



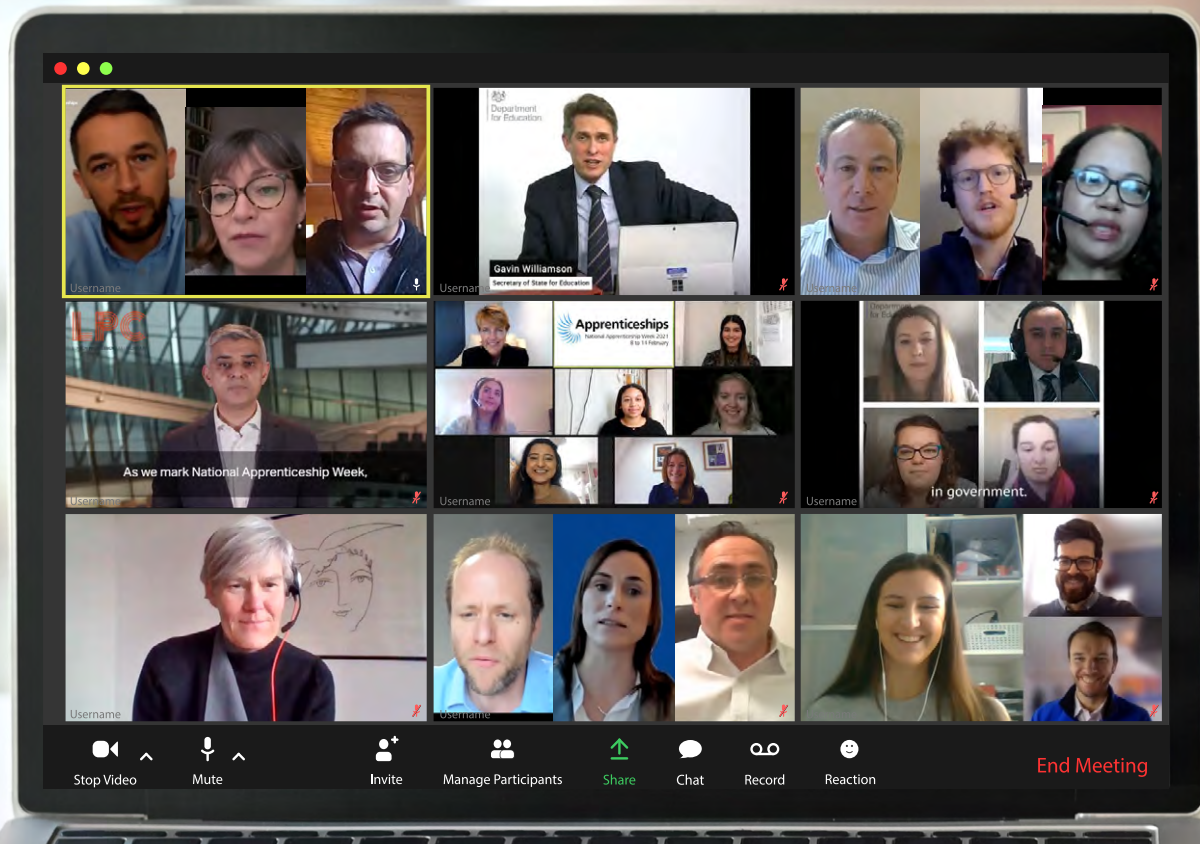
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NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP WEEK GOES VIRTUAL



Page 13

SKILLS GUARANTEE IN TROUBLE

- Education secretary pleads with colleges to 'take up this new offer'
- AoC 'worried' £95m level 3 adult entitlement will be slow start
- AELP 'disappointed' and describe the timelines as 'impossible'

Page 4

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International students: Why college income is in freefall

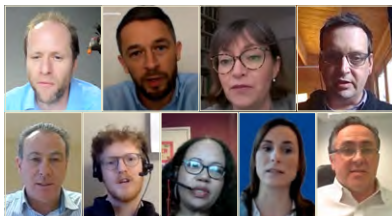


Page 11



Re-apply – again! Anger as ESFA asks providers to make fresh register application

Page 5



A 'blunt instrument'? NAW round table debates the 20 per cent off the job policy

Page 15



Combined and local authorities absolutely must have a role in the government's skills plan

Page 26

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Warning there is still 'not enough detail' for colleges to plan new level 3 offer

BILLY CAMDEN

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From front

Exclusive

The head of the Association of Colleges is "worried" there will be a slow start to the new flagship level 3 adult offer despite pleas from the education secretary for his members to embrace it.

David Hughes has warned that colleges "still don't have enough detail" to fully plan their offer, even though it is due to start in a matter of weeks under the lifetime skills guarantee.

He is also concerned about eligibility issues – such as the rule that it can only be taken by individuals who do not already hold a level 3 qualification – which may scupper demand.

He made the comments to FE Week following Gavin Williamson's speech at this week's AoC conference. The education secretary told delegates they would be "absolutely key" to the programme's success and "strongly encouraged" them to get involved.

FE Week recently highlighted the plight of the fully funded level 3 offer for 24-year-old and above learners for independent training providers, who are being given just a four-month window to start and complete the substantial courses, many of which can take a year or more to complete.

The issue stems from the scheme being funded by the new national skills fund but routed through adult education budget allocations from April, the contracts of which run out for private providers in July.

Colleges are funded differently through "grants" and will continue to receive funding for the level 3 offer in the next academic year.

The government has set aside £95 million to fund the "entitlement" during the next financial year from April 2021 to March 2022. When FE Week asked the Department for Education how much had been allocated for the 2020/21 academic year, which ends in July, a



Gavin Williamson

spokesperson said this information would be released in "due course".

During his conference speech, Williamson thanked colleges for "all the hard work you've already put in to scale up this offer ahead of April".

But Hughes has warned Williamson not to expect large numbers of adults taking up the offer in colleges from the get-go.

He told FE Week: "Nobody should be under the impression that the timing is ideal. We have said from the start that there is a lead-in time to expanding numbers, and colleges still don't have enough detail to fully plan their offer, which is due to start in a matter of weeks.

"The publication of the eligible qualifications was helpful and officials are working hard to get the details and allocations out, but with the lockdown still with us, I am worried that numbers will be low in the first few months of the summer term."

Hughes said that September will see a "big increase in numbers in colleges and I just hope that everybody recognises that as a realistic ambition".

He added that there are also "wider issues which may limit

demand, such as benefit claimants not being able to learn full-time and the entitlement only covering the first level 3 qualification, which means those needing re-training might not be eligible".

Hughes pledged to "continue to press" for solutions to both of these and to allow modules to be delivered that "fit better with some needs from adults wanting training to move quickly into work".

The Education and Skills Funding Agency will administer allocations for the offer for national training providers. Mayoral combined authorities with devolved AEB will be given their own allocations to fund the offer through their providers.

However, the allocations for devolved mayoral authorities have still not been signed off as they await further guidance from central government.

A DfE spokesperson said: "We have updated the funding rules for academic year 2020 to 2021, which provides full details of the level 3 adult offer for FE providers.

"We recognise that providers will want to know their individual funding amounts, this information will be shared with FE providers shortly along with updated technical guidance on gov.uk."



