting an individual to "scope and design a brand new programme of work" aimed at "strengthening efficiency and value for money in further education".

This would form the "next phase" of the department's School Resource Management (SRM) strategy which will undergo a "formal relaunch" and form a new division in the DfE in early 2021.

The advert stated this is a "fast-paced, high-profile" area of work and a "top policy priority" for ministers and HM Treasury.

FE Week's sister paper *Schools Week* revealed in August 2018 how the DfE was to spend £2.3 million on up to 250 money-saving advisers who were parachuted into struggling schools to help them cut costs. This was part of a trial led by then-academies minister Lord Agnew, who is now a minister in the Treasury and Cabinet Office.

But the SRM consultants caused controversy, with *Schools Week* reporting one school, for example, being advised to replace experienced teachers with support staff on term-time contracts, while another was urged to limit lunch portions for pupils.

An evaluation of the trial was published in January and revealed how during the visits, advisers found savings of £35 million across 72 schools and academy trusts. But they failed to identify savings at more than one in ten of the schools they visited.

The DfE would not reveal any more details of how the SRM programme might work in further education. A spokesperson would only say that the department is "exploring how this approach can be applied to all parts of the sector to ensure every penny

counts towards excellent educational outcomes for all".

Stephen Morales, chief executive of the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL), which accredits SRM advisers, told *FE Week* it was always Agnew's goal to expand the programme into all parts of the education sector, but said the move into FE was at "very, very early stages".

"The DfE is developing the thinking that they developed for the mainstream schools sector into FE but it is super early," he said.

"I don't think they know what the controls would look like yet – so will it be retraining the existing army of SRM advisers, or will it be seeking those that have direct experience in the FE sector? They are a long way away from that."

He added that that resource consultants are one aspect of the SRM strategy, which includes a "whole series of toolkits and benchmarking information that schools can use to compare themselves with similar schools", that FE could get involved in.

Morales also said that the "formal relaunch" of the SRM strategy for schools is also in its early developments, and discussions around how much extra funding will be thrown at it or if any more advisers will be recruited are yet to happen.

He added that the emphasis on the SRM strategy has shifted under Lord Agnew's

successor Baroness Berridge away from the "cost-cutting, efficiency type narrative to one of reinvestment – so 'let's see where we can find potential savings and let's look at resource optimisation to put back into the classroom'."

But Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive of the Association of Colleges, warned about the dangers of adding further oversight to an already complex FE system.

"The school resource management model is collaborative because it uses existing finance staff to advise their peers on good strategies," he said.

"However, we already have a complex oversight, intervention and support system in colleges and the 100 published FE commissioner reports are full of financial management advice already.

"The priority in the next 12 months should be to simplify the external scrutiny and sort out funding arrangements so that those running colleges can get on and do what they need to do in the national interest."

Julie McCulloch, director of policy at the Association of School and College Leaders, said that while the SRM scheme was "often helpful in schools" there were "misgivings about some of the advice given, and it will be important to ensure that lessons have been learned from this experience".



Lord Agnew

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Online learning resources to support
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Mass testing: will it be the game changer that keeps campuses open?

BILLY CAMDEN
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From front

Rapid mass coronavirus testing has been hailed as a potential “game changer” for keeping campuses open and courses running, as trials get under way in colleges.

A pilot that tests all students and staff, as much as once per day, began this week with the help of the army at the City of Liverpool College – as part of the country’s first city-wide mass testing scheme.

Newcastle Sixth Form College is also set to launch its own trial for staff and students using lateral flow tests, which give a result in less than an hour, on Monday as ministers develop plans for further field tests in education settings across the country.

The Department of Health and Social Care would not say how many colleges in total have been asked to participate in the trials, but principals have said these will make a “huge” difference to keeping students in the classroom and in tackling the anxiety around keeping their sites open during the pandemic.

However, questions will be raised about how a wider rollout of the tests would be staffed,



and a recent evaluation of the speedy antigen tests being used has prompted concerns that cases could be missed.

Speaking exclusively to *FE Week* following the launch of the government’s first mass testing pilot in Liverpool last week health secretary Matthew Hancock said: “We should all applaud the level of collaboration we’re seeing in Liverpool between colleges, the council and NHS Test and Trace in a common mission to tackle coronavirus.

“We must learn from what goes well in Liverpool and roll it out across the country.”

Under the scheme, which involves around 2,000 army personnel, regular or repeat tests are offered to everyone, whether or not they have Covid-19 symptoms, in an effort to self-isolate those found to be infected and drive down the rate of transmission.

For schools and colleges, it also means that for students who have come into contact with someone who has Covid-19, instead of self-isolating at home for ten days they can be tested daily and continue to come into campus as long as they return a negative test.

The lateral flow tests involve a handheld kit that can produce a result within 15 minutes without the need for a lab. Fluid from a nasal swab or saliva goes on one end, then a

marking appears if the person is positive.

A new Covid-19 testing site exclusively for the 500 staff and 12,000 students at the City of Liverpool College opened on Tuesday.

The British Army was deployed to open the site, which has the ability to conduct 84 tests per hour and will be running for 12 hours each day initially from November 10 to 16.

City of Liverpool College principal Elaine Bowker said: “As Liverpool’s largest college, we’re clear on our responsibility to contribute to the safety of our community.

“The wellbeing of our students and staff is our absolute priority, and we welcome the opportunity to take part in this mass testing pilot as a means of controlling the spread of coronavirus.”

After hearing about the mass testing trial in the college, Stuart Rimmer, chief executive of East Coast College in East Anglia, said: “We should welcome this step at City of Liverpool. If this approach could be rapidly scaled up for colleges nationwide it could be a game changer ahead of a vaccine, increasing staff and student confidence to fully participate in learning.”



Matt Hancock

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Investigates

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CONTINUED

The City of Liverpool College appears to be the only college in the city that has its own site.

Carol Nield, vice principal at Merseyside-based Hugh Baird College, told *FE Week* the college "would welcome the opportunity to participate in mass testing" but has not been approached to trial it by government.

She added that the college is "fully supportive" of the idea of mass testing in education as a "vehicle for keeping our communities safe and preventing the spread of Covid-19".

While a city-wide trial is currently running in Liverpool, the government has announced it is issuing a further 600,000 tests to local authorities, with many choosing to deploy them to schools for mass testing of students.

Sign-off has almost been given for a mass testing site at Newcastle Sixth Form College in the north-east exclusively for its 1,223 students and 100 staff.

The college was approached by government officials last week and is waiting for official approval, expected on Friday, before beginning to test on Monday.

Principal Gerard Garvey told *FE Week* that he expects between 15 and 20 army personnel to be deployed to the college each day from Monday until Christmas to administer the tests.

The college plans to test each student and staff member who consents each week for the remaining five weeks of this term – which means they'll conduct over 6,000 tests.

"For as long as they return a negative test,

they will be able to come into college," he said. "This will enable us to minimise the numbers who have to self-isolate when they are worried they have come into contact with somebody who has had a positive test."

Garvey added that students were "excited" to be part of the trial because they have "seen the impact that coronavirus can have on their education and they want to help to reduce that impact".

No discussions have yet been had about training staff to administer the tests, but the principal said they are straightforward and the army personnel will be there to "hand materials to the students and collect in samples".

"It is a very short test and we think it will have a minimum impact on learners. They will be asked to come from class and return to class."

Newcastle Sixth Form College will use a student IT open access room on the ground floor of its building because it is "easy for students to get to and runs an existing one-way system so we can control and easy route in and out to keep contact with others minimal", Garvey continued.

He thinks the difference mass testing in college will make is "huge".

"We have had just 23 student positive cases so far this year but this led to us having to self-isolate 130 students and work from home. We believe that with A-levels in particular, the best place for learners is in the classroom, with expert teacher guidance. The more learners we can continue to do that for will only benefit learners as they head towards exams in the summer."



Gerard Garvey

Garvey added that the testing should provide peace of mind for staff, students and parents: "There has been anxiety around the pandemic and I think our students and parents have felt reassured by the way we have been operating, but this pilot will give us an extra level of assurance for parents that we are looking to minimise, in particular, asymptomatic transmission. This benefits not just the college community, but the wider community in the north-east."

Despite excitement around the rapid lateral flow Covid tests, a recent study by Public Health England and the University of Oxford found that while false positives were rare, the tests were found to have a 76.8 per cent sensitivity rate, meaning they do still miss nearly a quarter of cases.

On Thursday, a record 33,470 people tested positive for coronavirus in the government's latest daily figure. It was the highest daily number since mass testing began in the UK, and brings the total number of cases to more than 1.29 million.

