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'DEEPLY CONCERNING'

- Minister's Skills Toolkit figures prove inaccurate, admits DfE
- Official 'course registration' data still counting web hits
- No learner record required for 39 of the 79 online courses
- DfE refuses to say who was paid £1m to develop 'platform'

EXCLUSIVE

Pages 7-8

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Outrage as AoC recommends 1% college staff pay rise



Page 16



Profile: David Phoenix:
Chief executive, London
South Bank University Group

Pages 23-25



Advance notice of exam topics comes with problems too

Page 26



This is why we should delay the white paper even longer

Page 27

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Revealed: The government's plans for 2021 summer exams and assessments

FRASER WHIELDON
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GCSE and A-level students sitting exams next year will be given more generous grading, advance notice of some topics and "exam aids" owing to the disruption caused by Covid-19.

They will also be offered a "second chance" to sit papers if they miss any through illness or self-isolation and in "extreme cases" where a student has a "legitimate reason" to miss all their exams, a "teacher-informed assessment" can be used as a last resort.

The package of measures was announced by the Department for Education and Ofqual this week in their efforts to "boost fairness" in recognition of the "unprecedented disruption" to students' learning.

Education secretary Gavin Williamson said he hopes these "exceptional steps" will give young people the "clarity and confidence they need to achieve every success".

Sector leaders agreed that the flexibilities "will make things fairer" but called for "urgency" over the final details after the government said full plans will not be set out until the new year.

On top of the three-week delay to GCSE and A-level exams previously announced by government, more generous grading will be provided



Gavin Williamson

"in line with national outcomes from 2020, so students this year are not disadvantaged".

Under this system, every subject will "receive the same level of generosity so that the approach doesn't advantage some students over others, depending on their subject choice".

"Exam aids", such as formula or vocabulary sheets, will also be provided for use in "some exams" – but it is not expected students will be allowed to bring passages of text in with them.

It is not clear at this stage which aids will be permitted for each subject or what FE-based courses will be included.

Students will also be able to focus their revision with advance notice of certain topics which will be covered in GCSEs, AS and A-levels; and additional exam papers are being scheduled in the event a student misses exams or assessments due to illness or the need to self-isolate.

If a student misses all their assessments in a subject, they will have the opportunity to sit a "contingency paper" held shortly after the main exams.

In the "extreme case" where a student has a "legitimate reason to miss all their papers", then a "validated teacher-informed assessment can be used, only once all chances to sit an exam have passed".

An expert advisory group will also be assembled to "monitor the variation

in the impact of the pandemic on students across the country".

And while the government will still publish data from the 2021 exam series for schools and post-16 providers, they will not publish the normal ranked performance tables with school and college-level data. This includes not publishing qualification achievement rates (see page 10).

Chief executive of the Association of Colleges, David Hughes, said there is "no simple solution which the government could implement to ensure that exams are fair for everyone in 2021, but the range of adaptations announced today will help make things fairer".

He added that there is an "urgency on this" because over 50,000 students will sit BTEC and other technical exams in January and "all students want certainty about how assessments and grades will be carried out as soon as possible".

Bill Watkin, chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, added that the plans introduce "some welcome flexibilities" but he remains "concerned about the differential impact that Covid has had on young people in different parts of the country".

Ofqual published research on Thursday that found the gap in learning loss across different regions is "one of the most intractable issues" and any potential solutions are "fraught with difficulty".

WHAT ABOUT VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL ASSESSMENTS?

Ofqual announced in September that awarding bodies will be given the freedom to adapt their assessment arrangements for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) on a case-by-case basis to mitigate any impact of the pandemic throughout 2020/21.

In the House of Commons on Thursday, Williamson said the exams regulator will work with awarding organisations to also "ensure that vocational and technical

students benefit from the same generous approach" that is being applied to GCSE and A-level students.

Ofqual said it was now encouraging exam boards to make "full use" of the regulatory flexibility now available to them where appropriate.

"Where vocational, technical and other general qualifications have similar structures as GCSEs, AS and A-levels and

the same progression routes into higher and further education or into work, many of the measures will be appropriate; for other qualifications, different adaptations will be suitable."

Ofqual added that it has already seen a range of adaptations put in place for VTQs, including the "use of remote invigilation or assessment, extended assessment windows and increased assessment opportunities".

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'Really troubling': Minister's 'skills toolkit' figures prove inaccurate

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From front

Exclusive

The government has been urged to withdraw claims made in parliament about the take-up of the courses on its new "skills toolkit" after *FE Week* started asking questions about the figures.

Significant over-counting has already led to revised estimates, and an investigation by this publication has found "course start" and "registration" claims in official statistics will continue to include web hits.

Despite this, education secretary Gavin Williamson described the free online courses as having a "transformational impact on so many people taking furlough" during a speech in October.

The course content has not been developed by the government, but more than £1 million has been spent to develop and promote the skills toolkit "platform", which consists of a web page on the National Careers Service with short course descriptions and links to the external websites.

The government says the educational content being promoted aims to help people who are out of work to boost their digital and numeracy skills during the pandemic.

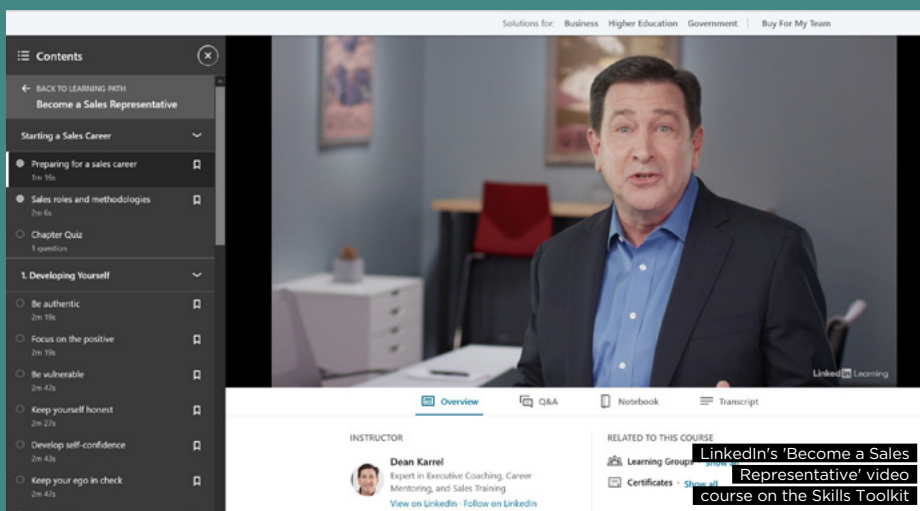
However, little is known about who is accessing the content or whether they are completing the course, as almost half of the 79 available online courses require no registration.

Skills minister Gillian Keegan has publicly claimed these are "high-quality" courses but a former director of FE funding in the DfE, Susan Pember, questioned how this can be known in the absence of learner and completion data.

Many of the courses are simply short video tutorials or PDF documents that people can stop and start with no tuition and no external quality assurance from the likes of Ofqual and Ofsted.

Pember told *FE Week* she would advise ministers to be "cautious" as "website hits or even signatures on enrolment forms do not equate to learning taking place".

The department has already had to row back



on claims that 136,000 people started on the courses in the toolkit's first month of operation but there are currently other incorrect records, including answers from Keegan to parliamentary questions (PQ) tabled by shadow chancellor Anneliese Dodds.

On October 5 the minister told Dodds that as of September 30, there had been 97,615 "course starts" and 16,219 "completions".

In a separate PQ two weeks later Keegan said that as of October 4 there had been 118,011 "course starts" and 19,564 "completions".

When *FE Week* asked if it was true there had been almost 20,000 additional starts on courses on the toolkit in that four-day period, the DfE admitted they could not confirm.

A spokesperson said the information was the "best data available to us at the time of response" but it has since identified "issues" with a number of courses that it was "working to resolve". They added that the DfE will "update the answers as appropriate, once the examination has completed".