David Hughes

Re-apply – again! Anger as ESFA asks providers to make fresh register application

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

Training providers were left “appalled” this week after the Education and Skills Funding Agency made the “ridiculous” decision that all who are on the apprenticeships register will need to re-apply yet again.

“They just don’t get what we are going through, do they?” was how one managing director of an independent provider reacted, while a college principal declared this is the “last thing my team need at the moment” as they continue to battle against the pandemic.

This will be the third time that providers will have had to apply to the register of apprenticeship training providers since its launch in March 2017. The most recent “refresh” was in January 2019.

Last month’s FE white paper revealed that the government would undertake another “full refresh” of the register commencing in April 2021. The aim is to adopt “more stringent entry criteria for both new and existing providers, to better determine whether providers have the capability and capacity to be able to deliver these higher-quality apprenticeships”.

A “new set of application criteria” has now been created which every provider will need to meet to be able to deliver apprenticeships. A “phased reapplication” process will begin from May.

Guidance published about this on Wednesday also hinted at a potentially major change in the apprenticeships that providers are allowed to deliver.

It said that the agency is looking for providers to “evidence their capacity and expertise” and are considering how this “may be required beyond the initial application process where providers wish to expand their delivery to new areas”.

Former ESFA director of apprenticeships Keith Smith told *FE Week’s* Annual



Apprenticeship Conference last year that he was working on plans to require providers to be “accredited” for the apprenticeship standards they offer.

FE Week asked the agency if the “subject-specific expertise” requirement meant that providers would need to re-apply to the register again in the future if they wanted to move into new sectors, but a spokesperson would only say that “further guidance will be published in due course”.

Smith also previously spoke about imposing earning limits on new apprenticeship firms, following various cases of new providers growing too quickly and struggling to manage demand.

The latest example of this was revealed by this publication last week. A freight company called Logistics.com (UK) got on to the register last March and then became the fastest growing provider in the country, delivering over 1,100 apprenticeships in eight months, mostly to apprentices working in care homes. The provider is now under ESFA investigation and faces going bust after the agency stopped payments.

Guidance published on Wednesday did not give any mention to new provider earning limits, but the ESFA told *FE Week* they have not ruled these out.

A key part of the RoATP refresh is to kick providers off that aren’t delivering. Any provider that has not delivered training in the most recent six months will be considered for removal from May 2021.

Lianne Onslow, owner of training and learning consultancy firm LMO Development, said there “must be other ways of identifying and dealing with concerning providers”.

She was one of dozens in the sector who took to Twitter to express their outrage at the ESFA’s reapplication announcement.

“Blooming heck. I remember the RoATP reapplication like it was yesterday, probably because it near enough was yesterday,” she tweeted.

Elsewhere, Sue Bishop said: “I actually can’t believe they are doing this to us right now, we’re all on our knees trying to develop and deliver quality remote learning. Give us a break ESFA.”

Chris Todd, principal of Derwentside College, added: “Nooooooo!?!?!? Surely we can avoid this for those of us who are continuing to do well. It’s the last thing my team need at the moment.”

Jamie Rail, managing director of The Focus Training Group, said the decision shows the ESFA has a “complete and total lack of understanding of what’s going on out on the ground”.

Consultant Stefan Drew also tweeted: “I despair. I keep seeing FE leaders telling us the government are on our side, listening and helping. This disproves the optimism and brings a hint of reality to the situation. There is little help...just more applications for what most colleges have been doing well.”

RoATP has been closed to new applications since April 2020. The only exception has been for levy-paying employers delivering services critical during the Covid-19 outbreak. However, any providers that have been successful through this exceptions policy since its inception will still be subject to the refresh planned from May.

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ESFA launches new AEB tender, with caps to avoid oversubscription

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The long-awaited national adult education budget tender has been launched by the Education and Skills Funding Agency and will cap providers to mitigate "significant oversubscription".

Bids for a slice of the £73 million initially up for grabs in 2021/22 went live last Friday and are being invited over the next six weeks, with a final deadline of March 22.

The ESFA had originally planned to launch the tender in July 2020 but it has faced a number of setbacks. It is a "re-procurement" exercise, and follows roughly the same scope as the controversial AEB tender that caused havoc in 2017 – the contracts for which expire this year in July.

The last procurement was plagued with delays following huge volumes of bids and

had to be completely redone after the ESFA realised it was botched.

Caps depending on the type of provider applying for the funding in this current AEB tender have now been introduced to "mitigate significant oversubscription and speculative bidding".

For "new" providers, bids are capped at £1 million, subcontractors are capped at £2 million and "existing" providers are capped at £3 million.

Additionally, a minimum contract value has been set at £150,000 and a maximum of £3 million.

Priority courses for this tender includes the new first full-level 3 qualification offer for those aged 24 and over as per the prime minister's Lifetime Skills Guarantee, as well as sector-based work academy programmes (SWAPs) – both of which were key features in the chancellor's Plan for Jobs.

As previously reported by *FE Week*, traineeships are excluded from this procurement. Only providers with an AEB grant allocation (such as colleges) and those part of the current traineeship tender exercise will have access to traineeship funding in 2021/22.

Each provider that bids in this AEB tender will have their financial health assessed to ensure "its ability to meet ongoing financial commitments".

The total procurement could potentially reach £157 million if extensions are granted in future years, but these are not guaranteed.

Outcomes are set to be communicated to bidders by June 24 and the service start date will be August 1, 2021.

This tender is just for the national budget, not for devolved combined authorities, which run their own procurements.

Ofsted parks new provider monitoring visits

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Exclusive

New provider monitoring visits have been delayed indefinitely by Ofsted.

The inspectorate previously said it would restart the visits from January face-to-face but later announced they would be conducted remotely until at least the February half-term in light of the third national lockdown.

The virtual monitoring visits to providers that are new to delivering apprenticeships were set to get under way on January 25, but Ofsted has now told *FE Week* these will not be going ahead.

There is also no set date for when they will recommence.

A spokesperson said: "During the national

lockdown, we have had to pause new provider monitoring visits (NPMVs) because these visits require inspectors to carry out in-person inspection so that we can fairly judge the progress made, including safeguarding. However, we hope to return to NPMVs as soon as it is possible to do so.

"Currently, we are conducting remote inspections of those that most need it, but we will undertake onsite work where we have serious concerns, which could include new providers."

FE Week understands the Education and Skills Funding Agency is becoming increasingly concerned about new apprenticeship providers that are going for prolonged periods without oversight from the watchdog following the pause to normal inspection activity since March 2020 amid Covid-19.

Last week, *FE Week* revealed how a freight company had become an approved

apprenticeship provider in March 2020 and over the next eight months recruited more than 1,100 apprentices – more than any other provider in that period – mostly in the care sector.

The firm, called Logistics.com (UK), is now under investigation by the ESFA and faces liquidation.

According to Ofsted's latest operational note for FE providers, published on January 20, the watchdog is currently only conducting "progress monitoring visits" to "providers judged to require improvement for overall effectiveness that have not yet received a monitoring visit since their last full inspection".