Schools and colleges are still waiting to hear if or when the lateral flow tests will be rolled out nationally, including how they would be staffed.

Association of Colleges chief executive David Hughes said he was "pleased to see colleges included in the mass testing pilots because reliable testing will augment the plans already in place".

"With testing, we expect young people and adults to be even more confident about attending college face to face, allowing them to get the education and training they deserve," he added.



Elaine Bowker

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Higher education admissions process set for radical shake-up

FRASER WHIELDON
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The government is set to move closer to meeting a manifesto commitment to reform the higher education admissions process.

Earlier this week, UCAS put forward two new "radical" options, one of which is a "post-qualification offers" model where all students, including those on technical and vocational routes, would be offered college and university places at the same time, after their final qualification results in the summer. UCAS made clear this model was its preferred approach.

The other is a "post-qualification application" model, where all students would start the whole application process after their results came through. To allow time for their applications to be submitted, assessed, and for offers to be made and decided upon, the university term would need to begin in January.

Currently, applicants to college or university are given predicted grades by

their current education provider, from which colleges and universities can decide whether to offer them "conditional" or "unconditional" offers, and the applicants can then rank their offers in order of preference.

This system has created concerns around the accuracy of predicted grades, especially for disadvantaged applicants whose grades are more likely to be under-predicted, and "conditional unconditional" offers, which offer applicants an unconditional place as long as that university is their first-preference choice.

Writing for *FE Week* (see page 29), John Cope, director of strategy, policy and public affairs for the admissions service UCAS, said the current system also creates an "unhelpful split" between academic and technical results and offers, and so "life-changing decisions" on whether to pursue a place at college, university or elsewhere can be made on "imperfect information".

Reforming the admissions system was a commitment in the Conservative Party's manifesto, which pledged to "improve the application and offer system for undergraduate students", with an approach "underpinned by a commitment to fairness, quality of learning and teaching and access".



Geoff Barton

Cope argues a post-qualification model could "significantly" level up the playing field for further education and skills providers and create an "offer window" where they and universities could attract applicants at the same time.

UCAS's modelling coincides with publication today of an 18-month review from Universities UK (UUK), the representative organisation for vice-chancellors, which recommends further consideration be given to reforming undergraduate admissions, based on a post-qualifications model.

This comes after their poll of 1,500 adults who applied for college or university in the UK between 2015 and 2019 found 56 per cent of recent applicants feel universities and colleges should only make offers after people have received their results.

Responding to the report, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, Geoff Barton, said there was "growing consensus" in favour of ending the reliance on predicted grades, and moving to a post-qualification system.

Also commenting on the report, the Office for Students, which has banned "conditional unconditional" offers until next September, warned that while there is "widespread recognition" that the current system is not working, a post-qualification admissions system "is not a magic bullet for fair access".

Lifetime skills guarantee: Fresh setback to list of free level 3 quals

FRASER WHIELDON
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Exclusive

The list of level 3 qualifications being fully funded for all adults under the Lifetime Skills Guarantee could take until the end of the year to be published, despite the government originally promising it for October.

Prime minister Boris Johnson announced at Exeter College in September the government would extend its current offering of a first, full-level 3 qualification for learners up to the age of

23, to adults of any age, from April 2021.

The Department for Education said, following Johnson's speech, they would set out details of the courses "next month [October]".

Come October, and skills minister Gillian Keegan told an *FE Week* roundtable they were working to "give you some more information in the next couple of months, and hopefully by November".

She told the grouping of awarding organisations and sector representative bodies the qualifications have to be high quality, have the respect of business and address a "wide range" of labour shortages.

The government is having to select the level

3 qualifications from the over 4,300 that are currently on the ESFA's online "list of qualifications approved for funding".

Now, the department has told *FE Week*: "We are working to provide more information by the end of the year."

Federation of Awarding Bodies chief executive Tom Bewick said awarding organisations have yet to be consulted about the details of the level 3 qualifications being funded under the Lifetime Skills Guarantee.

He urged the Department for Education to "get on with it, as the sooner we have transparency, the sooner we can get stability".

Former leader of bankrupt college returns to auditing firm

FRASER WHIELDON

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Exclusive

Investigations by the government's insolvency watchdog into the former leadership of two bankrupt colleges are still ongoing – as one of the individuals at the centre of the scandal takes up a role at the colleges' former auditor.

The Insolvency Service confirmed this week its inquiry into the conduct of directors at Hadlow College and West Kent and Ashford College (WKAC), the first two colleges to enter education insolvency, last summer, are "continuing".

It comes as the former deputy principal of both colleges, Mark Lumsdon-Taylor, has re-joined the accountancy firm MHA MacIntyre Hudson as a "senior corporate consultant".

MacIntyre Hudson employed Lumsdon-Taylor from 1997 as an audit manager and director of education until 2003, before he moved to Hadlow, according to his LinkedIn profile. The accountancy firm was internal auditor for Hadlow and WKAC in the years leading up to its collapse.

The company was also the internal auditor for eight different colleges in 2018/19, and the external auditor for 11, according to the Education and Skills Funding Agency's register of college accounts for that year.

It is not clear at this stage if Lumsdon-Taylor is back working in MacIntyre Hudson's education department.

His LinkedIn profile says he has "returned to the financial corporate world in 2020 after stepping down following a 15-year career in rural business and education in which he built a £50 million institution employing over 1,000 staff and oversaw multi-million-pound investment and regeneration projects."

"As a result, Mark is seen as leader in the finance, HR, education and corporate landscapes."

It also says he has been seconded as a



From left: Mark Lumsdon-Taylor and Paul Hannan

chief financial officer for a "world-class business", but does not specify the name of the company.

Lumsdon-Taylor declined to comment, saying he would only comment after the Insolvency Service's investigations are complete. MacIntyre Hudson did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

It was revealed in November last year the Insolvency Service would be investigating the "conduct of relevant personnel in the period leading up to the onset of insolvency", after Hadlow entered administration in May 2019, followed by WKAC the following August.

If their investigation does find evidence of misconduct, and if it is in the public interest, the service may pursue enforcement measures, such as director disqualification.

They have a three-year window from the date of insolvency "within which to issue disqualification proceedings should there be evidence of wrongdoing".

Administrators, which in the case of Hadlow and WKAC is BDO, have also prepared a report on the conduct of "relevant persons" at the colleges in the three years prior

to administration, according to the latest administration progress reports for both colleges.

BDO could not say when the conduct report would be published.

The principal of both colleges Paul Hannan, Lumsdon-Taylor, the chairs of both colleges, as well as several governors, all resigned after having to apply for emergency funding from the government to keep the colleges open, as Hadlow had run up £40 million in debts, while WKAC owed over £100 million.

Last week, North Kent College confirmed 90 staff are at risk of redundancy under plans to cut 44 posts, following its takeover of Hadlow College and the West Kent campus of WKAC in August.

EKC Group (East Kent College) said it had cut three jobs when it closed a motor vehicle centre as part of its takeover of the Ashford campus and Hadlow's Canterbury site in April.

Capel Manor College, which took over Hadlow's Mottingham campus in January, confirmed it had not made any redundancies, nor does it plan to.



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Further glitches in T Level rollout

BILLY CAMDEN

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An update to the official list of T Level providers this week reveals several colleges cancelled courses scheduled for September 2020.

Three of the flagship post-16 technical education qualifications – in digital, construction and education and childcare – got off the ground two months ago and are being offered at 44 schools, college and training providers across England.