Dodds, the Labour MP for Oxford East, told *FE Week* it was "really troubling" that government appears to have no idea how many people have registered for the skills toolkit courses and that it is "incumbent on them" to correct the parliamentary record.

She said she was also "deeply concerned" that the DfE has spent over £1 million on the resource "without knowing how it's

performing", which raises "major questions about the government's ability to get a grip on the jobs crisis that's engulfing Britain".

Pember, who worked as a top government skills official from 2000 to 2013 and is now the policy director of adult education network HOLEX, said that in order to "protect the reputation of FE" the courses need to go through the "same rigorous process as everyone else", which includes audit and regulatory oversight.

She explained that after the individual learning accounts debacle in the early 2000s, it was "understood that we needed really good-quality criteria for FE courses – that is when you get your standards written, Ofqual and Ofsted involved" to ensure "good experiences for learners" and "good value for public money".

FE Week's analysis of the courses on the skills toolkit, offered by 14 providers which are mostly commercial businesses, shows that their duration can range from 25 minutes to 70 hours.

Just two of the 79 involve guidance from a live tutor. Almost all of them, 69, can include certification but only if the person registers for the course. Registration is, however, not required to view and use the content for 39 of them.

Examples include "Become a Sales

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Representative" from LinkedIn – a series of 25 short videos from a sales expert that allows you to download a certificate of completion at the end, with no testing.

Another is "Make It Click", provided by the Good Things Foundation, which is a web page that directs visitors to other web pages, such as "A Beginners' Guide to Excel" on YouTube.

Three of the providers that do not require registrations told *FE Week* they use unique URL data to capture the numbers of participants and then relay that information to the DfE to measure "starts".

After being presented with the *FE Week*'s findings, the DfE said it was "in the process of developing an assured standardised system for collating data from different course providers".

When asked how they know the courses have had a "transformational impact" and are "high quality", as claimed by ministers Williamson and Keegan respectively, a spokesperson added: "The skills toolkit is a successful platform, delivering good value for money, which has encouraged tens of thousands of people to undertake online learning in courses that are valued by employers.

"It plays an important role in packaging up courses that are both free, high quality, and which people can access from home at this difficult time. We are reliant on providers for estimates of registrations and we continue to work with providers on improving this process further."

Pember urged DfE to get a grip on the data: "We collect registration or enrolment data because that is the beginning of a performance pathway that allows you to

monitor retention, completion and then how many people achieve.

"Without registration data you can't do any of the rest and you can't monitor whether that particular pathway for doing a subject is as good or better than the ones the state is already funding."

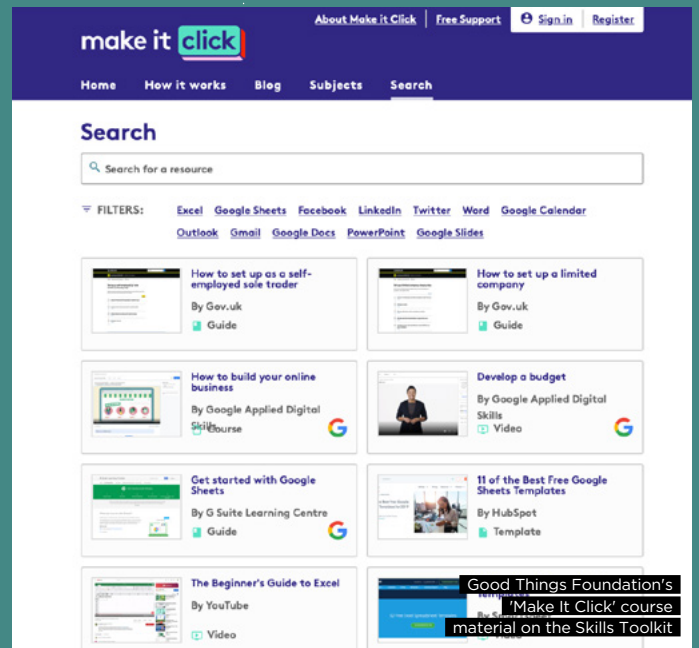
She said the next questions DfE should be asking are how many learners have completed and been offered qualifications at the end. "Why treat those people taking the courses differently to other funded courses?"

"I'm sure every provider in the land would like to be monitored just on registration – it makes it so much easier for people. So it seems there is an element of unfairness around it.

"Other providers are wondering why there are now a set of very low benchmark rules for the stuff on the skills toolkit and a very high set of benchmarks for them."

Having herself looked through the skills toolkit courses, Pember there is content that she "quite likes" but also found some worrying examples. "Take maths, for example – one of the courses says it is for level 1 learners, but the language around it is graduate level.

"Many people with level 1 maths also usually have level 1 English, so they're not going to get



past the first screen," she said, adding that it could "demoralise" vulnerable people who in turn would be "lost to the system".

In terms of costs for the skills toolkit, almost £800,000 has been given to a firm that the DfE refuses to name to carry out "user research and testing, IT security testing, content and user experience design, software development and performance testing". Just over £325,000 has also been earmarked for advertising, such as paid-for social media on Twitter and Facebook.

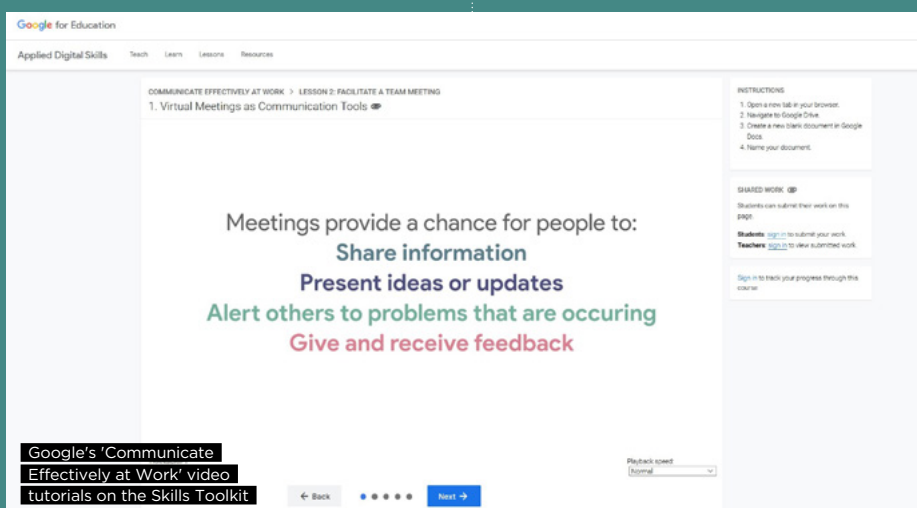
Pember said the advertising "worries me". "When the DfE puts out its own advertising for the toolkit it always talks about good quality, but under whose judgment? It may be, but how do they know?" she told *FE Week*.

"You've got other outstanding providers out there but why is the state advertising a certain set of commercial products over and above another set of commercial products? It doesn't even say there are others available."

Aside from the PQs, the DfE is reporting the number of skills toolkit starts in their official apprenticeship data releases and labels them as "experimental".

"These are experimental statistics and rely on website analytics from providers and the method of processing these is subject to change," the department said.

The UK Statistics Authority said it welcomed the inclusion of these statistics to "support transparency and clarity" as long as the DfE acknowledges the data's "limitations".



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DfE WILL share 2020/21 achievement rates with Ofsted

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For a second year the critical qualification achievement rates (QAR) for providers will not be published, but unlike last year the data will be privately shared with Ofsted.

The inspectorate will again be able to use the QAR data in its inspection judgments as well as it being central to their published “risk-assessment methodology” when deciding which colleges and training providers to visit.

Announcing the decision, the DfE said on Thursday: “QARs, usually published for certain post-16 providers, were suspended for 2019 to 2020 due to coronavirus.