The same visits will be made to providers "judged inadequate for overall effectiveness that have not yet received a monitoring visit since their last full inspection, or that are due their second re-inspection monitoring visit (if they continue to be publicly funded)".

Covid-related death of college lecturer investigated

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The death of a college lecturer who died after contracting Covid-19 is being investigated by the government's agency that polices workplace safety.

Donna Coleman, who worked with vulnerable students at Burnley College, according to the University and College Union, of which she was a member, passed away last month aged 42.

In a press release to the media on Thursday the UCU said it was "investigating the circumstances that led to Donna's death, including whether she contracted Covid through her work at Burnley College". The union claims that prior to Coleman's death it had "rejected the college's risk assessments because of their poor Covid controls".

The union says it also raised its health and safety concerns with the government's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and has lodged a formal complaint with the agency since Coleman's death.

"Her passing will be deeply felt by her family, her students and her wider community"

HSE told *FE Week* that it has been "working with the college regarding Covid measures on campus and safety with



Burnley College

regard to events such as open evenings" and will now be "liaising further with the college in relation to this fatality and will make further enquiries".

Burnley College has not responded to requests for comment.

The UCU confirmed this was the first time it has publicly raised concerns about a college staff member's death.

According to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, ten "further education teaching professionals" have died from Covid-19 to date.

UCU general secretary Jo Grady said: "We are all angry and devastated about the loss of Donna. Her passing will be deeply felt by her family, her students and her wider community.

"Too many workers, including those in post-16 education, have lost their lives to Covid. These deaths are not inevitable. UCU will continue to fight to keep our

members safe, and for employers and the government to protect their health and safety."

UCU regional official Martyn Moss added: "Donna's death is an appalling tragedy and we are supporting her family at this difficult time.

"UCU is investigating the circumstances that led to Donna's death, including whether she contracted Covid through her work at Burnley College.

"Unfortunately, the college is refusing to disclose whether it knows if it has had any Covid outbreaks. Prior to Donna's death we had rejected the college's risk assessments because of their poor Covid controls.

"We have also raised our health and safety concerns with the college and with the Health and Safety Executive, the government body that polices workplace safety."

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International students: Why college income is in freefall

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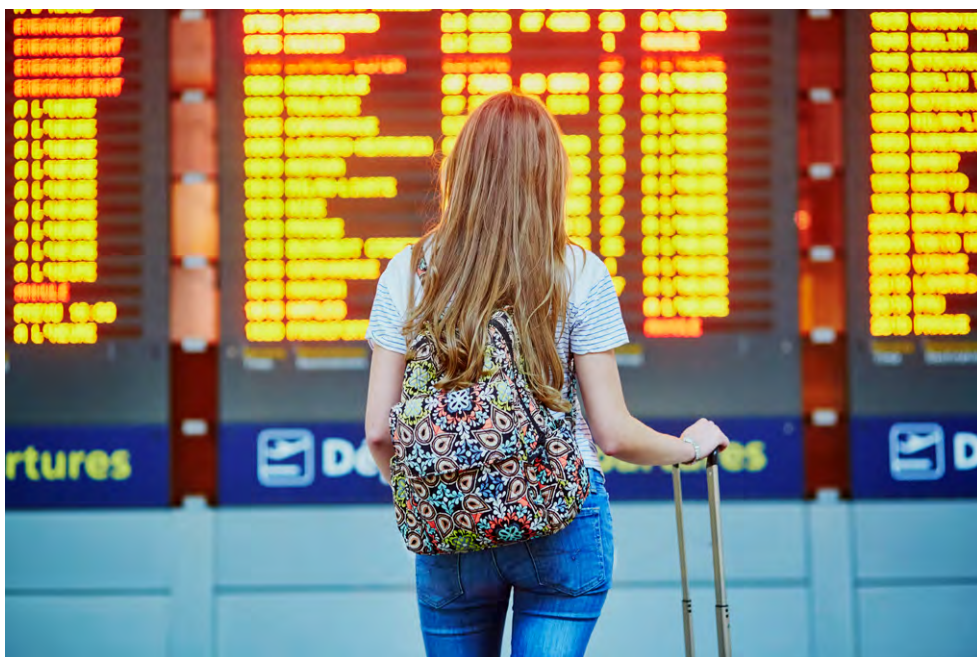
With the income colleges make from international students plummeting, *FE Week* spoke with college and sector leaders to understand why this is happening, why foreign students are so important and what can be done to keep them coming

Income from international students studying at UK universities and other higher education institutions is up two-thirds since 2010, hitting a whopping £15.9 billion in 2018. Yet the same official income figures for non-EU international students studying at FE colleges show a 64 per cent fall from £920 million in 2010 to just £330 million in 2018.

Why the dramatic fall in college income?

Government policy has been largely to blame for the fall in student numbers, according to the Association of Colleges' international director, Emma Meredith.

The UK's points-based immigration system, originally introduced in 2008, has "made it



harder over time for FE colleges to recruit international students," she says, particularly in countries with a higher demand for vocational skills courses.

The system has also proven problematic due to the "gradual" introduction of rules, including removing part-time working rights for students in 2015.

Colleges holding 'tier 4 sponsor licences' – a Home Office requirement when enrolling non-EU students – have been required to be rated either 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted since 2011.

Highbury College, for example, lost their licence after receiving an Ofsted grade three in June 2018, and their financial accounts show a subsequent decline in international student income.

In addition, a number of "bogus" institutions had been filtered out the system, Meredith said, which has led to a reduction in numbers.

Then there is the red tape. One college with a tier 4 licence, Dudley College, has found recruiting non-EU students "increasingly challenging" due to the "increasing regulation

of visa applications". So much so, "we have planned for a decrease in this income stream in recent years", a spokesperson said.

Dudley's financial statements show its overall international student fee income has declined by over half between 2016 and 2020, falling from £1.172 million to £550,000.

Barnet and Southgate College has seen its international student fees income drop by 89 per cent, from £112,000 in 2016 to £12,000 in 2019.

The Ofsted grade three Bournemouth and Poole College, which does not hold a tier 4 licence, saw its income fall from £1.049 million in 2016, to £749,000 in 2019 – a 28 per cent drop.

Matt Butcher, commercial director of Bournemouth & Poole College, called it "a common trend that other colleges across the country have experienced when working with international students over the past few years," and recent times "have been



Emma Meredith

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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CONTINUED

incredibly challenging”.

Why is it important for colleges to teach students from other countries?

Meredith says colleges are a pathway into the already-booming higher education sector, where education-related exports rose by 67 per cent between 2010 and 2018, from £9.5 billion to £15.9 billion.

Also, such recruitment, especially where international students fill up classes, is a “good revenue and expertise base from which colleges can consider engaging in other forms of international activity”.

Oxford-based Activate Learning started a multi-million-pound, six-year contract to train China’s national youth rowing team in September 2019, in partnership with Oxford Brookes University.

Speaking to *FE Week*, Activate’s director of international, Niko Phillips, said the college group uses its commercial divisions to “help subsidise the income that we get from our domestic learners”.

So it was “pretty impressive for an FE college” to be able to score a contract with the Chinese government.

Yet once Covid lockdowns started coming in across the world in March, the Chinese students headed home, and until they return “we don’t see that money,” Phillips said.