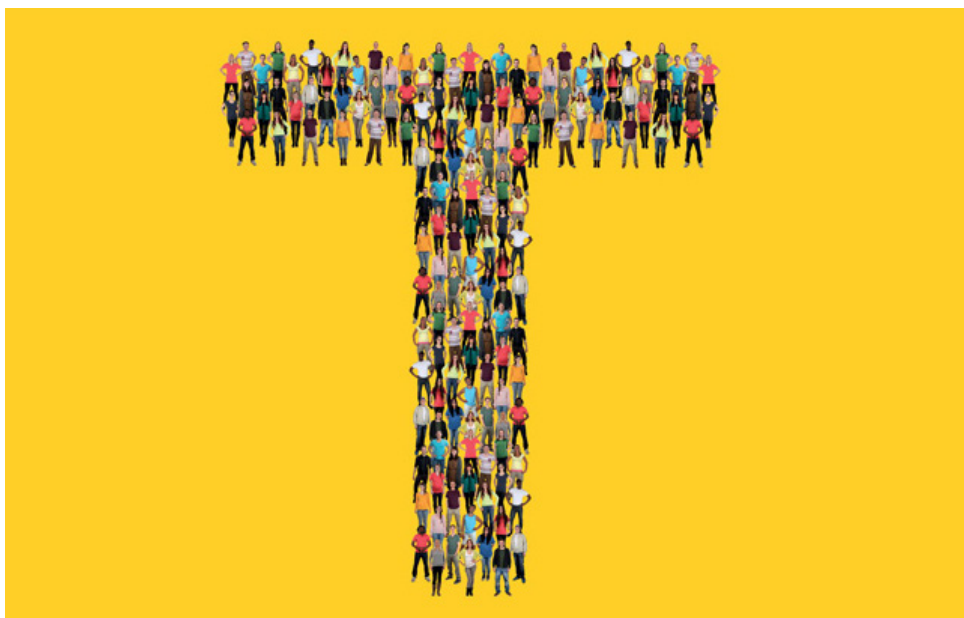
But the College of Richard Collyer, in West Sussex, has decided to cancel delivery of the digital pathway in 2020/21, while another, Shipley College, will no longer offer the education and childcare subject this year.

Shipley has also pulled out of delivering the T Level transition programme – which is being taken by young people who are not yet ready to start a full level 3 T Level – as has Peter Symonds College in Winchester.

A number of other schools and colleges have cancelled or delayed T Level delivery over the past year following disruptions caused by Covid-19 and a lack of industry placement opportunities.

A total of 50 providers were supposed to teach the first T Levels from September 2020, but this was whittled down to 44 by the time the academic year began.

FE Week carried out an early survey of



recruitment levels in September and found that colleges and schools had missed two-thirds of their enrolment targets, with digital proving to be the toughest subject to sell to students.

However, full enrolment numbers will not be known for some time.

A Department for Education spokesperson said that while Covid-19 had an “impact on planning” for a “small number of providers”, they have had a “hugely positive start to T Level delivery and we are seeing some excellent examples of practice”.

Peter Symonds College said the transition

programme “did not have sufficient student interest this year, unfortunately”, but the college remains committed to offering the course and is “confident” that it will run in the next academic year.

A spokesperson added that the college has “successfully recruited students” to the education and childcare T Level this academic year, and that learners are “thoroughly enjoying the new course and have settled in well to their studies”.

Shipley and the College of Richard Collyer did not provide comment at the time of going to press.

But the DfE told *FE Week* that in Shipley’s case, the college decided that, given local lockdown constraints, they would delay offering the education and childcare T Level and the transition programme until 2021.

With regard to the College of Richard Collyer, the DfE said they have decided that, given the impact of Covid-19 on recruitment, they will not offer the digital T Level until 2021.

T Levels, are being rolled out gradually over the coming years. A further seven will be available in September 2021 with the remaining 14 courses starting in either 2022 or 2023.



Peter Symonds College

Employability must start with accessibility



By Dan Howard FIEP,
Managing Director at Skills
Forward, Operations Director -
Learning for Work at NCFE

With the potential for even more lockdown life ahead of us, the adaptations made to the UK's business infrastructure to remain operational seem set to remain for some time. Alongside this has been a hard lesson in humility and humanity that, coupled with our newfound affinity for tech-enabled workspaces, may prove to be the most advantageous of the changes from which there should be no going back.

Flexibility and profitability

Before buy-in from businesses was required as a matter of safety, [flexible working has been proven to have a positive impact](#) on recruitment, productivity, retention and inclusion – not to mention the potential for costs saved on office space, parking, security and other sundries associated with maintaining a physical workplace. For staff, the feeling of autonomy of their own work/life balance is emboldening. And, with so little control of our lives as we once knew them, this is an important luxury that we cannot discount as essential to our continued mental management of this ongoing crisis.

The challenges of creating an inclusive workforce

With the mention of such huge strides towards a tech-enabled work environment, it would be easy to forget the elephant in the room which is our straining economy and jobs market.

So far, [the greatest increase to unemployment has been seen in young people](#) who have left education or some of the worst affected industries, like retail and hospitality, with few opportunities available to them. For them, the government's recent cash incentives for employers provide a beacon of hope and it's important that when used, these measures are inclusive of young people with a range of abilities, wherever possible.

Unfortunately, this fiscal flexibility does not extend to the Kickstart scheme, for which there are more stringent terms on how this incentive can be spent. However, a recent step

in the right direction toward inclusivity for young people with disabilities is that [SMEs have now been invited to apply for funding](#). Previously, only businesses employing 30 or more placements would be eligible for this scheme. This is an important move as it will allow the support of a wider range of young people with differing needs. The Kickstart scheme needs to be seen as a programme of learning for all young people, focused on valuable employability skills and the opportunity to be exposed to workplace practices, irrespective of how different they currently look. Access to employers with the resources to support them is imperative for young people with disabilities or chronic illnesses. The widening of the scheme is good news and will help them gain access to the opportunities such a programme will afford.

The future of accessibility and employability

The ability to work from home and use technology supports employers to ensure that employees, and prospective employees, aren't put at an unfair disadvantage because of differing needs or disabilities. To revert to how we once thought the workplace needed to operate would be a damaging backwards step. It would slam a door in the face of those most marginalised who, through the changes needed to support industry during lockdown, have been granted the flexibility they have found so hard to win. For industry, it would be equally destructive, as it would close again the huge pool of talent that is available, if we continue to take steps to encourage it.

Amidst collapsing sectors, there are new and emerging opportunities, businesses, and sectors. We have seen businesses previously bound by process, structure and sign-off move in a direction that was never thought possible. For them, there is no going back, for new businesses, there is no excuse.

If employers aren't putting flexibility and accessibility at the heart of their employment strategy, they will fall behind, both morally and in profitability. Now, more than ever before, we need a resilient and adaptive workforce and to exclude anyone from that would be to the detriment of our economic recovery.

For information on focused and inclusive employability skills testing, education and support, contact skillswork@skillsforward.co.uk. You can also visit www.ncfe.org.uk/go-the-distance to find out more about how NCFE together with Skills Forward is taking action against unemployment.

The winners of the BAME Apprenticeship Awards 2020

FRASER WHIELDON

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Outstanding black, Asian and minority ethnic apprentices, as well as employers and providers leading in increasing the diversity of apprenticeships, were celebrated at a stellar awards ceremony this week.

Twelve individuals, ten employers and one provider walked away victorious from Wednesday night's BAME Apprenticeship Awards 2020, which were held on YouTube and Facebook after the Covid pandemic forced plans for an in-person ceremony (in Edgbaston in July) to be abandoned.

But, hosted by the star of BBC comedy show *Man Like Mobeen*, Tez Ilyas, and Capital Xtra host Remel London, the new setting allowed the event to become what awards organisers ThinkFest called an "awesome online extravaganza", which featured a musical performance from Aston Performing Arts Academy.

Over 100 apprentices were shortlisted for awards, which cover everything from accounting and finance to transport and logistics, and head judge Olga Bottomley said the year had been "fantastic" and the quality of the apprentices has been "phenomenal".

"It has been a pleasure to be a part of such an amazing cause that really highlights diversity in apprenticeships," she added.

The judging panel included Errol Ince, vice principal for STEM at London South East Colleges, former National Union of Students president Shakira Martin, and NOCN managing director Graham Hasting-Evans.

Apprentice of the year went to Kimmy Kimani, 26, who is completing a business administration apprenticeship with Milton Keynes College, and who won after developing a keen interest in thwarting misconceptions and myths about apprenticeships, showing her online following of 150,000 the true value of the vocational programmes.

Judges said that while all those shortlisted were "exceptional", the award "had to go to her for her sheer commitment" as she had gone "above and beyond" by building a "fantastic platform and network where she can shout about apprenticeships".

Employers were also recognised for their contribution to equality, diversity and



Top, left to right: Remel London, host; Kasim Choudhry, creative director, ThinkFest; Safaraz Ali, founder, ThinkFest; Tez Ilyas, host
Bottom, left to right: Edwin Ladd, Photographer; ThinkFest; Khoram Hedayati, visuals director, ThinkFest

inclusion in apprenticeships, with the small employer of the year award going to law firm Thrive Law, and the large employer award going to Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Learning provider of the year was awarded to the JGA Group for having worked with BAME communities to "address real issues related to knife crime and county lines, removing barriers, and creating real opportunities for learning and employment", the judges said.

They led by example, having several people from BAME backgrounds on their board as well as a network of "inspiration" role models from those communities.