“For 2020 to 2021, QARs will not be published but will be produced and shared securely with providers, Ofsted and DfE.”

“From a transparency viewpoint, I am struggling to see why data is not going to be published for year two”

QAR data, which is used to measure providers’ performance and hold them to account, was scrapped for the 2019/20 academic year following the Covid-19 outbreak. Providers were not able to receive the data themselves and it was not shared with the inspectorate.

When asked how the inspectorate plans to use this year’s QAR data, an Ofsted spokesperson said: “Decisions on the use of achievement rate data for 2020/21 will be



made in due course.”

The decision has attracted split views from the sector.

Association of Employment and Learning Providers managing director Jane Hickie said that “on balance”, giving Ofsted access to QARs “doesn’t seem unreasonable, although the authorities should bear in mind that some perfectly good providers are struggling right now in terms of achievement rates because of the Covid restrictions”.

“If you are in tier 3, for example, the challenge to deliver well is harder,” she added.

“At the same time, providers won’t want to sit back thinking that ungraded inspections (see page 11) mean that they can switch off.

“They believe that the approach which Ofsted has taken since March has been entirely sensible and are ready to work with the inspectorate to give an accurate picture to employers and learners of the quality of their provision.”

Tony Allen, an ex-deputy director of the government’s skills funding agency and who now runs his own apprenticeship consultancy firm, said that he struggled to see, from a

“transparency viewpoint”, why the data “is not going to be published for year two” of the pandemic.

“Covid has impacted, but isn’t that the point? Everyone knows that Covid has impacted,” he added. “Why are we denying employers access to invaluable intelligence for a second year?”

QARs calculate what proportion of learning was successfully completed in each academic year by providers. They are produced for apprenticeships, adult education and 16-to-18 programmes.

The latest achievement rates were published in March for the 2018/19 year and showed the overall national rate for apprenticeships dropped 2.2 per cent points to just 64.7 per cent.

The ESFA minimum standard threshold sits at an achievement rate of 62 per cent.

If more than 40 per cent of a provider’s provision fails to meet the minimum standard, then intervention can be as severe as contract termination, in line with the ESFA’s “oversight of independent training providers” operational guidance.

Full Ofsted inspections pushed back to summer 2021

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Full graded Ofsted inspections will not return until the summer term, the government announced this week.

But monitoring visits, including to those with grade three and four ratings and new apprenticeship providers, will resume in January.

And for FE providers that do not receive a monitoring visit, they "may receive support and assurance visits", which will result in a report but no grade, similar to the "interim visits" being run this autumn.

The watchdog will also continue to have the power to inspect an education provider if it has serious concerns about safeguarding.

Under a raft of measures announced on Thursday for holding exams in 2021 (see page

4), education secretary Gavin Williamson said that Ofsted's full return has been pushed back again until the summer term. Full inspections have been paused since the outbreak of Covid-19 in March.

The inspectorate described the plans as a "phased return" to normal activity.

Chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, said: "The usual level of scrutiny within the education and care system has been absent since last March, so it's important that it returns next year as we all hope for a greater level of normality.

"But we understand the pressure that everyone in education is working under and we want to return to our usual work in a measured, sensitive and practical way."

She added: "Our role is to offer the greatest assurance we can to parents and the public about the quality of education and care arrangements for children and learners. These plans will help us support the providers who are facing the

greatest challenges during these difficult times.

"They will ensure that inspection is fair, safe and valuable, while remaining true to our core purpose and principles."

Ofsted confirmed that the return of monitoring visits will include a progress judgment, as they did pre-pandemic.

Chief executive of the Association of Colleges, David Hughes, said he was "pleased to see the common sense decision that full Ofsted inspections will not commence until summer term" as they would be "impossible to carry out fairly and safely in these conditions".

He added that he would urge the DfE "not to continue barring colleges with legacy 'requires improvement' grades from being able to deliver T Levels, Institutes of Technology and other programmes where they have good, sustained progress on quality".

Quality of apprenticeships warning, with 1 in 10 'inadequate'

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Apprenticeships are the "weakest" area of provision in FE providers, with one in ten judged 'inadequate' last year, Ofsted has said.

In its annual stock-take of education, the inspectorate reported that of the 120 inspections to include an apprenticeships grade in 2019/20, three per cent achieved 'outstanding', 50 per cent were 'good' and 38 per cent were 'requires improvement'.

A total of ten per cent were 'inadequate', which the report says is "clearly too large a number".

The figures come 18 months after Ofsted's chief inspector Amanda Spielman told *FE Week's* Annual Apprenticeship Conference that the quality of apprenticeships was "sticking" and urged the sector to "improve".

Meanwhile, the annual report also warned of declining quality in independent learning providers with the proportion judged 'good' or 'outstanding' falling for the fourth consecutive year – dropping from a high of 83 per cent in 2016 to 74 per cent in 2020.

However, it should be noted that Ofsted has included employer providers in the data for

private providers.

In 2019/20, the watchdog said it saw in some independent providers that governance was "not in place or was not sufficiently challenging in holding senior leaders to account to identify the aspects of the provision that needed to be improved".

"We also saw leaders, managers and the governance function not moving swiftly enough to implement the recommendations made at a new provider monitoring visit," the report added.

"Independent learning providers did not focus enough on working closely with employers to develop a meaningful and well-thought-out curriculum to meet the training requirements of apprentices and employers."

Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of providers that received new provider monitoring visits this year had at least one insufficient progress judgment.

Ofsted said that in "many cases" this was down to "weak leadership and a lack of co-development of the curriculum with employers".

Association of Employment and Learning Providers managing director Jane Hickie told *FE Week* that the pressures on private providers have been "enormous".

"Even before the pandemic struck, the Commons education committee warned that good-quality apprenticeships can't be delivered on the cheap and while the [Ofsted] report doesn't cover the

first lockdown period when inspections stopped, the lack of provider relief for levy apprenticeships and the crash in starts have added to the scale of the challenges, even though the minister and others have recognised what a fantastic job providers did in keeping so many programmes going remotely," she said.

In comparison to private providers, community learning providers have seen the proportion judged 'good' or 'outstanding' increase for the fourth year and sat at 92 per cent in 2020, while colleges have seen their proportion shift downwards from 78 per cent last year to 75 per cent.

During an Ofsted press conference on the annual report, Christopher Russell, acting national director for education, said that the inspectorate will be "focussing sharply" on apprenticeships' quality when normal monitoring visits return in January (see story above).

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "We are pleased the vast majority of apprenticeships providers have continued to deliver high-quality training. However, we recognise that there is more work to do to make sure that every apprentice can access the best possible training."

In conversation with Paul Joyce about Ofsted's 2019/20 annual report

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Exclusive

Ofsted published its annual report for 2019/20 this week, and while chief inspector Amanda Spielman chose not to use any of her speech to talk about the sector, deputy director for FE and skills Paul Joyce was on hand to catch us up on developments.

Here are four key points from *FE Week's* interview with him...

1. No monitoring visits of new providers this autumn owing to resource issues

The education watchdog paused all routine inspection activity in March, and has only this week revealed it will resume monitoring visits to new providers come January, with full graded inspections to come in the summer.

Joyce said that in March, many providers were "not operating, so we could not go and see their provision to make the judgments".

However, he said that in the autumn term, they had "prioritised our resources" where it was "best suited", so made "interim visits" and second apprenticeship monitoring visits where the provider had received an 'insufficient progress' rating at their first visit – rather than carrying out first-time monitoring visits to new providers.

Apprenticeship provision was identified as the "weakest" area of FE and skills provision in Ofsted's report for 2019/20 (see page 11) and Joyce admitted: "We remain concerned there are a number of new providers that have not yet had a visit. We will prioritise those providers, as soon as we're able to do so."

Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of providers that received new provider monitoring visits last year had at least one 'insufficient progress' judgment.