“With luck and vaccinations, we should be able to start the project again,” he hopes.

What can be done?

The government does place prominence on the benefits of education providers making money from international students and acting overseas.

Last year, the University of Exeter’s vice chancellor, Steve Smith, was announced as the UK’s international education champion, to complete two ten-year goals in the UK’s newly updated international education strategy: to increase education exports

to £35 billion per year, and to increase the number of higher education students learning in the UK to 600,000 per year.

The lack of a similar commitment for FE students does reinforce one point Meredith raised, that “colleges have not had much encouragement to take their offer internationally, and the FE international offer has not always been well understood nor promoted”.

The government also has an Education Sector Advisory Group, which meets three times a year and includes Department for International Trade and Department for Education ministers, where colleges and training providers are represented by the UK Skills Partnership, a grouping of sector organisations including the Association of Colleges and WorldSkills UK.

According to its GOV.UK page, the group “aims to increase UK education exports by overcoming sector challenges and exploiting opportunities”.

The government has also launched its new Turing Scheme, to replace the European Union’s Erasmus+, which will fund students and apprentices to study and work abroad from September this year.

This, the government says, will allow colleges, schools and universities “to build reciprocal relationships on a truly

global basis”.

But the policy that led to the Turing scheme, Britain’s exit from the European Union, may stifle FE’s international student numbers, with Meredith warning the end of free movement from Europe means EU students will need visas to study courses longer than six months.

And from August 2021, EU students will no longer be eligible for ‘home’ tuition fees, which are charged at a lower rate than ‘overseas’ fees.

“The way the UK partners with the EU will need to adapt,” she said, “but the key concerns are to maintain the important partnerships colleges have built up in the EU over the years and assess where any new opportunities may lie”.

Federation of Awarding Bodies chief executive Tom Bewick (a former parliamentary candidate for the Brexit Party who has worked in ten countries on technical and vocational education systems) does not believe Brexit “will be a factor at all” on colleges’ international activity due to the breadth of nations with historical and cultural ties to the UK.

Bewick highlighted data from the International Monetary Fund, which predicted 90 per cent of all future growth in the world’s gross domestic product

will be from outside the EU, “so that gives you a sense of importance of developing countries in Africa, many of which are quite well developed, with large populations with large middle classes same in India and South Asia”.

Meredith has called on the government to “better include” FE colleges in international campaigns that promote UK education, particularly in those countries with demand for skills education. Otherwise, she says, “international FE numbers will continue to decline”.

“Risk will always – and rightly so – be a concern. Colleges are keen to collaborate on international opportunities and more steps can be taken to facilitate this,” she added.

The Department for Education was approached for comment.



Niko Phillips

Pandemic didn't stop National Apprenticeship Week celebrations

FRASER WHIELDON
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From front

National Apprenticeship Week was celebrated as never before as the event went virtual.

The theme of this year's week was 'Build the Future' and people from across the nation refused to let Covid-19 put a stop to them doing just that, putting on events such as roundtable discussions, podcasts and recruitment drives.

Education secretary Gavin Williamson got in on the action, taking questions from a group of civil service apprenticeships on Tuesday. During the session, Williamson said it was key to "get that message out there about how incredibly fulfilling, how incredibly rewarding the apprenticeship route is".

Apprenticeships and skills minister Gillian Keegan also met with five women apprentices on Tuesday to discuss how government can encourage more youngsters to take up the scheme. They also told her how they have managed to break into traditionally male-dominated industries, including STEM sectors.

One of the women, degree apprentice Elysia Moore from Anglian Water, recalled going into a school and asking the female pupils to draw an engineer – they all drew men. "I told them, 'No, I am a software engineer and you can be one too.' And that's the key to tackling stereotypes – knowledge is power."

Keegan, herself a former apprentice, urged them to "believe me when I say the learning experience you are getting now is going to accelerate your career – I guarantee it".

The Labour Party also showed its

support for apprenticeships, with shadow education secretary Kate Green and shadow apprenticeships and lifelong learning minister Toby Perkins making a virtual visit to Midlands-based Remit Training's centres on Tuesday.

"We know that apprenticeships offer a great start for a young person," Green said. "Top-class companies like Remit are going to be so important to our Covid recovery."

FE Week held its own roundtable discussion on Tuesday, in partnership with NCFE and featuring eight sector leaders and policymakers (see page 15).

Major companies also used the week to plug new apprentice recruitment drives. Luxury carmaker Bentley announced it would take in its largest-ever intake of apprentices in 2021, with more than 100 new starts in departments such as engineering, production, marketing, project management, human resources and health and safety.

Meanwhile, Amazon announced it was hiring 1,000 apprentices across the UK in 25 areas of its business, from robotics to logistics.

A number of organisations have taken the opportunity provided by the all-virtual celebrations to innovate, with the Institute for

Apprenticeships and Technical Education launching its own podcast this week. The first episode to hit the airwaves featured the institute's apprentice panel member, Jamilah Simpson, in conversation with Keegan where questions ranged from social mobility to funding for degree apprenticeships.

Individual colleges and providers have themselves been showcasing their own apprentices, in many cases through video on social media channels.

Oldham College put a spotlight on three of their apprentices – paralegal Charlotte Traverse, plumber Brendan Maughan and electrician Adam Walker – with videos on Twitter in which they discussed how the programme has boosted their career.

Principal Alun Francis said apprenticeships "are a 'win win' for everyone", giving students "hands-on experience and theoretical learning to get industry-recognised qualifications and the skills employers really need".

Keep an eye out for FE Week's annual souvenir supplement for National Apprenticeship Week, which will be published on Monday.



Association of Apprentices launches to support trainees and boost retention

BILLY CAMDEN

BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

A new support network for apprentices has been launched in an effort to help boost the number of the work-based trainees staying on and completing their course.

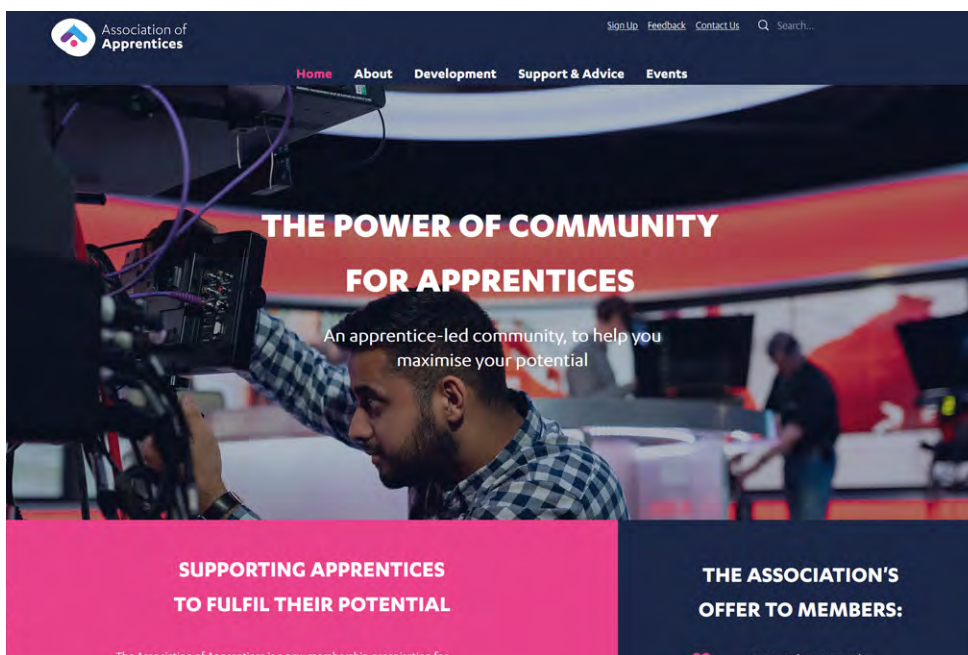
The Association of Apprentices was founded by the government's apprenticeship ambassador Jason Holt, former Lord Mayor of the City of London Sir Peter Estlin and a co-founder of venture builder Blenheim Chalcot, Charles Mindenhall, in late 2019 but has been formally launched this week.