Judges added: "They are actively promoting the positive benefits of apprenticeships across many sector areas and continue to raise awareness of the opportunities they generate."

JGA was credited for making "real change and real impact within and by BAME communities".

The event was run in partnership with education company Pearson, and Cindy Rampersaud, its senior vice president of BTEC and apprenticeships, said: "We were delighted by the number of high-quality applicants received this year.

"It has been another great opportunity to showcase and celebrate so many inspirational BAME apprentices and to learn about their individual journeys.

"We are so proud to be sponsoring these awards, seeing so many realise their potential, ambition and aspirations.

"We would like to thank all the participants, the nominees, and winners for taking part in these awards and wish them all continued success."

THE FULL LIST OF WINNERS

Apprentices:

- Accounting and Finance - Haider Ali of Rolls-Royce
- Legal and Professional Services - Kimmy Kimani of Milton Keynes College
- Health, Medical and Social Care - Pal Kaur of Walsall Council
- Carers Award - Chipo Parirenyatwa - Mitchell's Care Homes
- Charity, Voluntary and Public Services - Chantel Fry of EMH Group
- Retail, Hospitality and Tourism - Raginee Scudamore of University of Buckingham
- Engineering and Manufacturing - Ashaan Grewal of Royal Mail
- Construction Services - Romario Cazaubon - Mace Group
- Media and Marketing - Sofia Mumtaz of Google
- Digital and Technology - Hammad Shah of Suez Recycling and Recovery
- Transport and Logistics - Hiba Abo Slo of Arup
- Judges Choice - Samah Rafiq of Coca-Cola European Partners
- Apprentice of the Year - Kimmy Kimani of Milton Keynes College

Employers:

- Financial, Legal and Professional Services - EY
- Health, Medical and Social Care - PJ Care Ltd
- Charity, Voluntary and Public Services - HMRC
- Retail, Hospitality and Tourism - Travis Perkins Plc
- Engineering and Manufacturing - Bombardier
- Construction - JS Wright & Co Ltd
- Creative and Digital - IBM
- Transport and Logistics - Transport for London
- Small Medium Employer - Thrive Law
- Large Employer - Great Ormond Street Hospital

Providers:

- Learning Provider of The Year - The JGA Group

Ofqual's independence questioned after exams fiasco

JAMES CARR

NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The education select committee has accused Ofqual of "burying its head in the sand" by ignoring repeated warnings in the run-up to this year's disastrous exams and has claimed that the regulator instead chose to follow orders from ministers and "hoped for the best".

As well as questioning the independence of the regulator, committee chair Robert Halfon took aim at the influence ministers may have had over decisions and the Department for Education's failure so far to produce requested papers detailing the decision-making behind scrapping exams.

A letter to education secretary Gavin Williamson also states exams must go ahead in 2021 and "robust contingency planning must be in place as soon as possible to ensure this can happen".

Halfon said the "fallout and unfairness" from the cancellation of exams will "have an ongoing impact on the lives of thousands of families".

"But such harm could have been avoided had Ofqual not buried its head in the sand and ignored repeated warnings, including from our committee, about the flaws in the system for awarding grades."

He writes that although Ofqual was "clearly aware" that its controversial algorithm would cause problems for high-achieving pupils in historically low-attaining schools it "believed the number would be statistically small and could be addressed through an appeals process".

It also recognised the approach would benefit smaller schools, such as private schools, and would place pupils at large schools and colleges at a disadvantage.

Halfon said it was "revealing" that Ofqual ploughed ahead instead of raising issues at the time.

The letter states: "We regret that Ofqual decided not to raise wider concerns about the fairness of the model they were being asked to



Robert Halfon

implement.

"They had every opportunity to do so when they came before us in June. Instead, they simply followed the ministerial direction and hoped for the best."

Halfon explains the "whole episode calls into question Ofqual's independence" from government.

While ministers are able to issue directions to Ofqual, the regulator is not required to follow these directions.

The committee concluded it was unacceptable that the regulator had taken up a "half-way house position where lines of accountability for standards are blurred".

It was also revealed that the committee is of the opinion that if running a full schedule of exams this year was not possible, there should be at least be exams in "core subjects".

"There must be exams in at least English, maths and the science subjects, so that students are tested in these core curriculum subjects," Halfon wrote.

This suggestion echoes comments made yesterday by Ofsted's chief inspector Amanda Spielman when speaking in front of the education committee.

Spielman, who is chairing Ofqual's new "recovery committee", said holding exams only in core subjects was "the kind of option under consideration" for next year.

However, she caveated this suggestion and said "every option creates some unfairness".

GCSE and A-level exams are currently scheduled to go ahead as normal next summer, with the addition of a three-week delay to help students make up for any time lost learning due to coronavirus.

Halfon also noted that the select committee had not yet been provided with the "relevant information and papers" by the Department for Education relating to the decision to cancel exams in 2020.

Despite ministers assuring the committee that the papers would be provided in early September they have "not materialised".

He said he expected the papers by Monday, November 23, so that the committee "may complete our investigation".

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "It is completely unacceptable that the government has apparently thus far failed to supply relevant papers and the minutes of meetings requested by the committee."

"We seem to be no nearer understanding what steps ministers took to ask the right questions at the right times to assure themselves on behalf of the public that the system for awarding grades would work and wouldn't fall apart in the way that it did."

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News

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Gov careers agency fails to persuade majority of schools to engage with FE

BILLY CAMDEN

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Less than half of the schools in the government's multi-million-pound network of careers hubs have met a target for providing "encounters with further and higher education".

A report published on Thursday by the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) shows that while more schools are meeting the eight Gatsby benchmarks for good careers guidance, progress towards full compliance remains slow.

"Encounters with further and higher education" is the seventh benchmark and sets a target for every pupil by the age of 16 to have had a "meaningful encounter with providers of the full range of learning opportunities, including sixth forms, colleges, universities and apprenticeship providers", which should include the "opportunity to meet both staff and pupils".

But this week's CEC data shows that just 47 per cent of the more than 2,000 schools in the quango's careers hubs fully achieved the target by March 2020.

The figure was even lower when the CEC looked at achievements in the rest of its network of almost 2,000 schools and colleges not in hubs – where 26 per cent met the target

by the same period. For those schools not in the CEC's network, 13 per cent met the target.

The findings chime with concerns from the education select committee about non-compliance with the Baker Clause – a law introduced in January 2018 that stipulates schools must ensure a range of FE providers have access to pupils from year 8 to year 13 to provide information on technical education and apprenticeships.

The committee questioned Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman on this issue during a hearing this week. Spielman said inspectors have found examples of non-compliance in schools and pledged to give careers guidance the "attention it deserves" when inspections restart.

Asked why they thought schools were struggling to provide encounters with FE providers for pupils, a CEC spokesperson said: "There has been sustained improvement in the number of young people having encounters with further and higher education. This improvement represents a threefold increase over two years.

"These are rigorous and demanding standards for schools and colleges. In order to achieve the criteria, they must achieve a range of measures such as meeting a full range of FE and HE providers and information about a broad range

of apprenticeships."

Today's CEC report shows that overall national performance towards all eight of the Gatsby benchmarks has doubled since 2016/17 – schools and colleges have moved from achieving 1.87 of them on average to 3.75 as of March 2020.

Progress is higher when looking only at schools and colleges in career hubs – they are achieving 4.8 of the target on average.

The other benchmarks that appear to be proving most difficult to meet include "a stable careers programme" and "addressing the needs of each student".

The CEC has come under fire in recent years from high-profile people in the sector such as education select committee chair Robert Halfon, who has accused the quango of making little progress in improving careers education in England despite receiving millions from the public purse.

The first 20 careers hubs, for example, launched in 2018 and were backed with £5 million, covering 710 schools and colleges. A further 19 opened or expanded in 2019 and were given with £2.5 million as the programme scaled up to cover 1,300 schools and colleges.

An additional 882 schools and colleges joined the programme in September 2020 backed with an extra £2 million.