2. College mergers research on the cards after poor performance

One finding from the annual report was that of the 26 newly merged colleges Ofsted had inspected since 2015, one-third were graded as 'requires improvement'.

This is a lower rating than the "original grade profile before the mergers" for the colleges involved, the report reads.

Joyce said that "unfortunately, because of the suspension of routine inspections" the watchdog hasn't been to inspect a number of other merged colleges that had been scheduled a visit as enough time had now elapsed since their merger had taken place.

"We will return to those as soon as we're able to return to full inspections, and once we've inspected more, we will be able to do some research and evaluation into the effectiveness of mergers – what worked well and hasn't worked so well."

He also promised Ofsted would return to look at the possibility of campus-level inspections for college groups, and will continue work with the Department for Education, Association of Colleges and other bodies "about what we can do to improve reporting and possibly grading of campuses".

3. Ofsted can't say if apprenticeship quality is better now than before the 2017 reforms

Ofsted's annual report quite starkly highlights how ten per cent of apprenticeship grades at inspection were 'inadequate' – which the report (see page 11) says is "clearly too large a number".

However, Joyce refused to be drawn on whether quality has improved or worsened on average since the widescale reforms to the apprenticeships programme in 2017.

"It's too early for me to definitively say whether standards-based apprenticeships are a better product than legacy frameworks," he told *FE Week*.

"There are still frameworks and standards being delivered in providers. So, until frameworks go completely and we're looking at only standards, it's really difficult to make that comparison."

He did say it was "unfortunate many new apprenticeship providers had been allowed to enter the apprenticeship market without the necessary oversight."

"A lot of brand-new providers without any experience are coming into the market,



Paul Joyce

and through our monitoring visits we have demonstrated the quality is poor."

Pressed on whether his criticisms on oversight were directed at the Education and Skills Funding Agency, he said: "With hindsight, there were a number of providers let into the market, so it therefore became very crowded with untried, untested providers."

4. Would not be drawn on achievement rate data decisions

Joyce refused repeated requests for his view on the decision by the DfE not to publish and share with Ofsted qualification achievement rate (QAR) data for providers in 2019/20.

"We will deal with whatever situation we have," he said. "We will use whatever data is available to us from the DfE, and we will use whatever data is available to the provider."

"I won't want to use any data the provider does not see themselves, because that's not open and transparent."

"If we've got it, we've got it; if we haven't, we haven't," he summarised.

Since the interview, the DfE has announced that, although qualification achievement rate data will not be published for 2020/21, it will be shared privately with Ofsted, as well as providers and the department (see page 10).

QAR data is used to inform inspection judgments as well as being central to Ofsted's published "risk-assessment methodology" when deciding which colleges and training providers to visit.

Little known skills-based work academy programme given major funding boost

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Exclusive

Marius Ardelean found himself without a job and with little prospect of finding another after Covid-19 struck. But he is now about to start a new career after retraining through a long-running skills programme that is finally getting its time in the sun.

The 34-year-old had quit his job at the British Museum restaurant at the beginning of the year to visit his family in Romania, with a plan to then switch careers in the UK. However, upon his return he could not find work, despite sending out “hundreds” of CVs, and he had to resort to Universal Credit.

He spoke to his local Jobcentre Plus about finding a course to retrain and that is where he came across sector-based work academy programmes (SWAPs) which has now ultimately led to him finding a job in the care sector.

Marius is one of thousands of people the government is hoping to help back into work through SWAPs this year, following a £17

million investment by the chancellor Rishi Sunak to “triple the number” in 2020/21.

The new National Skills Fund will also be used to fund the scheme from April 2021, taking a share of £127 million announced in last week’s spending review. However, just how much is unknown, and a DfE spokesperson said, “This is a level of detail we are not going to be getting into.”

Launched in 2011, SWAPs are jointly run by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Education (DfE), and are administered by Jobcentre Plus; they involve pre-employment training, a guaranteed job interview and a work placement to help prepare those receiving unemployment benefits for new jobs.

They are described by the Association of Employment and Learning Providers as a “mini adult traineeship”, which can last up to six weeks, and are funded through the adult education budget.

According to DWP statistics, 330,000 SWAP starts were recorded between August 2011 and November 2017, but the department then stopped publishing the data.

It is therefore hard to pin down precisely the recent popularity of SWAPs, and the DWP refused to say how many starts would be required this year to meet the chancellor’s target of “tripling” their number.

But colleges and training providers already involved in the programme told FE Week it has been catering for great swathes of learners in recent years, with the vast majority finding employment straight after completion.

“The evidence shows they work, so we will expand them,” Sunak told the House of Commons during his summer statement.

Funding for SWAPs is being dished out to



Marius Ardelean

the Education and Skills Funding Agency for nationally AEB funded providers and also to mayoral combined authorities who administer the budget for providers in their area.

The government says colleges and providers that wish to get involved in SWAPs should get in touch with their local Jobcentre Plus and the DfE as their first port of call. AEB allocations can then be topped up to account for SWAPs, which will be based on a provider’s historic delivery to unemployed residents studying courses at level 2 and below, spanning two to five weeks in length.

A spokesperson added that FE providers are “part of the SWAP local design process and are informed when to expect referrals and how many by Jobcentre Plus”.

Marius’s two-week SWAP was with Barnet and Southgate College and was formatted to teach skills such as what to do in interviews and how the law operates with regard to the care sector, as well as having him work towards a level 1 certificate in the subject.

The course ran close to business hours,

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Tracey McIntosh

Feature

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CONTINUED

9.30am to 4pm, and was carried out over Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

"It was good to get back on track," he said, adding: "The main thing with the course is it has direct contact with future employers.

"So, there were three companies and we got to know them, they got to know us, so we could ask questions related to the care sector and the jobs they offer.

"In this current time, you send your CV and it gets lost or ignored. But through this course we had an opportunity to speak with the employers and after we had finished, I had interviews with two of them."

Barnet and Southgate College's executive director of commercial partnerships Tracey McIntosh, who oversaw the 2,000 people go through a SWAP last year, said: "Personally, I think it's a win-win opportunity for all of us. This is a great example of partners working together with the students at the heart of it."

Aside from the care sector, her college runs SWAPs in such areas as construction, external wall insulation and the Civil Service, with the age profile of participants stretching from 19 to 55.

"We are continuously looking at ways to attract and retain a diverse workforce"

Asked whether she would recommend other providers to get involved, McIntosh jokes: "No, because it's my business!

"Of course we would recommend it, as we do pretty well."

She added that employers "keep coming back" for SWAPs because they are part of the development of them, and it costs them nothing – as any costs associated with the



Southern-Gatwick Express SWAP learners. From left: Charlotte Man, Sally Maile, Xander Shears, David Laird, Natmaniel Atfield, Inaki Ruiz

work placement are met by the DWP.

Mat Chapman, managing director of independent provider The Development Fund, which runs SWAPs to help recruit and train drivers for major bus companies, says they see 80 per cent employment outcomes off the back of the programmes.

He says one of the employers he works with "was pleased with how it increased their ability to recruit. It expanded their numbers where they were struggling to get people into bus driving schools."

He stresses the importance of tailoring the pre-employment training for the employer – which the DWP says has to be "matched to the needs of your business sector" – so, for instance, his courses cover the theoretical knowledge expected of drivers.

"If you're recruiting to a marketplace, you want them to understand the fruit and veg they are selling," he says.

Railway operators Southern Railway and Gatwick Express have recently completed their first SWAP with East Sussex College, where 12 learners were taught "essential" customer service skills and qualifications on a four-week course.

The operators' managing director Angie Doll said they, with the college, had created



Angie Doll, Southern Railway

what they feel is "a valuable opportunity for all learners on the programme".

"We are continuously looking at ways to attract and retain a diverse workforce that is truly representative of the communities we serve," she continued.

"Working in collaboration with East Sussex College and Jobcentre Plus means we have been able to offer those who aren't in employment the opportunity to gain skills and qualifications to help them into the world of work."