It gives apprentices access to information, advice and guidance about their programme – including what to do in events where their provider closes down or if they have been made redundant – as well as putting on social events for apprentices to network.

Holt told *FE Week* the association started almost ten years ago with his review of apprenticeships in small and medium-sized businesses, in which he recommended government to consider creating a society of apprentices.

“We realised that something needed to be done to bridge that gap and build a community”

Since then he, Estlin and Mindenhall have convened a number of apprentice roundtables in which it became “increasingly clear that there was a gap in the way



apprentices were being supported”.

“We realised that something needed to be done to bridge that gap and build a community-based entity for all apprentices in the UK,” he added. “This is where the association was born.”

The founders hope the new network will play a part in helping providers and employers to retain the apprentices to complete their programme.

Apprentice drop-out rates are high, particularly for the new style programmes called standards. *FE Week* previously reported that in 2018/19, of the 54,590 apprentices that were due to finish standards, more than half of them withdrew from their course before reaching the end-point assessment stage.

The association is a not-for-profit company “for apprentices by apprentices” and has now recruited a council of 18 apprentices.

One of them is council chair Joel Roach, an apprentice at Microsoft, who believes the association will be a “powerful catalyst” for supporting apprentices and employers to

“think creatively and be aspirational about skills and careers”.

“Not only will apprentices be able to learn from experts, employers and each other to enhance their skills and careers, but they’ll be able to build communities from which they can influence out, creating positive change across the thousands of organisations that employ apprentices,” he added.

Skills minister Gillian Keegan has already expressed her support for the association. In a podcast with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education this week, she said: “Hopefully they’ll include older ones like me as well and I’ll get an opportunity to join. I think you can always learn from shared experiences.”

The association is currently being financially backed by its founders. A spokesperson said it may pursue charitable status in the future.

The association also has founding partners who include Babington, BBC, Health Education England NHS, NCFE, Royal Mail and Salesforce.

A 'blunt instrument'? NAW round table debates the 20 per cent off the job policy

BILLY CAMDEN

BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

The controversial off-the-job training policy is "vital" in safeguarding the quality of apprenticeships – but the "arbitrary" 20 per cent minimum rule "feels like a blunt instrument" and should be up for debate.

That is according to a group of sector leaders who discussed the topic and other apprenticeship reforms during an [FE Week roundtable](#), sponsored by NCFE, on Tuesday to mark this year's National Apprenticeship Week.

The policy, which requires apprentices to spend at least one-fifth of their week on activities related to their course that are different to their normal working duties, has arguably caused the most tension in the sector since its introduction in 2017.

Previous *FE Week* surveys have found that the sector considers the rule as the single biggest barrier to apprenticeship recruitment – but many also view it as crucial to setting the programme apart from other forms of training, and policymakers do use it as a quality marker.

There has also been high-profile concern from the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee about non-compliance with the rule – and in recent years the Education and Skills Funding Agency has been demanding more robust reporting of providers' compliance for audit purposes.

Asked by *FE Week* editor Nick Linford, who chaired this week's roundtable, whether or not they support the policy, all participants replied that they do, but called for flexibilities to be introduced.

Jeff Uden, head of talent and learning and development at employer the Iceland Group, argued that the rule needs to be "reframed", particularly for lower-level apprenticeships that might not necessarily require 20 per cent off-the-job training.

"Overall, I am for it, but we need to take into account the amount of off-the-job training that could, say, for example, happen with a retailer level 2 apprenticeship," he said.

"There is not a great deal that is on there,



and how much of the productivity is built into the off-the-job training as well as the actual training itself."

Another employer who echoed Uden's view was Health Education England's national programme officer Lucy Hunte. While she is "definitely supportive of recognised protected off-the-job learning time", her issue is whether different levels of apprenticeships require 20 per cent minimum.

"In terms of a clinical apprenticeship, level 2 or level 5, do they both still both warrant 20 per cent?" she questioned.

Hunte added that "high flyer" apprentices do bring with them "core knowledge" of the apprenticeship they are training for and therefore should have "flexibility" to not meet the minimum.

Chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education provided the view from the policymakers' side and told the panel that the rule is an "important safeguard" for the programme.

"There are probably occupations that do not require 20 per cent time away from the job to learn the skills to really understand the knowledge that underpins the thing that you're training to do, and those probably aren't appropriate for apprenticeships but probably very appropriate for other forms of training programmes," she said.

However, Coupland did concede that there are "probably some more flexibilities in how we deliver that and helping people's

understanding of the existing flexibilities in the programme to deliver training in slightly different ways if it is not fitting their business model".

Crawford Knott, chief executive of independent provider Hawk Training, agreed that the rule is "vital" but warned that it is currently "feeling like a blunt instrument" – calling for flexibility if apprentices meet, say, 18 or 19 per cent.

Lastly, Jo Maher, principal of Loughborough College, said the policy needs to be looked at "holistically... You can't look at an arbitrary figure of off-the-job percentage without looking at the context of the length of the programme linked to high-quality assessment and learning.

"I think as we develop the reforms, if Ofsted is saying that there are high-quality providers that have got fantastic recognition of prior learning that have high-quality assessment, surely it is those providers that over time earn the right for the element of flexibility."

She added: "Of course we have to set standards and benchmarks to ensure appropriate, ethical and the right behaviours, but we shouldn't be setting it for an audit perspective – we should be setting it in the benefit of learning, assessment and good pedagogical practice. So you need to look at it in the context of length and level as well as quality."



Submission deadline:
23:59 Monday 1 March

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APPLY TO enquiries@mcacoopers.com including a current CV by 12 Noon on Friday 26th February 2021. Initial interviews will be held online during week ending 12th March 2021. For an informal discussion of the role ring [Malcolm Cooper](tel:07950931389) on 07950 931389.



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Profile

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Introducing

REBECCA CONROY

CEO, East Sussex
College Group

'Personal ambition isn't a driver.
But I guess that doesn't equate
with securing the CEO job!'