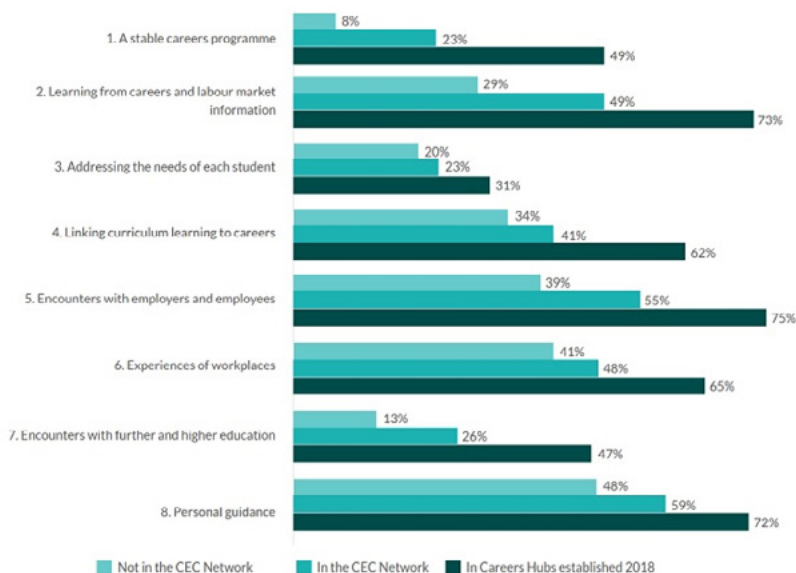
Figures obtained by *FE Week's* sister title *Schools Week* last year revealed that the CEC itself had received almost £100 million since launching in 2014 to boost provision.

Careers hubs comprise colleges working with local schools and universities, training providers, employers and career professionals to pool their expertise on improving careers education in their area.

They include a "hub lead" who works with school and college leaders to provide "strategic support" on their careers plan and access to business networks, as well their delivery against the Gatsby benchmarks.

A CEC spokesperson said: "The evidence shows performance on this measure is significantly better in CEC's careers hubs and network, proving that targeted investment has accelerated progress."

Percentage of schools and colleges fully achieving each of the Gatsby Benchmarks, March 2020 (N=3,296)



Colleges fear enrolment surge could see 20,000 sixth-formers go 'unfunded'

BILLY CAMDEN

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Around 20,000 "unfunded" 16-to-18-year-old students are studying in colleges this year following a surge in enrolments due to Covid-19, according to the Association of Colleges.

The membership body said that the number – caused by the Education and Skills Funding Agency basing college funding on lagged learner numbers – equates to around £120 million.

The analysis comes a week after the Institute for Fiscal Studies warned that because of FE's lagged funding system, exceptional rises in student numbers could generate a real-terms fall in funding per student this year despite FE's £400 million boost for 2020/21.

An AoC members' survey released this week found that nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of colleges have seen an increase in 16-to-18 enrolments while costs have soared to make campuses Covid-secure.

The association estimates that most (£225 million) of this year's £400 million funding boost has been absorbed by the additional costs that include personal protective equipment, cleaning, technology, transport and extra staff.

To make up for the unfunded learners and Covid-19 costs, the AoC has called on the government to reallocate unused apprenticeship funding to colleges.

The AoC says that apprenticeship starts have fallen 60 per cent in comparison to the levels seen during 2019, and for 16-to-18-year-olds, the drop is even greater, at 79 per cent.

The association claims that with many workplaces shut or unable to take on apprentices, the reduced numbers are likely to remain in 2021 and 2022.

However, the AoC could not say how much



David Hughes

it expects the apprenticeships budget to be underspent by, nor how they knew that there would be an underspend, considering the carry-over funding that has been building since the launch of the levy in 2017.

The government is also making a big push to increase apprenticeship starts post-pandemic, including new employer cash incentives that can see businesses receive £3,000 for taking on an apprentice aged 16 to 18 from August 2020 until January 31, 2021.

The DfE was approached for comment but did not say at the time of going to press whether it projects an apprenticeship underspend itself.

But, as FE Week revealed in July, £330 million of the 2019/20 apprenticeships budget was unspent and handed back to the Treasury.

In 2017/18 (the first year of the levy) around £300 million was surrendered. The DfE previously said it did not surrender an apprenticeships underspend in 2018/19.

Making the case for reallocating unused apprenticeship funding to colleges, AoC chief executive David Hughes said: "Sadly, many young people have not been able to secure the apprenticeship they want, so have turned to their local college to provide the training and education they know will help them when the

jobs market picks up.

"Colleges have welcomed them, designed study programmes to meet their specific needs and want to help them get ready for the future. Unfortunately, though, the funding system which works well in a stable world, is not designed for such big in-year growth. In many cases it means that colleges are supporting hundreds of unfunded learners at a time when Covid has already increased their costs and put pressure on their budgets."

He continued: "At no extra cost to Treasury, a redirection of unusable apprenticeship funds to colleges could help these young people pave a way to a promising future. We want this to be for the next two years, giving time for the labour market to pick up again and businesses to recover from the downturn. By which point thousands of young people will be work-ready and have the skills employers will need to get back on their feet."

While the ESFA's 16-to-19 funding system does have mechanisms to allow colleges to apply for in-year growth if they have a spike in student numbers, the AoC has previously pointed out that this is based on affordability.

Could an FE white paper signal government support to host the skills Olympics?

FRASER WHIELDON
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The much-anticipated FE white paper could provide impetus and galvanise support for a bid to host the international WorldSkills competition in the UK.

That's according to the chief executive of WorldSkills UK Neil Bentley-Gockmann, who spoke to *FE Week* on the first day of the organisation's International Skills Summit, which took place on Wednesday and Thursday.

He announced in January, before Covid-19 engulfed the UK, that his organisation was interested in exploring bidding to host the competition. This triggered an enormous sector response, spearheaded by *FE Week's* Back A Bid campaign, and led to education secretary Gavin Williamson calling for the sector to support the idea.

Asked today whether he thought the FE white paper, expected to introduce major reforms to the sector, would help remind people of the bid and attract support to it, Bentley-Gockmann said: "Yes it would. I think it would have a galvanising effect and would provide impetus to really get some detailed conversations going about



feasibility."

He said hosting would be a "massive undertaking," but "now is the opportunity to be thinking ambitiously, now is the time to be thinking ahead and about the legacy from the white paper.

"Now is the time to be thinking for the medium- and long-term and sending a really strong signal that the UK is interested in hosting WorldSkills as part of that ambitious strategy.

"It would be a great opportunity for the country, the skills systems, and more importantly, a great opportunity for the next generation."

At the summit, education select committee chair Robert Halfon and former skills minister Anne Milton both voiced their support for a bid.

Speaking with Shane Mann, managing director of *FE Week* publisher Lsect, Halfon called the idea a "no brainer", while Milton said she would lobby for it, as would a "queue" of skills ministers and education select committee chairs.

They join a string of other figures from the education sector who have backed bidding, including Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman, broadcaster Steph McGovern, Pearson's senior vice president for BTEC and apprenticeships Cindy

Rampersaud, and numerous college principals.

Because of the pandemic, every future WorldSkills competition has been put back a year, including the next two, in China and France. For this reason, competition organisers WorldSkills International (WSI) have yet to reveal when countries can bid to host a tournament.

"Now is the time to be thinking for the medium- and long-term"

Former WSI president Simon Bartley told *FE Week* in January the UK would have had to put in a bid five years before the competition they wished to host.

Any UK bid would be subject to a feasibility study, which would include discussions around cost and where in the UK the competition would be located.

Bentley-Gockmann said he did meet Williamson in March to discuss an ambition to host but there has been "no movement" on the bid since earlier this year due to Covid-19.



Neil Bentley-Gockmann



Further Education Commissioner

The role of Further Education Commissioner was created in 2013 as an independent adviser to ministers at the Department for Education (DfE). The FE Commissioner, working closely with colleagues in the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) supports improvement in our national network of further education and sixth form colleges, as well as working with local authorities, specialist designated institutions and other organisations to deliver high quality outcomes for learners, and to meet local economic need.

As FE Commissioner, you will take a key role in working with colleges to improve the quality of education for learners, strengthen financial resilience, improve the quality of leadership and reduce the risk of colleges requiring interventions. You will do so as an integrated part of the DfE's overall approach to intervention, within the context of the ESFA case management approach. As such you will work closely with key teams within ESFA, as well as the wider DfE, Ofsted and broader partners within the sector.

Successful candidates for this position will be or will have very recently been an FE sector leader with a national profile and an outstanding track record of college leadership or leadership of major organisations within the sector. You will have generated improvement, including financial improvement, across the sector by working with other colleges and providers. You will have exceptional communication skills and the ability to work with, influence, persuade and engage stakeholders at the highest levels. You will also have the ability to lead a team of highly experienced FE professionals. Remuneration will be £135,000 per annum, for a four day week.

Closing Date: 11am on Friday 20 November.

How to apply: Please visit bit.ly/FE_Commissioner to download a candidate pack

Interviews will take place virtually on Monday 18th January and you will need to make yourself available for this date.