Stuart Cleworth, operations director for Wates Construction, which works with Barnet and Southgate College and independent provider Ixion Holdings on SWAPs, says supporting initiatives like this "is vital for the construction industry as it provides us with the perfect opportunity to enhance and build on the knowledge of those engaged, helping to equip them with the real skills our sector require".

Ixion has been using virtual reality and remote activity, such as remote construction site tours, to continue delivering the work experience placement during the pandemic, and the provider's national construction operations manager Joe Makowski said SWAPs fill "essential skills gaps".

News

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DfE: students self-isolating and onsite should receive 'same amount' of teaching

FRASER WHIELDON
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FE providers should attempt to deliver the same amount of teaching and work to self-isolating students as they would if the student was onsite, new government guidance has said.

The Department for Education has this week outlined new guidelines on remote learning in further education during the coronavirus pandemic.

It states that for students who have been advised to self-isolate, but are "well enough to learn", officials "expect FE providers to continue their education remotely as far as is reasonably possible".

Students learning remotely "should benefit from the same amount of teaching and guided work that they would normally receive onsite".

But there are exceptions to these rules, for instance, where a student is on a course that involves practical teaching and training and requires specialist equipment and supervision.

The exception also applies to work experience

and placements.

Providers should have systems in place to check at least weekly if a student is "persistently" missing lessons for their study programme, or if they are not engaging with remote education.

Students should be provided with clarity on arrangements for remote education, for example on timetabling and on the expectations for them to participate in remote learning.

And it should be confirmed with them the different ways they will receive assessment and feedback while learning remotely, as well as how often that will be provided.

In comparison, primary schools have been told to deliver at least three hours of remote learning to self-isolating pupils, while secondary schools should deliver at least four.

The department said FE providers must continue to deliver fully planned hours for students, unless further restrictions come in force for their area, and should also put in place support for vulnerable and disadvantaged students which could include deciding whether

they need support for remote delivery.

The government has come under pressure to help providers with online learning, with the Association of Colleges reporting last month that as many as 100,000 students may be missing out because they do not have a suitable device to learn on, or access to the internet from home.

The association's chief executive David Hughes called for "immediate support for colleges to allow students to get the devices and access they need", without which, he said: "We risk stunting the life chances of young people for years to come."

This week's guidance included how providers can use the 16-19 bursary fund to provide digital devices and connectivity support for students, based on individual circumstances.

There has also been a change to the adult education budget rules for 2020/21, the guidance reads, so providers can use learner support funds to buy IT devices for students aged 19 and over, and to help providers meet students' connectivity costs.

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Outrage as AoC recommends 1% college staff pay rise

FRASER WHIELDON

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College staff should receive a one per cent pay rise this year, the Association of Colleges has recommended in a move that has outraged trade unions.

Following a meeting with union officials last week, the membership body said on Thursday it was "disappointing and regrettable that the sector is unable to afford a better offer at this time" but that the "pandemic has changed everything".

Trade unions had called for a "significant" pay rise for college workers this year after the government injected an additional £400 million into colleges.

But the AoC said it could only recommend a pay rise of one per cent, or £250, whichever is the greater, because of the unforeseen and "severe financial pressure" colleges are now facing that have "forced many into deficit".

The association did say that it would "strongly advise that those colleges who can afford to award staff more should do so", while "we must acknowledge that some colleges may be unable to meet this recommendation".

But the University and College Union, Unison, the National Education Union, Unite and GMB said in a joint response that after years of campaigning for more money for staff, now is "not the time for excuses on pay but instead an investment in staff so that further education can provide the skills for a post-Covid recovery".

UCU general secretary Jo Grady said: "Yet again colleges have shown they cannot be trusted to spend public funds in the way they were intended. The joint campaigning was always on the understanding that staff pay would come first.

"UCU members will now find it hard to believe that AoC can be a trusted partner for

joint campaigning."

Unison head of education Jon Richards added: "College leaders had made clear promises that staff would get a substantial pay rise this year. But they've simply ripped these up and raided the wage pot to foot the bill for the pandemic. Pay in the FE sector is simply too low and this offer yet again ignores the value of college staff."

The unions have called on individual colleges to publicly commit to working towards closing the £7,000 pay gap between school and college teaching staff and introduce the foundation living wage.

Defending the pay recommendation, the AoC cited Education and Skills Funding Agency officials at last week's House of Commons Public Accounts Committee hearing saying 64 colleges are at risk of running out of cash.

And on top of extra costs associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, the association said colleges have "suffered a significant loss of revenue" due to a drop in commercial activity, fee income and apprenticeships, which has only been "partially" offset by extra government funding.

The AoC also recommended a one per cent increase for 2019/20, but promised to accelerate a pay recommendation for the following academic year.

AoC chief executive David Hughes has argued that every college leader wants staff paid "fairly and adequately" for the work they do and is "committed" to campaigning for better college funding, which allows pay issues to be addressed.

But, he added, "a decade of neglect and funding cuts have devastated the financial health of the sector".

Gerry McDonald, AoC interim chair and chief executive of New City College in London, said: "The pay recommendation we have made is regrettably the only affordable offer AoC can make on behalf of the college sector, given the sharp reduction in college income as a result of Covid-19.

"This ongoing instability means anything further at this time is not possible and we know that the first priority for colleges will be to protect jobs."

While the AoC recommends a pay increase to its members, colleges are independent and make final decisions on pay themselves.



'Shock' decision to sell college slammed by MP

BILLY CAMDEN
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An MP has hit out at a college group's decision to close and sell a historic adult education site.

Harriett Baldwin, Conservative MP for West Worcestershire, said she was "shocked" by an announcement made by Warwickshire College Group (WCG) last Friday that it will shut Malvern Hills College by August 2021.

It is the latest in a string of colleges looking to sell off a campus in order to balance the books.

Malvern Hills began delivering to students in 1886 but WCG says it has conducted an 18-month review of its provision and found it was no longer viable to run due to "reduced adult education funding and a diminishing customer base".

The college currently has around 900 adult learners on part-time arts and craft commercial courses but also offers government-funded vocational programmes, including hair and barbering, via the adult education budget.

The government-funded provision moved to WCG's Evesham College campus in September owing to the Covid-19 outbreak, while Malvern Hills stayed closed.

Under WCG's plans, government-funded provision offered at Malvern Hills will be moved to Evesham College permanently – which is 40 minutes away by car and over an hour away by public transport.

The college group said they could not say how many jobs were at risk at this stage.

Baldwin said: "I am shocked with the Warwickshire College Group for taking this decision at a time when training young people could not be more important, and I am saddened for those people taking courses like hairdressing or beauty therapy who are faced with a long diversion to Evesham to continue their studies.

"They also have done it without even a consultation or the courtesy of sharing their



Malvern Hills College and Harriett Baldwin

thinking with me. In fact, when the group took over the Malvern site they promised they would invest. Last week's spending review delivered a £375 million investment in skills."

She added that this feels like a "very short-term decision" and has asked for an "urgent conversation" with WCG chief executive Angela Joyce to "understand her thinking and to reassure me that this is not just an asset-stripping exercise".

WCG was formed through the merger of Warwickshire College Group and South Worcestershire College in 2016, at which point WCG's name was kept. The group now has seven campuses – three of which are in Worcestershire.

Announcing the closure of the Malvern Hills campus last week, Joyce said her group has "worked hard to maintain" its colleges in Worcestershire, all of which had "quality or financial issues when they merged into the group".

"Given the widely known pressures in the FE sector, linked to a decade of funding cuts, we have had to continually drive improvements and, like almost all organisations and businesses, Covid-19 has impacted WCG significantly," she continued.

"The type of education offered at Malvern Hills College is sadly no longer viable for

WCG as Malvern Hills College has been financially supported by the rest of the group since. We recognise the important role the college plays in supporting part of the community and we hope we can find a way for the courses to continue for local people to attend."