JL DUTAUT
JL.DUTAUT@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Challenging CEO stereotypes is one thing, but Rebecca Conroy's relentless and contagious positivity must have an explanation. JL Dutaut finds out

Chief executive. The title conjures up hard-nosed decision-makers in sharp suits. Google the words and still to this day the image results will return

very few women. I'm happy to say that my experience of interviewing education's finest has consistently challenged those stereotypes, but none more so than meeting Rebecca Conroy.

Casually dressed, and with a genuine and contagious smile that appears not to have dulled at all since her graduation from the University of Sussex 22 years ago, the East Sussex College Group chief executive forces you to rethink all your assumptions of the role from first impression to last.

Her approach to the interview is genuine. There are no cheat sheets. No board-approved 'lines to take'. She's looking straight at me – at least as much as a video call allows – so I believe her when she tells me she's "ambitious in terms of doing a good job" but that "personal ambition isn't a massive driver".

"That doesn't really necessarily equate to securing the CEO job, I guess," she adds, though my questions have done nothing to suggest that line of inquiry.

Profile

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Conroy has been in post exactly a year. She stepped up as acting CEO the week after February half-term in 2020 when ESCG's previous leader, Clive Cooke, announced his retirement, precipitated by ill health. So you could put her zest down to being relatively new to it all, but given the pressures of the past year, I'm not sure that argument holds.

And those pressures have been all the more challenging at ESCG. When Clive Cooke stepped down, it was in tandem with the group's chair of governors, Henry Ball. The timing, said Ball, would "allow the new leadership team a clear path to take the college forward into the new decade".

So Conroy has had to step into the breach, with little by way of transition, and without a chair of governors. Within weeks of her appointment, the nation went into lockdown. One of her first actions as CEO was to hand over the keys of one of the Eastbourne campus's buildings (where she had been principal mere weeks before) to the general hospital next door so that chemotherapy could continue safely.

"It was supposed to be a short-term appointment. I was just asked to hold the fort," says Conroy. "And then we went into lockdown. And to be quite honest, for me it was a great opportunity to make a difference, and I actually found that I really enjoyed the role." She sounds almost surprised at the fact, and adds, "When the post came up, I thought, 'Well, let's put my hat in the ring and see how we go'. But it wasn't on my agenda this time last year at all."

Given that the past 12 months have also



Boxing day sea swim with her husband

included dealing with a challenging financial situation left over from the merger that created ESCG, a nine-stage recruitment process supported by the Association of Colleges to appoint the group's second permanent CEO and a September Ofsted monitoring visit to boot, it's a wonder Conroy is meeting with me at all, let alone with such energy and enthusiasm. "It's been an exciting time," she beams.

ESCG was created only three years ago, in March 2018, from the merger of Sussex Coast College Hastings and Sussex Downs College. The former's last Ofsted inspection in December 2017 found it to be 'good', but the latter, inspected just a month before, returned a 'requires improvement' judgment. The merged college's priorities have therefore been to maintain and build the good provision at Hastings while driving improvements at the old Sussex Downs sites.

Conroy's advantage has been that she is familiar with the challenges. But her appointment wasn't a given. In these pages recently, Ian Pryce warned of our education system's tendency towards interventionism. Given AoC's involvement in the recruitment process, it's not hard to imagine calculations ending in the appointment of someone with 'turnaround experience'.

Her appointment not only bucks that trend; it could turn out to be an inspired decision. Behind the warm façade and unassuming demeanour, Conroy is



Conroy with her baby sister

clearly a shrewd operator. At Eastbourne, she oversaw cost savings of £5 million in the two years between the merger and her hop and skip to the top job.

"We've had to take out a lot of cost, which has been really horrible"

Conroy brands her entire leadership approach as 'people first'. The educational hinterland of her 20-year career in FE is in inclusion. She started as an EFL teacher in 1997, then went on to the University of Brighton to work in widening participation before joining the sector to work with looked-after young people, pupil referral units, NEETs and SEND. Her CV is peppered with roles that show a moral purpose to her engagement with the profession. Overseeing redundancies, while hard on all leaders, clearly contradicts a deep-seated instinct. "We've had to take out a lot of cost, which has been really horrible."

She's grateful to be "picking up a college that is in a much better financial position." Since her appointment she has pressed on with a restructure at the top of the organisation. "We had principals in each of



At her MBA graduation with her daughter

Profile

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the campuses. Our senior team was quite large by most college standards." A retirement here. A move to another college there. Her own promotion out of one of the principalships. All have added up to "quite a different structure", but all in all, normal attrition has meant she has largely avoided causing more pain in the effort to reduce that top-heavy structure. Given everything else, a bit of good luck was surely due.

"We're controlling vacancies within an inch of our lives"

As a result, as well as ESCG's CEO, Conroy is its executive principal, supported by an assistant principal heading up each of the four campuses. One of the college's alumni, Mark Wardle, is returning from his post as St Austell head with Cornwall College to support her as deputy.

But no, the lesson she has learned from the experience of the past few years isn't to dull her smile and harden her nose. Instead, it is that she should do all that's in her power to avoid having to make such decisions again.

"In practical terms, we're controlling vacancies within an inch of our lives. That's never easy, but it's far easier than to have to go back and go into some horrible restructuring. At the moment, it's essential spend only to protect the teams we've got."

So what is the secret to her seemingly unstoppable positivity? Well, it might be the region. Leicester-born-and-bred Conroy remembers her northern upbringing with joy. A good home. A good education. Friendships that have endured a 25-year distance. She left the community college where she did her A-levels with great results, but little idea what to do. She worked in social care and in administration roles with Leicester University before moving down to Brighton to complete the history degree she started there.

By her own admission, she "fell in love with the place". "Was it the sunshine?" I ask. "Yes, and the sea swimming." She reveals that she and her husband – who she met here and with whom she has two children



Conroy with her mum 1989

– are avid, all-year-round sea swimmers. There's photo evidence of them taking in a paddle in Eastbourne on Boxing Day! Well, that would keep you vibrant!

Not only did she fall in love with East Sussex, but so has the rest of her family. Her younger sister and her parents have all moved down. "We all live within three minutes of each other," she tells me.

Both her parents were FE lecturers – her mother taught sociology and her father economics. She says they filled her with self-confidence and, she admits, a bit of their politics. "They're good, old-school socialists. So they're not always as diplomatic as I am when referring to the actions of our government."

That might explain that deep drive to seek out and to use her positions and privileges to help the most vulnerable. But I'm not convinced it's the secret to that energy.

When I ask her what she'd say to Gavin Williamson or Gillian Keegan if she had their ear, her answer echoes what she's told me about how she was brought up and how she leads others. "It's easy for the sector to be cynical, but they have been consulting well with the sector. So let's really understand how we can deliver some of [the skills white paper's] ambitions, and have faith and trust in the sector."

It couldn't be that simple, could it? Faith and trust?

No. It must be the sea swimming.



At her graduation with mum and dad

CINDY
RAMPERSAUD

Senior vice-president
for BTECs and
apprenticeships, Pearson



Apprenticeships are a crucial vehicle for tackling worsening Covid inequalities

We need to be creating a seamless pipeline towards higher-level apprenticeships, writes Cindy Rampersaud

Recognising National Apprenticeship Week is more important than ever before this year. As we begin to look towards reopening both the economy and society, we need to consider how we will offer opportunities to those who have been most impacted by the pandemic.