Further Education Advisers – Further Education Commissioner Team

Further Education Advisers form a key part of the team of FE experts who work with the FE Commissioner, a role created in 2013 as an independent adviser to ministers at the Department for Education (DfE). FE Advisers are generally either finance or curriculum and quality specialists and we are looking for outstanding candidates from both backgrounds to help grow our team.

As an FE Adviser, you will support colleges through carrying out Diagnostic Assessments, to help them improve the quality of education, strengthen financial resilience, improve the quality of leadership and reduce the risk of interventions. You will undertake interventions when serious weaknesses and risk of failure have been identified and make recommendations to secure improvement. Your work will help to determine the best way FE can be delivered in any given area.

You will work as part of the DfE's overall approach to intervention, within the context of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) case management approach, working with teams within the ESFA, as well as the wider DfE and Ofsted.

We want you to apply for this post if you can show you can lead and influence complex change within an educational context, including developing and implementing quality and improvement and finance strategies. You will have outstanding analytical, written and verbal communication skills, including the ability to write clear, concise reports. You will be able to influence, persuade and engage stakeholders, demonstrating excellent management and interpersonal skills. You will be able to show you can work effectively with ministers, civil servants, college leaders and other stakeholders. If you are a finance specialist, you will have a chartered accountancy qualification and will be able to demonstrate extensive senior level experience of managing college finances successfully.

Closing Date: 11am Wednesday 2 December 2020.

How to apply: Please visit https://bit.ly/FE_Adviser to download a candidate pack.

Interviews will take place virtually on 12, 13 and 21 January and you will need to make yourself available for these dates.

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Closing Date: 14 December 2020

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You should be educated to degree level or hold an equivalent professional qualification. While having extensive Finance and Business Support Management experience at a senior level in a further education and/or land-based college, alongside this experience of delivering large capital projects is advantageous at a Senior Level.

A good understanding of effective curriculum planning and business planning, in support of this excellent leadership and management skills would be advantageous.

Assessment and Interview days will be held on the 2nd & 3rd December 2020

The College is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and vulnerable adults and expects all staff and volunteers to share this commitment.

Please visit East Durham College website to complete the online application form.
www.eastdurham.ac.uk

Closing date: 15th November 2020

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Introducing...

JOHN LARAMY

Principal and CEO,
Exeter College

**'You can't build a system
where the plumbing teacher
is paid less than the plumber'**

JL DUTAUT
JL.DUTAUT@FEWEEK.CO.UK

**JL Dutaut meets a principal who is ideally
placed to talk about building back better**

Exeter College has become a magnet for the government. Just over a year ago, Gavin Williamson visited to talk about T levels. He was back again in June, this time virtually, and six weeks ago it was the prime minister's turn – not

just for a photo op, but to deliver a major policy speech on the future of the sector.

Modestly, its principal, John Laramy, says he doesn't "quite know how it how it came about. Somebody somewhere obviously said 'Exeter College seem to be doing an OK job', and off the back of that they came for a visit."

In truth, it's no surprise at all. The first general further education college in England, founded in 1869, Exeter College was crowned best college in the country by FE Week two years running in 2016 and 2017 and hasn't been out of the top five

(of 172) in the past four years. It's been Ofsted 'good' since 2008 and 'outstanding' since 2014.

Laramy, who will mark 12 years at the college this January, having joined as vice principal in January 2009, has been in its top job for nearly five of those. And one of the features of Johnson's speech really resonated with him: "Now is the time to end this bogus distinction between FE and HE," he exclaimed.

That point alone made Exeter the ideal location for delivering that speech. As Laramy explains: "One of the things we benefit from in

Profile

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Exeter is how the schools, the college and the university all work together. It's not about competing, it's about collaborating. And because of that, Exeter scores really well on stats like productivity, and it's got very low levels of unemployment in normal times. I don't think it's an accident."

"Particularly in technical areas, you need to match market pay"

Given the economic pressures facing the country, it's obvious why a recipe with such hearty results is particularly politically palatable. But there are many more reasons why the town and its college exemplify so well the government's vision for education. Exeter College's apprenticeships provision is noteworthy. Its collaboration with the University of Exeter extends to their co-running of Exeter Maths School – a darling project of this government, which Williamson has pledged would eventually reach every region. It has embraced T levels as one of its early adopters. And its facilities are second to none. But it has also been held back by disinvestment.

"We need to invest in skills, and we need

to invest in FE," said Johnson on his visit, after beaming about spending a part of the morning sampling Exeter's "awesome" facilities with the students. "Let us begin by admitting that part of the problem is that not every FE college is as superb as Exeter College."

But the truth is that not even every part of Exeter College is as "awesome" as the one he visited. And leaky ceilings are a characteristic understatement by the PM of the problems facing the college estate nationally.

In its last report, Ofsted called Exeter College's facilities "exceptional", but among its many sites around the town the one that could be expected to be its showpiece – the Hele Road town centre site, whose tower block, built in 1963, is the third tallest building in town – is increasingly inoperable. It will cost an estimated £70 million to knock it down and build new accommodation. "The legacy accommodation is one of my top challenges at the minute. This year, we're hiring three rooms – meeting rooms in a hotel – because Exeter College isn't able to accommodate all the students who want to study here."

Despite the funding announcement, there is little clarity about how it will be allocated and what the expected standards will be.



John (far right) with the current Head Teachers from all of the Exeter Schools Partnership

But the college's need is so great that it can't afford to wait. "I'm quite hopeful," says Laramy, "but we've taken quite a risk by developing quite a detailed plan without the funding to support the build."

And that's not all. "My second biggest challenge is the funding reductions that we've seen over the past ten years. It has slightly improved this year. But it's still not a point where, you know, we don't want to employ OK teachers, we want to employ brilliant teachers. And for that, particularly the technical areas, you need to match what the market pays for things like engineering, aerospace, construction and digital programming."

Given these acute challenges, Laramy's past makes him a conspicuously serendipitous appointment. For starters, he's from Devon and has only left the area for a year to do his PGCE at the University of Greenwich. "That was my year in the big smoke," he muses. He was raised as an only child on the family's farm, which kept both of his parents occupied. The family no longer own the farm, but his memory of it is rather idyllic.

And he might still be there today, were it not that he was unable to start working there at 16. Instead, he joined the construction industry. Every leader I've interviewed manages to find a link between their previous career and education – some more tenuous than others. In Laramy's case, ten years in construction is apposite. It may well explain the trust that Exeter's governing body has placed in his strategy of developing plans for a major re-development "on spec".

Yet his practical knowledge isn't the



John as a child with his parents, in 1975

Profile

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aspect of the industry he himself singles out as relevant. "Construction is a people business. It's about getting a team to coalesce around a vision of what you want to achieve. You could be the best construction manager in the country, but if the painters the plumbers, the carpenters, the bricklayers aren't great, trained professionals, you won't get a great building. I can be the best leader in the country, but if the teachers at the college aren't brilliant, the students won't get a great experience." So with his BSc in construction management, when it comes to that second challenge of recruiting and retaining excellent teachers, it looks like he is well qualified too.

"Exeter College can't accommodate all the students who want to study here"

It won't hurt either that he is highly personable. Of his school experience, he offers only that "I was the kid who had in all my school reports 'John's bright but can't be bothered'" – testament perhaps to being a "people person" from the start, but testament also to an upbringing that valued practical

work at least as much as its academic counterpart. Of pressure to go to university, for example, he says: "Honestly, it wasn't part of my upbringing."

In many ways, his experience confirms the line the prime minister seems to be following with his education strategy. Laramy holds a HNC in construction – from Exeter College, no less – as well as his "foreman's book", but also his BSc and a master's in educational leadership, not to mention his teaching qualification. "I've benefited because I've had the university experience but I've done those part time," he says.

He has worked throughout, accumulating knowledge and experiences of a practical and academic nature simultaneously. A karate enthusiast, he discovered through the marital art that he enjoyed teaching the younger members. "And then at 26 I just thought, actually, I could do this for ever or I could do something different. I've tried to have the ethos that you don't regret things you've done, only the things



John with his wife and children

you haven't done." So he sold his sports car – a Volkswagen Corrado – and invested the proceeds in teacher training. His first job came at North Devon College (now part of PETROC), where he stayed a decade, eventually becoming its head of curriculum.

In essence, Laramy's career gives the lie to more than the "bogus" distinction between FE and HE. It shows that the idea of a linear progression, a single-track or single-industry career, is also suspect. But so is flexibility without foundations. A sense of place and a sense of agency and direction also matter.