According to WCG's latest accounts, for 2018/19, the group generated a deficit before other gains and losses of £2.9 million. The group also recorded net debt of £7.3 million.

The accounts state that as of the end of July 2019, the group was in its fifth year of a "debt reduction strategy linked to a series of property transactions and an attendant debt amortisation schedule".

Other site sales for WCG in recent years included selling its Henley College campus to Wasps Rugby. As well as closing and selling Malvern Hills, the group plans to sell buildings that are part of Evesham College as it is a "currently under-utilised site".

WCG is one of a number of colleges in recent years that have announced plans to close campuses and have been met with MP opposition.

Other cases have included the RNN Group, Cornwall College Group, BMet, Warrington & Vale Royal College and Askham Bryan College.

Post-16 high needs system needs 'radical' shake-up, report finds

FRASER WHIELDON

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A "radical" shake-up of the "overly complicated" high-needs FE system is required, following a quadrupling in the number of learners with special educational needs and disabilities, new research has found.

The Association of Colleges (AoC), specialist providers' organisation Natspec and the Local Government Association (LGA) this week released a joint report into the planning, commissioning, funding and support of provision for post-16 high-needs learners.

It found a litany of problems with the system, including education, health and care plans (EHCPs) that are "not sufficiently up to date"; statutory deadlines being missed; arrangements for transitioning learners from school to further education being delayed,

and possibly not taking place at all.

Chair of the LGA's children and young people board Judith Blake said an "overhaul and streamlining" was needed for processes to improve the system for local authorities and colleges.

She continued: "This has become more urgent due to the huge increase in size and complexity of the task faced by councils and providers in supporting young people with SEND, with funding not keeping up with the rising demand for support."

The report's authors say the number of 16-to-25-year-olds with an EHCP, or a SEND statement, has quadrupled between 2015 and 2020, from 25,548 to 108,308.

The rise has been caused by a number of factors, including the Children and Families Act 2014 extending EHCP eligibility up to 25 years of age, which brought more people into the system.

At the same time as this increase in demand, the AoC and Natspec say their members are facing financial pressures due to a "squeeze" on local authority budgets and real terms cuts to FE funding over the past ten years.

So a "more radical re-working of the whole system" of high-needs post-16 system is required, as the report's authors found demand for places is likely to be outstripping supply in many local authorities, and providers are having to invest in creating extra capacity without the promise of a return.

Although £700 million in high-needs post-16 funding was announced for 2020/21 at the Spending Round in 2019, the report cites LGA research that found councils face a high-needs deficit of at least £889 million for that period, owing to the rising demand.

The AoC's SEND policy officer Liz Maudslay said that while they welcome the 2014 reforms, for them

to be "effective, there is a need for significant changes to implementation processes".

The report recommends greater planning of provision after it had seen "little evidence that longer term planning of post-16 high-needs provision is currently taking place".

Planning could be aided by having "block agreements", where providers and local authorities agree funding for provision as a block rather than at an individual learner level.

This, the report reads, could "guarantee a fixed level of income in respect of a target number of 16+ young people with high needs, simplify the costing of provision, and thereby facilitate the planning process".

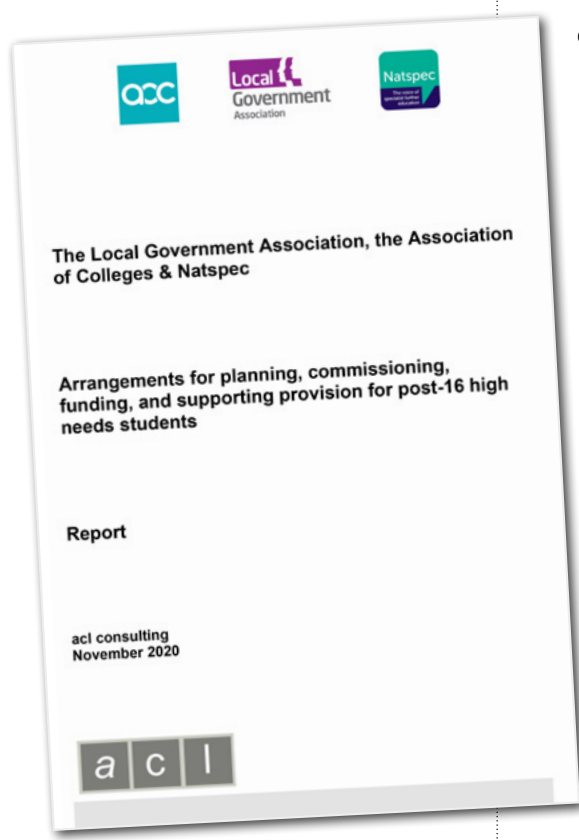
Another theme of the report is greater collaboration: between providers, and between them and their local authorities.

Authorities should involve all post-16 providers in regular strategic planning discussions about provision for learners who are leaving school provision, the report argues.

Furthermore, post-16 providers should be given access to pre-16 learners earlier, as it would make it "more likely the young person's post-16 needs and aspirations will be known in good time" and planning their transition to the post-16 provider will be "more effective".

Natspec chief executive Clare Howard welcomed this recommendation in particular, as she says: "The detrimental effects of the system on all young people are amplified for the small number with the most complex needs, who require more specialist provision."

Another recommendation is the "currency and content" of EHCPs to be improved to be fit for post-16 purposes, with the report saying plans are often not updated, that "too many" reports display "little or no knowledge of the further education sector" and that providers feel there is little point securing EHCPs as students could be with them for just two years, and that additional SEND funding is "limited".



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Introducing...

DAVID PHOENIX

Chief executive, London
South Bank University Group

'I was allowed to
just run with ideas'

JESS STAUFENBERG
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David Phoenix, a scientist who heads a group bringing together FE, HE and academics, shows why experimenting with a new model is critical for technical education

Quite how long education secretaries in England have been banging on about “breaking down” the divisions between technical and academic

education and their respective sectors is anyone's guess. At a speech in 1987, then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher bemoaned the “great difficulty” she had getting a new technical and vocational initiative “into a number of schools because the education system itself was not prepared to take it”. Some 33 years on, and Boris Johnson has joined in as he says “now is the time to end the bogus distinction between FE and HE”. It's almost a rite of passage for the education secretary to trot out such a speech at some point. College leaders can be forgiven for having especially well-exercised

eye-roll muscles.

Perhaps it would always take a scientist, rather than a polemicist, to gather evidence on the problem, test a theory and, once proven, apply it properly. Professor David Phoenix, chief executive of the London South Bank University Group, is chancellor of the university and boss of its subsidiary education groups, South Bank Colleges (which oversees Lambeth College) and South Bank Academies, which has an engineering-focused academy and UTC. The idea is for seamless learning pathways between the academies,

Profile

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colleges and higher education. It's the only group in the country encompassing three education sectors under one governance structure, and needed special sign-off from ministers.

But Phoenix, the son of a joiner, didn't set out to go into educational reform. He just liked science club.

"You can't take ownership of an existing college, people said. So I needed to get the skills minister to agree, and he did"

"One of my big influences was my chemistry teacher, because he not only had a passion for the subject, but he supported us to do our own experimentation." At this time Phoenix was in sixth form, having moved as a child from inner-city Manchester to Bolton. His first school had left him with big gaps in reading, maths and drawing that took a long time to fill in, he explains. Only by A-level had he caught up. "My teacher allowed us to have our little science club in the lab at lunchtime, to try things out. We created models of structures and quite complex purifications, and I found that really exciting."

Having the freedom to try his own thing from scratch is something that Phoenix has valued – and made room for – throughout his life, sometimes to a quite extraordinary degree. First, he headed off to Liverpool University to study biochemistry and could be found in the labs once again, tinkering around. "I was lucky because there were lecturers there who let you go in and experiment, just try things out." He recalls trying

to find a solution to the fact most people hadn't finished all their practical work. "We thought if we could just scale up our experiments, I could share some of my sample, and they could share some of theirs." It didn't go entirely to plan. "You find out with some of the more reactive elements, it's not a good idea to scale them up! We certainly had a number of pieces of equipment that didn't survive." Behind what can seem a serious face at first, Phoenix's eyes are definitely twinkling.