We need to ensure people have access to programmes to build fulfilling careers, contributing to the recovery of the UK and also mitigating a widening inequality gap.

Even before the pandemic, policymakers were prioritising reskilling to tackle the rapidly evolving jobs market.

In 2019, the government's UK Skills Mismatch 2030 paper had predicted that seven million additional workers could be ill equipped for their job requirements by 2030. That's about 20 per cent of the labour market.

So one of the biggest draws of apprenticeship is that they offer the opportunity to gain skills on the job while earning – particularly attractive if you're reskilling later in life.

Vocational learning is also a route to higher education that is more appealing to those who do not wish to pursue a career through academia.

But the pandemic is worsening existing inequalities, impacting

women, the BAME community, those with disabilities, the LGBTQ community, young people and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

For many women, Covid has brought additional pressures in the form of increased caring responsibilities and higher unemployment, as 2.5 million women work in heavily impacted sectors.

“Even before the pandemic, policymakers were prioritising reskilling”

The BAME community has seen a 47 per cent drop in household income compared to the national average of 28 per cent over the past year, with 15 per cent reporting losing their jobs, compared to a national average of eight per cent.

Research by the charity Turn2us found that 58 per cent of BAME workers have had their

employment affected since the start of the pandemic, compared to 47 per cent of white workers.

There is currently an under-representation of BAME apprentices across all levels in our economy and it is no coincidence that there has been a notable reduction in participation rates in education, too.

In the post-Covid era, apprenticeships provide a real opportunity to bridge some of the inequality gaps and mitigate the effects by providing access to retrain, upskill and access careers.

Apprenticeships are a crucial vehicle for those looking to return to the workforce. They also provide a more inclusive route to upskilling for those of all backgrounds.

The Social Mobility Commission found that learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds benefit more from apprenticeships than those from non-disadvantaged backgrounds. The boost to their earnings post-apprenticeship is greater than for their non-disadvantaged peers.

However, we should also think about the ways people

can undertake apprenticeships. Providing technical and occupational learning to 16- to 18-year-olds has been notoriously difficult in the past. The pandemic has only exacerbated that challenge.

T Levels have a fundamental role to play in upskilling future generations and are a welcome initiative to sit alongside existing pathways.

But we must now look ahead to create a seamless pipeline to higher-level apprenticeships and work with employers to make that a reality.

To create inclusive opportunities for all, there must be choice between routes that suit those starting out in their career or looking to develop new skills.

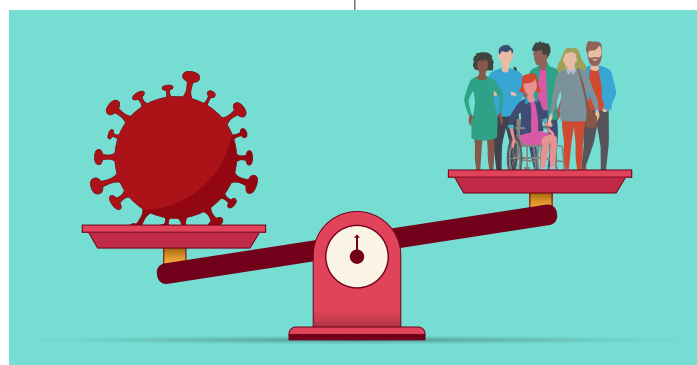
If the options available are limited, you close off opportunities for millions of people.

Apprenticeships form an incredibly important part of that mix, especially for the 60 per cent of over-16s who choose a vocational or work-based pathway.

As we look ahead to the post-Covid world, ensuring structures are in place to offer opportunities to all in our society so they can thrive in their careers will be vital to the success of our recovery.

So apprenticeships really matter more now than ever.

The theme of this year's National Apprenticeship Week is 'Build the Future'. But if we are to do that, we must open opportunities for everyone and address the gaps now.



LOUISE
WOLSEY

Chief transformation
officer, London South
East Colleges



To become 'anchor institutions', colleges should operate like social enterprises

To articulate its real worth, the FE sector needs to start measuring its social value in ways central government can't ignore, writes Louise Wolsey

Further education contributes an enormous amount to the UK's productivity agenda but as a sector, we seem to struggle to articulate this in a way that has resonance or can influence central government policy agendas.

This means that a large part of what colleges do, beyond simply "delivering qualifications", has not been fully recognised over the years and disregards the positive impact that FE has socially and economically across entire regions.

Encouragingly, the FE sector has started to reflect on this collectively over the past year, through the Independent Commission on the College of the Future and its recognition of colleges as "anchor Institutions".

But as a sector we have yet to demonstrate true "anchor impact" beyond the usual outputs and outcomes that all colleges deliver.

To maximise our potential as a sector, we need to unlock opportunity within our communities and add real value locally by thinking and working differently.

One way to do this could be for colleges to operate more like social enterprises – the definition of which already sounds exactly like an FE college: "An organisation whose main goal is



promoting social or environmental welfare rather than making or maximising profits."

But what does this actually mean and how can social impact truly be measured in a quantifiable and recognised way?

The National Themes Outcomes and Measures (TOMs) framework, which was officially launched in 2017, provides a reporting standard for measuring social value. It sets out the areas that have real resonance with our communities.

1. Jobs, by promoting local skills and employment
2. Growth, by supporting responsible regional business
3. Social, by creating healthier, safer and more resilient communities
4. Environment, by decarbonising and safeguarding our world
5. Innovation, by promoting social innovation

London South East Colleges' latest five-year strategy sets out our planned transition to a social enterprise, rather than remaining

as "just a college".

As an £80 million education group, these are big plans. But we know that any impact has to be fully quantifiable.

With this in mind, we are working with the Social Value Portal, an online solution to help us measure and report on our social contribution in a way that enables us to quantify, in financial terms, the full impact we are having on our communities.

This involves translating some of our actions, such as local supply chain spend, work experience and community projects, into their equivalent value.

For example, every hour of staff volunteering has a social value equal to £16.70 and a week of student work experience is equal to £158.23.

Over 2019-20, our group generated £31.75 million in additional social value, beyond the economic benefits that result from our students progressing into employment.

To make the shift to thinking and acting as an anchor Institution, it is

crucial to embed the principles of creating social value through every layer of a business.

This is not necessarily about doing more, but encouraging staff to think and act differently, such as embedding social value in procurement strategies, setting targets to maximise the number of local, small businesses within a supply chain or designing new work experience opportunities that support local issues.

In our case we have linked our internal performance management systems and student career frameworks to the TOMS framework.

We still of course have some way to go, but we are starting to see a cultural shift and real enthusiasm from staff.

This approach has, in effect, created what in the world of business would be a corporate social responsibility strategy. But this isn't an "add on". This is our business now. It is how we operate, generating quantifiable, nationally endorsed measures of social value.

It's early days, but we often wonder: what if the FE sector were to adopt this approach across the board? Could it help us better articulate the significant social value we generate every day across the country?

With the social value framework now being applied to new central government procurements from January 1, 2021, we think it's a step in the right direction.

Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UKHONORARY PROFESSOR
RUTH LUPTON

University of Manchester

STEPHANIE
THOMSON

University of Aberdeen



Combined and local authorities absolutely must have a role in the government's skills plan

Many GCSE 'low attainers' need support but there is no one locally to oversee provision, write Ruth Lupton and Stephanie Thomson

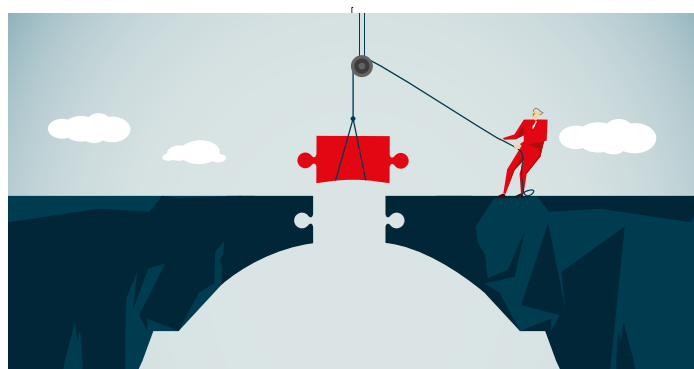
Andy Norman was right. At the end of January the research analyst at the Centre for Progressive Policy argued in these pages it's "risky business to have an employer-dominated skills system". In confirming that devolution has no part in government plans to transform post-16 education and training, last month's FE white paper missed a crucial opportunity.

It was an opportunity to build a more coherent system, fit to serve the needs of individuals as well as employers.

The impact that a poorly coordinated post-16 system is having on the 40 per cent of young people without at least a grade 4 in both English and maths was explored in our recently published research for the Nuffield Foundation called 'Moving on from GCSE "failure"'.

The structure and nature of provision is part of the problem. Every local area has a different mix of academic, vocational and apprenticeship provision and institutional arrangements. Some provision is clearly linked to local labour market needs – for example, where a large local employer or growth sector stimulates demand for skills.

But employer demand waxes and wanes and financial pressures, competition and incentives mean



that local provision can be volatile. This creates holes in progression routes that young people (and adults) find difficult to climb out of.

Greater coordination between employers and providers is needed, but it is hard to see how the linkage to the local labour market promised by the white paper will work if strategic authorities responsible for industrial strategy, planning and transport are not involved.

To do this, combined and local authorities need to be centrally involved in provision planning and given capacity to commission specific provision (in the 16- to 18-age phase as well as for adults) where this aligns with local priorities.

But making the system work better isn't just about getting provision right and expecting learners to make informed choices. Our research revealed many blockages to progress, including transport links.

However, the two key issues were local practices around entry requirements and inadequate guidance and support.

Most geographic areas in our study had a vast array of provision, but once GCSE-based entry requirements were taken into account, this narrowed dramatically, giving some young people limited choice about what they did after school.

"The white paper mustn't create a new set of cracks for learners to fall through"

For those who did not move straight to A-levels, the rush to identify suitable courses or apprenticeships following GCSE results created too many risks of drop-out or direction change.

Many GCSE "lower attainers" were not ready to make career decisions and reported that advice and support had been minimal. Yet no one locally has an oversight of these linkages between the pre- and

post-16 phases, nor the authority to intervene.

To improve the way the system works, the local state, whether combined or local authorities, needs the analytical capacity to map the provision that exists and, crucially, the associated entry requirements.

This way, gaps in provision could be properly identified and action taken with providers to make sure entry requirements are appropriate and do not block progress.

This capacity would underpin the building of progression pathways and foster collaboration and information flows across pre- and post-16 phases.

It would identify young people at risk of dropping out. It would form the basis of a wraparound support service starting in year 11 and continuing through to 19 to help young people construct a career pathway that recognises they might need to take sideways moves.

Supporting post-16 progression demands not just better employer-provider collaboration but strategic oversight and practical intervention in education and training sub-systems, from school to adult learning.

If we are to persist with a centrally funded and regulated market approach, we need to find much better ways to make it work locally.

This means trusting local leaders to ensure that the white paper's proposals don't just create a new set of cracks for young people (and adults) to fall through.



READER'S REPLY

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK

DfE expanding FE teacher recruitment programme with £3m tender

I'm a maths teacher qualified from India. Taught mathematics in UAE for 13+ years and struggling to find a teacher job in London. Need to support expatriates so that they can take initiatives for the same.

Imran, website

Talks under way on threshold rate for college adult education under-delivery

Constantly amazes me that we ITPs on procured contracts can find and help people to 100 per cent so we get paid with no threshold allowance but colleges who are grant-funded cannot. It's almost like they know they are going to get paid anyway. Funny that.

Clare Parker-Doyle, Twitter

An early decision on this is vital. With colleges so stretched, it's important to know we can reallocate resources to continue to meet the challenge of continued lockdowns.

Marc Gillham, Twitter

More employers want technical skills delivered via FE, not university

I would disagree. We find that universities and private training providers are streets ahead of the FE sector in addressing our training needs, especially in the digital space, where their links to industry are far superior to the FE sector. We have good relationships with two colleges delivering engineering and manufacturing apprenticeships near our sites in the north of England,

REPLY OF THE WEEK

DfE expanding FE teacher recruitment programme with £3m tender



This initiative is all well and good, but how much of the funding will be swallowed up by bureaucracy? How about increasing FE lecturer salaries in line with teachers? A national pay scale instead of each college setting their own scale would help. Many lecturers leave FE because of the low pay in comparison to schoolteachers. A more manageable workload would also help retain staff.

Anita Price, website

but they are the exception, not the rule. FE colleges try to tell us how they will deliver, not work with us to build delivery options.

Tim Buchanan, website



You are right to highlight all the potential positives for skills and our sector in the white paper. However, the role of the Office for Students (expensive and slow) and the lack of clarity about who will award the new level 4 and level 5 qualifications provide loopholes for higher education to claim the lion's share.

Jim Grant, website

Providers complain of 'impossible timelines' for lifetime skills guarantee offer



This is active discrimination against training providers as it limits delivery to colleges only. As a tutor, there is no way an adult care level 3 can be delivered in four months. It contains at minimum 16 units, and most will do 18. For quality, that would mean a timeframe of 18 months.

Anne Eshborn, Facebook

Bulletin

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?
CONTACT US NEWS@FEWEEK.CO.UK



Vicky Frost

Head of training,
PA Training

Start date March 2021

Previous job

Editor, 'Future London', Evening Standard

Interesting fact

She is often found on her allotment, where last year she grew her first crop of "enormous" globe artichokes

Movers & Shakers

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



Lia Nici

Chair, Apprenticeship Diversity Champions Network

Start date February 2021

Concurrent job

MP for Great Grimsby

Interesting fact

During a previous career in television, she worked on the famous BBC children's show Byker Grove



Andrew Gedge

Deputy principal,
SMB Group

Start date February 2021

Previous job

Assistant principal, College of West Anglia

Interesting fact

He once managed to help successfully land a medical helicopter in the middle of a very busy college campus with several hundred students watching on



James Wharton

Chair, Office for Students

Start date February 2021

Previous job

MP for Stockton South

Interesting fact

He is a keen walker

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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