So much for the individual, but as Laramy makes clear – no doubt based on his construction experience here too – you get what you pay for. That goes for buildings, and it goes for staffing them too. "You can't build a system where the plumbing teacher is paid less than the plumber," he tells me.

Even with greater investment, there are limits to modelling a national policy on Exeter. Laramy is right to praise the collaboration between education institutions in the town, but it's hard to envisage how that could translate to larger conurbations where students have a choice of multiple FE providers. Collaboration means something very different to The Manchester College principal, Lisa O'loughlin, for example.

One thing's for certain though: when it comes to building back better, the government have chosen the right place and the right person to visit for advice.



John with Boris Johnson



Submission deadline:
FRIDAY, 18 DECEMBER

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STUART
RIMMER

Chief executive,
East Coast
College



We should name, but not shame, the colleges that are getting bailouts

The sector is shooting itself in the foot if we don't argue that colleges getting financial help should be transparently listed, writes Stuart Rimmer

Should the names of colleges getting bailouts be made public? Well, the simple answer to that simple question is – yes! Of course they should.

Towards the end of last month, details of the revised college oversight policy were amended. We were told colleges that apply for government bailouts will now not automatically fall into formal intervention, although it is unclear why.

That, of course, means their names won't be published online. Here's why that's a bad idea...

1. Values

This is the most compelling reason to publish college names. Simply put, public funds should be a matter of public record. Earlier in the year *FE Week* calculated that £725.8 million has been spent on bailouts and restructuring funding, based on National Audit Office figures. This is not just loose change down the back of the sofa. We cannot just ignore it because it may cause embarrassment.

2. Funding

The size of bailouts is not always reflective of poor management, as some would try to make us believe. Actually, it often points

to chronic underfunding of our sector.

Colleges under intervention rose by two-thirds in 2018-19. Meg Hillier, chair of the influential commons public accounts committee, recently said this situation "paints a stark picture of the college sector's plight".

The scale of intervention and bailouts needs to be known in order to form part of the evidence base for colleges to argue for greater funding.

3. Institutional equity

At East Coast College I led one of the first deals in 2017, through the ESFA's fledgling Transaction Unit, latterly the Provider Market Oversight (PMO), which leads on college financial health in high-risk and complex cases. While I'm not allowed under disclosure to talk directly about it, I can say that we got a weak deal in comparison to many "fresh start" colleges that followed, as the system became more

sophisticated, knowledgeable and generous.

If deals for bailout funding are now permitted behind closed doors – with colleges and agencies hiding behind the nonsense "commercial sensitivity" argument – then the system is not transparent about whether it is treating everyone who passes through it fairly. More importantly, the situation leaves the power dynamic resting unhelpfully with the centre.

4. Institutions, not individuals

One of the big problems with the dialogue around bailout is that individuals often get stigmatised. This must stop. We need to shift the narrative towards "how can we help a college in need?". As of February 2020, the government was intervening in 48 per cent of all open colleges – with more than one-tenth in formal intervention. This is clearly not an individual personality issue.

5. Flattered accounts

Bailouts flatter financial performance reporting. It is a huge injection of cash that can reduce debt gearing, increase cash holding and improve performance ratios, such as earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA). Not being transparent about them can stifle the public's understanding of how a college is really performing.

6. Details, details, details

More contentiously, I think that not only should the bailout figure be made public but also how it is spent. Currently this relies on freedom of information requests and journalistic wrangling.

We should know: is the bailout used to reduce debt and create long-term sustainability and drive rapid improvement of student experience? Or is it spent to excess on consultant fees servicing the various machineries of intervention?



The vast majority of colleges spend bailouts wisely. Good consultants no doubt can add huge value, but the rise of ameliorating banks and reporting back to the centre means too many pound notes flutter away from the sector. We should at least start to be honest about this.

Less backstairs intrigue should make the jobs of the ESFA, Project Management Office and FE Commissioner office easier too. So win, win, win, win.

SIMON PARKINSON

Chief executive
and general
secretary, WEA



The government must consult on a detailed plan for the national skills fund

There are now more questions than answers about the national skills fund, writes Simon Parkinson

The WEA gave a cautious welcome to the news that the national retraining scheme would be integrated into the new “national skills fund”

As many of you will remember, the national retraining scheme pilot was announced to much fanfare in the 2017 budget with the backing of £100 million, of which the Get Help to Retrain website was one product.

Then in early April, the Department for Education cancelled all national retraining scheme tender activities for all products, and about a month ago the skills minister, Gillian Keegan, announced the scheme was to be “integrated” into the national skills fund, with “learnings” from the retraining scheme carried forward.

It seemed to make sense – why have two streams when there could be one?

There is certainly scope for simplifying education funding. As a national organisation delivering courses locally, the WEA receives funding from a bewildering array of streams, both central and devolved.

That creates administrative costs for us. More importantly, it sometimes leads to students in one part of the country being able to access a very different range of courses to those elsewhere



– as determined by the funding available.

But the lack of detail on what the national skills fund would include has now begun to raise more questions than answers. There is a lack of clarity on how the funding from the national retraining scheme “pot” will be incorporated into the new fund. We found out some of the cash would be returned to the Treasury, although we still don’t know how much exactly.

Worse still, the national skills fund became the rationale for the closure of the Union Learning Fund. This was set up in 1988, was worth around £11 million a year, and was supporting around 250,000 workers a year to access learning.

When the need for retraining and reskilling is paramount, this feels like a big mistake. It is difficult to see how a new programme could match the well-established confidence that workplace learners have in Unionlearn.

In parliament, Gavin

Williamson also made clear that the national skills fund would be just that – entirely national.

So where does this leave the mayoral combined authorities that still hold the purse strings on much of the adult education budget? How will the national skills fund complement the investment flowing through the regions?

“The national skills fund can’t be a hasty sticking plaster”

Perhaps we are being impatient. Around the corner are a spending review, FE white paper and (one assumes) some consultation on the direction of the national skills fund.

The nation is about to enter one of the toughest economic periods in history, with some predicting unemployment rates at similar levels to the 1980s.

The prime minister has made some stirring announcements about the importance of adult learning. Now is the time to add detail to those statements by releasing a plan – for consultation – on the national skills fund.

We appreciate that the government must move quickly in order to bring the new level 3 entitlement in by April as promised.

Welcome though that is, it’s clear that investment in the non-accredited courses and lower level qualifications is also very much needed.

These courses and qualifications often act as necessary stepping-stones towards level 3 qualifications. Not everyone is ready to go straight into a qualification, especially if they have had a negative experience in education previously, or they’ve been out of it for many years.

We also believe that there should be maximum flexibility in the courses available. Essential skills such as critical thinking, communication skills and resilience can all be gained through many different forms of education, not only the narrowly technical and vocational routes.

We at WEA would also point to the importance of adult learning in workplaces and community venues, as well as colleges.

The national skills fund ought to be pragmatic in the short term, but with a clear direction of travel. It can’t be a hasty sticking plaster.

JOHN
COPE

Director of strategy,
policy and public
affairs, UCAS



Reforming admissions offers opportunity to achieve parity between HE, FE and apprenticeships

A plan of action by UCAS could significantly level the playing field for HE, FE and apprenticeships, writes John Cope

UCAS has called this week for serious consideration of changing the way we do higher education admissions, with Universities UK also publishing the conclusion of their Fair Admissions Review today. This comes off the back of a welcome manifesto commitment from the government to consider admissions reform.

As with most debates in education, though, the focus will inevitably be on undergraduate degrees and universities. We saw this with the publication of the Augar Review, with most reaction obsessing about recommendations on tuition fees, but overlooking the important proposals on adult education, higher technical qualification, and colleges.

“Most forget that the “C” in UCAS stands for colleges”

While publications like FE Week do a good job balancing the debate, all of us need to play our part. And yes, that must include UCAS. I've no doubt that if you ask most people what UCAS does, the answer will normally be “the university admissions service, right?”. Most will forget that the

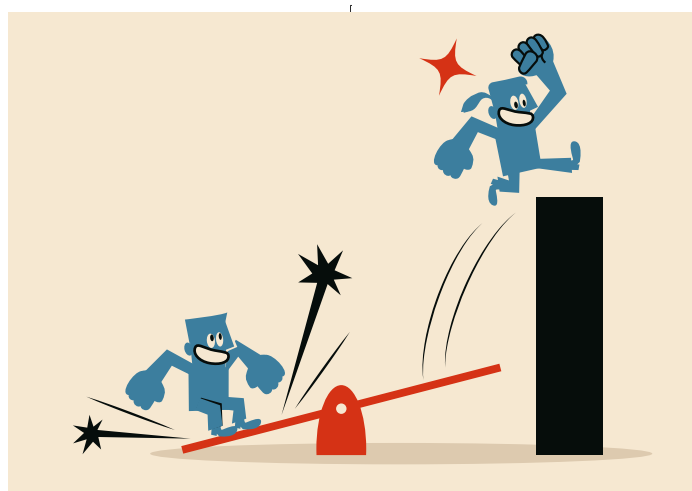
“C” stands for colleges – and that universities increasingly use UCAS to advertise their apprenticeships.