Exploding test tubes aside, by final year Phoenix was working on drug design. He went on to do a PhD "about a molecule called a penicillin-binding protein" – we'll leave that there – and afterwards was awarded a grant to work at a top lab at Utrecht University, in the Netherlands. He was just 24. All this was cross-disciplinary work, he tells me. "I kind of worked at the interface of multiple sciences. I applied chemistry and biology, physics and biophysics." Just so his calculations could keep up, he also did a part-time maths degree at the Open University.

An opportunity soon arose to transfer to the prestigious Pasteur Institute in Paris, but it was time to return to his now-wife, Stephanie, says Phoenix. He got a lectureship at the University of Central Lancashire, "and to be honest, I didn't think I'd be there that long".

But again, it was the freedom to experiment that kept Phoenix in situ. "That institution was absolutely fantastic in terms of the environment it created. I was allowed to just run with ideas." Almost as though explaining a simple wish to pop to the shops, Phoenix then says: "I had an idea to develop a Centre for Forensic Science. The idea was quite straightforward: bring together practitioners



Speaking at the House of Commons

with scientists, so ex-police officers, crime scene specialists, biologists and chemists." It sounds madly fun, especially the "automotive crime scene" garage. "We mocked up break-ins, accidents, and we had people go in and take DNA samples. They had to put knowledge into practice."

As with his scientific research, Phoenix sought to pull together disciplines and professions, applying different kinds of knowledge so better ways of working might be discovered. As dean and later deputy vice chancellor at the University of Central Lancashire, he remodelled the school of biosciences and created a new school of pharmacy with industry links. The strap line for the latter? "Fit to practise."

It was in 2013, a few years after being awarded an OBE for services to science and higher education, that Phoenix took the vice chancellor role at London South Bank University. It was "not seen as a happy institution", he says. "It wasn't performing very well, but the potential was fantastic." A huge consultation including everyone from "professors and cleaners" was launched and performance indicators began improving. Yet a Daily Mail article soon arrived, reporting that Phoenix had been

given a £350,000 interest-free loan by the university to buy a house near the campus, prompting former education minister Lord Adonis to fume: "He already gets a salary of £295,000 [...] I think this sort of behaviour by universities is disgraceful." Phoenix says a condition of his new role was to live near the university, which the loan partially helped with and it was paid back once he'd been able to secure a mortgage.

Further challenges were to follow. Having taken on the Il-19 University



Profile

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Academy of Engineering South Bank in 2014, and the South Bank Engineering UTC two years later, Phoenix saw the benefits of taking over the struggling Lambeth College nearby to push forward the group's reputation as a hub for technical and vocational education. Annual budgets, staffing arrangements and the college's "strategic direction" would all pass over to the university under the transfer. Needless to say, there was resistance. "You can't take ownership of an existing college, people said," Phoenix tells me. "So I needed to get the skills minister [Robert Halfon] to agree to a national pilot, and he agreed."

"We mocked up break-ins, accidents, and we had people go in and take DNA samples"

Finding the people in charge who will allow Phoenix and his team to experiment is clearly the man's special skill. The college transferred to South Bank Colleges in January 2019. This January, construction will also begin on a £100 million Vauxhall Technical College, the second college in the group, with a proposed opening date of 2022.

The big question now is, is the experiment working? In 2017, the university achieved a silver rating in the government's Teaching Excellence Framework and was named

university of the year for graduate employment for the second year running in 2018 by the Times/Sunday Times "Good University Guide" – meaning it looks increasingly strong as the powerhouse within the group.

The picture elsewhere is mixed, with signs of green shoots. University Academy of Engineering South Bank was graded 'good' by Ofsted in 2017, while South Bank Engineering UTC got 'requires improvement' last year, although inspectors praised staff for creating a "unique and nurturing learning environment".

Lambeth College was also graded 'requires improvement' just four months after transferring last year, but a monitoring inspection in March this year found the proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds achieving their qualifications had "markedly improved", leaders were taking "decisive action" on poor subcontractors and had "rapidly" changed the way they improve teaching.

So Phoenix is adamant – education provisions should work together like this. "One of my issues with the Sainsbury review [on technical education, in 2016] is that it spoke about learners having 'choice'. But the problem is, you don't know what you don't know. What we're doing is providing taster sessions for the college, the academy, the UTC, for students across the group.



A student might go through the academy, do a level 2 at college, do an apprenticeship, or go on to HE for a business degree." Phoenix explains that the proportion of learners getting level 4s in this country will not improve unless the "supply chain" is linked up in this way: "This requires FE-HE partnerships, and I think there is a key role for UTCs."

It's a compelling vision, and typically Phoenix has yet again broken the box with a new initiative. When apprenticeships for 15 of his UTC students were cancelled this year, his team "created a year 14" so they could stay on for an extended diploma and a higher national certificate exam with the support of the university. "This gives them the chance to get a level 4 at no cost to them," explains Phoenix. This kind of year 14 offer "could really differentiate UTCs from academies," he adds.

Last but not least, Phoenix recommends spreading good practice around the entire system – and thinking beyond the usual horizons, he means overseas too. As an advisor on science to the University of Guyana, he tells me "there is so much the college sector can offer to other countries in need of vocational education".

It doesn't seem too excessive to say that skills minister Gillian Keegan would do well to pay attention to what Phoenix is up to in this corner of London. If his performance indicators – particularly at the UTC and college – keep moving upwards, he may well prove a model for breaking down tired distinctions. And ultimately, for allowing educators to keep on "trying out".



RACHAEL
BOOTHPrincipal, Leeds Sixth
Form CollegeAdvance notice of
exam topics comes
with problems too

The latest government intervention fails to take account of socio-economic inequalities, writes Rachael Booth

This week we found out that students sitting assessments next summer will be given advance notice of topics and allowed to take in exam aids in an effort to offset learning disruptions caused by the pandemic.

In colleges and schools, the delay of information has already had a significant impact on student and staff wellbeing, with tension mounting on what plans will be decided. And we still don't know yet what aids will be permitted for each subject or what FE-based courses will be included.

But the new decision appears to give some students an unfair disadvantage and overlooks key socio-economic factors.

GCSEPod conducted a survey with 2,649 16-year-olds and found 66 per cent of teenagers consider knowing topics in advance as a very fair measure. However, does having sight of the topic beforehand change the value of the result?

Although there are revision advantages, examiners may have higher expectations, potentially resulting in added pressure for the students. Issues may arise for teaching and learning. Knowing a topic beforehand may beg the question – are educators just teaching to test?

Universities could be led to believe that students only have

knowledge on a niche subject, rather than a well-rounded perspective of the whole topic.

We also need to know what the expectations around exam aids are. They could dissuade students from preparing for their tests altogether, giving them the wrong idea about preparation and so hindering their meaningful understanding of information.

This latest proposal by the government may also only serve to further support those who have the means to access additional tutoring and resources. If they don't reference deprivation in some way, then these measures will reinforce inequalities for years to come.

Another contingency measure would be to adjust grades by region to take into account varying degrees of coronavirus disruption. However, this risks students in, for example, the north losing out, as although they may be given more generous results, universities may see this as devaluing their grade.

The measures don't go far enough and do not take into

account socio-economic inequalities. A more strategic contingency plan needs to take this socio-economic inequality into account to avoid accentuating the culture of poverty. To do this, we need to assess access to resources to ensure all students are equipped with the appropriate tools and unfair advantages are eliminated.

“We need to assess access to resources, to ensure all students are equipped”

Affluent students who have their own laptops and decent wifi connectivity at home are more likely to perform better than those who don't have access to technology outside of the classroom. This is evident through last year's private school grades and there needs to be radical change to address this disparity.

A third alternative would be

to reduce subject content and focus on academic and analytical skill acquisition, making clear to students and teachers what this focus will be. This would take account of disruption to learning. Although students would be measured on a narrower basis in terms of subject content, it would allow them to demonstrate their skill set and understanding.

At Leeds Sixth Form College, we've noticed increased stress surrounding exams due to previous disruptions caused by the pandemic. Enforcing rigorous assessments with reduced content means students would develop exam skills and learn to cope in a high-pressure environment.

Another option could encompass a combination of centre-assessed grades and examinations. Students would still do exams, combined with teacher-based assessments. By working with awarding bodies, we could produce centre-assessed grades that have been quality assured. This may be fairer but would require a great deal of planning.

The government needs to appreciate the human aspects and mental health implications of the current situation. While the announcement about advance notice of topics is welcome in its clarity, it comes with its own set of issues.

There needs to be a clear and strategic assessment method that addresses inequality and gives every student a fair chance to succeed.



STEPHEN EVANS

Chief executive,
Learning and
Work InstituteThis is why we should
delay the white
paper even longer

The government should start again with a green paper for an FE strategy that stands the test of time, writes Stephen Evans

The much-anticipated FE white paper may now be delayed into 2021, we've found out. But is there a case for waiting even longer?

Last week, ESFA chief executive Eileen Milner said the white paper would "certainly" be published this financial year, later than its expected launch this autumn.

The purpose of the white paper is, I believe, to set out a clear, long-term vision of how we improve learning and skills for young people and adults that we can all get behind and play our part in.

To do that properly, it needs to be co-designed with employers, providers and other stakeholders and be backed by investment.

But the problem is that a white paper published after a one-year spending review while we are still in a pandemic and without open consultation doesn't really allow that.

So the risk is we get a document that gives a framework for what the government is already doing, but without the money to match the ambition.

That would mean it doesn't stand the test of time as the dust (hopefully) settles following Covid-19.

The Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which provides an entitlement to a first level 3 qualification, is a case in point.

It's a step forward and we need



far more people progressing to level 3. But it is limited in scope, with Whitehall officials deciding which courses people can do – including entire sectors being left out – and little support for maintenance costs.

It also does nothing to tackle the sharp decline in learner take-up at basic skills and level 2.

Not only is that a bad thing in its own right, it shows there are a limited number of people ready to progress to level 3.

"We need to move beyond fragmented initiatives and the assumption that 'Whitehall knows best'"

Meanwhile, the tight budget for the guarantee (£138 million per year when around 20 million adults don't have a level 3) reveals the government is expecting limited take-up.

Better surely to have a clear

strategy for increasing learning at all levels, allow local areas to tailor support to their industrial strategies, and let people and employers make their own decisions?

In other words, to move beyond fragmented initiatives and the assumption that "Whitehall knows best".

The government could do this by publishing a green paper setting out its ideas, then genuinely work with local government, employers, colleges and providers over the next year.

This would then be followed by a lifelong learning white paper, alongside a longer-term spending settlement next year.

What could this green paper say?

1. Ambition and investment

Analysis from the Learning and Work Institute shows that England will fall even further behind the skills profile of other countries by 2030 on current trends. We should benchmark ourselves against the best in the world. We can't deliver that on

the cheap: before the pandemic, we argued for an extra £1.9 billion per year for the next decade.

2. Learning pathways

We need a much clearer plan for how people can progress in their learning, switch between provision, and how learning routes interact with each other. For example, how does someone who doesn't have a level 2 get into learning, progress on to a T level and then on to a higher apprenticeship? This needs thinking about in terms of a system – not individual policies.

3. Local leadership

We've argued for a more ambitious approach to devolution, agreeing a single funding pot tied to local labour market agreements focused on outcomes. There would then be more scope to integrate and align services for people and employers.

4. Upskilling and retraining

We need much wider and broader entitlements for adults to upskill and retrain in more flexible ways, bolstered by a learning account giving people the chance to invest in learning beyond these entitlements.

A clear plan is important but it will be more effective if developed collaboratively with the sector.

Better to get it done right – even if that takes a bit longer.



READER'S REPLY

College adult education budget under-delivery revealed

... If the government and the ESFA had not managed the significant feat of performing three U-turns on this (count them), they might be in a position to address the current issue – namely the inevitable under-performance that many providers face THIS year.

Richard Heath, website

ESFA director wants 'more power' as college ownership battle rages

... A couple of years ago there was talk of resurrecting a version of the FEFC for both funding and inspecting colleges. It worked very well on both counts and both the funding side [LSC, ESFA] and the inspection side [Ofsted] have not been up to the job. We didn't have the insane scale of losses that we have moved towards now because there were some fine minds with the right skill sets – ditto the inspectorate, where the quality of those carrying out inspection was really so much more "fit for purpose". Having an auditor as part of the team gave inspectors the right kind of feedback on the spot about finances. The frameworks used were so much more fit for purpose and the loss of areas such as range and responsiveness, equal opportunities, quality improvement and governance gave a much better idea of what individual colleges and the sector were doing, with a dedicated college inspector monitoring each college between their four-year cycle of visits so that none was left too long. We certainly would not be having the sad headlines and systematic waste of funding.

Phil Hatton, website

... I agree with Phil Hatton's sentiments about the inadequacies of today's inspection, funding and audit regimes, when what we need is a consensus on what we want the FE sector for and how it should be managed, a preparedness to fund it properly, a need for ethical management practices and a demand for a

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REPLY OF THE WEEK

College adult education budget under-delivery revealed



This is incredibly frustrating when ITPs have over-delivered and won't get funded for their continued hard work and support to learners who needed training throughout the pandemic!

Brenda McLeish, Twitter

more participative model where local authorities or similar structure can once again have regional oversight and ensure FE is an integrated partner in a national education system. We should also accept that the Area Review Process, launched to most practitioners' scepticism and cynicism in 2015, has been disastrous for the financial health of the sector (the opposite of its intentions) – a deeply flawed and antagonistic process, that has been exposed in NAO reports and which should now be jettisoned as 'failed'.

Paul Tully, website



Yes, but... no, but... Stop dithering – we need detail on the summer assessments

Nice one, but should the department make the decision without proper input from school and college leaders?

Lesley King, Twitter

FE white paper pushed back to 2021, ESFA director suggests



The government's lack of urgency when millions face unemployment and need to reskill is breath-taking.

Shadow education secretary Kate Green, Twitter

Revealed: The FE winners honoured in the 2020 Pearson Teaching Awards



Congratulations to Dr Paul Phillips on his Lifetime Achievement Award. Brilliant and well deserved.

Steve West, Twitter



Not only has Paul Phillips been the best thing for the Weston College Group – he has been the best thing that has happened to Weston-super-Mare for a century or more.

Graham Briscoe, Twitter

Bulletin

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Palvinder Singh

Trustee, Education and Training Foundation

Start date December 2020

Concurrent job

Group deputy principal, Kidderminster College, NCG

Interesting fact

He once attended a wedding at Vatican City

Movers & Shakers

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



Gavin Batty

Vice principal for technical and professional education, Barnsley College

Start date January 2021

Previous job

Director of curriculum and operations, Leeds City College

Interesting fact

He has competed in national swimming championships and starred in the Royal Life Saving Society national pool lifeguard training manual



Lynette Leith

Trustee, Education and Training Foundation

Start date December 2020

Concurrent job

Assistant principal for technical and vocational studies, Newham Sixth Form College

Interesting fact

She trekked on the Great Wall of China for seven days to raise money for the Teenage Cancer Trust



Stuart Galloway

Security sector product manager, NOCN Group

Start date November 2020

Previous job

Senior associate, WSG Associates

Interesting fact

He enjoys playing walking football

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

Got a story?



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