This perception needs to change – although interestingly around half of those surveyed currently filling out their UCAS application for next year have told us they're interested in apprenticeship options.

As well as shifting perception, UCAS needs to overhaul our own systems and processes which, if we are honest with ourselves, are still designed to support three-year undergraduate degrees. We will be setting out plans on how we expand to better support wider choice in the coming months.

These plans will only work, however, if the UK's application and admissions system is set up in the best way. This is especially relevant for FE and higher technical qualifications, meaning admissions reform offers an important opportunity. Colleges and independent providers need to take it seriously and make sure their voice is heard, especially if there is a consultation.

At the root of admissions reform will be addressing the fact we currently ask people to write their application, choose their courses, and narrow down their options to just two choices based on predicted grades, rather than actual results. It also means that there's an unhelpful split between academic and technical results days. As a result, life-changing decisions can be made



on imperfect information and with the potential next steps in education or training fragmented.

At UCAS, we have been looking closely at potential options for reform. While there are several being contemplated, one in particular stands out for serious consideration in our view and is the option that would likely work best for FE. This model of post-qualification admissions keeps the application writing and research pre-results but would move course offers by universities and colleges so they are made only on actual grades – this avoids the January start model. The reason that this could work better for FE is that it creates an opportunity to combine academic and technical results day, as well as create a new “offer window” where universities, colleges and others could make offers to applicants all at once – whether this window is a day or a few weeks is up for debate. UCAS

would also be able to meaningfully integrate apprenticeship options into this window.

This model, if done in the way described, would mean applicants who have done A-levels, an applied general, or a T Level would be able to choose from the full range of next steps at the same time.

I'm not going to pretend this change would be a silver bullet or is enough on its own – it's not. It could, however, significantly level the playing field and open the door to further changes UCAS and others could make to achieve genuine parity between HE, FE, and apprenticeships.

What is most critical is that any reform of higher education admissions includes voices from FE colleges, independent providers and the whole skills sector. It is an important opportunity and shouldn't be viewed as just relevant to higher education.

CHRIS
QUICKFALLChief executive,
CognassistApprenticeship providers are
short-changing themselves
on reasonable adjustments

Providers are stuck in a vicious cycle of ignorance and avoidance that frustrates both learners and Ofsted, writes Chris Quickfall

If apprenticeship providers were offered a way to reduce dropout rates, improve the learner experience, satisfy Ofsted and were paid to do so, it would be reasonable to assume that most would jump at the chance.

What, after all, is not to like?

Yet when it comes to making and claiming for reasonable adjustments (RAs) to support apprentices with learning needs, there are those providers that still fail to do so.

The question is, why?

For some providers it's a case of "once bitten, twice shy".

There's a wariness about making claims for learning support funding that require more evidence, partly because of the perceived admin burden. But it can also be because they've had trouble in the past justifying additional payments to auditors. So they are disinclined to put themselves through it again.

That's despite the fact that by not providing the support learners need, providers run the much greater risk of being criticised by Ofsted.

At first glance, too, the challenge can seem daunting. Each apprentice is in a different working environment and programmes are strictly controlled in terms of content, timescales and employer involvement.

Creating individual plans and



making the necessary learner adjustments isn't straightforward without the right experts behind them, and the onus is on the training provider to explain to the employer how they would work.

Most employers, in my experience, are positive and responsive – but the provider must still manage the process, and that can be off-putting for some.

Many providers are also under the impression that any learning difficulties will be spotted because they already conduct assessments for English and maths.

Unfortunately, this is a pretty imprecise metric.

There is a common assumption, for instance, that if an apprentice is bright they won't have any learning difficulties. That's simply not true. I'd argue the smarter a learner, the less chance an educator has of spotting any need without a cognitive assessment.

Finally, self-identification can itself obscure the problem rather than illuminate it.

Yes, one in ten apprentices self-

identify with a learning difficulty or disability. But research by Cognassist last month suggests that this is the tip of the iceberg – over one-third of apprentices have a learning difficulty that could require additional support.

“Providers aren't fully aware of how great the problem is”

All of which suggests that the issue of unidentified learning difficulties and disabilities is much greater than generally thought.

It then becomes a vicious cycle. Providers aren't fully aware of how great the problem is, they lack a full understanding of what adjustments can be made, the learner experience suffers, Ofsted isn't happy, dropout rates rise and employer satisfaction falls.

And all this happens as providers are missing out on an estimated £22 million in extra learning

support funds.

It doesn't have to be this way. Our work with Bradford College demonstrates that achievement rates can improve by at least ten per cent with a more robust cognitive assessment process embedded in the learner journey.

If providers develop a better understanding of the adjustments that can be made and make them, then programmes will be much more tailored to individuals' needs, achievement rates will go up, dropout rates will fall and funding will increase. And that's even before any additional learning support payments.

There's one last, key area that many providers are missing out on when it comes to providing appropriate support, and that's reasonable adjustments at the end-point assessment (EPA).

The EPA is a vital part of the learner journey and therefore it's crucial that any reasonable adjustment needed by the learner is implemented.

All of this requires providers to adopt more flexible and robust assessments and to raise the level of awareness of learning difficulties among trainers and management.

Only then will they have the confidence to make the adjustments needed and deliver more flexible programmes.

But as things stand, those providers lacking such a strategy are not only failing to address the needs of their learners, they are also short-changing themselves.



READER'S REPLY

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Ofsted 'visits' to go online during national lockdown

Ofsted interim visits seem largely a waste of time to me and the subsequent reports are very thin and not of much use to anyone really. How great it would have been to be able to read about specific areas of good practice in detail from the colleges and providers visited – so much more useful to the sector. There is no doubt providers enjoy talking to inspectors in a non-threatening environment as opposed to an inspection, but it seems like a real lost opportunity for Ofsted to provide so much more value for money in these strange times.

Richard Moore, website

Large redundancies planned at college that took over Hadlow Group campuses

This is what happens when leaders are poor and governance is ineffective – hard-working people lose their jobs. It's happening so many times.

David, website

Profile: Lisa O'loughlin

Brilliant from regional skills and education leader Lisa. Greater Manchester is exemplary model of collaboration. But the uneven playing field – significantly exacerbated by Covid – needs so much more if regions and

REPLY OF THE WEEK

Lockdown letdown: union slams decision not to close colleges



Glad we stayed open at my college to continue to allow our learners some normality and to progress. The prolonged closure of my department from March to July caused chaos for our adult learners, who were unable to complete. In my department we are able to socially distance, plus staff can wear PPE. There are some staff who are apprehensive, but also there are lots who are comfortable continuing to teach with the precautions taken.

Jonathan Thompson, website

communities are to #levelup

Coral Grainger, Twitter



Great article, Lisa. Your passion for providing quality education and training shines through. The Manchester College is lucky to have someone with passion and drive to make a difference.

Liz Jacques, Twitter

Revealed: the number of bids in ESFA's traineeships tender



The tender was not straightforward (highlighted by the significant Q&A responses), it had additional requirements, e.g. Cyber Essentials (or equivalent) in a relatively short time period... I'm not surprised by the lower than anticipated response.

Graham Howe, Twitter

Bulletin

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Movers & Shakers

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



Oli de Botton

Chief executive,
The Careers and
Enterprise Company

Start date Early 2021

Current job

Headteacher, School 21

Interesting fact

He once, inadvertently, shared an open mic stage with Ed Sheeran



Trudy Norris-Grey

Chair, UCAS board
of trustees

Start date December 2020

Current job

Chair, WISE Campaign

Interesting fact

A trip to Saladin's castle in Syria was interrupted when a van load of armed militia took them away and advised them to leave - war broke out two days later



Rebecca Conroy

Chief executive,
East Sussex
College Group

Start date October 2020

Previous Job

Principal, East Sussex College,
Eastbourne campus

Interesting Fact

During the first lockdown, she took up sea swimming

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